



A Thematic Reading of C. Ama Ata Aidoo's "Certain Winds from the South"

Une lecture thématique de "Certain Winds from the South" de C. Ama Ata Aidoo

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Abstract:

Christina Ama Ata Aidoo's short story "Certain Winds from the South" deals with a community that is victim of both colonisation and World War II, as African nations witnessed both of them between the late eighteenth century and the mid twentieth century. This paper aims at shedding light on the varied themes that Aidoo dealt with in her short story. She focuses on the impact of the colonist and highlights a community that is dismantled in the period of post-war. Her characters struggle hard to survive and are obliged to take decisions that do not necessarily suit them. Indeed, African nations do share this in common, as they have a common past of torture and destruction. Colonisation left these nations in a state of utter despair, and survival was not an easy task and is still not, even after 60 years of independence for some. The south in "Certain Winds from the South" stands both for hope and despair in this Ghanaian community.

Keywords: South, struggle, Ama Ata Aidoo, coloniser, war

Résumé :

La nouvelle de Christina Ama Ata Aidoo «Certain Winds from the South» traite d'une communauté victime à la fois de la colonisation et de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, dont les nations africaines en ont été victimes entre la fin du XVIII^e siècle et le milieu du XX^e siècle. Cet article vise les différents thèmes traités par Aidoo dans sa nouvelle. Cette dernière cible l'impact du colon et met en lumière une communauté qui est démantelée dans la période d'après-guerre. Ses personnages peinent à survivre et sont obligés de prendre des décisions qui ne leur conviennent pas forcément. En effet, les nations africaines partagent cela en commun, car elles ont un passé commun de torture et de destruction. La colonisation a laissé ces nations dans un état de désespoir total, et la survie n'était pas une tâche facile et ne l'est toujours pas, même après 60 ans d'indépendance pour certains. Le sud dans « Certain Winds from the South» représente à la fois l'espoir et le désespoir dans cette communauté ghanéenne.

Mots-clés: Sud, lutte, Ama Ata Aidoo, colonisateur, guerre

Introduction

“Certain Winds from the South” is a short story written by the Ghanaian writer Christina Ama Ata Aidoo, published in 1969 in a collection of short stories entitled *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories*. African writers sought to highlight colonisation and its impact on the African societies. They tackled several scars left by the coloniser that, even after independence, are still visible.

The short story of the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo is set in a Muslim community, in a post-independence period. It highlights the struggles that these characters undergo in order to survive in a time of economic crisis, where income is very scarce and the only remaining solution for survival seems to be the South. The south in itself represents both hope and fear for the characters in the short story.

Contextualisation of the Short Story

“Certain Winds from the South” was first published in 1969, less than ten years after the independence of Ghana. The latter was under the British rule and was called the Gold Coast, which “was dominated by numerous forts controlled by Dutch, British, and Danish merchants. Britain made the Gold Coast a crown colony in 1874, and British protectorates over the Asante and the northern territories were established in 1901¹.

When the colonists came to Africa, they sought to change everything and they worked hand in hand with missionaries whose mission was far from only spreading religion. They implemented their educational system and of course touched all what was related to customs and traditions under the label of christening the colonies. Jomo Kenyatta² sums up the idea in what follows,

When Europeans came to Africa, they had the Bible and the African had the land. They gave the Bible to the African and told him to hold it in his hand, close his eyes, and pray. When the African opened his eyes, he had the Bible and the European had his land (Cited in Khapoya, 1997, p.103).

Furthermore, Ghana, just like the other colonies, was concerned with whatever war its colonist was engaged in. Britain’s Colonial Office adopted African fighting troops to face War’s pressure (Roberts, 1990, p.41), and the Ghanaian soldiers were taken overseas to fight in World War II (1935-1945) and this automatically resulted in the death of a great number of African soldiers.

Soon after World War II, awareness of the coloniser’s oppression was raised by educated people as “the myth surrounding the Whiteman has been broken. The rulers were considered economic cheats, their arrogance had become very offensive”³. Ghana finally got its independence in 1957.

A Brief Overview of Aidoo’s Short Story

In “Certain Winds from the South”, there is a story within a story. The story of Hawa is intertwined with her mother’s M’ma Asana. It deals with themes of starvation, unemployment, War, resilience and survival. It “involves the fear of the future, the idea that anxiety and

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Ghana>

² Jomo Kenyatta, former President of Kenya, is not the owner of the quote; he used it in one of his speeches, as the origin of the saying is not found.

³ South African History online

uncertainty could cause failure or worse, solitary. Either without a husband, father, or provider” Michael Vaspasiano, 2013).

M'ma Asana is checking the Kraal (the house) one more time before going to sleep when she hears light steps coming towards her. She wonders who this might be and wishes to see her husband back, which is a total absurdity. Her night guest happens to be her son in law Issa.

If only it could be my husband – But of course it was not her husband!

'Who comes?'

'It is me, M'ma.'

'You, Issa, my son?'

'Yes, M'ma.'

'They are asleep.'

'I thought so. That is why I am coming now.' (Aidoo, 1970, p.54)

Hawa is a new mother who gave birth to her baby boy Fuseni a week ago. When Issa came at night, it was not to see his wife and new born. It was, rather, to inform his mother in law that he was leaving his family to go to the South. M'ma Asana tried her best to change his mind and prevent him from going,

'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 would think I was 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.' (Aidoo, 1970, p.55)

Issa was determined to go. He argues that he cannot stay in their village and watch his wife and Fuseni starve. Issa goes away to catch the night train, whereas M'ma Asana goes to her bed, unable to sleep as she needs to tell her daughter in the morning about her husband who left them to go to the South. The fear of starvation, indeed, seems to be the drive behind the departure of Issa.

Twenty years ago, or more than twenty years, M'ma Asana had just given birth to her baby girl Hawa when her husband left her to go the South, as a soldier, and later on to take part in World War II, in other people's war,

You see, he said we were under the Anglis-people's rule and they were fighting with the German-people... - Ask me, my child, for that was exactly what I asked him. 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? My child, it is as if you were there, that is what I asked him. 'But it is not as simple as that, he said'.

We could not understand him. 'You shall not go', said his father. 'You shall not go, for it is not us fighting with the Grunshies or the Gonjas...I know about the Anglis-people but not about any German- people, but anyway they are in their country.' Of course his father was playing, and so was I. 'A soldier must obey at all times, he said (Aidoo, 1970, p.58)

The soldier dies and leaves M'ma Asana alone with the hard reality of surviving without her man. The woman ends up without a husband, the provider of the family and having at her charge her new born baby Hawa. In fact, history seems to repeat itself. What happened to M'ma Asana twenty years ago is happening again to her daughter Hawa. Though it is true that Issa did not

go to fight in a War, so he might not end up dying, yet, the same outcome is there. Hawa is left alone with her new born baby.

The Juxtaposition of the Lives of M'ma Asana and Hawa

In the present time (of the story), the community is patriarchal and relies solely on agriculture. Though Ghana is independent, it still remains in a period of crisis. Harvest is very bad and people started to be afraid of starvation, that is why men, in this community thought of the south as a place where they could find an appropriate job and get paid for it.

Twenty years earlier, (in M'ma Asana's time) it is still the same community; a patriarchal one that is agricultural. Yet, M'ma Asana's husband is a soldier, and since at that time Ghana was still a British colony, those soldiers were taken to fight in World War and eventually ended up dying.

Therefore, and though in different times and periods, both mother and daughter suffered from abandonment, loneliness and the fear of starvation. The reason behind such suffering was the South. The South was the place that the soldier went to, as the government was there, and he never came back. It is the south again that takes Issa away from Hawa in order to find a job and it is not sure whether he will ever come back or not.

The males of M'ma Asana's village kept going to South; trading their presence with money they hoped can support their family. It seems that even if the males were still breathing somewhere, they *were* already dead in their homeland due to their absence. The lack of males resulted in decreased the number of birth in the village as M'ma Asana predicted that "then there were no more pregnancies and therefore no more births. But there is only one death and only one pain." This painful perspective of future gave the impression that it was not the abundance deaths or the absence of births; it was the loss of certainty itself that slowly crawled to their—mostly, the left behind females like M'ma Asana—hearts and consumed their hope (Natashey, 2018).

In fact, the reason behind such absences and uncertain future is the South. The latter is viewed differently by men and women. For men, it is a refuge they run to in order to find a solution to their economic problems. It can even be considered as an escape from that closed community in which agriculture was the only source of income. The south is a second chance to these men, thanks to which they might think of a brighter future.

On the other hand, women considered the south like a monster that eats their men away. They promise to come back but, apparently, they do not. The south becomes then like a rival, a kind of mistress that takes their husbands from them. Likewise, it becomes a damage maker. The south destroys families, one generation after the other. It gives birth to fatherless boys and girls, but most importantly, it gives rise to a type of women that becomes independent by obligation. These abandoned wives take the lead of their families because their men were swallowed by the South. For Dermot McManus (2017), the two men in the story had the choice whereas women did not,

Hawa's father and Issa both decide of their own free will to go south. Whereas neither of the women in the story (M'ma Asana and Hawa) have a choice. They must stay in the village as homemakers. Their role appears to be defined by the actions of the male.

Accordingly, in this story, there seems to be no clear gender fight; no Men Vs Women: the only fight is for survival. M'ma Asana is left alone because her husband died in the War, and Hawa is abandoned too because Issa cannot stay in the village and watch them starve. Both men and women fight for survival in different ways. However, McManus (2017) sees "no sense of unity between male and female which may again suggest that the society that existed at the time the story was written was male dominated with women not necessarily being treated equally". It is

true that the society was male dominated, yet it automatically turned matriarchal after the disappearances of men and when women found themselves obliged to do everything. Thus, giving the women of that community a greater role than the one they had before.

What is interesting to notice, as well, is the difference between mother and daughter. Throughout the whole story, only M'ma Asana speaks and at no moment, we hear Hawa's voice. Even when Issa comes to inform about his leaving, he comes at night, on purpose, knowing that Hawa would be sleeping. He comes to see M'ma Asana, not his wife.

In fact, Aidoo highlights another feature in this community, which is the fact that older women are listened to and have an important role in the society. M'ma Asana was both the father and the mother of the family. So, she had her say and she reached this position and right thanks to the life experience she has gained throughout the years of fight she survived. Hawa, on the other hand, still very young, in her twenties, is voiceless and muted all along the short story. Her mother asks and answers questions instead of her daughter, not only because the latter is young and automatically culturally muted, but because M'ma Asana knows it all, as she has been through this more than twenty years earlier.

The end of the story is typical to African stories. The protagonist has to accept her fate and move on. Those women had to accept the situation as it is and keep in mind that life must go on, that tomorrow can be a better day. There is always a light of hope; the protagonist remains optimistic and manages to wake up the next morning to carry on her life where it stopped the night before. Overnight, Hawa finds herself husband-less, obliged to fight for survival not only for herself, but for her baby Fuseni. One might say she is lucky in the sense that she has her mother who has been through this before, so she might teach her how to live and react. Indeed, the mother explains to Hawa through her own story that Issa will come back, that it might take time, but that it is for the benefit of everyone. She reassures her that it is relieving to know him alive, even though far away, but not dead like her husband whom she lost in the coloniser's War.

Though "Certain Winds from the South" is a rather short, short story, Aidoo tackled themes of pre-independence and post-independence. The death of the soldier during colonisation symbolises the idea that the colonist is death itself, causing starvation, struggle and lots of damage to the family.

Likewise, post-independence period is symbolic of that never-ending impact of the coloniser which leaves the former colonies in continuous struggle. Families are split because of that fear of starvation. Thus, men leave to the south looking for jobs, leaving their wives and children behind. Family unity is disturbed and everyone has to learn to survive on his own, because life must go on.

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