ISSN: 2349-2147

Modern Research Studies

Editor-in-Chief
Gyanabati Khuraijam

An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal
www.modernresearch.in

Title: Black Prophesies on White Soils and Ears: A Reading of Joyce Ashuntantang's "The Clairvoyant''

Author/s: KENNETH TOAH NSAH

Volume 2, Issue 3
September 2015

pp. 502–514.

Email: editor@modernresearch.in
mrsejournal@gmail.com

Managing Editor: **Yumnam Oken Singh**

ISSN: 2349-2147
Modern Research Studies:
An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Black Prophesies on White Soils and Ears: A Reading of Joyce Ashuntantang's "The Clairvoyant''

KENNETH TOAH NSAH
Research Assistant
University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon

Abstract: Inscribed within the paradigms of postcolonial and new historicist theories specifically and within the broader perspective of interdisciplinary studies, this paper attempts a reading of Joyce Ashuntantang's "The Clairvoyant". Tapping from the fields of literature, Diaspora and/or cultural studies, the paper wrestles thematically with issues of assimilation/hybridity, longing for home, reconnections with history/culture, and language. It views various characters in and connected to the short story through different prisms. Basically, Maru is considered an assimilated African/Cameroonian in the US society. Despite her black/Cameroonian origins and physical texture, she stands for black individuals on white soils with white ears—ears that are not ready to listen to ''baseless'' black/Cameroonian nonsensical prophesies. Ma Bechem appears to be essentially and purely representative of the Black/Cameroonian identity and culture, but her linguistic choice of Pidgin English complicates issues and situates her within the matrix of hybridity alongside the Narrator/Author and Wale (there are striking similarities between the narrator in the story and its author). The two latter characters are not only cultural hybrids par excellence, but equally emblematise a new breed of black individuals on white soils with black ears and with a burning zeal to return, either physically or psychologically, to their Black/Cameroonian roots.

Keywords: Black Prophesies, White Soils and Ears, Assimilation/ Hybridity, Reconnections/Language, Cameroon Diaspora Literature, Cameroon Anglophone Literature, Joyce Ashuntantang

Introduction

This paper is a reading of Joyce Ashuntantang's short story "The Clairvoyant." The work is informed by postcolonial criticism and new historicism and adopts an interdisciplinary approach spanning literary, diasporic and cultural studies. The justification for this approach emanates from the setting of the story, the characters and themes in the story, and the real origins and actual residence of the story's author. Thematically, the paper wrestles with issues of assimilation/hybridity, longing for home, reconnections with history/culture, and language. The various characters in the story have been viewed through different prisms, with varying discoveries. No matter how intricately connected the terms assimilation and hybridity may be, Maru is mainly perceived as an assimilated African/Cameroonian in the US society. Despite her black/Cameroonian origins and physical texture, she stands for black individuals on white soils with white ears—ears that are not ready to listen to ''baseless?'' black/Cameroonian nonsensical prophesies. Ma Bechem—the Cameroonian clairvoyant/prophet in the story—appears to be essentially and purely representative of the Black/Cameroonian identity and culture. However, her linguistic choice of Pidgin English and her actual, though involuntary, residence in the US complicates issues and situates her within the matrix of hybridity. The Narrator/Author (there are striking similarities between narrator in the story and its author) and Wale are also found within this matrix. These two characters emblematise a new breed of black individuals on white soils with black ears and with a burning zeal to return, either physically or psychologically, to their Black/Cameroonian roots. Situating our author within the context of Diaspora writing is undeniably useful in this paper. This constitutes the focus of the following segment.

Ashuntantang within the Cameroon/African Diaspora Scope

Joyce Ahuntantang hails from the south west region of Cameroon, precisely from Manyu Division. She is of the Kenyang ethnic group. After studies in Cameroon, UK and USA, she is presently a tenured Associate Professor of English at the University of Hartford, West Hartford, CT, USA. Besides lecturing, she is an actress, a screenwriter, a film producer, a poet, a non-fiction author, and a short story writer.

She is also one of the foremost critics/researchers and promoters of Cameroon Anglophone Literature, CAMLIT; she authored a groundbreaking book on this minority but widely growing literature in 2009 entitled *Landscaping Postcoloniality: The Dissemination of Anglophone Cameroon Literature*. All these roles have plunged her into incessant movements and displacements across different countries and continents on the globe for varying purposes, thereby indisputably conferring on her the status of a Cameroon/African Diaspora writer/worker. This author can be placed within the confines of Edward A. Alpers's, Alusine Jalloh's and Harris' definitions of the the African Diaspora (Jalloh and Harris, as cited by Alpers, 2001). Harris, for instance, contends that

> The African diaspora concept subsumes the following: the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. Thus viewed, the African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, continuous, and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class, and gender. (qtd in Alpers 2001, 8)

According to this excerpt, we can situate Ashuntantang among the category of African/Cameroonian migrants involved in voluntary global dispersal, who, while residing abroad, are fully aware of their cultural and social origins and make both pyschological and physical efforts to return to their roots, African homelands. She attests to her strong connections and commitments between various places on the globe as follows: "Everyone must be tied to a place or a couple of places" (Joyce Ashuntantang: Still on the Go). In the same interview, she expresses heightened pride about her Cameroonian identity. Then, in an interview with Integration, a New York-based newspaper, Ashuntantang acknowledges her reconnection trips and initiatives to Cameroon:

> Yes, I visit Cameroon quite often because I believe in giving back whatever I can to this land of my birth. It is in this regard that I founded EduArt INC, a not-for-profit

> organization that seeks to bring about positive changes through art. One of the projects launched by EduART is the literature awards for Cameroon literature in English. (Joyce 2010)

The author's literary activities, especially with regard to her native Cameroon, are obvious – her residence in the US and incessant displacements elsewhere on the globe notwithstanding. It is therefore not surprising that many critics/researchers of CAMLIT cite and/or hold her in high esteem under rubrics like third generation poet and fiction writer; diaspora writer; seasoned researcher, critic and promoter (Charles Teke, 2014; Dzekashu MacViban, 2014; Oscar Labang 2014; Shadrach Ambanasom, 2008). Joyce Ashuntantang thus occupies an uncontested space on the Cameroon/African diasporic landscape from many perspectives.

Black Prohesies on White Soils and Ears: A Reading of "The Clairvoyant"

This portion of the paper delves into a reading of the short story under study. The underlying interpretation here is that Ma Bechem's prophesies, no matter their profundity and accuracy, are/would be perceived disgustingly as black, baseless, and superstitious predictions on white American soils by white ears, including, in a very disturbing manner, the "white ears" of her very own black daughter, Maru. This interpretation, however generic it appears, gives rise to many different postcolonial and/or diasporic thematic concerns, and even exceptions, made possible by analysing the various characters—both active and passive—in the story, as well as its author. The thematic topicalities discernable in the story include, among others, the following: assimilation/hybridity, longing for home, reconnections with history/culture, and language. Each of these issues alongside the character(s) concerned will be considered in the paragraphs that follow.

In "The Clairvoyant", assimilation/hybridity is a thematic topicality that cannot be glossed over. Maru—Ma Bechem's US-based daughter—and the larger US white community, to some extent (no matter its degree) drive home the message of assimilation in hybridity.

They constitute white soils and ears that are not receptive of anything emanating from the Other – black world. Maru is much more assimilated in her hybrid state, however contestable this may appear. She is that black daughter with whitened/assimilated ears that are deaf to her mother's prophesies, and by extension to Africa's talents and potentials. Largely influenced by her inclinations to Western-oriented science, she ignores all the accurate prophesies Ma Bechem have made to her since childhood on issues like studies and marriage and rather considers "her mother's clairvoyance as coincidences" (par. 2), "clairvoyant nonsense" (par. 2) and "her mother's eccentricities" (par. 4). She expresses impatience with regard to "her mother's freedom of speech" (par. 4). This profoundly shocks the Narrator/Author who admires this special spiritual gift of Ma Bechem's and laments thus: "To be fair though, even her own daughter, Maru, had doubted her clairvoyance although she now felt her mother could indeed have the rare spiritual gift of telling the future" (par. 2). The narrator/Author does not only "call [on] Maru to comment on the accuracy of her mother's prediction," but also ponders on/frawns at the ridiculous, mocking and biased manner in which the US white community would have certainly received and reacted to this black but accurate prophesy in case it had been made public beforehand. She writes:

> I even suggested that we should inform the [white US] media that Ma Bechem had predicted the now historic power outage. But knowledge of our marginal lives in this foreign land intimidated us. I smiled to myself as I imagined the caption in the Connecticut Courant, "African grandmother predicted power outage?" The article would have been riddled with all sorts of biased connotations. A mere grandmother from Africa could not have predicted what all the technology in the USA had failed to predict. (par. 2)

While Maru and these white Americans represent (assimilated) hybrids/Self who despises black potentials and talents/Other, Narrator/Author and Wale are symbolic of commendable and balanced hybrids who treat issues on a Self-Self basis. They are ready not only to fall back to their black/Cameroonian roots, but to tap from both ways in

forging a new world order. That is why they recognise Africa's talents and potentials by referring to Ma Bechem's prophesies as "the rare spiritual gift of telling the future" (par. 2). These two characters, Narrator/Author and Wale, are indeed "*new* ***transcultural*** *forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation [voluntary displacement?]*" (emphasis in original) (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 1998, 16). Although Ma Bechem appears to be essentially and purely representative of the Black/Cameroonian identity and culture, her linguistic choice of Pidgin English and her actual, though involuntary, residence in the US situates her within the matrix of hybridity.

Narrator/Author and Wale, and to some extent Ma Bechem, display feelings of homesickness and nostalgia in the story. They overtly and/or implicitly long for their Cameroonian home and culture in the story. They are aware of their "marginal lives in this foreign [US] land" (par. 2), a land described by Ma Bechem as "Whiteman's land" (par. 4) and "dis wuna kontry" (par. 12). The latter's descriptions of this land signal detachment from it, consequently implying a longing for her native Cameroonian home. The US is a place where Western-oriented education and its culture have corroded and corrupted some Cameroonians like Maru of whom Ma Bechem says: "Whiteman book don spoil wuna sense; ting fit stand for wuna front so, wuna no go see'am" (par. 3). It is a hostile and uncomfortable place for Ma Bechem's Cameroon-originated, generous and motherly habits of sharing "tasty home-cooked meals" (par. 6) to all children and believing that all children (including adults) belong to her and all other mothers. As for Wale, the Narrator/Author tells us that his nostalgic feelings for his ethnic roots are frequent: "Wale often talked of the deep sense of loss he felt as an African and how he wished he could regain his "African spirit" with all its healing attributes" (par. 3). Similarly, Joyce Ashuntantang, who is also the Narrator/Author, holds that

> There is no universal being. Everyone must be tied to a place or a couple of places. I am very proud of my identity as a woman from Cameroon and Africa. I am so proud that my parents raised me to be passionate about my ethnic identity and values. Yes, I may pick up citizenships as I go but my country of origin is the

> beginning point of my identity. (Joyce Ashuntantang: Still on the Go)

Her strong nostalgic feelings for her ethnic origins surely account for her frequent and numerous trips to Cameroon. She contends elsewhere: "*Yes, I visit Cameroon quite often because I believe in giving back whatever I can to this land of my birth"* (Joyce 2010). The diasporan/migrant experiences and/or choices of all these three characters – Ma Bechem, Narrator/Author and Wale – are aptly captured by Victor J. Ramraj in his essay, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism", who holds that

> Yet though diasporans may not want actually to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them, they retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home. (qtd in Abdur Rahim 3)

The above excerpt does not only accentuate nostalgic emotions of Ashuntantang's migrant/diasporic characters but equally ushers in the related trajectory of reconnections with history/ culture. Wale's aspirations to "regain his "African spirit" with all its healing attributes" (par. 3) collocate with the author's ambitions of giving back whatever she can to the land of her birth, expressed in the interview with Integration cited earlier. She frowns at all those who deliberately embark on supressing the cultures and identities of others/Others: "Whenever someone tries to suppress another person's identity for whatever reason I become highly suspicious" (Joyce 2009). In "Joyce Ashuntantang: Using Poetry to Help Save Cultural Treasures", Barbara Steinberger exposes and acknowledges Ashuntantang's unwavering commitment and reconnection to her Manyu/Cameroon/Africa culture:

> Among the themes that run throughout Ashuntantang's teaching, poetry, and scholarly work is her connection to her native Cameroon in western Africa. This past summer, she traveled to Cameroon as part of her work on a book that will use poetry and photography to

> document the disappearing folk art of the Manyu region of Cameroon, where she is from.
>
> Ashuntantang has written many poems about Manyu crafts that tell vivid stories about the crafts and their role in the lives of Manyu women, in particular. One poem, *Asoreh,* tells a story centered around an "asoreh," a richly decorated dish that Manyu women created for their husbands. When the husband died, the asoreh was broken in a public ceremony, indicating that the woman was now free to re-marry […]
>
> Ashuntantang is hoping that her work will help preserve disappearing Manyu crafts like the asoreh—and she also wants to use her poetry to help preserve Kenyang, one of the disappearing ethnic languages of Cameroon. While the official languages of Cameroon are English and French, the country has more than 200 ethnic languages, many of which are dying as those who know them pass away. (Steinberger 2014)

She is determined not only to get as close as possible to her Kenyang/Cameroon enthnic roots but also to contribute within all her possibilities towards preserving all positive, endangered aspects of her ethnic culture, especially given her belief that "There is no universal being. Everyone must be tied to a place or a couple of places" (Joyce Ashuntantang: Still on the Go). This runs parallel to Nsah Mala's commitment towards preserving the endangered Mbesa culture and language as demonstrated in "Do You Know Mbesa?" (2013), his poetry and other works. Mala intends to "treat in greater details other elements of the Mbesa history, language, culture and economy" (Mala 2013, 63). The possible conjugal union hinted at the end of the story between Narrator/Author and Wale has far-reaching implications in the direction of reconnections with culture/history. If Narrator/Author really consults Ma Bechem the seer on how to protect the laughter of their beautiful friendship epitomised by the special gift of "a large pair of beaded circle-shaped earrings" (par. 10), the latter would surely advise them that "Marriage is a wonderful institution" (par. 17), in spite

of how many worries and fears inherent in "but who wants to live in an institution?" (par. 17). Their marriage will become a union of migrants/diasporans who believe in their cultural origins/roots – Narrator/Author believes in Ma Bechem's black prophesies and Wale yearns for the regaining of his "African spirit" – and are ready and willing to reconnect to these origins/roots and preserve them for posterity. Though some may categorise the Narrator/Author and Wale as global citizens, Ashuntantang cautions that "There is no universal being [/citizen]" (Joyce Ashuntantang: Still on the Go).

"The Clairvoyant" also offers insights to the question of language as a thematic concern, however debatable, within postcolonial literary criticism. The linguistic choices operated by the Narrator/Author and Ma Bechem in the story point to the manipulatability/vulnerability of imperial language, English, in the hands of postcolonial writers. Charles Teke, contrary to disciples of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's doctrine of abandoning imperial languages in favour of local ones, argues that "The vulnerability of English is registered in its inevitable submission to multiple uses" (Teke 2013, 74). The story contains elements of local colour in the form of local names such as Ma Bechem, Maru, and Bakebe which are Cameroonian/African in nature. Ma Bechem's use of Pidgin English creates room for code-mixing and code-switching in the story, further weakening the supposed US/UK (coloniser) grip and ownership claims over English language. As early as in the first paragraph of the story, Pidgin English comes in when Ma Bechem announces her prophesy: "I don talk say place go dark for lekeh ten days. When I sleep for night I see'am for my dream; even this afternoon wey I sleep, I still see as place dark for my dream" (par. 1). In paragraph 15, last but two paragraph of the story, this creol is still in use through "dis wuna kontri*"* (par. 15). Although the Narrator/Author seems to weaken our arguments when she expresses worries at the linguistic errors found in her "substandard" English translation of Ma Bechem's interpretation of the symbolism behind her special gift of earrings, there is still much evidence in the story showcasing Ashuntantang's expert ability in playing with languague to fit postcolonial ambitions – the said substandard rendition can and should be read as a deliberate attempt by the author since her plans to revise it

are not concretised in the story. Ashuntantang is one of those numerous postcolonial/African/Cameroonian writers that Teke describes as follows:

> Linguistically, Africa can claim English as cultural capital, using it in such ways as to suit its various contexts. The expression "local colour" has quite often been used in most postcolonial writing. This expression is arguably an extended metaphor of transformation. (Teke 2013, 77)

This citation points to Ashuntang's, as well as many other postcolonial writers', masterly techniques of playing with, modifying, distorting, transforming and puncturing imperial languages in order to send across various messages, including messages of liberation from colonial and linguistic bondage. In fact, this story is another major move taken in the direction of rendering imperial English vulnerable in the hands of postcolonial writers.

Conclusion

This paper reads Joyce Ashuntantang's short story ''The Clairvoyant'' from an interdisciplinary dimension guided, broadly but not exclusively, by the theories of postcolonialism and new historicism. After putting the various characters in and/or related to the story through different interpretative lenses, the paper grapples with issues of assimilation/hybridity, longing for home, reconnections with history/culture, and language. Maru is mainly perceived as an assimilated African/Cameroonian in the US society while Narrator/Author and Wale embody commendable diasporic/migrant hybrids who refuse to be overwhelmingly assimilated into any purportedly superior culture. Maru is a hybrid that is largely, obviously and/or progressively becoming assimilated. The Narrator/Author and Wale suffer from some sort of homesickness and are eager to reconnect with their pasts/histories/cultures. Although some may perceive Ma Bechem's depiction in the work as essentialist and purist, her use of Pidgin English and her maternally-accommodating qualities render her as both a hybrid and subaltern, especially given her bold and

authoritative manner of speaking. We are told that "Ma Bechem had a quiet authoritative way of talking, and it was hard to shut her up" (par. 4). The story celebrates black/African/Cameroonian cultural values and other potentials and seeks to promote them, especially in a global era where science is quickly replacing anything Divine or spiritual despite its obvious shortcomings and deficiencies. This paper, however, does not assume in any way that it has carried out an exhaustive reading of "The Clairvoyant". Many other literary theoretical pradigms, including those used in this present work, can still yield many plausible and insightful interpretations of the story under study.

References:

Alpers, Edward A. 2001. "Defining the African Diaspora." Paper presented to the Center for Comparative Social Analysis Workshop, October 25, 2001. 1-28. Web. Accessed January 22, 2015. http://www.ces.uc.pt/formacao/materiais_racismo_pos_racismo/alpers.pdf.

Ambanasom, Shadrach. 2008. "Half A Century of Written Anglophone Cameroon Literature." A keynote address by the occasion of the EduArt Literary Awards Night at Capitol Hotel Buea, July 18, 2008. 1–23. Web. Accessed January 21, 2015. http://www.eduartawards.org/files/ambanasom_50_years_of_anglophone_literaturef.pdf.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, & Helen Tiffin. 1998. *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Ashuntantang, Joyce. 2009. "Joyce Ashuntantang: Foreign Publishers Determine the Nature of our Stories (Interview)." Interview by Dibussi Tande. June 13, 2009. Web. Accessed January 25, 2015. http://www.dibussi.com/2009/06/joyce-ashuntantang-foreign-publishers-determine-the-nature-of-our-stories.html.

---. 2010**.** "Actress, Screenwriter, Filmmaker, and Poet, Dr. Joyce Ashuntantang grants interview to Integration, a new York based Newspaper" Culled from Integration of May 19-June 02, 2010. Web. Accessed January 24, 2015. http://www.joyceash.com/2010/06/interview-with-frank-gutenburg-of-integration-a-new-york-based-newspaper-.html.

---. 2015. "The Clairvoyant" (Fiction/Short Story). Bakwa Magazine Online. January 14, 2015. Web. Accessed January 20, 2015. http://bakwamagazine.com/2015/01/14/fiction-the-clairvoyant-by-joyce-ashuntantang/.

---. "Joyce Ashuntantang: Still on the Go" Interview at Africans on the Move. Web. n.p. Accessed January 25, 2015. https://africansonthemove.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/joyce-ashuntantang-still-on-the-go/.

Labang, Oscar. 2014. "Apostatized Imagination: Poetry, Religion and the Dilemma of Postcolonial Experience in the Poetry of Wirndzerem G. Barfee." *Intersections. 2.1*: 11-24.

Mala, Nsah. 2013. *Do You Know Mbesa?* Yaounde: Ansama Publications.

Rahim, Abdur. "Diasporic Dilemma in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake.*" 1-12. Web. Accessed January 10, 2015. https://www.academia.edu/4840224/Diasporic_Dilemma_in_Jhumpa_Lahiris_The_Namesake.

Steinberger, Barbara. 2014. "Joyce Ashuntantang: Using Poetry to Help Save Cultural Treasures" September 16, 2014. Web. Accessed January 25, 2015. http://www.joyceash.com/2014/09/joyce-ashuntantang-using-poetry-to-help-save-cultural-treasures-.html.

Teke, Charles. 2013. "The Vulnerability of Imperial Language as a Transformational Tool in Postcolonial Transcultural Discourse." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies. 2.3*: 71-81.

---. 2014. "Exuberance and Multi-Talented Questing: An Interview with Oscar C Labang" ResearchGate. 1-10. Web. Accessed January 28, 2015. http://www.researchgate.net/publication/269518881_Exuberance_and_Multi-Talented_Questing_An_Interview_with_Oscar_C_Labang.