



‘African Assimilationist’ as Victim and Victimizer in *Othello* and *Anowa*

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Abstract

The European and African contact has been and will always be the gravest in the history of humanity. This is the result of the extreme difference in culture, religion and most of all the color of both entities. This disparity created nothing but repulsion from the European side which considered itself superior to the different other. This attitude was expressed through the oppressive channels of slavery and colonialism which fixed the European as the norm and the African as a deformity. The only option that was left for the African was to assimilate. That is to say, to surrender all aspects of his identity and embrace that of his oppressor. In return, Europe continued its rejection and inferior view to the African. Both Shakespeare and Aidoo tackle this idea in *Othello* and *Anowa* respectively. This research paper focuses on the unique view of both playwrights about the African assimilationist in relation to his oppressors and his own people. Shakespeare criticizes the European racism and presents it as the monster that changes Othello into a victim. Whereas Aidoo criticizes the African guilt in the slave trade which results into changing Kofi Ako into a criminal who victimizes his own people.

Keywords: Assimilation, Shakespeare, *Othello*, Aidoo, *Anowa*.

Introduction

Africa and Europe are two separate worlds. They have always been apart in terms of culture, language, religion and race. In spite of this disparity, both entities came together in the most awkward manner which was slavery and then colonialism. In both channels, Europe took advantage of Africa’s difference, considering it as a sign of its inferiority. Hence the legitimization of slavery and colonialism as the only interpretation to the relation between Europe and Africa.

During this course of events, many Africans tried to end this inferior European look to them by assimilating with their oppressor’s culture. In spite of their success in that culturally, linguistically as well as religiously, they failed in one aspect which was their African race. Hence comes the idea of assimilation in which an African is internally European but, unwillingly, is still externally African.

This mental struggle has been dealt with multiple times specially in postcolonial literature. However, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) unprecedentedly tackled this controversy through his everlasting masterpiece, *Othello* (1604-1605). In the play, Shakespeare discusses the idea of an interracial marriage between a black Moor and a European woman.

Many consider the play an authentic proof of the European prejudice against people of colour. However, the researcher believes that Shakespeare was among the first to unravel his society’s racism instead of adopting it as a moral code. This is shown through the play’s tragic hero who becomes the white society’s victim. He succeeds in assimilating yet continues to be rejected. This finally leads to his marriage’s destruction which is, in the first place, a symbol of this unnatural communion between two unreconciled cultures and races.

In the same context but after precisely three hundred and sixty-five years and after the termination of both slavery and colonialism, the Ghanaian dramatist, Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-2023) tackles an idea that seems to a great extent inspired by Shakespeare’s *Othello*. *Anowa* (1969) revolves around Kofi Ako, the African who willingly assimilates for the sake of money and rapid wealth. This leads to his marriage’s destruction to Anowa who is the incarnation of proud Africa. Through

his transformation from a poor African to a wealthy assimilationist, Aidoo deals with the unspoken African guilt of opening the door to slavery.

Therefore, the paper’s main idea is to reveal the opposite point of views of two outstanding playwrights whether in Europe or Africa. Shakespeare is a European, yet he uncovers the racist truth of his society. The same can be applied to the African Aidoo who also courageously speaks about her society’s guilt against its own children. Consequently, the African assimilationist becomes the victim from the European point of view of Shakespeare, but the victimizer from the African perspective of Aidoo.

These texts in particular are chosen for various reasons. First, they are written by two outstanding playwrights. Shakespeare is undoubtedly the father of English Drama and one of England’s most cunning weapons of colonial domination. His masterfully written works were intentionally spread through the colonial education which preached England’s superiority above its colonized subjects and their cultures.

As for Aidoo, she is one of the most outstanding African writers. Her literary career is versatile as it includes writing poetry, novels, short stories as well as drama. Her works always reflect her revival of the Ghanaian oral tradition which makes her no less than Shakespeare in being an ambassador of her African culture to other nations like Europe. What is more interesting about Aidoo is her political involvement in the Ghanaian government during the 1980s and her struggle to free the Ghanaian education from the colonial influence in postcolonial Ghana. This role makes her an unintentional rival to Shakespeare who was unwillingly used by the English colonial forces as an intellectual invader after his death.

The second reason behind choosing these plays is the obvious resemblance between them. They follow the same pattern in which a fruitless marriage is doomed to failure from the beginning. Of course here Shakespeare’s play is the archetype. As for Aidoo’s play, it is the African replica which shows the difficulty to shed the Shakespearean influence even from a well-established African author like Aidoo.

In both plays, Shakespeare and Aidoo focus on the husband, wife and the monster that separates them. Deep analysis shows the significant interpretation of

Shakespeare and Aidoo to the image of the African assimilationist. Though Othello and Kofi differ in their circumstances and motives, they end up having the same destiny which is committing suicide and destroying their loved ones.

In analyzing both plays, the researcher focuses on the works of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) including: *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (1988). The reason for choosing Fanon in particular is his experience first as a person of color who went through the process of colonialism. Second his own struggle as an assimilationist trying to regain his balance as an African distorted by the oppressive European culture. Both are clear in his works which analyze the African assimilationist. His motives, fears and logic behind his actions are all explained. In addition to Fanon, the works of Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Arnold Rose are used to define the concept of assimilation and its various methods. This proves highly effective in the application on the chosen plays.

Assimilation: The Process and its Methods Applied to the African Case

Robert E. Park explained the literal meaning of the term and how it evolved. He stated that in “earlier usage it meant ‘to compare’ or ‘to make like.’ According to later usage it signifies ‘to take up and incorporate’”(606). So it appears to be a productive process in which two or more individuals or cultures share and combine to reach a united form. This positive meaning is well expressed in the following definition:

Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life. (Park and Burgess 735)

Based on this definition, assimilation appears to be a process of transaction between or among equal parties. Therefore, neither is ashamed to share aspects of his identity nor sceptic to accept that of the other. This is not the case where the interaction among different races or cultures take an oppressive form. Suddenly, the process of assimilation becomes a compulsive relationship in which the oppressor enforces his cultural aspects and destroys

that which is different from his own. From this perspective, the meaning of assimilation changes to be:

. . . the adoption by a person or group of the culture of another social group to such a complete extent that the person or group no longer has any characteristics identifying him with his former culture and no longer has any particular loyalties to his former culture. (Rose 721-22)

The victims of this process change into blur figures who can no longer belong to their former selves or be fully accepted by their oppressors as equals. The European-African interaction is a well proven example of this case. Through slavery and colonialism, Europe sought to destroy the Africans’ sense of belonging to their own culture. They were forced to shed every aspect that reminded them of their previous existence to adopt that of their oppressors. In *Toward the African Revolution* (1988), Fanon analysis what the process of assimilation means to the Africans:

The oppressor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular a pejorative judgment with respect to his original forms of existing. This event , which is commonly designated as alienation, is ... found in the official texts under the name of assimilation. (38)

After explaining what is meant by assimilation, the reason for adopting this behavior from the African side becomes clear. Fanon explained that the act of assimilation was the African’s strategy to cope with his feelings of “[g]uilt and inferiority”(38). This occurred through “proclaiming his total and unconditional adoption of the new cultural models, and ... by pronouncing an irreversible condemnation of his own cultural style” (38-39). He was simply brain washed by his oppressor to reach a state of compliancy that put him off against any act of revulsion against his state.

This process of assimilation occurs through two methods. The first is “the coercive method” (Simons 808). As its name suggests, this method relies on threat and violence “in which attack is made by force” (808). The second is “the attractive method” (808) and as its name implies, it is based on “influence” (808). Whether the

African was forced into assimilation or embraced it willingly, the reasons were usually the same. The African was oppressed by the European culture that loathed him and all what he represented. This was clear in the European stereotypes about all that was black or African. According to Fanon:

When European civilization came into contact with the black world, with those savage peoples, everyone agreed: Those Negroes were the principle of evil.... In Europe the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul. In the collective unconscious of *homo occidentalis*, the Negro — or, if one prefers, the color black — symbolizes evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, famine. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 190-91)

The misery of the African does not end here as though he tries to alienate himself from his race and culture, he is “never wholly successful” (*Toward* 38). This is due to the fact that “the oppressor quantitatively and qualitatively limits the evolution” (38). This is the case that Shakespeare presents through *Othello* and Aidoo through *Anowa*.

***Othello*’s Historical Context as a Precolonial Play and *Anowa*’s as a Postcolonial One**

The Renaissance was one of the greatest times for Europe in general and England in particular. It was a great age for development which was accompanied by the contact with new worlds and cultures. Nevertheless, this contact was a double-edged weapon. It showed the Europeans that they were not alone in the vast world as other cultures and nations could claim greatness in cultural and scientific developments. But at the same time, it was the cause of fear that ‘the other’ with its difference could ultimately change the norm and standard of European life. Therefore, the contact resulted in repulsion most of the time rather than openness to change and collaboration (Loomba 4). This was clear in the riots that were raised during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries against strangers who aggravated “both nationalist feelings and hostility to outsiders...” (15). There were also “proclamations against foreigners” that were issued against aliens to drive them out of England (52).

Since that was the atmosphere of the Renaissance, no wonder that most of Shakespeare’s plays depicted foreigners since they were always present in the English society. However, Shakespeare also dealt with the way these strangers crossed over and tried to mingle with the English fabric. This represented the core of the problem that threatened the English culture. Examples of these assimilationists were presented in Shakespeare’s plays like *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598) through the conversion of Jews into Christianity (18). Shakespeare was conscious enough to notice not only the problem but also its effects on these strangers. He was among the first to discuss the idea of the assimilationist before it even developed to take its present form in postcolonial literature. This is shown in *Othello* through the interracial marriage between a Venetian white woman and a Moor. The term, ‘Moor’ was given to those who were

of mixed Arab and Berber ancestry and Islamic faith who came to Spain in the eighth century.... For Shakespeare’s audiences, certainly, the word Moor was an amalgam of both religious and colour difference.... In English theatre, ‘Moor’ is primarily associated with blackness and ‘Moorishness’ is generally a set of attributes that cannot be either acquired or shed. (46)

As a European, Shakespeare had at first a prejudiced view of the Moors. Yet one sees a development in his conception of the European stereotypical view of the Moor in his plays. Shakespeare introduces the character of the Moor in three plays. *Titus Andronicus* (1593-1594), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598) and *Othello* (1604-1605). In the first play, Aaron, the Moor is presented as the villain who embodies the traits of evilness and wickedness as he plots against the play’s tragic hero. His ethnicity and skin colour fit the devilish stereotype that Europeans give to blacks and Muslims. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Moor presented is a more respectful character. He is one of Portia’s suitors. As the prince of Morocco, he is portrayed as a shallow minded man who only cares for appearances. This shows that as a black man, he feels inferior and insecure. So he tries to compensate for the lack of good looks by extravagant appearances.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare appears to reach a stage of maturity in which his view of the Moors is no longer stereotypical but more of an analytical one. Instead of presuming traits about his character, he brings forward the cultural and racial stress

that finally leads to his hero’s collapse in the same stereotype that he is fighting. Therefore, the Moor in *Othello* is no longer a secondary character, but he is the play’s main hero around which all characters revolve. He is embodied with all the noble traits of a classical tragic hero that make him the center of praise and envy from all characters. However, his tragic flaw is not jealousy, but his feelings of alienation. Leaving his mind to be manipulated by Iago, the play’s villain, Othello’s flaw leads to his downfall.

As a Shakespearean tragic hero, Othello’s fall from glory is met by the audience’s sympathy and not satisfaction. This proves that Shakespeare succeeds in glorifying the character of the Moor rather than the trace of prejudice which can be found in his earlier works. Although Othello’s murder to Desdemona is horrific, his repentance and agony after killing his soulmate is heart breaking and convincing. The effect of his crime is intensified because of Desdemona’s innocence. But again, it is equalized with Othello’s own suicide. This is where Shakespeare’s version of the story is intentionally different from that of Cinthio’s.¹ This difference highlights Shakespeare’s new evaluation of the Moor’s stereotype.

Similar to Shakespeare, Aidoo adopts *Anowa* from an original source. The play’s idea is derived from a Ghanaian “popular folk tale” (Odamtten 48) in which a rebellious daughter defies her parents by marrying against their will. This reflects Aidoo’s influence by the Ghanaian oral tradition. Set in the late nineteenth century, particularly the 1870s, *Anowa*, the pretty girl refuses all her suitors to marry Kofi Ako who in her parents’ eyes is “a less than exemplary young man” (48). After their marriage, *Anowa* and Kofi establish a small “trading business between the hinterland and the coast” (48-49). Together they succeed in growing this business, but the more they accumulate wealth, the more they drift apart. Their wealth is expanded through Kofi’s trade in slaves. *Anowa* who is a representative of Africa, refuses to be his accomplice and tries to save him from losing his humanity. The marriage becomes more futile because of the couple’s inability to have children. Their marriage ends tragically, and Kofi becomes the main reason behind that.

Anowa’s events are set exactly at the crux of the commercial contact between Europe and Africa. It initially began through the trade in “African gold, ivory and pepper” in exchange for European products (43). This marked the preparatory stage

to the slave trade, especially with Europe’s need for large numbers of laborers to match “the development of plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean” (44).

What was remarkable about that transaction was the major role that the Africans played, not as commodities, but rather as providers. African tribes began waging raids against each other (Elkins 98). None was immune against capture. The captives were then sold through African “middlemen” (99) who negotiated the price with the European slave traders. The transactions were usually done on the African coasts. This proves that at that time, Europeans did not have the military power or experience to invade the African interior and face the heat and the dangers of unknown lands. After the purchase was done, hundreds of Africans were stacked in dungeons in the coastal forts. These “fortified stone forts” (Klein 61) were built by Europeans but with the consent “of the local African state or community, to which it often paid taxes and from which it obtained its provisions and access to the interior trading routes” (61). Among these forts was Sao Jorge da Mina (Elmina) which was built in the fifteenth century in the Gold Coast which is now known as Ghana (61). Explaining these historical facts is intended by Aidoo.² She states:

I think that the whole question of how it was that so many people could be enslaved and sold is very important. I’ve always thought that it is an area that must be probed. It holds one of the keys to our future.... Until we have actually sorted out this whole question of African people, both on the continent and in the diaspora, we may be joking, simply going round in circles. (James 21)

After discussing the mindsets and circumstances surrounding the writing of each play, focus is given to the plays’ protagonists. Their similar behavior as assimilationists but their different methods in adopting this process is analyzed through the unique perspective of the playwrights.

Othello and Kofi Ako: Two Different Cases of Assimilation

➤ Othello: A Victim Saved by Shakespeare

Othello is first presented in the play as a “valiant” (Shakespeare 1.3.47) leader and the sole defender of Venice. Though he is not a Venetian by birth, colour or culture, he is their leader. Superficially, this is an excellent example of assimilation.

It proves that the black man can be reformed and elevated to the status of white people. It is also a proof of the graciousness of Europe in accepting foreigners and treating them as equals.

Othello overcomes his feelings of alienation by being a loyal servant and a fierce protector of white culture against ‘the other’, represented in the Ottoman enemies. He refers to them in more than one situation as being inferior to the Venetians and himself as being superior to them. For instance, after breaking the fight between Cassio and Montano, Othello warns:

Are we turn’d Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl:
He that stirs next to carve for his own rage
Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion. (2.3.149-153)

He becomes the duke’s trustee and a regular in the homes of senators like Brabantio, his future father-in-law. During this time, Othello is out of reach from the claws of racism. When he is threatened by Brabantio’s attack on him, Othello assures Iago:

My services which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints. ‘Tis yet to know, —
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
I shall promulgate — I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach’d ... I must be found:
My parts, my title and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly. (1.2.21-32)

Othello’s fall from this false European blessing is only clear the moment he decides to choose one of Europe’s women to be his wife. This case of the black man’s desire in having a white partner is analyzed by Fanon. He considers it as another symptom that shows the black man’s desperate attempts to authenticate his assimilation and remove any traces of inferiority from his part. Speaking from the perspective of the black assimilationist, Fanon writes:

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*[...] who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization.... I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. (*Black Skin* 63)

Thus Othello’s marriage to Desdemona becomes more than an act of love from Othello’s part, but rather an act of self-assurance.

With Othello’s marriage to Desdemona, he crosses the sacred blood barrier that Europe cannot tolerate. Subsequently, the racist attacks against Othello breaks out, declaring that Europe’s fake tolerance to the inferior races can turn to backlashes in the blink of an eye. Brabantio who has once been a close friend and an advocate to Othello’s leadership has become an enemy and an outspoken racist. Brabantio addresses the duke and the entire senate to raise the alarm on the threat of treating inferior races as equal:

Mine’s not an idle cause: the duke himself,
Or any of my brothers of the state,
Cannot but feel this wrong as ‘twere their own;
For if such actions may have passage free,
Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be. (Shakespeare 1.2.100-04)

Here lies Othello’s dilemma as he succeeds to blend culturally into the European world through his loyalty in saving Venice from the threats of the Turks. However, his colour remains his obstacle. According to Ania Loomba:

In the theatre, the outsider is not safely ‘outside’ at all ... he or she threatens to cross over the boundaries of racial or ethnic or religious difference. Othello is not simply the alien who crosses over by marrying Desdemona; he is also the exotic outsider who alone is capable of defending Venice against the Turks... Theatrical images of converted Jews, Turks, blacks, and Indians, of Othellos and Calibans ... allay the fears of Englishmen going native. (18-19)

Under these direct and severe racial attacks, Othello begins to lose control over himself and his actions. This becomes magnified after he learns about Iago’s allegations about Desdemona’s infidelity. Othello’s complete assimilation suddenly converts into a full indulgence in Europe’s racist labels to his own kind. He changes into a “jealous, intemperate, murderous, barbaric” man (Roux 26). This is shown when Othello slaps Desdemona in public and in the presence of Lodovico, her father’s kinsman.

LODOVICO. Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
Could neither graze nor pierce? (Shakespeare 4.2.250-45)

Desdemona’s claimed unfaithfulness therefore becomes not only about a love proved untrue, but also an act of rejection and further alienation from the white culture. This assumed rejection is shown in presenting their union as a childless marriage as if the society can never allow such a breach in its natural order. Consequently, the more Othello is estranged from Desdemona, the more he loses his assimilated self. Fanon states:

Affective self-rejection invariably brings the abandonment-neurotic to an extremely painful and obsessive feeling of exclusion, of having no place anywhere [...] To be “The Other” is to feel that one is always in a shaky position, to be always on guard, ready to be rejected and ... unconsciously doing everything needed to bring about exactly this catastrophe. (*Black Skin* 76)

Othello’s agony is ended when he finally avenges his honor by murdering his abuser. He kills Desdemona as if he kills the white rejection to his racial identity. However, he later realizes that he was betrayed by his own friend, Iago and that his wife is a pure soul innocently murdered by his own hands. In this moment, Othello realizes that the only penalty is to take his own life as a brave warrior. However, before doing this, he gives a last speech saying:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know’t.

.... I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak

Of one ... whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

....Set you down this;

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turban’d Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,

And smote him, thus. *[Stabs himself]* (Shakespeare 5.2.337-55)

In these final words, Othello confesses his failure to assimilate. Therefore he punishes himself by death. He finally recognizes himself as an outsider. However, he keeps his loyalty to the state of Venice by killing its last enemy, himself. With this glorious death, Othello becomes a combination of contradictions. He is a man “who has both a slave past and a noble lineage, a black skin and thick lips as well as great military skill and rhetorical abilities, a capacity for tenderness as well as a propensity to violence” (Loomba 92).

Here lies Shakespeare’s innovation as he presents a Moor who matches as well as contradicts the European stereotype to black people. Shakespeare satisfies his English audience by presenting different characters in the play who direct racial abuse against Othello. At the same time, he puts his hero in situations that smoothly contradict these racist views. The audience are tricked and intrigued by Shakespeare’s mastery and slowly, their racist views are changed to admiration and sympathy for him.

It becomes apparent that the play is not only about showing Othello as the assimilationist victim but also showing the European society as the victimizer. Shakespeare succeeds, though in an indirect way, in criticizing the inadequacy of the European societies. Therefore, *Othello* reveals “a troubled and troubling fantasy of containment for a society frightened by the idea of cultural integration” (Burton 59).

The embodiment of this psychotic fear as well as the catalyst behind its incitement in others is represented through Iago. Shakespeare excelled in portraying Iago’s character as the ultimate villain. A.C. Bradley describes Iago as “a being who hates good simply because it is good, and loves evil purely for itself. His action... springs from... a disinterested delight in the pain of others ...” (179). Every time he is asked why he is doing what he does, he gives a different reason. Sometimes he expresses his jealousy from Cassio because he was overstepped by him. For this, he blames the injustice of the Moor. Sometimes he declares that he hates Othello for suspecting that he had an affair with his wife. Sometimes that he envies that such a base human being can be preferred to him by Desdemona. Lacking purpose increases his villainy and makes it unlimited as it lacks justification. He tells Rodrigo, “I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason” (Shakespeare 1.3.357-59).

This is intended by Shakespeare; the main reason becomes mysterious but only to the untrained eye. Iago becomes the symbol of white hatred and rejection to all what is different. Hence Iago’s envy becomes explainable. He refuses that Othello reaches a high place in the Venetian society. He tells Roderigo, “I follow him to serve my turn upon him:/ We cannot all be masters, nor all masters/ Cannot be truly follow’d...” (1.1.42-44). Iago also refuses that Othello reaches a sort of equal status

by marrying a white woman who truly falls in love with him. This is clear in the way he instigates Brabantio’s attacks on Othello:

... your fair daughter,
At this odd-even and dull watch o’ the night,
Transported, with no worse nor better guard
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor....
Your daughter, if you have not given her leave,
I say again, hath made a gross revolt;
Tying her duty, beauty, wit and fortunes
In an extravagant and wheeling stranger
Of here and every where.... (1.1.110-25)

Iago’s fears represent the European fear at that time that these assimilationists dissolve in the European social fabric and by that pollute the pure European bloodline with their barbaric identity. Through this idea, a new understanding is given to the image of “the green-eyed monster” that Othello must be aware of as it “doth mock the meat it feeds on” (3.3.116). It is an embodiment of the European physical features, racial prejudice and hidden jealousy of other races who are mocked for allegedly being inferior to Europe. So in *Othello*, the white, green-eyed man becomes the monster though he is supposed to be the stereotypical white angel. As for the black man, he becomes the victim though he is stereotypically supposed to be the black devil. According to Martin Orkin:

Shakespeare is writing about color prejudice and, further, is working consciously against the color prejudice....He in fact reverses the associations attached to the colors white and black that are the consequence of racist stereotyping. It is Iago, the white man, who is portrayed as amoral and anti-Christian, essentially savage towards that which he envies or resents....(170)

Thus, *Othello* becomes an indirect Shakespearean inditement for the racism of the English society. This proves that Shakespeare was unwillingly used as an aiding element in establishing Europe’s superiority to other cultures and races. It is true that as a European, he always celebrated his culture and showed concern for the flood of strangers who were invading the familiarity of the English people at that time. But in later works like the play at hand, he showed maturity in understanding that this fear can lead to unjustified antagonism rather than a healthy dialogue.

The researcher does not believe that it is the playwright’s fault that after his death, his works were used by the colonizers as “the quintessence of Englishness and a measure of humanity itself. Thus the meanings of Shakespeare’s plays were both derived from and used to establish colonial authority” (Loomba and Orkin 1). Later on, a more profound examination was done to Shakespeare’s works and many “[i]ntellectuals and artists from the colonized world . . . appropriated Shakespeare as their comrade in anti-colonial arms by offering new interpretations and adaptations of his work” (2).

That is why many talented African writers are not shy to show Shakespeare’s influence on them as it is the case in Aidoo’s *Anowa*. Using the same idea of the African assimilationist, Aidoo portrays Kofi Ako. The variation between both protagonists is that Othello’s predicament is the fact that he is a black man alienated in a European milieu. He is simply a Moor in Venice, not in Africa. His enforcement into assimilation follows the “coercive method” (Simons 808) which was mentioned before in part one. This method can be described as being “direct” as in it, the oppressor launches an “attack” which is “made by force” (808). As for the oppressed, he is obliged to surrender his identity “through fear — a realization of differences . . .” (808).

For Aidoo’s Kofi Ako, the situation is completely different as he is an African willingly alienated from his people and victimized by his own hands. He is shown to be the result of “the attractive method” (808). This is an “indirect method” of assimilation as in it, the oppressor relies on his overwhelming “influence” (808). As for the oppressed, he is allured by his blinding “ambition” that gives him “an intense realization of likenesses” to what is furthest to him (808).

➤ **Kofi Ako: A Victimizer Judged by Aidoo**

According to Fanon, “the enemy of the Negro is often not the white man but a man of his own color” (*Toward* 17). This idea can be applied to Kofi Ako’s case. Kofi plays the role of the white man in the way he deals with his own people as well as his wife. He is not put under the same racial pressure of Othello’s alienation in a European society. Instead, Kofi alienates himself from his people and Anowa.

Kofi and Anowa appear at the beginning of their marriage to be on good terms, and a cooperative young couple. They accept the little they have and are happy to share the workload together. The only concern they have is that they have been married long enough to be still childless. Anowa tells Kofi, “I am already worried about not seeing signs of a baby yet” (Aidoo 86). Indications become clear that to many people, though they do not know about Kofi and Anowa’s unblessed marriage, they seem to be an odd couple. Kofi tells Anowa that “wherever we go, people take you for my sister at first. They say they have never heard of a woman who helped her husband so. ‘Your wife is good’ they say ‘for your sisters are the only women you can force to toil like this for you’” (87).

Kofi begins to think of ideas to expand their trade. He proposes to Anowa the idea that “the time has come for us to think of looking for one or two men to help us[...] I hear they are not expensive...” (89). Anowa immediately refuses to be part of this infamous trade, but Kofi justifies his view. He becomes the mouthpiece of the previous African generations who indulged themselves in this guilt shamelessly.

KOFI AKO. Now here is something I am going to do whether you like it or not[...] What is wrong with buying one or two people to help us? They are cheap[...] Everyone does it ... does not everyone do it? [...]

ANOWA. I shall not feel happy with slaves around ... Kofi, no man made a slave of his friend and came to much himself. It is wrong. It is evil. (90)

Therefore, the moment of Kofi’s indulgence in the slave trade marks the crux of his assimilation. Similar to Othello’s marriage to Desdemona, the slave trade becomes Kofi’s weapon against himself. Through it, Kofi becomes his own people’s victimizer, an alien to them and to his wife whose womb symbolically dries up with every slave he trades in. Vincent O. Odamtten comments that, “Kofi Ako’s

ramblings indicate his inability to come to terms with his own guilt.... His solution only perpetuates hierarchical distances, alienation, and separation, even as he seems to offer the opposite” (76).

As Kofi accumulates wealth, his appearance changes. In Phase One, he appears wearing “*work clothes and carrying a fish trap and a bundle of baits*” (Aidoo 69). But in Phase Two, he appears to be “*better dressed than before*” (94) and to be “*carrying what seems to be a ridiculously light load*” (94). In contrast to him, Anowa appears to be “*still bare footed*” (94). This shows that she does not share Kofi with any of his profits. She continues to serve him out of her duty to him as his wife and not out of her approval of his doings. Slowly, she turns to be his slave rather than his wife as he refuses to ask her to bed. Also strange enough, the young boys and girls that Kofi keeps as slaves address him as “Father” (94) and Anowa as “Mother” (95). So these slaves replace their children and the act of selling their own children leads to their impotence.

To prove that they are now a cursed couple, “THE-MOUTH-THAT-EATS-SALT-AND-PEPPER” (99) represented in the old man comments on slavery saying:

My fellow townsmen. Have you heard what Kofi and Anowa are doing now? They say he is buying men and women as though they were only worth each a handful of the sands on the shore ... money-making is like a god possessing a priest. He never will leave you, until he has occupied you, wholly changed the order of your being, and seared you through and up and down....

Those who have observed have remarked that every

House is ruined where they take in slaves....

It is frightening.

But all at once,

Girl-babies die

And the breasts of women in new motherhood

Run dry. (99-100)

Here slavery becomes similar to the “the green-eyed monster” (Shakespeare 3.3.116) of racism which finally consumes Othello. They are simply two sides of the same coin and initiated by the same oppressor. For Kofi, slavery becomes a productive monster which feeds his greed and hidden desire to be equal in status to the white man. This blind desire for assimilation becomes a compulsive force that pushes Kofi to rise above the dead bodies of his African brothers and sisters. Fanon states that for the assimilationist, “there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world. Whence his constant . . . concern with being powerful like the white man, his determined effort to acquire positive qualities – that is . . . the composition of an ego” (*Black Skin* 51).

This becomes clear in Phase Three in which Kofi reaches the height of his wealth and indulgence in the slave trade. It becomes obvious in the description of his house, which is referred to as “THE BIG HOUSE” (Aidoo 103). It is described as being richly furnished and adorned with “*beautiful skins*” and “*richly carpeted floor*” (103). On the wall is “*a picture of Queen Victoria*” (103) which is a clear evidence of his assimilation. For him, the West is now the symbol of authority and wealth. However, Kofi equals himself to the queen as he places his own picture next to hers. So if she is the queen of England, he is now the king of slaves. But if the English are enslaving the Africans whom they consider inferior, Kofi is enslaving his own people. He is increasing his wealth over their blood. Thus, the more he assimilates, the more he is estranged from himself and his identity.

In a display of power, Kofi places “*a gilded chair with rich-looking cushions*” (103) as if it is a throne and he let his slave boys and girls call him the “*master of the earth*” (103). He is seen carried by four slaves “*in some kind of a carrier chair*” (104), dressed in an expensive “*kente or velvet cloth and he is over-flowing with gold jewelry, from the crown on his head to the rings on his toes*” (104). With all this extravagancy, Kofi makes himself forget his previous poverty as well as his present guilt. Fanon explains that “the racialized social group tries to imitate the oppressor and thereby to deracialize itself. The ‘inferior race’ denies itself as a different race. It shares with the ‘superior race’ the convictions, doctrines, and other attitudes concerning it” (*Toward* 38). The only reminder that Kofi fails to get rid of is Anowa. She appears worse than before. She is described as being “*aged and forlorn*” (Aidoo

104). She continues to be “*in her old clothes*” (104) as well as being “*bare-footed*” (104).

Similar to Shakespeare, Aidoo speaks about the unspoken sins of her own people. However, she is more overt than him in declaring this. Aidoo blames her people for being consensual partners in selling their own kind. She has courageously “chided African historians (both oral and written) and the population in general for ‘amnesia’ concerning the Slave Trade” (Wilentz 5). This is clear in the play’s flashback scene in which Anowa remembers a conversation she had with her grandmother when she was still a child. In it, Anowa asks about “the houses” (Aidoo 104) which were built over the entire coast. This is a reference to the slave forts which were built by the Europeans, like Elmina, to keep the slaves until they were loaded to the ships to be taken away to the New World. In this dialogue, Nana represents the older generations who live in denial of their sin as participants in selling their own people. As for Anowa, she represents Aidoo with her rebellious soul and wish to acknowledge the forgotten guilt:

Tell me Nana, who built the houses?

She said: ...

They are white men.

Who are the white men? ...

They come from far away....

But what do they look like Nana?

I asked....

As if you or I

Were peeled of our skins,

Like a lobster that is boiled or roasted....

Nana, why did they build the big houses?

... to keep the slaves.

What is a slave, Nana?

A slave is one who bought and sold.

Where did the white men get the slaves? ...

No one talks of these things anymore!

All good men and women try to forget;

They have forgotten! (104-06)

Anowa keeps questioning because she “wishes to uncover the truth so that others may remember and learn from the past” (Eke 66). As for Nana, she continues her denial to what happened because she is the “representative of the collective consciousness whose guilt overwhelms it to forget, and by forgetting denies the inhumanity of which her people are guilty ...” (66). Anowa’s flashback becomes essential to explain her refusal to be an accomplice and to relate her impotency to the sin of her ancestors. Thus, Anowa’s stand against her once beloved but now estranged husband becomes her plea for her lost motherhood that was lost through men like Kofi. According to Angeletta Gourdine, “Anowa ... becomes mother [Africa] and the mo[u]ther of unspeakable things ... she awakens the ghosts from the past, gives voice to the silenced cries of those whose bodies were torn asunder and now lie under the waters of the middle passage” (37). This is shown more explicitly in Anowa’s dream or rather, nightmare.

Affected by the dialogue she had with her grandmother, the young Anowa falls asleep to find herself having a disturbing, yet highly symbolic dream. She dreamt that she was “a big, big woman” (Aidoo 106). She had “huge holes” in her body (106). From these holes, came out “men, women and children”. The moment they came out to the sea, huge lobsters appeared (106). This is a reference to the white enslavers. They captured all that came out of Anowa and “they tore them apart, and dashed them to the ground and stamped upon them” (106). What was strange is that there was no reaction of any kind as “everything went on and on and on” (106). This of course reflects the African silence to this massacre that went on for years under their own eyes and with their own help.

It was this dream which made Anowa hate slavery and think horridly of it as “any time 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). This explains Anowa’s bareness as like Africa, she was robbed of her children. She could not bring them back because the criminal was her own husband. A man of their own who betrayed them:

Anowa’s nightmare is imbued with metaphors of power, conquest and domination, empire and colony.... In the dream, Anowa becomes a metaphor for ‘Mother Africa,’ whose children are being subjugated, torn, and dispersed globally. Like mother Africa, Anowa experiences the anguish of watching helplessly while her children are destroyed or dispersed. (Eke 67)

Anowa grows strange to Kofi year by year. As a result she starts to wander around aimlessly, talking to herself about what has gone wrong between her and her beloved husband. As for Kofi, though he has all the riches he wishes for, he still refuses to take Anowa or even any other woman to bed. A slave girl comments on his refusal to choose one of them or even to have a new wife by calling him a “man who is afraid of women” (Aidoo 111).

Anowa reaches to the point where she finds herself not good enough for Kofi. She suggests that she should marry him to another woman as he must have children of his own.

ANOWA. But you deserve a son. So Kofi, I shall get you a wife. One of these plump mulatto women of Oguaa [. . .] Besides, such women are more civilized than I, who only come from Yebi. They, like you, have learned the ways of the white people. And a woman like that may be attractive enough to be allowed into your bed(115)

Though Anowa does not know about the term that can describe these women, they are a clear indication of the spread of assimilation. This makes these women so distinguished. Like Kofi, they are no longer Africans and they assume superiority to others based on their resemblance to the white man’s culture. As for Anowa, she is a traditional African woman who reminds Kofi of what he wants to be alienated from.

Kofi refuses this suggestion as he knows that he is no longer a man. He has exchanged his manhood for wealth and power given to him by the white man. This is highly significant as only an emasculated man can sell his own people with cold blood. Fanon explains:

When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other ... for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem. (*Black Skin* 154)

With Kofi’s insistence to push Anowa away, she finally realizes that she is not the reason for their childless marriage. Anowa faces Kofi saying:

Kofi, are you dead? [*Pause*] Kofi, is your manhood gone? I mean, you are like a woman. [*Pause*] Kofi, there is not hope any more, is there? [*Pause*] Kofi ... tell me, is that why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth? [*Silence*].(Aidoo 121-22)

Confronted with the truth he has been covering up, Kofi commits suicide by shooting himself. As for Anowa, she follows him by drowning herself. In contrast with Othello’s martyrdom, Kofi’s suicide becomes an escape from shame which makes him a coward. But similarly, Kofi’s wife, Anowa becomes his victim as though she takes her own life, she is smothered by Kofi the day he started trading in slaves.

So Aidoo and her mouthpiece, Anowa are alone in questioning an entire society. They try to force it to remember and to take responsibility for a destroyed present and an insecure future. This was the consequence of the loss of Africa’s children who were either dead or enslaved to build Europe’s empires. Those empires expanded later through colonizing Africa and consuming its natural resources. Nevertheless, Aidoo is more of a reformer than a critic. She wishes to acknowledge yesterday’s mistakes to reform the African society of today. Aidoo declares that “it should be remembered that this type of purgative exposure, however painful it is, is

absolutely necessary, depending whether or not one believes that truth as represented in writing can be in any way effective in helping social change” (qtd. in Killam 18).

Conclusion

To sum up, the research paper has dealt with two examples of African assimilationists. Each has been presented from the different perspective of an author who belonged to a racial and cultural background different from the other. Shakespeare and Aidoo have been chosen as powerful representatives to their culture and era. They both have been proven to be critiques of their societies whether indirectly or directly. Shakespeare indirectly attacks Europe’s racism and fake superiority over other races. As for Aidoo, she bravely criminalizes the Africans themselves for playing a part in destroying their future.

In both plays, the African assimilationist has been analyzed, but from the unique perspective of the authors. *Othello*, the brave leader goes through difficult and racist pressures which force him to assimilate. However, his agonies increase the more he throws himself into the hostile European culture. He ends up losing himself and his beloved, but he goes down as a martyr who could have been saved if it was not for Europe’s white devil represented in Iago. He is simply a victim of the European racist monster. The same cannot be said about Kofi Ako. He is an African who willingly indulges himself in the oppressor’s culture to chase his own dreams of wealth and power. His low self-esteem is patched only through enslaving his brothers and sisters. He ends up losing his manhood and his beloved. His death is an act of cowardness as it is the only way to escape his guilt.

Both plays revolve around a marriage which has not been approved by society. The first marriage is a prohibited union between Europe and Africa. The second is a blood-stained reconciliation between Africa and its own African enslavers. In both marriages, the wife has played a significant part in explaining the opposite roles that the two black protagonists play. Desdemona is the symbol of European culture. She is the blind love that Othello indulges in. She is the gate to white acceptance. Her love to Othello is a blessing while her rejection means havoc and destruction to his self-awareness. As for *Anowa*, she is the symbol of Africa. As long as she is with Kofi, she gives him blessings and acknowledgment. The moment he estranges

himself from her, he loses his identity and what defines him as a man. To mark the failure of both marriages, the lack of a physical contact and therefore children becomes vital. Shakespeare shows that no good can come out of a match that Europe considers as blasphemy. As for Aidoo, she proves that there will be no fruitful future for a nation who refuses to face the ghosts of the past and reconcile with them.

To conclude, the idea of African assimilation has been dealt with before as well as after the end of colonialism. The European view, represented in Shakespeare, has been more judgmental of the causes that force the African to assimilate rather than the act itself. As for the African view, represented in Aidoo, it has been about criminalizing the act and its consequences on Africa. Whether victims or victimizers, both playwrights agree, though separated by time, that not all whites are angels, not all blacks are devils and vice versa. The researcher recommends relating Shakespearean and African works in further studies as the more one delves deep in Shakespeare’s works, the more one finds his coded appreciation to other cultures as well as his universal influence on literature.

Notes

¹ As it was always the case in Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* was based on an original story which Shakespeare read and modified reaching to his own masterpiece. In *Othello*’s case, the main source was the seventh novella written by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio. It was published in his *Gli Hecatommithi* in 1565 (Neill 21-22). Shakespeare follows the main thread of the original story in which the white Desdemona marries the Moor out of love. However, the villainous “alfieri” (22) raises the Moor’s doubts against his wife’s fidelity. Convinced of her adultery after seeing her handkerchief with another man, the Moor plots with the alfieri to kill the innocent wife and her assumed lover (22). Comparing the main source of the play with Shakespeare’s modifications in *Othello* is vital in proving the researcher’s point of view. As mentioned before, Shakespeare does not change much in the overall events. However, his modifications are more for the purpose of how he portrays his Moor rather than his plot. In the original story which also ends in Desdemona’s murder, the Moor is a coward who plots with his Ensign to murder his wife by beating her to death (Turner lxxxvi). Cinthio’s Moor is also a coward who refuses to declare his crime as a defense for his lost honor or even confess his guilt

and face condemnation like Othello. In contrast, he pretends that his wife’s death was an accident after the bedroom’s ceiling collapsed (lxxxvii). Till the end of the story, he denies his crime even after being tortured to confess it. He dies dishonorably by the hands of Desdemona’s relatives in banishment (lxxxviii). His death is seen as heaven’s punishment for the devil who murdered an innocent angel who before her death prayed to God to avenge her murderers. In Shakespeare’s play, the case is completely different.

² Unlike Shakespeare, Aidoo is an overt revolutionary figure. She tackles unprecedented literary territories and social taboos for the African society. She was raised in a household which encouraged education and abhorred colonial domination. Her grandfather was a revolutionary figure who paid his life for confronting colonial authority in Ghana (Azodo 400). The result was not only an outspoken literary figure but also a political one. Aidoo held many significant positions like Ghana’s Education Minister in 1982, and the director of the Ghana Arts Council (400). Though her political career was cut short because of her rebellious views against neocolonial powers, she continued her activism through her revolutionary literary works.

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'الأفريقي المتشبه' كضحية وجاني في مسرحيتي *عطيل* و*أنوا*

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المستخلص

يوصف الاتصال الأوروبي الأفريقي بأنه كان وما زال الأكثر حدة في تاريخ البشرية. يرجع ذلك للاختلاف الكبير بين الكينونتين من حيث الحضارة والدين وخصوصاً اللون. أدى هذا الاختلاف الكبير إلى خلق نوع من النفور من جانب الأوروبيون الذين اعتبروا أنفسهم أعلى شأناً من الآخر والمتمثل في الجنس الأفريقي. ظهر هذا التعالي من خلال العبودية والاستعمار. ساهمت هذه الممارسات القمعية في ترسيخ صورة الأوروبي كشخص مهيمن على الجنس الأفريقي. لمواجهة هذا القهر اضطرت الإنسانية الأفريقي أن يتجه للتشبه أو استيعاب فكر الغرب ، أي أن يتنازل عن كل ما يميز هويته ويتبنى هوية من يخضعه من الجنس الأبيض. ولكن كانت المفاجأة إستمرار أوروبا في رفضه. يتناول وليام شكسبير في مسرحيته *عطيل* وأما *أنوا* في هذه الفكرة. ومن هنا يتضح الهدف الرئيسي للبحث وهو مناقشة وجهة النظر الفريدة للكاتبين في معالجتهم لصورة الأفريقي المتشبه وعلاقته بما أدى إلى اضطهاده من المجتمع الأبيض وتعامله مع جنسه الأسود بعد هذه العملية. ينتقد شكسبير العنصرية الأوروبية ويمثلها كوحش يحول *عطيل* إلى ضحية. من ناحية أخرى تنتقد *أنوا* الذنب الأفريقي المسكوت عنه وهو دور الأفارقة في إزدهار تجارة العبيد وبالتالي تصوير بطل المسرحية ، كوفي أكو كجاني يضحي ببني جنسه من أجل طموحه المادي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التشبه – شكسبير – *عطيل* – *أنوا* – أيدو - *أنوا*