DIASPORIC POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND THE LOGIC OF ABJECTION

Mpale Silkiluwasha[1]

Abstract

Lacan's mirror stage points out to the human tendency in desiring wholeness while abjecting what is considered to be the lack, and in this article whiteness represents the desired wholeness. Using children's books about Africa written by diasporic writers primarily for a Western audience, I first analyze how a picture book titled A Promise to the Sun demonstrates the Logic of Abjection, and later I discuss how these writers, unable to establish the symbolic identity and as they strive to embrace whiteness, and its material representation, end up replicating stereotypical colonial discourse that abject Africa (ns). I focus on one stereotype – a monolithic Africa – to demonstrate how books written by diasporic writers may replicate colonial discourse, concluding that material conditions facing these writers hinder their efforts to challenge the hegemony.

Keywords: abjection, diasporic, mirror, stereotype, symbolic, whiteness.

1. Introduction

Post-colonial studies seek, among other things, to interrogate inequalities characterizing the global economy, inequities that are directly related to the North/South dialectical relations. Clare Bradford argues that "an important component of postcolonial studies is discourse analysis" because it is "a strategy which examines how colonial discourse maintains power and determines what counts as knowledge" (2010 p. 45). This study interrogates two post-colonial discourses— whiteness and diaspora—in an attempt to examine how post-colonial children's books about Africa written by Africans in the diaspora may, consciously or unconsciously, work to enhance colonial discourse by embracing whiteness.

2. Hegemony of Whiteness

Melissa Steyn defines whiteness first as "an ideologically supported social positionality that has accrued to people of European descent as a consequence of the economic and political advantage gained during and subsequent to European colonial expansion" and second as "the shared social space in which the psychological, cultural, political, and

1. Department of Literature, University of Dar es Salaam, P. O. Box 35041, Tanzania. Email: mpaleyvonne@hotmail.com, / mpaleyvonne@uccmail.co.tz.

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economic dimensions of this privileged positionality are normalized, and rendered unremarkable" (2005 p.121).[2]Steyn's definition points out to the fact that although the elevated position enjoyed by people of European descent is often considered "normal" and "unremarkable" Its construction is neither accidental nor natural but the result of calculated economic and political moves that subjugated others while uplifting this group of people. Bradford's observation offers a more comprehensive explanation of the emergence of race discourse by tracing the historical construction of whiteness:

> As European powers established colonies in the New World, they sought to distinguish themselves from the various indigenous peoples who occupied territory appropriated to serve the various purposes of the imperial project. Discourses of race were also used to justify the institutionalization of slavery in the late sixteenth century as pseudoscientific arguments were marshaled to demonstrate that there existed a "natural" hierarchy of worth which held true across European powers and their colonies. By the nineteenth century it was generally accepted that this hierarchy comprised of three major races: white, yellow, and black, with white at the apex (Bradford, 2010 p. 40).

Thus it took about three centuries and pseudoscientific evidence to construct whiteness before it was eventually established and accepted in the said racial hierarchy. Bradford states that by the nineteenth century racial logic was accepted; but, she does not specify as to whether or not those at the bottom of the apex also accepted it. Karen Coats, on the other hand calls whiteness a master signifier when it "unites economic privilege, male privilege, maternal benevolence, insularity of the immediate family, able bodiedness" (2004 p. 56). Coats' definition cuts across that racial hierarchy and focuses on the ideology behind whiteness; although as Bradford correctly states, whites were at the apex of the hierarchy, the ideology behind whiteness is such that Caucasians who would not fit in the above mentioned privileged groups would somehow be incomplete.[3] Thus, whiteness would be the totality from which both non-whites and those whites who do not fit into that particular privileged class regard their incompleteness - their

2. The first definition ties whiteness to Europeans, although it doesn't mention Caucasians' visual proximity (light/clean/pure vs. non-white/dark/evil), which also played a role in constructing whiteness, as I will discuss later in this chapter, while Steyn's second definition links the ideology of whiteness to hegemony.

3. I have used the term "incomplete" while discussing whiteness as the master signifier and the mirror stage. The lack stated here refers to the same thing and I will be using the two terms interchangeably.

lack – which would consequently make them desire whiteness[4].

Coats offers a theoretical approach to interrogating the hegemony of mainstream discourse. She observes that although multicultural children's literature sets out to challenge the established norms, its efforts to increase different representations into the mainstream merely constitutes "image control" that does little to interrogate or theorize whiteness (2004 p. 122). Employing theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly by examining the logic of desires and signification, Coats theorizes whiteness as a signifier of desires. Since humans are split subjects who desire an unattainable wholeness (ibid: p. 123), that desire for wholeness is reflected in people's aim to identity with the master signifier; thus whiteness is desired to cover one's split and validate his/her identity. Our desires and the sense of incompleteness elaborated earlier may come from within, but our idea of what is considered whole is inherent within our societies: it is "a construction of both natural and cultural influences of conscious and unconscious process" (ibid: p. 6). Similarly, Jane Gallop makes reference to Lacan's theorization of an infant's desire during the mirror stage that the infant is thrown forward from "insufficient" to "anticipation": However, that "insufficiency" can be understood only from the perspective of the "anticipation'" (1985 p. 86). Much as desiring whiteness fits into human tendency towards wholeness, the definition of that wholeness comes from specific societies. Humans' desire for whiteness is frequently unconscious on one level; but, it is a conscious effort on another level because what is desired is subject to societal norms and ideals. Had whiteness not been elevated as the master signifier through its hegemony of vision and historical social and economic privileges in the first place, it would not have been an anticipated desire, but at the same time, this desire is motivated by an inner desire that moves us to desiring wholeness.

Louis Althusser argues that although ideology is a system of ideas, it also has material existence. Similarly, Coats looks at class, power and economic status as they represent the material existence of whiteness by being its secondary signifiers. If the totality in whiteness is considered the master signifier, the political, social and economic

4. Karen Coats in Looking Glasses and Wonderland talks about the logic of abjection as follows: "Socially speaking, under a logic of abjection, my identity depends on gathering to me those people who bolster my illusion of totality (that is, those who are like me), and pushing away those people who remind me of difference, my lack (2004 p.155).

privileges mentioned above become secondary signifiers or alternatives that may be desired. Alfred Lopez looks at whiteness "as a desirable and even necessary trait for colonized subjects who wish to achieve class mobility and financial success in a colonized (or formerly colonized) society" (2005 p.17). Lopez's focus is on the colonized people and how they too may not only desire secondary signifiers in whiteness but also see the secondary signifiers that they desire as necessary if they are to attain the class mobility or financial success enjoyed by their colonizers. In the same line of thought in his discussion of Gramsci's hegemony, Steve Jones looks at how the hegemonic group ensures its domination over the subordinates into assimilation and ultimately submission. Jones concludes that, eventually those "subaltern groups and individuals" will "actively give their consent" and "express their consent through cultural values" (2006 p. 51). I see the consent elaborated by Jones to be a result of some sort of coercion rather than being a voluntary one; moreover, desiring whiteness and its signifiers may be an example of giving and expressing one's consent.

From these arguments it seems fair to say that both whites and non-whites may desire whiteness and continue to enable the existence of its hegemony in various ways. This phenomenon is especially clear in the world of children's publishing where "[A]uthors, publishers, critics, and educators" have been active contributors in "moving a culturally hegemonic literature", which in turn "help[s] produce a colonial–based socialization" (MacCann, 1996 p. 186). My discussion aims specifically at examining whether or not literary works by diasporic post-colonial children's books writers fall into this category of culturally hegemonic literature.

Steyn (2005) defines diasporas as involving people from poor countries who try to make homes in rich countries; she thus points to the dichotomy between poor and rich countries as the reason behind diasporic movements. Furthermore, Steyn adds that people in every diaspora are linked to and find acceptance in their home countries, which could suggest another dichotomy: they may not find acceptance in the diaspora. I would read the acceptance or lack of it pointed out by Steyn along the lines of MacCann's analysis of that phenomenon. MacCann sees acceptance for literary artists or scholars in the diaspora to mean introducing African literature, for example, that produces a diverse based socialization instead of introducing a culturally hegemonic literature that produced a colonial based socialization (ibid:

p. xx). Thus, acceptance or lack of it enjoys privileged space without the diasporic peoples needing to conform to hegemony. Although Africans in the diaspora in the twenty-first century are positioned differently, Steyn argues that "Diasporic people are bonded through shared structures of feelings, such as their sufferings, which gives a sense of being caught up in a common history, despite being scattered" and that powerlessness will "probably be the most salient point usually made in relation to diasporic identity" (2005 p. 124). I group diasporic African children's books writers into this category of disadvantaged positions—a position defined in large part by a sense of lack.

Various scholars have focused on theories of interpellation and reclaiming indigenous identity and representation in literary works, although others argue that such a focus may not be sufficient in interrogating whiteness. Bradford (2007) asserts that indigenous writers can exercise agency in their works by including perspectives that are different from hegemonic perspectives. This happens because certain works include distinctive cultural aspects, like indigenous names or food, or some words in native languages or even a unique style, all of which help "interrupt or decenter the discourse of white superiority" (2007 p. 64). It is suggested that since Western civilization dominates published literary works in the field of children's literature indigenous cultures need to be represented in literary works if whiteness is to be challenged. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw adds that names, life styles, foods and languages become a culture's symbols and that "once made public, these symbols become the sole means through which most of the world comes to know any particular culture" (2008 p. xv). Such representations determine the way African cultures are viewed and understood in the world. While it is undeniable that indigenous writers can make a difference by bringing diversity into the mainstream, I cannot ignore Steyn's argument that, as we focus on indigenous writers and issues of representation, the self (center/norm) strengthens itself. Steyn argues for the importance of studying whiteness and calls it "a critical move in race studies" because it involves redirecting the academic gaze from "racism," the way in which "the center constructs the margins, to the way in which the center constructs itself" (2005 p.120). Studying whiteness, as Lopez argues, helps us seek for "salient question[s] of how the representational power of whiteness has historically operated in the service of colonial and neocolonial regimes and has specifically served such regimes in the domination of their nonwhite others" (2005

p. 4). Thus, not only do I look at how non-whites are marginalized, I also study the construction and maintenance of whiteness, which gives me an opportunity to challenge norms.

I have talked about the historical construction of whiteness as presented by Bradford, especially the categorization of races labeled "white," "yellow," and "black," with whites being at the apex. Coats argues that stereotypes against others are important if whiteness is to prevail. For whiteness to be the norm, the totality that others desire, there have to be abnormal others to be abjected. Consequently, efforts to identify with whiteness are likely to meet opposition: 'even if Blacks "evolved", their unfitness remained intact alongside the concurrently "evolving" white population' (Yulisa Maddy and Donnarae Maccann, 2009 p. 16). In the following section, through a Lacanian reading of A Promise to the Sun written by a Tanzanian born author in the diaspora, I will propose an argument that children's books by diasporic writers abject Africanness while establishing desire for whiteness as its secondary signifier. I also demonstrate that since the continual superiority of whiteness depends on othering indigenousness, whiteness will also work to prevent the realization of these indigenous writers' desire.

Lacan's theory focuses on the mirror stage. When a child is able to recognize its image in the mirror, Lacan argues, that child realizes that the image is different. Since the image appears upright whereas the child may not be able to do so, or it may look cleaner than the child, this child would consider the image more complete or whole and, consequently, that image becomes a desire against which that child identifies its incompleteness. A child at this stage becomes "an other", a second person from its image. This stage is called the process of alienation when otherness is identified against the ideal and a subject can say – I am who I am (incomplete) because I am not complete like my image and we could view alienation as a stage where non-whites set their identity as incomplete with reference to completeness in whiteness.

Second is a sense of duality. The child assumes an identity of its image. It assumes a position that it desires but has not achieved yet; in other words, the child at this stage says – I am or can be what I am not – as Gallop says, the child "jubilantly assumes an upright position" (1985 p.78). Lacan further exemplifies this stage by involving the child's parents. Since a mother is the child's primary caregiver, Lacan

refers to Freud's Oedipal complex and argues that the child's desire is demonstrated as that child desires its mother and strives to fulfill the mother's desire. The child, therefore, assumes the completeness it lacks with awareness that it still lacks and cannot fulfill its desire; thus, the child becomes an object willing to fulfill its mother's desire. At this stage a subject views oneself from an idealized image and assumes an object status that serves the cause of the hegemony of the dominant culture (Coats, 2004 p.70).

The final stage is identification. At this stage the Law of Father intervenes in the child's desire and the child in Lacan's third stage mourns but eventually accepts the intervention because it recognizes the Law of the Father—which is shared societal laws that govern the society. To mark its acceptance of the loss and consent to its subject position in accordance to societal rules and regulations the child, now the subject, identifies in the first person as I; Coats says the subject claims, "This is me" (Ibid: p.19) and Gallop tells us the subject can now say, "This is my history" (p. 83). The Law of the Father can be represented by external/societal rules and regulations that work to prevent the child from achieving its desire and instead make the child assume its position in history. This law, the big Other, as Lacan calls it, is of ultimate importance because it ensures positionality in society to continue undisturbed.

I will use Mollel's A Promise to the Sun to explain how and why the I – my history – may fail to be asserted. The child in Lacan's mirror stage shares an understanding with the Law of the Father and thus, with time, it stands a chance of achieving that totality into whiteness, should it play by the rules and regulations it can identify with. Diasporic writers, on the other hand, are outsiders by default and since they neither share nor are they likely to benefit from the Law of the Father in whiteness they cannot easily accept defeat, abandon their desires towards whiteness, and find an identity in the symbolic. Consequently, as I will try to argue in the following section, they seem to dwell at the second stage of an objectified subject catering to the needs of hegemonic culture as the provisional identity promises to ensure their survival; I will borrow from Coats and call this situation the Logic of Abjection.

3. Logic of Abjection

Mollel's A Promise to the Sun: An African Story is a story about a bat

that seeks acceptance among birds. She begins with a meeting among these birds to discuss ways to find rain because the land is faced with drought, and it is at this meeting that we are first introduced to a bat who is told, "You might not be a bird…but for now you're one of us" (Mollel, 1992: n.p.). The stage of alienation is established here; bat is not a bird. Although bat is singled out as an other, when someone is needed to search for rain "as luck would have it, the task fell to the bat" (n.p.). The luck, I suppose, is for the bat since it could work as an opportunity for an outsider to earn acceptance among birds. The bat takes up the task assigned by birds and embarks on a mission to search for rain. On her journey bat first meets the moon, stars, clouds and the wind, all saying they cannot provide rain, until the bat gets to the sun. Of the five, the sun is the most terrifying. Illustrations depict a rather shrunken bat. She is very small, positioned on a lower part of the opposite page with her wings slumped down as opposed to stretched wings when the bat meets the other characters. These features suggest that the sun holds some kind of power or authority over bat because it is positioned higher than the bat and it is bigger in size. In Lacanian terms the sun could stand for the law that comes between bat and its desires. In a terrifying voice the sun agrees to provide rain; but, "in return for a favor" (Mollel, 1992: n.p.): a nest ought to be built for the sun to rest at night. The bat, realizing its inability to build a nest because it is not a bird, assumes an anticipated position and promises on birds' behalf. However this is the stage of duality - the bat assumes an identity with the anticipated desire – is short lived because the subject (the bat) seems to jump into the final stage of identification. In uttering the phrase "I promise" (n.p.), an "I" is asserted to affirm bat's identity among birds and this premature language affirmation is problematic because the bat seems to assume an identity into the symbolic which is not hers. The bat might be acting on her own desire, but being a bird is certainly not her identity; for now, at least. In uttering an "I" while speaking for those with whom she does not belong, bat suggests a decision has already been made. As she is blinded by desire to belong with and/ or serve the birds, she prematurely asserts her identity among them.

Upon her return to birds' land, bat comes with power and glory; she is positioned above all birds with a colorful rainbow behind her – signifying that happiness and purity have been bestowed upon bat. As per bat's promise, birds in their excitement "readily promised to build

the nest" once it starts to rain (n.p.). Strangely, when it finally begins to rain bat is neither mentioned nor illustrated with the birds as the latter grow and later harvest their crops. It is only after the harvest that the bat shows up again coming from above to remind them of their promise. Contrary to their promise, birds would not build a nest for the sun; all the birds want to do is to celebrate their harvest. Bat is in a dilemma: "What was she to do? A promise is a promise, she believed, yet she didn't know anything about making a nest" (n.p.). It appears here that bat is not one of the birds anymore. Bat's identity among birds has been only temporary and a possible explanation could be that bat – a subordinate - was supposedly accepted among birds – the hegemony - for her ability to perform that task of bringing rain; thus, after serving the hegemonic power, bat is excluded among birds. Below, I explore the conditions of the promise for I see the sun's role as the Law of the Father standing between bat and her desire to become a bird.

The sun seems to have created conditions for bat's failure because it solicits a promise that is bound to be broken. Since bat has made a promise based on its imagination of what birds might do at that situation, that promise is invalid. In addition, the sun knows about bat's limitations, "The bat quickly replied, 'I'm only a Bat and don't know how to build nests, but the birds will happily make you one" (Mollel, 1992: n.p.). By holding bat responsible for that promise, the sun is using this opportunity to have control over the bat; in other words, it is that promise which gives the sun power over bat. The establishment of authority or the law according to Lacan is a necessary step towards establishing an identity since one's identity is established in accordance with one's social rules. The Law of the Father protects its own, ensuring its members assume their expected roles for the continual existence of society, as far as whiteness is concerned, while its hegemony continues to be constructed globally. As far as bat is concerned, therefore, sun assumes the role of the father's law to detach bat from its desire to become and/or serve the birds so that bat can take up its symbolic position as something other than the bird.

4. The Law of the Father as the Gate Keeper

I think it is important to understand the role of the sun in establishing bat's identity, which also demonstrates how othering works to sustain whiteness. Elwyn Jenkins (2003), in discussing issues of identity in

South African children's literature, talks about the story of a Zulu boy depicted by Fay Goldie, a boy whose aspiration is to wear a kitchen boy uniform and second hand clothes. For this boy, clothes like these bring him as close to whiteness as he could ever imagine in the apartheid era. Jenkins, however, observes that classes that place the Zulu boy where he is in the first place are not challenged by the writer: "Goldie was part of the political thinking of her time that whites had a paternalistic duty to "uplift black people – within limits" (Jenkins, 2003 p. 93, emphasis added). Like a bat among birds, a Zulu boy would be allowed a temporary identity into whiteness by wearing second hand clothes or a kitchen boy uniform, but the law would not let him progress into whiteness. Similarly, Perry Nodelman talks about the law in Mr. Gumpy. Mr. Gumpy requires creatures in the story to make promises, none of which are kept, and the story does not seem to judge either party; "Mr. Gumpy" for being "wrong to demand these promises", or the children and animals for being "wrong to make them" (74). Nodelman views the whole situation as Mr. Gumpy's "firm insistence on his right to have authority over" those children and animals (pp.74-75). By making these creatures promise him while knowing that those promises will not be kept, he is enforcing his law/authority over them because the creatures' failure to keep their promises makes them his subordinates by default. Thus, failure to fulfill promises benefits Mr. Gumpy more than the creatures because it ensures his authority; he is keeping those creatures in their respective places. I am tempted to read the sun in A Promise to the Sun as the law to maintain (purify) whiteness so that others may only be permitted into whiteness to be used, but never permitted full association with whiteness because the other has to continue to be othered for the symbolic order of whiteness to survive.

The sun's nest is never built in A Promise to the Sun, and it is bat – not birds – that has to take the responsibility for not keeping a promise to the sun. Following its failure to keep the promise made to sun, bat is never again portrayed together with birds. While birds continue with their celebrations, bat illustrated on the opposite page is "alone with her thoughts and tired, the bat fell fast asleep" (n.p.). We see bat for the first time expressing bat's traits; she is sleeping upside down, which could suggest that, realizing her inability to become a bird, bat is forced to face its identity. Again, since that identity comes when bat is asleep, we can take it as an indicator of her subconscious

enforcing that identity.

The realization that bat cannot be a bird, which she defines as the wholeness she desires, seems to prompt bat to seek a strategy to compensate for her incompleteness. First, the bat seems to be hiding and later on it is revealed in piece meals; initially, when she is peeking from a banana tree's leaves and later when she is hiding from the sun inside the cave where only her eyes can be seen (two white dots in a dark black cave). But that is not the end, as the story continues we are told: "gradually she got up enough courage to venture out – but never in daylight!" (n.p.). Perhaps bat eventually accepts her identity and resumes to bats' ways of life: going out at night. But why should anyone need to seek courage to be who they are? Why is it a gradual process for her to resume her position as a bat? A possible answer to the first question could be that it is an indicator of her abjection; she is compelled to accept being less than her desire, which is to become whole or "better" than a bat. On a second note, I would say it is a reflection of bat's acknowledgement of its lack and her strive to find the means to face the world on her own terms. In Lacanian terms it is the time to mourn, and later to substitute the desire with the symbolic subject order formation. Bat does not make her decision hastily; she does so gradually, and as with the construction of whiteness, in carefully calculated ways. The text declares that bat is going to find a way around the power (the Law of the Father): it will "venture out – but never in daylight", the time when the birds and the sun are outside. Bat is not going to assume an identity in accordance to the Law of the Father, but she negotiates an identity that will not interfere with the Law of the Father. In establishing her identity, and as she is catering for her own interest, bat focuses on power; she has to watch out lest she interferes with interests of the Law of the Father, the master signifier. The last two pages of the story make this even clearer.

On the penultimate page bat is all alone in a forest surrounded by tall trees, and we can only see her back as she is flying away, leaving the trees behind. On the final page, bat is at first illustrated hanging upside down, and since she is awake in that condition, this suggests her conscious acceptance of the bat identity. But the text tells another story.

> She made a home in the cave, and there she lives to this day. Whenever it rains, though, she listens eagerly. From the dark silence of her perch, the sound of the downpour, ripening the crops and renewing the forests, is to her

> a magic song she wishes she could go out dancing to. And as she listens, the trees outside sway and bow toward the cave. It is their thank-you salute to the hero who helped turn the forests green and thick and tall as the sky (n.p.)

As is demonstrated on that final page, identity among birds is not realized but rather remains in bat's imaginary. Bat demonstrates her desperate desire to assume an identity among birds when she imagines the forest that she has helped to create – but now belongs to birds – and to make "a magic song she wishes she could go out dancing to" and to salute her as the hero. As mentioned earlier, language affirmation in the form of the word "I" is imperative in subject formation, but, not for bat. Whereas in earlier pages the text refers to bat in the second and first person—"You are not a bird" and later, bat says, "I promise"—bat's identity is shifted in the end to third-person "she". Instead of affirming an identity in the symbolic, with "I" as is the case when a subject forms an identity during the last of Lacan's mirror stage, bat is pushed further out of the social rim, and referred to not in first, or even second, but in third-person.

As whiteness can be desired for its material existence, bat's desire is for the power that is expressed through metaphors of trees and advantaged position held by the birds.[5] In desiring totality, bat is abjecting the lack that is inherent in bats; things unsaid that made her seek a place among birds in the first place. But as we have seen, between the Law of the Father, as represented by sun, and bat's subconscious, she is forced to go back and renegotiate her symbolic subjectivity as bat. Although the desired totality (being a bird) is denied, bat still abjects the lack; but since she realizes how powerful the role of the Law of the Father is, that identity has to be negotiated to suit the Law's interest. Early in the story, birds declare to bat "you might not be a bird...but for now you're one of us", which points to bat's lack and its desire for their totality, the desire which birds grant her by giving bat provisional identity into totality. In that identity bat's imaginary makes her promise for the birds, assuming oneness with totality, but because of the sun and its Law of the Father, she is forced to hide in a cave, never to go out in daylight; in other words, she becomes a bat. Finally, the story ends with bat hearing trees saying a "thank you salute

5. Towards the end of the story, trees, surely a metaphor for phallic power are brought into the picture. On the last page, bat imagines trees bowing towards the cave to thank her for making the forest as tall as the sky, representing power held over the bat, although in the bat's imagination both the bat and birds hold equal power because of the role played by bat in helping to instill that power.

to the hero" (n.p.) for making the forest green, thick and tall, which demonstrates bat's continual object position in serving a desire she can never realize. As I have tried to elaborate, this suggests that what bat could not have (its lack) has been replaced by what seems to be the case.[6] Unable to identify among birds, bat does not identify among bats either, but instead seeks a relatively powerful position. Hence, bat establishes an identity in a position where she can serve the powerful by enabling their survival and prosperity, which in return makes her powerful too.

I associate my analysis of Mollel's story to the plight of diasporic post-colonial African writers. These writers are often compelled to make tough choices, either remaining bat with unmet desires that come with secondary signifiers (things like achievements in publishing contracts, education and/or life in the West) or negotiating an existence among birds and becoming the object-instrument in ensuring the survival of the master signifier. I will use an example of stereotypical assumptions of a monolithic Africa to elaborate how indigenous writers seem to recycle such an assumption while non-indigenous writers seem to challenge it.

5. Children's Books – Stereotypes of a Monolithic Africa

One way of institutionalizing whiteness was through reconstructing Africa and Africans to suit colonial needs. David Mengara (2001) states that the mapping, reshaping and renaming of Africa according to the European view of the world to suit its needs could be justified and validated "only if the lands to be conquered and the people who inhabited them were appropriated of their own identities and constructed in the Western mind as objects of devastation, ignorance and primitive that needed to be saved by the West" (p.3). As for this particular stereotype, Nancy I. Schmidt (1981) explains that by the middle of the nineteenth century, British explorers, travelers and colonial administrators had been to Africa and encountered people whom, judged from the standards of Western civilization, seemed inferior and backward; thus, "Africans came to be depicted in common stereotypes...for the most part Africans were viewed as an undifferentiated mass of savage humanity, and descriptions of Africans from one geographic region were indiscriminately applied

6. Lacan uses the term to seem in explaining the situation where the subject masks its lack by replacing what it can't have with what can replace or rather seem to resemble that desire.

to Africans from another geographical region"(p.14). From these observations respective identities of African people had to be ignored and a new identity constructed because valuing those distinguishing features would also mean accepting deviance. Describing Africa in a monolithic manner was the first step to institutionalizing its inferior status in relation to the West and whiteness.

Non-indigenous writers like Margy Burns Knight and Mark Melnicove (2000) are careful to defy such stereotypes in coming up with the title of the book Africa is Not a Country with the aim of disputing stereotypes of a monolithic Africa that dominate Western paradigms. I will not dwell in the details of that book; my focus remains on the title that adamantly challenges persisting assumptions that Africa is homogeneous. I will also explore some titles of books by diasporic post-colonial writers. There is I Lost my Tooth in Africa by Penda Diakite (2000). The author represents her own experience as a little girl who was living in the US and lost her tooth when she visited Mali with her father. It is problematic to brand this story set in Mali but told by a girl living in America an African story for a couple of reasons. One, the fact that the story is about an African tooth fairy suggests that African values have been Westernized to suit a Western audience as it is children from the West rather than children from Mali who are not only the target audience but are also the ones familiar with tooth fairies. Second, the cultural values, and ways of life represented in the book are those found in Mali, it is possible that other west African countries may share such ideals too, but not in the entire continent. The child in the story only travelled to and lost her tooth in Mali, not to all West African countries, or to the whole continent. A title like I Lost My Tooth in Africa can easily mislead its readers into ideas of a monolithic Africa, ideas that view Africa as a country.

Mollel's A Promise to the Sun: An African Story discussed earlier, presents another example. The inside cover page introduces the story as an "intriguing pourquoi tale by a Maasai author Tololwa Mollel," and apart from the fact that the author comes from Tanzania, an African country, there is no other indicator that links this "African Story" to Tanzania, let alone all of Africa. Why then would Mollel brand his story an "African Story"? The pattern appears in books by a renowned children's books author Ifeoma Onyefulu. Onyefulu was born in Nigeria and lives and publishes her works in England; and in her career she has won the United States' Children's Africana Book

Awards. Her books*: A is for Africa (1993) , A Triangle for Adaora: An African Book of Shapes (2000), Emeka's Gift: An African Counting Story (1995), Chidi Only Likes Blue: An African Book of Color (1997)s, Ogbo: Sharing Life in an African Village (1996), An African Christmas (2005) , Welcome Dede!: An African Naming Ceremony (2004), Here Comes Our Bride: An African Wedding Story (2004), Ebele's Favourite: A Book of African Games (2000), My Grandfather is a Magician: Work and Wisdom in an African Village (2006),* suggest one thing: Africa is a country.

Much as I concur with the acclamations that applaud Onyefulu for her postcolonial counter narratives that offer a balanced representation of urban as well as rural lives in a part of Africa, I am troubled by this persistent adherence to colonial discourse; an African story, an African village, an African game or an African book, for in this she strongly perpetuates this stereotypical image of a monolithic Africa. Her readers will grow up with the wrong impression that Africa may be a country after all: shared customs, artifacts, and ways of lives, while in fact such ideals are not shared by all. For example, as a Tanzanian I am not aware, let alone share in the marriage, naming or burial rituals expressed in Inyefulu's books. I share Yenika-Agbaw's (2008) observation that "with over 52 nations and thousands of ethnic groups and languages, the diversity is such that many representations of Africa are possible…such diversity makes it unlikely that any person, even an African, could capture the authentic African experience because there is not one experience that can be labeled African" (p.29). I am equally certain that Africa's diversity pointed here is not a foreign phenomenon to these African born writers; why then would they claim to have "African experiences" or "African stories"?

A possible explanation could be along the lines of Yenika-Agbaw's argument concerning Onyefulu's works: "Onyefulu, an African residing in Europe, and writing primarily for Western audiences, seems willing to represent Africa as one big village and through western eyes" (Ibid: p.32). Yenika-Agbaw later adds that as African countries are presented as "sets of unnamed colonies…this view of Africa makes it easier for Westerners to accept it when the 'first world' continues to intervene in African affairs and transnational corporations export African's natural resources"(p.34). I have talked about subalterns and their consent to conform to hegemony which in this case would refer to these writers perpetuating stereotypes of a monolithic Africa. But I have also pointed

out that this consent is not voluntary; it is coerced. Bradford (2010) offers an additional explanation on that matter. As colonial ethnographers and folklorists collected stories from indigenous people, those stories would be altered “to accord with European narrative practices and publish them as children’s stories”; these stories would be “[d]etached from the cultures from which they originated” and “appear as ‘West Indian’, ‘Native American’ or ‘African’ stories” (Bradford, 2010: p. 44). To brand a story African, therefore, demonstrates deliberate moves to identify with hegemonic practices that focus on ignoring specific cultural values and identity. My interest is in interrogating why diasporic writers, unlike their American counterparts presented herein, would be willing to perpetuate this stereotype of a monolithic Africa and aid in the construction of whiteness. Possible answers can come up as I compare indigenous to non-indigenous writers in this matter, for I would argue the two parties face different challenges. Thus, arguments as to which party can better challenge stereotypes ought to take into consideration the vulnerability of indigenous writers as opposed to power held by non-indigenous writers, factors which may also determine one’s ability to actually challenge these stereotypes.

Although writers can and have played a significant role in disputing various stereotypes, their intentions can be compromised for various reasons. Maddy and MacCann argue that children’s books that offer an “allegedly authentic” view of Africa actually bring information that come “right out of the news” (1996: p. 5); their contents include manipulated information to serve interests of the colonial or neocolonial Western states. Since the Western media, as Yenika-Agbwa correctly observes, “often represent[s] Africa as a homogenous enigma, which defies modernization, even civilization” (2008: p. xv), it is not surprising to find stereotypical presentations in diasporic post-colonial works such as that of a monolithic Africa discussed earlier. Mengara too is skeptical over the success of African scholars and blacks in the diaspora who have played a big role to rewrite Africa’s history from a non-European perspective, for he argues, intellectually and historically, “deconstruction of Africa’s European-made identity has been relatively successful” (Mengara, 2001: p.12, emphasis added). That relativity, he explains, arises because as the “need” to exploit Africa continues, and practically speaking, the continent’s colonial-made identity cannot easily be deconstructed. If I am to consider Yenika-Agbaw’s argument that African writers may carry stereotypical

presentations because of “their internal struggles with their ideologies of empowerment, oppression, and liberation” (p. 8), it becomes clear that consciously or unconsciously, works by African writers too are not free of stereotypical presentations.

6. Conclusion

In this discussion I have used the bat’s inability to form an identity in the symbolic (from A Promise to the Sun) and linked it to some diasporic African post-colonial writers’ misrepresentations of Africa’s identity as a reflection of desires into whiteness, which in turn serves the hegemony of the dominant culture. Diasporic writers have historically been at a disadvantage because most of them come to the West as economic refugees following colonial and neocolonial exploitations in their home countries. To these people, whiteness and its secondary signifiers bring a different ambivalence; their idealized image brings both constant memories of injustices, exploitation and oppression, and at the same time, power relations makes whiteness their salvation for depending on resources that come with whiteness for survival. This is not a unique experience among those unfavoured by the system. Bradford gives an example of an Indian children’s book writer who reports to have had to remove some jokes in her story (after being advised by two readers/friends) because they seemed too Indian and would not appeal to a mainstream audience. Thus, concludes Bradford; “Many indigenous authors tell similar stories about the dilemmas they face when writing for mainstream audiences, but aside from self-censorship” as presented in my discussion Bradford adds, “systematic forms of intervention occur in mainstream publishing companies as the processes of selection, translation, editing, and marketing typically shape indigenous texts into mainstream products” (Bradford, 2007: p. 46). Such conditions might make any efforts of post-colonial writers to challenge hegemony futile.

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