

THE CHARACTER PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AND TECHNIQUES IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF AYI KWEI ARMAH

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Abstract

Fictional exploration of the status of women in African literature is a discourse that has recently gained momentum considering the myriad critical harvests on female character portrayal by African male and female writers. This paper examines the character portrayal of women and techniques in the selected novels of Ayi Kwei Armah. It aims at showing Armah's utilization of the "Manichaean" principles, the inflationary and deflationary ridiculing of characters by means of contrasts, and, in the process, injecting a female point of view that tended towards the deification of the female voice. The theoretical framework employed in the analysis of our selected texts is postcolonial theory. The hallmark of postcolonial theory is to explain the political, artistic, economic, historical, and social effects of European colonial control as represented in Armah's female characters, spotlighting the moral degeneracy of these women. This research concludes that through Armah's deployment of techniques, his ideological underpinning on the modern woman as decadent and the traditional as agents of positive cultural revitalization is affirmed.

Keywords: Character, Manichaean, Postcolonial, Inflationary, Deflationary, Economic

Introduction

Today's African writers exhibit a strong commitment to nationalistic themes. Through their writing, they express their thoughts and feelings on the current issues bedeviling the nations. These writers mostly focus on social, political, and economic challenges that arose following the massive liberation revolutions that swept across the African continent. Like the majority of his contemporaries, Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah discusses the situation in postwar Ghana. According to Okachukwu Onuah Wosu, "Armah does not attempt to cover up political corruption or moral decay in his portrayal of Ghanaian culture and government in his novels, which paint a grim but true picture of the country following independence" (1) The loss of ethics, spiritual emptiness, and the driving thirst for materialism are all depicted by Ayi Kwei Armah in his novels.

Our attention however will be focused on the various categories of female characters and the techniques Armah has used to describe them. As a prelude to this inquiry, attention should be paid to Laurence Perrine's observation, which states that:

Fictional characters begin when the author breathes life into his characters and convinces us of their reality..., and that though fullness of characterization may not be his aim, soundness of characterization is a test by which he stands or fails. (70)

Within the above assertion is embedded the need to unravel the key elements that could provide the basis for testing the soundness of characters and thereafter reveal theme and meaning in a work of art. These elements could be traced in the writer's technique.

In explaining the term technique, Mark Schorer did establish a point that "in art, beauty and truth are indivisible and one", and that "the difference between content or experience and achieved content or art is technique" (qtd in Stevick 66). Schorer therefore, describes technique as:

The means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter compels him to attend to it; technique is the means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally evaluating it. (qtd in Stevick 66)

In illuminating this term, Schorer quotes T.S. Eliot as having dubbed technique as "convention". Eliot explains this to mean "any structure or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action; by means of which... our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed (Stevick 67).

In further clarification, Nnolim echoing Schorer describes technique as 'the means by which an author organizes his materials, the rhythm or form he imposes on his work in order to achieve his meaning and in order to convey that meaning to his audience' (Approaches 215).

This exploration technique encompasses mode of presentation. One can speak of it as being good or bad; as adequate or inadequate. Technique can serve or fail to serve the novel's purpose. It may contain some moral and intellectual, implications and could discover them as well. Armah in utilizing this technical element has established a point of view and a tone which, in actual fact, convey his meaning to his audience. 'Tone' in this case "refers not to attitude but to those techniques and modes of presentation that reveal and create attitude" (Edgar and Jacobs 299). By utilizing this, Armah has more or less "shed his sickness" in his works and has presented his emotions unequivocally.

This paper will therefore explore the following: Armah's technical application of the principles of "Manichaeism"; the elements of contrast by means of inflationary/deflationary ridiculing of his characters; his high mimetic mode in the projection of female point of view; his use of antithesis cum point/counterpoint; his application of image patterns and symbols in

the delineation of his female characters, in order to emphasize his theme and meaning, in these works studied.

Literature Review

A number of prominent Ghanaian poets, novelists, and playwrights have been the subject of Angmor's highly outstanding research. Following his praise of Armah's ability to connect "life and art" in his work, Angmor remarks on his style in *Fragments*, pointing out that the piece exhibits "the self-revelation of characters" (90) and "the naturalistic representation of life" (91). Characters that contribute to Armah's "naturalistic representation of life" include the old woman Naana, whose character profile is presented in this study.

Rao has also done a very comprehensive evaluation of the role of the elderly woman, Naana, in Armah's *Fragments*. He explains and sums up his thoughts in the following passage:

Fragments' narrative is revealed by means of Naana's all-encompassing vision. She has a vision while being blind. Naana's incantatory tone in the novel's opening chapter functions as a prologue. Similar to the epilogue, which is preceded by Joana's realistic vision, the final chapter contains Naana's insightful reflections on the life that has been lived and its prospects for the future. They both serve as symbols of the importance of feminine principles, giving the book both structural and thematic cohesion (57).

Rao once more notes how crucial the elderly woman is to the plot's progression. According to him:

The novel's beginning and final chapters are emphasised by the legendary experience of Naana, the protagonist's blind grandmother, and her ancient world. In the final chapter (55), Naana's thoughts reflect the novel's title's importance as well as its structural patterns.

The aforementioned quotes highlight the importance of the elderly woman's character in the Ghanaian text. They also highlight the need for more research on how older women are portrayed in other Ghanaian novels and plays. Derek Wright gives insights into Naana's contribution to the book from Colmer's critical reactions to Armah's writings.

"The novel is framed by chapters in which Baako's grandmother, Naana, reflects on "the circular way" (5), as she calls it...Naana's framing vision provides a sane view of the world against which we can measure Baako's vision as he moves toward insanity of believing that he is wrong and the people who surround him are right. Where Naana and Baako concur in dissenting from the common view, we can be reasonably sure that their vision is more valid than that of Baako's demanding relatives...Naana is a vital figure in *Fragments*.

The comments from Rao and Calmer provide a concrete undertone to this study and it is along this line that the researchers chose to investigate the portrayal of female characters and techniques in Ayi Kwei Armah's selected novels.

An essay by Senanu, on Armah's second novel *Fragments*, discusses the high expectations of the family about Baako's conformity "to the image of the car-owning, consumer-oriented Ghanaian elite". Baako's inability to do so however ends in his insanity" (21). Senanu's concern here is about the kind of character the writer develops in the protagonist. This, however, is not far-fetched from the concerns raised in this research. Her life also aids in contrasting the decadence of the present generation with the genuineness of the older generation. Other literary works on Armah's Naana gave their general impression about how the author presented her as a character and commented on her roles. The present study however delves much deeper into the roles played by female characters to bring about the success of the narrative—*Fragments* and other selected novels of Armah through a critical study and discussion of events in the text.

Commenting on Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, Wole Soyinka referred to the novel as "a visionary reconstruction of the past for social direction" (106). Soyinka's view is reiterated by renowned Ghanaian oral artist Kofi Anyidoho who hails *Two Thousand Seasons* as a united Africa's reconstitution, a vision of all people of African descent as one people (25).

Other critics regard *Two Thousand Seasons* as a conglomeration of African literary work (Francis Smart-Ngaboh 2000, Mensah, 1991, Nwahunaya 1991). Smart-Ngaboh calls it "a text about history, politics, identity, or about the post-colonial writer's indulgence in the ongoing mandate for self - legitimization. Smart add that the novel seeks to unite Africans as a community (176). These sampled reviews are an endorsement of the literary value of the text under consideration. Again, Lief Lorentzon argues for the 'epicness' of *Two Thousand Seasons* through Armah's extensive use of the 'we' narrator (2). In Lorentzon's view, "Armah's consistent use of the first person plural, "we" gives an indication of a Pan African approach to African affairs, which in itself is characteristic of modern African Literature with epic qualities" (230). The above comments notwithstanding, Bernth Lindfors thinks otherwise. He believes that "*Two Thousand Seasons* is a philosophy of paranoia, anti-racist racism - in short, negritude reborn" (271). Lindfors adds that in place of usable historical myths, *Two Thousand Seasons* over-schematises the past, creating the dangerous kind of life. Lindfors' argument may not be out of place as it adds to the beauty of diversified reviews on the text under consideration.

In his assessment of *the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* Okachukwu Onuah Wosu avers, "Armah in the novel reveals the antics of the political elite as they maneuver their way into lucrative public positions, promising to eradicate corruption and revitalize the economy but instead leaving the treasury in worse shape than it was before the change of guard" (2) The position of Wosu above shows that Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* is renowned for its in-depth depiction of the flaws and abnormalities of Ghanaian society after

independence. Most studies on the text have shown that corruption is the text's primary concern.

The position of Nkansah above represents the level of corruption and decay in Ghana. It shows that the real intent of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is to represent the total breakdown of society.

Alexander Dakubo Kakraba, further opines:

The novel is generally a satirical attack on Ghanaian society during Kwame Nkrumah's regime and the period immediately after independence in the 1960s. Armah demonstrates his eloquence and establishes his trademark as a profound moral writer, as stated by Ode Ogede in his study, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast, Pitting the Imaginary World against the Actual* (306).

In *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah is bent on shocking his readers and, in so doing, awakening them to the rottenness in society, which occurs as a result of the lack of a culture of maintenance. Francis Etsé Awitor, in his article "The Aesthetic of Decay in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Meja Mwangi's Kill Me Quick*", posits that:

Armah and Meja Mwangi describe, in their novels, an environment polluted by smells, filth, and decay. The protagonists, in their daily routine, are overwhelmed by the omnipresence of stench, rottenness, swear words, curses, and insults. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* depicts the daily life of an unnamed railroad clerk in independent Ghana who is torn between his family and his society (47–48)

Okachukwu Onuah Wosu further sums up Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* thus:

The pervasiveness of filth symbolizes the system's decay and actually represents the reality of a filthy environment in Takoradi or Accra (the novel's likely settings), as well as in the majority of African cities. In other words the characters' oppressive and filthy surroundings are depicted using excremental terminology, which also serves to highlight the corrupt society they live in (3).

Armah's *The Healers* has received its fair share of critical appraisal, some disparaging (Lindfors), some balanced (Boafo; Ogede), and some eulogistic (Nwahunanya; Petrie; Ashcroft). If scholars are unanimous on the centrality of physical, psychological, and social healing to the novel, very few have interrogated the nature and scope of its underlying concept of responsibility-laden multi-faceted recuperation.

Appositely Bill Ashcroft says of Armah's fifth novel: "The healing that comes from the recuperation of traditional knowledge is a key feature of Armah's vision of the future, and the memory of history a key to the transformation of the present" (710). For all their incisiveness, Ashcroft's article, "Remembering the Future: Utopianism in African

Literature”, and Y. S. Bofo’s “The Nature of Healing in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers*”, for example, do not consistently explore the diverse facets of recuperation and Armah’s call for commitment to give effect to each of its constituent variables. To the extent that the name Damfo, the master healer, in the Mfantse dialect of Akan means “friend” or “helper”, it foregrounds the facilitative role of the guild of visionary traditional health practitioners, thus indexing, by the same token, the responsibility of subjects (patients, polity, public) in their own multiple recuperation. In other words, recuperation, for Armah, involves the responsiveness, agency, and self-empowerment of the individual and the community in their multidimensional wellbeing. The double focus, in the current study, on multivalent recuperation and the imperative of responsibility that attends on each of the constituent subsets of recuperation will help to fill the gap in knowledge with respect to the literature on therapy in *The Healers*.

Operationally defined in this paper as commitment, duty, action, praxis, application of knowledge, and self-empowerment, the notion of responsibility is grounded in this configuration by Molefe Kete Asante, the renowned Afrocentricity scholar, “An agent, in our terms, must mean a human being who is capable of acting independently in his or her own best interest. Agency itself is the ability to provide the psychological and cultural resources necessary for the advancement of human freedom” (153)

According to Augustine H. Asaah & Tao Zou Given, this historical and sociogenic context, Armah conceptualizes healing as an all-embracing therapeutic activity, guided by the imperative of wholeness—that is, the unification of fragmented entities: individuals, ethnic groups, and nations in Africa and the African diasporas. Grounded in communalism, Armah’s dilated conceptualization of healing is thus premised on his project of dismantling the spatial, cultural, and epistemic limitations that colonialism imposed on Africans (44)

Theoretical Framework

The hallmark of postcolonial theory is to explain the political, artistic, economic, historical, and social effects of European colonial control in the world from the 18th to the 20th centuries. It is concerned primarily with literature created in nations that have historically or currently been colonies of other nations. It may also cover literature that was created by or about citizens of colonizing nations and that uses those nations’ colonies or citizens as its subject matter. Concepts of otherness and resistance serve as the theoretical cornerstones. Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *the Healer* is a representation of political and economic decay and corruption that are prevalent in postcolonial Africa. Armah figuratively links Ghana’s post-independence corruption to the depictions of physical decay and excrement. In the 1970s, postcolonial theory entered the critical toolkit, and many practitioners cite Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* as its precursor.

The Character Portrayal of Women and Techniques in the Selected Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah

One seemingly obvious technical element that one observes in Armah's attitude of presentation of characters representing the modern and traditional eras is his strict adherence to the doctrines of "Manichaeism". Thus, in these works, one encounters characters fashioned strictly on "Manichaean dualism" - giving us characters who are inherently good and others who are essentially bad. These essentially separate and opposed principles embedded in Armah's characters have become mixed in his fictional world through the act of evil principles. In the words of Mary Boyce, "Salvation therefore lies in the release of goodness and a return to the original state of separation" (783)

One can therefore observe in the female characters of the *Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments*, corrupt matter unleashed through the contact of the modern African woman with the evil, corrupt and disorienting immoral principles of the colonialist invaders. Whereas in the characters of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, we have characters reflecting true light and when confronted by the corrupt matter coming by chance to her boundary, desiring to invade her light. These traditional women fought against the mingling of these opposed principles, which have become mixed in Armah's society. One thing these traditional female characters are very much aware of is the fact that their salvation lies in the release of their original state of separation. In this heightened sense of Manichaean dualism, Armah has pitched tent with the 'spirit' against 'matter' as reflected subsequently in this analysis.

Operating from the above principle, Armah has pitched the bad against the good characters in *The Beautiful Ones/Fragments* and *Two Thousand Seasons/The Healers*, respectively. In the former pair, Armah shows revulsion and outrage against the physical/spiritual decay in the society of the female characters, through the use of pejorative images. While his effort has not been an attempt to correct humourously, he has however expressed with satiric thrust his anger, bitterness and contempt for the corrupt men and women who peopled his fictional world soon after the colonial encounter.

Decadence becomes naturally the pervading metaphor encasing *The Beautiful Ones*. Hence, from Oyo and her mother to Estella and her husband, we encounter people suffering from uncontrolled desires and voracious appetites. Other people around them are equally ensconced in scenes of "ooze", "slime", "rot" and "decay" arising from greed, forcing critics like Nnolim to comment in "Dialectic As Form..." that "Ghana seemed to be one giant, stinking lavatory" (111). Estella's husband, having abused the privilege he had through corrupt practices, was seen at the point of his fall from grace, wallowing in 'shit'. He later gained freedom through the 'shit hole'. Oyo's husband also taints his entire body through Oyo's irrepressible pressure to share in Estella's family wealth through the boat deal. The man's ambivalence about repudiating this boat deal including the largesse, allowed a rush from Koomson's foul air to corrupt his entire family at the end. It is through these deflationary images that Armah points to his diseased society.

In *Fragments*, the situation rather than abate, heightens as Efua and Araba in their mad rush for material things, became responsible for the death of an innocent grandchild. This heinous act more than anything else emphasizes greatly the above tendency.

In *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* Armah applies inflationary strategy to contrast with the deflated characters above. Hence, Yaniba and other noble women in *Two Thousand Seasons* instituted an ordinance to check the excesses of men by controlling their consumption habits. Deflatingly, he gives us a picture of this new kind of man thus “his belly like a pregnant woman’s of a habit to consume more food and drink than he gives out in work and energy” (11) And inflatingly, he gives a counter picture of some purpose-driven women who were said to have “...razed the men’s unearned privileges, refused to work to supply the unnecessary wants of men. All enjoyment, the new order said, was to be the result of work accomplished” (11)

This of course instituted a fertile time that generated abundance of everything their people needed.

In the same vein, when King Koranche forbade all life sustaining food from Isanusi, we are told that ‘most men knowing the King’s vindictive nature and not wanting to be trapped in another “blood quarrel” with him capitulated hence, “forbade their sisters to give Isanusi food” (102). The women were inflatingly made to look superior, daring this blood thirsty King by bringing “food as well as other things Isanusi needed”(102) Armah ultimately, has used this technique to contrast the quality of women in *The Beautiful Ones/Fragments* with those of *Two Thousand Seasons/The Healers*, favouring the latter to the detriment of the former.

The technique Armah has chosen for portayal of the narrator’s tone and language in *Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers* is the high mimetic mode. “The narrator in this case is a master of decorum who selects words to fit his grand purpose” (Mensah 6). Using a conscious formal tone, the narrator speaks as one inspired by the gods or the muses. In *Two Thousand Seasons* for instance, the narrators, poised for a grand purpose, did not mince words or hide their mission behind fuzzy rhetorics. Their intentions are quite clear as demonstrated below:

We are not a people of yesterday. Do they ask how many single seasons we have

Flowed from our beginnings till now? (1)

With such sound rhetorical tact structured to question the authority of the addressee, Arnah enunciates further:

The air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins... What has been cast abroad is not a thousandth of our history... But the haze of this

fouled world exists to wipe out knowledge of our way. the way.
These mists are here to keep us lost... (1)

With such powerful rhetorics, the narrators set out to retell the women's story. They demonstrated some socio-cultural issues that undermined their ability and threatened their existence. With the story of Ajoa and Brafo, they brought into focus the lecherous dispositions of the men, age notwithstanding. They gave us here again, just a glimpse at the dross that had eaten into the society.

Subsequently, they showed us "the time of men" (9). This was a time of "confused competition of warring gangs, each gang under the red-eyed champion seeking force or ruse to force it will against the other" (9). We are told that in the end, it was "this hot greed that destroyed the power of the men, and that it was only salvaged when women came on board to "begin the work of healing" (19). Using the likes of Yaniba the narrators reinstituted lost democratic principles that abolished selfishness.

In real terms, the accomplishment of this liberating work was realized by another set of women - Azania, Sekela and other dedicated women of the way, who slew their predatory tormentors. The absurd, unrestrained characterization of these depraved Arabs and the corresponding ruthless manner of their destruction by these African women, for their excessive and lurid sexual indulgence, may have deviated from the formal, dignified tone of this work. To seriously mock, however been the intention of Armah. The perverted Arabs' overzealous fumbling with the African woman is in sharp contrast with her highly graceful control of the sexual act. By denying these Arabs grace and civility, Armah has heightened their mockery while emphasizing the significance of the women's resolve to sacrifice their lives for the salvation of their people. This is a point that was likewise, emphasized by Chukwuma with regard to *The Beautiful Ones* when she observed that Armah's "naturalism offends in order to correct" (42).

In the same vein, Anoa, Abena, Idawa etc., are virtuous characters juxtaposed in contrasting qualities with the morally corrupt, bankrupt ones like Oyo and Estella of *The Beautiful Ones* and Efua and Araba in *Fragments*. Having pitched the tone and language of these good characters in "high mimetic" mode, they reflect characters who are superior in degree to other women but not in their natural environment, and as has been pointed out of such people they are leaders' (Frye 34). We therefore do not expect to find in them the inconsistencies in ordinary women. In spite of their seeming superficiality, their corporate identity gives them some measure of credibility.

One other technique deployed by Armah for the revelation of theme and meaning in these works under discussion is his skilful deployment of images and image patterns in the representation of his male and female characters. Having set out to defend the values of pristine African past, his traditional female characters in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* have been crafted to represent life, vitality, dynamism, fecundity, courage and

meaningful movement; whereas, the women in *The Beautiful Ones and Fragments* signify corruption, aridity, vacuity, inertia, destruction and even death.

To flesh out these grim images, Armah deploys some symbols representing the genetic colours of his protagonists/antagonists. Hence, his traditional women have jet-black colour, exude warmth, and are proud of their blackness. Idawa was celebrated in *Two Thousand Seasons* for such amazing colour which must have come uninterfered with from night's own blackness" (70). With a beauty needing no counterpointing blemish to make its 'wonder clear, Armah contrasts her with a white woman. This was "a dry""ghostly" figure, foisted on Bentum - the stooge, for a wife. She was described as "half deaf, blind in one eye, with a body so dead it was whispered... she never could feel her husband enter her, and would not know what to do with him in any case" (91) This is an inadequacy that sharply contrasts with the proficiency in ecstatic inducement exhibited by Azania and other black female liberators whose sensuality became a bait that ensnared the lecherous Arab predators, leading to their death.

This ghostly white woman was also a poor contrast to Abena, a black beauty and the 'apple of Koranche's eye', "who had a mind that had filled every fundi's teacher's mind with joy"(91) and whom Koranche had craved for his retarded son--Bentum to no avail. In an equally deflationary contrast, this sickly apparition we were told, moved "exactly like a ghost... with a disjointed, severe, jerky walk, like a profoundly discontented walker" (119). This spectacle is indeed a deflationary depiction that is in opposition to Idawa's figure, which when seen from a distance, her shape in motion told the looker here was coordination free, unforced" (70). Obviously, this is a bias in favour of the black woman, which is often observable whenever Armah depicts characters along the colour line.

There is no doubt here that every white imagery is despicable whereas blackness is described in superlatives. This distortion may have been one of the seemingly racial overtones that Booth had alluded to in *Two Thousand Seasons* as representing, to some extent, "sophisticated version... of theoretical commitment to black consciousness or negritude" (62). This last statement corroborates Leonard Kibera's observation that Armah's technique "confirms his prejudices," making one "hale what he hates because it is not allowed to speak for itself" (67). Armah's irrepressible emotional stance has been considered by Nwodo as admissible since it has enabled Armah not only to rehabilitate, but to correct the often distorted images in black African history, which had remained unchallenged over the (97). Armah's sternness as well as his irreverence in speech and action emphasizes those things and beings that have compromised the principles of the way.

Myth or legend has offered Armah another mode of character representation and revelation. Hence, he intimates us on the legendary Anoa. Of this prophetic personage, we are informed about her origin and early history. Although she was not the first to bear that name, she became significant for bringing the wrath of patriarchs on her head for "uttering a curse against any man, any woman who would suppress another human being into her service" (14). Anoa, we are told, 'was possessed by the spirit hating all servitude'. At the point of her

training, when it was traditional for growing girls to choose the drudgery of motherhood as a vocation. Anoa perceived the discrimination intended, “spumed it and asked to be trained with her brothers in the hunt” (14). From this singular dissenting voice, a legendary account of female subjugation and an attempt to repudiate it and reposition womanhood was inscribed in African fiction.

Through other mythical female characters like Yaniba, who saved her people from extinction by drought Noliwe and Ningome--female pathfinders who exhibited courage, fortitude and astounding resilience needed to pilot their people to the Promised Land, we are shown the triumph of the Akan people, as they were ultimately led to their promised land. Through these invincible legendary women, Armah has shown grace, tact, diligence, resilience and leadership qualities needed to re-establish the way again.

While making prominent the history of the Akan people once again, Arrnah utilizes contrasts to underscore the merits of the female gender in *The Healers*. This was skilfully realized in his graphic description of the grandeur of the female river as revealed in the following passages contrastingly described:

Two streams flowed by Esuano. One was a calm stream. It flowed so gently there were places where its motion was barely visible. Its waters were extraordinarily clear. You could see all the way down to the bed of fine sand sprinkled with pebbles of many colours, from light yellow to deep dark purple. If your hearing was keen and your imagination alive, you could hear, deeper than the light breeze’s sand, the sound of pebbles rolling forward under the water. Along the clear river’s right bank the fine yellow sand brought by the stream formed a narrow strand. Below Esuano, just before the confluence with the second stream, the strand widened into an open beach. Because the first was smaller and gentler than the second, and also because it was such a clear thing of beauty people named it “NsuBer”, the female river. (3)

The second river was however said to be:

Wider and more turbulent than the first. Its bed was invisible; its water were opaque with mud. In its flow past Esuano it carried a heavy load of leaves, twigs and broken branches from its course upstream. Along both of its banks it deposited not sand but silt, a thick, muddy ooze. Partly because this second stream was heavy and physically forceful, and partly because it lacked the beauty of the first, people called it “NsuNyin”, the male river. (3)

Armah’s skilful antithetical description of the two rivers in a point/counter point manner which tilts the equilibrium in favour of the female gender has heightened his prejudice against the male. As a result, while we perceive one as a small, gentle, calm stream; the other is wide, forceful and more turbulent. While one is extraordinarily clear, with a bed of fine sand and sprinkled with pebbles of many colours; the other has an invisible bed of opaque muddy water loaded with silt and all sorts of clogging debris. While one is a gentle

thing of beauty; the other is a heavy ooze that lacked beauty. In their appellation, the female stream “NsuBer” has soft bilabial consonants and gentle vowels which ended in soft nostalgic plosive sound whereas, the male stream “NsuNyin” comes with forceful velar nasal consonants that dissipate energy in the articulatory process. The scenario the latter presents leaves one with feelings of detached fragments, with emphasis on ruins. This has been Armah’s inflationary/deflationary strategy at its best.

This same antithetical demonstration of turbulence in the male action has been highlighted by Opara in “The Herstory...” (119), as she noted that in *Two Thousand Seasons*, “the end of the rule of the fathers was violent. The beginning of the rule of the women was not” (10). The antithetical consequence of this was that the clans of men, having clawed themselves to exhaustion through warfare, have pulled themselves out of all ongoing works, preferring to sit beneath the cool grass of huts built by women; while the women on the otherhand, became their own ‘maintainers, protectresses, finders, growers, and ultimately tamed every danger and brought ‘tales and skins and meat home’ to indolent husbands. It is from these contrasts that Armah has successfully demonstrated the resilience, courage, ingenuity and the integrity of the black African woman.

One of the significance of Armah’s exploration of the female character in ‘The Histories’ is his use of the female voice. Opara has observed that in most cases ‘the male voice is muffled to the benefit of the female’ (119), an assertion corroborated by Palmer when he certified Abena’s voice as ‘a moral voice, courageous in her defiance of the King and her consistency in the search for the way’ (234). When one examines the role of Akole who challenged the false spokesman of King-Koranche, and of whom it was said that, ‘when she spoke it was as if the people had been waiting all day for just such a voice (79); and one listens to Ndola’s voice as she counters the ‘deceitful’ songs of the moron - Tutu, one is persuaded on the primacy of this voice.

In *The Healers*, the voice of Efua Kobri, despite its destructive selfish instinct was made to hold sway at a decisive deliberation at the royal court. And so was Nana Esi Amanyiwa’s voice made to bring Ababio’s exaggerated antics to an end, during prince Appia’s burial as revealed in this excerpt:

Let him go with him’ the voice said, ‘Since that is his wish. EsiAmanyiwa had spoken calmly. She had not raised her voice. But the effect of her words was instant. Where before the room had been filled with the noise of Ababio’s loud lamentation, now there was the profoundest silence, a silence like the sound of forests on a starless night. (58)

Armah gives us in this last statement an imagery that emphasizes the profundity of this noble voice. These have been indeed decisive and influential voices established further, when we see Araba Jesiwa mount the witness stand to extricate Densu from murder charges, while her testimony brings to book the real culprit, Ababio. In reflective rhetorical statement, the voice of Ama Nkoroma was privileged to have the last say at the denouement of *The*

Healers, as she foresees in jest the possibility of bringing all, the black people together in this huge attempt by the whites to keep them separate. In her words, “Does it amuse you, that in their wish to drive us apart the whites are actually bringing us work for the future”? (309) This is an observation that heightens the significance of the female voice in any future well coordinated plan for nation building in Africa, and indeed the world over.

Conclusion

Looking historically at the trend of Armah’s thinking and the technique he has used to illuminate the activities of his female characters, one may conclude that his vision had been influenced by the doctrine of ‘Manichaeism’. We have observed two forces in Armah’s universe. One, (representing the traditional) is good, and the other (representing the modern) is evil. That which was spiritual was good and pure, while that which was material and bodily was evil and corrupt.

In this exploration Armah has through deflationary/inflationary techniques utilized contrasts which were immersed in image patterns that paid particular attention to symbols. The result has been a deification of the female voice, giving it supreme regard unprecedented in African literature.

The question then is: has Armah, in applying ‘the novelist’s touch’ (Forster 227) through selecting facets of life - the most degrading for the modern woman and the most spectacular for the traditional ones - been fair to both sides and truthful to his mission? One is inclined to think that Armah has been fair, female gender bias notwithstanding. He has succeeded in giving us a variety of perspectives with the sheer number of his characters. This has left room for the possible contrasting of both genders in the divide. Thus, we could compare Ovo with her husband, Maanan with the other “wee” addicts-- all in *The Beautiful Ones*. We could also compare Naana with uncle Foli in *Fragments*; or perhaps Akole and Otumlor in *Two Thousand Seasons*; or even Araba and Ababio in *The Healers*.

It is through these varying perspectives that Armah has, to a large extent, established his characters’ reality. So much of what they are have been defined in terms of their relationship with other characters, thereby, confirming as it were, W. J. Harvey’s observation that, “Other people must exist if only to show us what we ourselves are not” (qtd in Stevick 232). Armah in this case has used these ‘others’ to state his case: ‘that the retrieval of our lost knowledge about our history as Africans’ is the primary thrust of his argument (qtd in Oladipo). And that the principal issues of African womanhood that have compromised her life must be revisited and addressed. By so doing he has underscored the need to uphold the dignity of the black African woman and the restoration of the essential nature in African womanhood. The techniques Armah has used have substantially underscored these points hence, could be considered appropriate.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the following:

1. A balanced fictional narrative that will ensure equality of sexes and a balanced society.
2. The unity of Africans, irrespective of gender, in order to oppose foreign invasion and influence, which precipitated gender inequality.
3. This paper also recommends the use of fictional narrative in addressing African and diasporic issues that have contemporary relevance.

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