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Regaining Original Identity and Change in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising*

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Identity and change are key issues to Ayi Kwei Armah, a prolific Ghanaian novelist. In his novel *Osiris Rising* (1995), he shows the interconnectedness between African identity and the reform of the educational system as a cure for the underdevelopment of the African continent. This novel is a continuity of previous attempts of African writers to underscore the relationship of Africa and African-Americans, who were taken into slavery long time ago. *Osiris Rising* is the first African novel to give prominence to a central female character that primarily concerns herself with the destiny of both her identity and Africa. In this sense, a detailed exploration of Ast's character is vital to the understanding of the issue of her sincere return and commitment that Armah advocates as useful instruments to bring about change the alienation of Africa. To realize her wish, Ast joins the Ankh community, a revolutionary grassroots movement, to step to the application of her commitment to Africa. She is in charge of reviewing African history. Through Ast, Armah presents a positive vision of African-American identity and experience, based on his holistic comprehension of the historical experience, the significance of the willingness of the African Diaspora to adopt the role of a life giver and the respect for the intellectualism and commitment of truthful activists.

Key words: Commitment, Diaspora, Return, Identity, Education.

Introduction

Ayi Kwei Armah is a Ghanaian novelist. His irresistible genius has contributed abundantly to the development of novel writing in the African continent. His artistic vision emanates from his commitment to Africa. His fiction testifies his preoccupation with the future of the continent. Armah embarks on a process of diagnosis of African contemporary situation and reconstruction of African history. He creates "a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature," to act as "an awakener of his people"¹. The early books, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest?*, expose the socio-political afflictions of postcolonial Africa in general and Ghana in particular. In these works, Armah identifies the socio-economic and cultural forces responsible for the advent of neocolonialism. In doing so, he indicts Africa's political leaders for both abandoning the collective goals of the independence struggle and failing to free the continent from the clutches of imperialism. *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers* and *Osiris Rising* and *KMT: In the House of life* focus on African history. In these novels, Armah accentuates the importance of the collective experience of Africa's past and provides alternatives to contemporary African society. However, in *Osiris Rising* his focus moves to the Diaspora. In this novel, identity and change are key issues in Armah's therapeutic vision. In this work, he shows the interconnectedness between the quest for identity and the reform of the educational system as a cure for the underdevelopment of the African continent. The search for the true identity is executed by Ast, an African-American. Thus, a detailed exploration of Ast's character is vital to the understanding of her motives and the stages she went through to regain her identity. It also uncovers her sincere commitment to Africa. Through Ast, Armah presents a positive vision of African-American identity and experience, based on his holistic comprehension of the historical experience, the significance of the willingness of the African Diaspora to adopt the role of a life giver and the respect for the intellectualism and commitment of truthful activists. To devote Armah a serious critical attention, I read his text against their cultural, historical and socio-political background.

Commitment

The postcolonial African novel is informed by the realisation of the new generation of postcolonial African writers that the political, social and economic predicament have extraordinary origins which need extraordinary commitment. There is no disagreement that commitment is one of the constituents of African literary theory. African theorists such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Chidi Amuta and others are on the mark when they emphasise that African literature is combative. It is driven by the need to engage in the struggle for liberation. The African writer is not defeated by the mind-blowing postcolonial problems. He is a fighter; he is looking forward. He is politically and socially a conscious writer who knows his mission: to use critically his fiction and to offer a vision of a promising future for the continent. From such perspective, the African literary theory acknowledges a social role for the African literature in general and the African novel in particular.

In *Writers in Politics* Ngugi argues about literature and its function in society. He asserts that literature is rooted in the African society and imbibes its breath from the community's realities. It is a functional art that he advocates, an art that serves the people.² It becomes clear that there is no art for art's sake for the African novelist. Concerning the writer's place and role in society, Ngugi strongly foregrounds the African writer's militancy and commitment. For him, the African artist is a member of the social body, so he cannot be exempt from his people's revolutionary struggle for justice and true decolonisation³. An African writer, eventually, who avoids the burning social, political and historical issues of his time will end up being useless and irrelevant in his society.

Postcolonial African novelists as diverse as Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ngozi Adichie – the list is seemingly endless – have used the novel as an aggressive means of protest to the postcolonial complications. Achebe, along with other African critics, lucidly expresses this point when he says that it is impossible for the African novelist “to write anything in Africa without some commitment, some kind of message,” he goes on to stress that African writers “whether they are aware of it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demanded that you should protest that you should put in a word for your history, your traditions, and your religion and so on”⁴. For Achebe, writing for the African is a serious enterprise, and protest is integral to postcolonial African novel. Protest is inherent within the African writer because it is a crucial part of the African novelist's necessity to alter things within the situation of oppression, corruption and exploitation. In *Osiris Rising*, Ayi Kwei Armah is determined to wage a struggle against African diseases so as to build a healthy society.

Osiris Rising is the first African novel to give prominence to a central female character that primarily concerns herself with the destiny of the continent. In this sense, a detailed exploration of Ast's character is vital to the understanding of her sincere quest for identity and commitment.

History of Africa in *Osiris Rising*

In *Osiris Rising*, Black African identity is a major issue. The novel concerns itself very precisely with the attempt of African Americans to regain their true identity. Armah's text describes the journey back to the source as a return. This homecoming is grounded on the history of Africa, particularly, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The Middle Passage, the forced crossing of slaves from Africa to America, has been a central preoccupation of creative African and African American writers. Many texts as varied as Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1954), Aimé Cécile's *A Season in the Congo* (1968), George Lamming's *Season of Adventure* (1960) and John Pepper Clark's *America, Their America* (1964) have made reference implicitly or explicitly to slavery and its implications. *Osiris*

Rising is not an exception. The Middle Passage is continually explored. This unwilling migration which transplanted away Africans from their homeland was characterized by violence on the body and mind. Those slaves were forced to travel in implausible conditions with chains on their necks, hands and feet. In America, they worked in European's farms in difficult work conditions.

At the very beginning of the novel, Nwt, Ast's grandmother asks her granddaughter: "Do you know that our people were sold into slavery?"⁵ Undoubtedly, this inquiry brings about the issue of the history of Africa that is associated with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Armah uses the past to overcome a troubling present and build a better future. In this sense, Armah has demonstrated through his dramatization of historical material that such material is meaningless if it is not assimilated to heal contemporary African problems. This is exactly what Armah does in *Osiris Rising*. In this work, Armah offers a mythic interpretation to the slave experience of Africans in order to make it relevant to his aim of showing how it contributed to the destruction of African identities and how it produced people in the Diaspora like Nwt and Ast. These fictional people and many others in real life who are dispersed in the world through the dehumanizing Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade still keep their personal histories.

Very significant is that Ast's reading of the book, *Journey to the Source*, reminds her of African history and anticipates her return to Africa. Thus, Ast begins a journey to regain her true identity. Critically examined, this "journey" of Ast is a journey back to her roots. As it will be clarified later, her homecoming is directly connected to Armah's work of reconstruction of Africa. In fact, Armah's endeavor is to bring to the fore an imperative question: what can the African Americans do for their motherland to get rid of its predicament

Regaining identity

Through Ast, Armah presents a positive vision of African-American identity and experience, based on his holistic comprehension of the historical experience, the significance of the willingness of the African female to adopt the role of a life giver and the respect for the intellectualism and commitment of truthful activists. Ast, the major character, is a manifestation of the goddess, Isis. Runoko Rashidi explains that "by practically all accounts, Isis was the most dominant goddess of ancient Egypt"⁶. Armah honours the African-American woman by naming the protagonist Ast after a goddess. He symbolically asserts the placement of trans-Atlantic African women in the historical matriarchy of African cosmology.

Ast grew up in America and studied African history. She obtained her doctorate in Egyptian History to become a history teacher. Ast was made aware of her past by her grandmother Nwt, who offered her the first training on hieroglyphics and ancient Egyptian mysticism. This African-American wise woman functions as a custodian of connectedness in the face of fragmentation. Ast is the medium through which the African Diaspora is examined.

Her prospective homecoming is mainly fueled by two motives: alienation and reconnection with an old love. A powerful impetus to impel the return is the willingness to escape the alienation from the American lifestyle. Ast acknowledges that the alienating environment of capitalism is not contributive to what Kwadwo Osei-Nyame refers to as "the desire for self-legitimation as a part of a discourse of self-rehabilitation"⁷. Ast has a personal dislike for living in America. However, it is not this negative life in American society that drives her towards Africa. Instead, it is her response to a far-sighted constructive end. In other words, alienation intensifies her will to join her roots. The second motive is that Ast hopes to be reunited with Asar, her old friend and an activist in the Ankh community, the house of life in the novel. She is fascinated and inspired by his fight for freedom and his strong belief in the regeneration of Africa. Asar's latest message "Who We Are and Why" quickens her return:

“For centuries now our history in Africa has been an avalanche of proplems. We’ve staggered from disaster to catastrophe, enduring the destruction of Kemt, the scattering of millions ranging the continent in search of refuge, the waste of humanity in the slave trade organized by Arabs, Europeans and myopic, crumb-hungry Africans ready to destroy this land for their unthinking profit. We have endured the plunder of a land now carved up into fifty idiotic neocolonial states in this age when large nations seek survival in larger federal unions, and even fools know that fission is death.

It may look as if all we ever did was to endure this history of ruin, taking no steps to end the negative slide and begin the positive turn. That impression is false. Over These disastrous millennia there have been Africans concerned to work out solutions to our problems and to act on them. The traces these makers left are faint, because in the continuing triumph of Africa’s destroyers the beautiful ones were murdered, the land poisoned. Now Wherever future seed seeks to take roots it strikes sand [...] we are after the intelligent action to change these realities. For we intend, as Africans, to retrieve our human face, our human heart, the human mind our ancestors taught to soar. This is who we are, and why”. (10)

Armah uses this article as a medium to highlight that both of them enjoy the same cultural and political understanding. They share the same desire: the reconstruction of African continent.

In fact, the teaching of Nwt inaugurates the first phase of Ast’s reconnection with Africa. Through Nwt, Ast is able to reconnect to her African past:

“Conversations with Nwt turned into voyages. Crossing space and time, the growing Ast stayed up nights with ancestors thousands of years gone puzzling over the motion of stars, wind, flood. Connections. Wonder turned to knowledge of measurable time. She watched kindred priests divide the year into seasons departing and returning, the day into twelve hours going, night into twelve tirelessly coming. Her mind met ancestral priestesses, companions caring for green fields on Hapi’s riverbanks, turning desire into myth, naming the myth Sekhet larw, perfect place, evergreen fields of the wandering soul returning home”.(13)

As Ogede rightly observes, Ast’s experience lends “considerable insight into how the individual is ultimately what she is prepared for by her blood, her family, and her environment”⁸. In this way, Armah presents an African-American matriarch, Nwt, as an ancient African soul. Nwt transmits Kemetic knowledge to Ast, including the Ankh. It is the ancient symbol of life and other active legends of African cosmology.

Very important is that Nwt assists Ast to overcome the prejudice inherent in the educational system which subjected her to the wrong account of her family history. Ast is indebted to her nurturing mother for teaching her a correct version of history, far from the one which describes Africans as passive and willing slaves. This kind of background has prepared Ast for joining the revolutionaries who are committed to change the realities of postcolonial Africa.

Similar to “typical Armah protagonists,” who are “soul-searchers, caring for things of the mind and spirit rather than the heavy things of the flesh”⁹, Ast is committed “to follow her soul to a different outcome, a reversal of the crossing and its motivation, both” (11). Ast’s decision to come back to her motherland is in harmony with the context of her education. Armah states:

“She took History for her first degree, then shifted closer home to Egyptology, for the second. Her doctorate focuses on Kemt; she wrote her thesis on identity and social justice in the philosophy of Ancient Egypt. By graduation time her search for knowledge of self, of self within universe, had led her through a flow of

changes, some so generous with knowledge they made pain worthwhile in the end. The search accelerated her decision: to return” (8).

Through her education, Ast knows about her identity, and she is able to embrace a revolutionary maturity at the very start of the novel when she decides to return to Africa.

The second stage to regain her true identity resides in her return. Ast rejects the sweet life in America. She returns to Africa not to fulfil egoistic desires. Her return is spiritual rather than physical. She comes back to seek her identity and roots. She is also determined to contribute to Africa’s development. The fact that Ast discarded the luxury life in America to work for the well-being of the masses in Africa is a proof of her sincere commitment to a cause in her motherland.

Ast knows that the crossing from the United States to Africa is very hard because it is painful. Since Ast’s return is for positive ends, she admits that “fulfilment involves a willingness to accept pain, even intense, lasting pain, as part of work that gives life a better meaning” (111).

Inspired and educated by her wise grandmother, Ast does not try to deny the historical experience of Africans, but she makes of it a starting point for her commitment towards her ancestral land. Her commitment, then, is informed by the experience of her people who were sold from the continent during the enslavement trade¹⁰. Highly important to Ast is her heritage as an African. In this regard, Armah redefines Africanness, not in terms of nativity, but in traditional terms of commitment, communalism and reciprocity

The last stage for Ast to embrace her true identity emanates from the cultural and political significance of Bara, the house of African culture and identity. In Bara, Ast admits that her love for Asar is love for Africa. There, she has maneuvered herself into that grassroots structure. It is in Bara that she could materialize her precondition to find her true identity; she could create a worker's cooperative to generate equal profit for all fishermen. Finally, Ast finds “the beginnings of an inner peace she'd only imagined, never experienced in America. Under this sky, with these stars [...] she knew she was home... Here was a life lived with a commitment so steady it created no anxiety”(233)

Armah does not choose Ast as the protagonist of *Osiris Rising* accidentally. He must have thought so much before selecting the appropriate character for the appropriate book. Armah uses Ast’s analytical skills as a Ph.D holder in African history to identify exactly and critically the situation in Africa and offer practical solutions to the problems. Therefore, Armah chooses the suitable occupation for Ast as a teacher of history which has a relation with Africa in general and the events of the novel in particular. Armah dramatises a chapter of attachment and commitment to Africa through Ast’s study of African history and Egyptology. Equally interesting is that Armah creates an African-American gifted with the attributes of the original Ast. They are commitment, creativity and intelligence. She becomes an example of a sincere Diaspora’s back-to-Africa¹¹.

According to Armah, the outcome of "the accidents of history"¹², necessitates thorough collaboration among African intellectuals wherever they are. Consequently, Ast’s journey to Africa is symbolic because it brings her into direct partnership with other Africans here on the continent to work together to provide a genuine solution to the cultural and political mess of postcolonial Africans in particular and people of African descent in the Diaspora in general.

Change

Ast knows that self-fulfillment is associated with actions in the political and economic life of the continent. She asserts that “it doesn’t matter how clear my vision of Africa may be. If I can’t connect through work,

the vision is useless” (244). Ast is conscious of the necessity of being practical in her commitment. At the beginning of the novel, Ast’s commitment to a shared cause is tested by Seth, the representative of oppression in the novel. He offers her a comfortable life so as to leave Asar and his subversive plans. However, Ast dismisses the offer to join the revolutionary community of Asar because she is “trying to help create a future” for Africa (112). In this regard, Obododimma Oha’s remark is to the point when he explains that Armah is

“more interested in motivation for return and prefers a motivation that cannot be easily subdued – that, instead, subdues conspiracy as staged by (in) security agents, and subdues nostalgia and its symptoms”¹³.

To highlight Ast’s commitment to change in Africa, Armah juxtaposes Ast with Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano, another African-American returnee. Armah pinpoints both positive and negative African-American home comers. As far as the last category of people is concerned, Armah precisely investigates with considerable candour their different and conflicting motives of their return. Whereas Ast’s ambitions are positive and constructive, Cinque’s are negative. He is power-hungry, profit-minded and destructive. Cinque comes to Africa merely to recreate the “American master-slave patterns” of relationship with Africans (129). In this sense, the portrait of Cinque denotes how African-Americans may be imprisoned in the myths of their Diasporic slave history and slave mentality which hinder their rediscovery of their true African identity.

Working within revolutionary community permits Ast to step to the application of her return and commitment to Africa. This time, Armah’s focus shifts from the individual to embrace the collective. Armah establishes a grassroots movement based on communal interests to work on solving Africa’s educational mess. Armah is legitimately concerned with the necessity of reforming the African educational system because it is the root-cause of political, social and cultural problems in Africa.

To achieve this aim the secret organisation proceeds to farsighted reviews in the areas of curriculum design of African studies, history and literature. The majesty of Armah’s novel emerges from the fact that it includes a curriculum proposal. It is a model of how African-centered education will give birth to productive African-centered generations. They will replace the neocolonial profiteers who are produced by the modern-day neocolonial education. Ast, Asar and Djattu assumed a leading responsibility within the group. Ast takes charge of history; Asar takes the responsibility for dealing with literature and Djatta’s task is to work on African studies (190-92).

It is reassuring that at the end of the novel the revolutionaries ultimately prevail. Their curriculum changes are adopted by Manda College, and they begin to radiate throughout the country. The way to victory and success, Armah underscores, is the collective effort as well as organisation. It is crucial to change. This is why the community of the Ankh is well organised. In Asar’s words, the collective work is to prepare the future (115).

Conclusion

All in all, *Osiris Rising* investigates the quest for identity and change in Africa. In dealing with such preoccupations, the novel is informed by the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. In her search for her African identity, Ast, an African-American history scholar, is mainly fueled by two motives: alienation and reconnection with an old love. She went through three phases to reconnect herself with her roots. She is also committed to contribute to Africa’s well-being. She became a member of that grassroots structure which could reform the African educational system. Armah invites African-Americans to make the journey back to Africa. He makes clear that the search for origin and identity must not be driven by egoistic interests. Instead, the authentic quest for an African identity is inseparable from commitment to Africa. According to Armah, commitment is the key to change, especially the

reform of education. Armah leaves no doubt that the reform of African education is a necessity because it is the main ground for political, social, cultural problems in the continent. I hasten to say that the reform of the educational system in Africa is viable. Also, I argue that the form of return Armah underscores is desirable, but it is too optimistic given the bleak postcolonial reality of Africa. There are many forces working against Armah's identity project such as poverty, unemployment and dictatorship. Nevertheless, *Osiris Rising* demonstrates that Armah is sensitive to the problems of his continent and is taking part in the education of his people.

A short bio-note on the author:

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End notes:

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1968), 179.
2. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: Essays*, (London: Heinemann, 1981), 5-6.
3. Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics*, 5-6.
4. Bernth Lindfors, Ed. *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 29.
5. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Osiris Rising: A Novel of Africa Past, Present, and Future*. (Penguin, Senegal: Per Ankh, 1995): 11. Further page references are in the main text.
6. Runoko Rashidi, "African Goddesses: Mothers of Civilization." *Black Women in Antiquity*, Ed. Ivan Van Sertima (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992): 84-5.
7. K. J. Osei-Nyame, "The politics of 'translation' in African postcolonial literature: Olaudah Equiano, Ayi Kwei Armah, Toni Morrison, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tayeb Salih and Leila Aboulela," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 21.1 (June 2009): 91.
8. Ode Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah: Radical Iconoclast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 141.
9. Kofi Ayidoho, "Literature and African Identity: The Example of Ayi Kwei Armah," *Critical Perspectives on Ayi Kwei Armah*, ed. Derek Wright (Washington, DC : Three Continents, 1992): 37.
10. Armah's text is not unique in exploring the enslavement experience for positive ends. Awoonor's text *Comes the Voyager at Last* underscores that this hard experience is not an indicator of separation of people from their identity and land, but it is an indicator of continuity of a people sticking to their origin and roots.
11. One of the notable returnees for roots in Africa is the African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois. His political and historical knowledge paved him the way to be Kwame Nkrumah's political adviser.
12. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Re-membering the Dismembered Continent* (Penguin: Per Ankh, 2010), 9.

13. Obododimma Oha, "Living on the Hyphen: Ayi Kwei Armah and the Paradox of the African-American Quest for a New Future and Identity in Postcolonial Africa," in Davis, Geoffrey V., Peter H. Marsden, Bénédicte Ledent & Marc Delrez (eds.), *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a 'Post'-Colonial World* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005): 264.

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