IMAGES OF WOMEN IN ARMAH'S *TWO THOUSAND SEASONS*: A THEMATIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the general treatment of women in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons.* The aim is to demonstrate how Armah crusades against female subjugation and actively promotes the feminist cause. In Armah's novels generally, women are always strong, *positively* or *negatively*. The study proposes the thesis that despite the long-held view that women in the context of African literatures are hardly protagonists or independent and are totally subjected to male control, there is strong evidence of feminism in male literature which promotes gender balance and equality. The methods adopted for this study are theories of feminism as espoused by Stacey and postcolonial feminists. Upon examining the images of women in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons,* it becomes clear that Armah liberates his women from the shackles of gender roles and stereotypical conventions. The typical Armah's females are very strong formidable women, often stronger than the males whom they overwhelm with the sheer vigour of their personality.

Key words: feminism – patriarchy - postcolonial feminism- radical feminism

INTRODUCTION

Feminism as a socio-political concept is the belief in and promotion of equal rights of women. It is observed however that scholars of Feminist theory have not agreed on a specific definition for the concept of feminism (Hirsch, 2015). Nevertheless, based on my readings of the various definitions of Feminism provided by these critics, we may define Feminism as a political, cultural, and economic struggle aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism also includes sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference (Gunew, 2013).

Most feminists agree that there are three classifications of feminism: Radical Feminism, Marxist/ Socialist Feminism and Liberal Feminism (Ryan, 2013). Radical feminism is defined as antagonistic towards men in its protests against male violence on women. Radical Feminists consider men as responsible for women's oppression and advocate that women declare war on

men. It is an extreme type of feminism (Koedt, Anne, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, 1973; Shulman, 1980; Crow, 2000; Rhodes, 2012; Mackay, 2015).

Marxist/Socialist Feminism on the other hand views women's oppressions as linked to the forms of capitalist exploitation of labour. In other words, the Marxist feminists perceive feminism as part of the class struggle and focuses on class along with gender to analyse the unfair treatment of women in society in relation to society's function within the capitalist economy. Marxist feminists believe that women's oppression will disappear after an economic revolution (Bandarage, 1984; Lorber, 2010; Tong, 2013).

The third class of Feminism, Liberal Feminism (some call it moderate feminism) in the view of Stacey (1993) is distinctive in its focus on individual rights and choices. Liberal Feminists argue that women's rights have been denied for so long that it requires both laws and education to rectify these injustices (pp. 49-51). Liberal feminism seeks opportunities for women's advancement in society through institutional changes and in the work place. Liberal feminism, unlike radical feminism is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of certain aspects of women's suppression.

In the area of feminist aesthetics, a poetics most relevant to our study is postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminism or 'third world feminism' emerged in response to Western feminism. According to the postcolonial feminists, images of African women in colonial literature are negative. White women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, and class. Postcolonial feminism advocates for the development of feminism which can acknowledge structural relation that constitute difference and recognize the history of colonialism and its role in shaping the modern world (Mehta, 2000; Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder, and You-me Park, 2000; Narayan, 2013). Thus African feminist writers have a responsibility to correct these negative images (Fisher, 2013). As far back as 1987, Molara Ogundipe - Leslie published her article: "The Female Writer and Her Commitment" in which she charges all African female writers with the responsibility of writing about what it is to being a woman and to describe reality from a woman's perspective (p. 10). In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, issues of women are approached from the radical feminist and the postcolonial feminist perspective.

Ayi Kwei Armah

Ayi Kwei Armah has published seven novels to date: *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), *Fragments* (1969), *Why Are We So Blest*? (1972), *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), *The Healers* (1979), *Osiris Rising* (1995) and *KMT: In the House of Life* (2002). Images of women in all seven novels are not of the usual docile, submissive and vulnerable victims of male domination depicted in most writings by African male authors. On the contrary, Armah's women are strong and assertive even when they play minor roles in the novel. A study of Armah's novels shows a development in his portraiture of women, from the controlling force behind the successful or not so successful male protagonist, to the female protagonist in charge of her own affairs. Indeed, *Two Thousand Seasons* is the climax of the ascending positive images Armah presents of women in his novels. The novels that follow *Two Thousand Seasons* continue in the tradition of the strong female but in more subtle forms in the sense that they are positive but less radical compared to the women in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Abena Busia (1986) affirms this point

in her essay titled "Parasites and Prophets: The Use of Women in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels" when she states:

> Armah has broken away from one tradition altogether - he does not subscribe to the convention of the free-spirited harlot; there are no whores in any of his texts, heroic or otherwise. In this he breaks away from a tradition which has existed for several centuries in the west (represented by such well-known characters like Defoe's Moll Flanders, and Dickens' Nancy), and which has also been reflected in the contemporary African novel by such writers as Ekwensi and Ngugi (p. 106).

Images of women in Armah's first three novels are of two types. The first groups women of strong character, but with negative attitudes. They are often selfish and materialistic and their constant demands on their male heroes (who usually happen to be relatives) put undue pressure on the latter, which in some cases leads to their downfall. The second group also consists of strong women, but unlike the first, they are self-reliant and able to provide support and a form of refuge for their male heroes especially when under pressure. In *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the anonymous protagonist resolves not to get involved in any corrupt dealings because to do so is morally wrong. But his materialistic wife and her mother strongly oppose this decision, simply because everyone does it and gets rich. In the man's struggle for survival in a hostile world there is no female support for him and he fights alone and futile battle to the end when the coup d'état finally but only partially absolves him. Manaan, perhaps the only positive image of the female in the novel belongs to the second narrative level and does not come into contact with the hero. Manaan, a representative of the second group of women is independent and free-spirited; but she is a victim, a portrait of male betrayal. Her story is told in an exterior analepsis where she goes mad as a result of betrayal by a leader she has believed in and has had high hopes in. Maanan in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* thus represents those Ghanaians who believe in Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, only for him to betray them all. Therefore, despite Maanan's semi-positive image of womanhood she does not, in reality, represent feminist tendencies in Armah's early novels.

For the true beginnings of Ayi Kwei Armah's feminist inclinations we may have to turn to his second novel, *Fragments*. In this novel, Naana, the aging matriarch of Baako's family becomes the image of the emerging feminist voice of Armah's novel. Naana is the first really positive female in Armah. A strong, determined and deeply intelligent woman, she is the pillar of tradition, culture and what is right in the African way. Naana, together with Juana, Baako's Puerto Rican girl-friend, reflects the second category of Armah's women. The two are the supportive women behind Baako's survival. Without them Baako might not have made it in the end. But these two positive women pale in the face of the sheer intensity behind the violent force of the women who play negative roles in the novel. Baako's mother and sister represent this second type of female in *Fragments*. They are strong but negative characters. Like the Man's wife and mother-in-law in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, they are hostile, possessive, materialistic, acquisitive and overweening. They are figures of oppression for Baako. Their perversion of custom and traditional practices and lust for material things epitomize their role in the novel.

Indeed, there are actually no weak female characters in Armah's novels in the sense of being victims of patriarchy. Missing in his novels is the effeminate, subservient female who is undermined and reduced to second-class dependency on male charity and chauvinism. There are

no obedient housewives in the novels of Armah wholly dependent and ruled by the bullying husband. There are no servile roles imposed by society on the female as a gender; no rape victims, no culturally subordinated images of the female. This is where Armah's novels essentially differ from other male novels of African Literature.

Armah's perception of women as strong players in society, whether negative or positive is reflected in his third novel: *Why Are We So Blest?* the work immediately preceding *Two Thousand Seasons.* As in the earlier novels, there is no weak female character in the sense of the traditional subordinate role society imposes on women. Instead, the two categories of strong females identified above are both presented: one strong in a negative way and the other strong in a positive way. None of the major females in *Why Are We So Blest?* fits the traditional obsequious role of the female in male-dominated novels. The female characters in *Why Are We So Blest?* are all strong, dominant, domineering characters who are playing either negative roles or positive roles. Unfortunately, Armah's feminist vision here is perceived within a context of racial stereotyping and bias. All negative females are white, and none of the positive females is white. The major negative females – both strong characters and white are Aimee Reitsch and Mrs. Jefferson. They are racist instruments of sexual oppression and death, and they are totally domineering, with a capacity to turn the lonely and confused African male student into a sex slave with death as its ultimate prize.

There is also another type of negative female character, white, neither violent nor mannish and yet not positive. She is not strong and though she is humane, feminine and admirable, she is weak and submissive to the level almost of the traditional role of the subservient female. But we are made to admire her for her strong female virtues, and we are only put off by her inability to assert herself and put her destiny in her own hands. In *Why Are We So Blest?* , Silvia the Portuguese girl-friend of Solo is one such character.

In contrast to the negative female, all white, is the strong positive female with productive and affirmative characteristics, all black and effectively represented by Naita the Afro-American female companion of Modin. Naita serves as both an emotional and cultural model for Modin's advancement. But unfortunately, Naita is unable to wean Modin off the fatal attractions of seductive whiteness. She is also Modin's lover but she does not suffer from the frustration of stale love and lack of emotional fullness endured by the sex-starved white female. Because of this, her relationship with Modin is more romantic than sexual, more natural than forced, and more tender than loving. Rather than being a source of frustration and violence, she is a source of hope and security for our hero. Sackey (2013) in his essay "Reading Ayi Kwei Armah's Why Are We So Blest?" affirms that Naita therefore represents love, hope and life for Modin; Mrs Jefferson and Aimee represent hate, doubt and death. Unfortunately, Modin chooses death in place of life (p.120).

TWO THOUSAND SEASONS

Two Thousand Seasons can be said to be the climax of Armah's feminist inclination. In this novel, Armah adopts the theory of postcolonial feminism in his treatment of women. Postcolonial feminists argue that oppression relating to the colonial experience, particularly racial, class, and ethnic oppression, has marginalized women in postcolonial societies. They object to portrayal of

women of non-Western societies as passive and voiceless victims and the portrayal of Western women as modern, educated and empowered (Frank, 1987). Consequently, Armah presents the reader with two categories of women in the text.

The first category is of African women often presented in a positive light. Examples are Nandi, Idawa, Abena, Yaniba, Noliwe, and Ningome, who are intelligent, brave warriors, fearless and proactive. This group will be examined in this paper under the title: positive images of women.

The second category is of European women who are usually given negative portraiture. This is done deliberately by Armah because of his racist agenda. European women are presented as sick, weak and ugly. The narrator calls the white wife of Bentum (renamed Bradford George) a "white ghost" and a "white apparition" and describes her as:

> a creature more than twenty seasons past the poor prince's age, a dry, white woman more than half deaf, blind in one eye, with a body so dead it was whispered here she never could feel her husband enter her, and would not know what to do with him in any case (p. 91).

In the same vein Armah describes the wife of the European governor in uncharitable terms:

> ...White like leprosy triumphant, her body bloated in a watery way, much as if she had been out of a single yaw, and given to frequent confinement with some ill-defined shaking disease, severest, so it was said, whenever she chanced to catch the governor tasting darker flesh able, as hers was unable, to satisfy his lust. The sickly female destroyer had died in a cataclysm of anger one riotous night at the stone place (p. 169).

Not only are European women given negative images as women who have no feelings to enjoy sex or satisfy their husbands, they are also made voiceless in the novel. The white wives of Bentum and the governor never speak or express their desires in any way. Both women, who happen to be the only white women in the novel, are just mentioned and they play no active role.

Ayi Kwei Armah due to his postcolonial mission in *Two Thousand Seasons*, condemns all that is connected to Europeans and Arabs in a way which might lead to him being accused of racism. Images of Arabs and Europeans are negative through and through. Mullatoes are also condemned because of the European blood in them.

In the novel, Arab and European men dominate their women. Arabs abuse women and induce their African male bodyguards to torture and kill them for their sake. European men, on the other hand, use women to satisfy their sexual desires, that is, they become objects for their sexual escapades and property to be kept home.

POSITIVE IMAGES OF WOMEN

African women on the other hand, play active roles which are entirely positive. Lorentzon (2000) in his "Aftermath" remarks of Armah's women that "Armah gives his female characters an altogether positive role; while there are both good and bad men here, there are no bad women. All cruelty and treachery stem from male characters, while only virtuous qualities are found in the women" (p. 231). In *Two Thousand Seasons* women take charge of affairs of the state and move the story. They play roles that defy traditional conventions of women in the African society. They are leaders, warriors, pathfinders, defenders and protectors. Armah takes the stand of a radical feminist and puts the woman above the man in society. Radical feminists blame men as the cause of women's oppression and call for the overthrow of patriarchy and the induction of matriarchy, with women in charge of all affairs of state. Armah may not have intended to take the position of the radical feminist in *Two Thousand Seasons,* but he actually emasculates men and gives all the power and decision making to women. With the exception of Isanusi, who play a positive and active role in the text, male characters in *Two Thousand Seasons* have negative roles. They are perceived as cowards, selfish and greedy people who, by their anti-African conduct, have long departed from the African way.

In *Two Thousand Seasons*, there is equality and togetherness of the sexes. The narrator of the novel by use of the plural form of the first person pronoun 'we' underscores the society's togetherness and equality. The novel postulates that the African way knows no oppression and that it is important that in a society, both men and women work together for the betterment of all. The narrator's use of the plural 'we' highlights the need for togetherness and all-inclusiveness in order to realize the African way. The narrator of the novel contends that "pieces cut off from their whole are nothing but dead fragments" (p.1). The way is for male and female to work together equally; anything far from that is a diversion from the African way. Accordingly, the novel denounces men who delight in leisure and by their inaction, impel their women to sacrifice their leisure time to provide for them and their entire family. Armah points out:

> For this the men – opprobrium fill their new-grown paunches – showed no extraordinary stomach, preferring to sit in the shade of large bodwe trees or beneath the cool grass of huts built by women, drinking ahey, breathing the flattering air of the shade, in their heads congratulating the tribe of men for having found such easy means to spare itself the little inconveniences of work while yet enjoying so much of its fruit – so easy it is for men's feet to dance off the way of reciprocity (p. 10).

The novel expresses strong disapproval of the attitude of men who do not see women as their equals and consider them as lower in standard and weak. These batches of men actually determine the sort of work they themselves ought to do as the strong breed of humans and the kind that women ought to do as the weaker breed of humans. In the novel, these men allocate work they rate trivial to women and set aside for themselves imaginary heroic work. Ultimately, these men do no work in the society; even so they enjoy every benefit the woman derives from her hard work.

The novel also talks about equal educational opportunities and togetherness when the narrator describes the rites of initiation for the youth of Anoa. During the initiation rites of the youth of Anoa, both boys and girls are taught the skills of protection, skills of farming, hunting, fishing,

carving, weaving of cloth, seasons, the healing arts, etc. The narrator's continuous use of the pronoun 'we' conveys the initiates' unity and equality.

One would expect Armah, in talking about equality and togetherness to create a balance between female and male characters. In spite of that, his female characters are more active than the male characters. The initiates for instance, are twenty; eleven girls and nine boys.

Indeed, the female characters actually defy traditional conventions. Feminist African novels by male authors like Azasu's *Invitation* (2006) Herbstien's *Ama: A Story of the Slave Trade* (2002) and Nurudeen Farrah's *God's Bits of Wood* (1970), have women who, right from infancy, are trained in the kitchen to accept domestic roles and to submit to men. Hannah Papanek (1990), a sociology researcher, in her essay, "To Each Less Than She Needs, From Each More Than She Can Do: Allocations, Entitlements, And Value" studied the root causes of gender inequality and observes:

> Children are taught very early in life about distributive justice in terms of differences in gender and age. When some get more food on their plate and others less, when some are sent to school and others not, children can see, in dramatic ways, what the differences are between boys and girls in their societies. These are lessons that they will remember, even those rebels who carry their anger over unjust treatment into adult activism for a cause. The way children are taught about shares and inequalities based on gender and age is a crucial part of the way they learn their place in family and society (p. 163).

This is not the case in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Armah's female characters are the equals of men, and in some instances superior to men because of the privileges they have over men in the society. They are not trained in the kitchen by elderly women on how to serve and submit as wives and mothers. On the contrary, they are trained, just like boys to protect themselves and their family. They learn together with the boys, skills of farming, hunting, carving, weaving, building and metal turning. The compelling thing about Armah's characters is that even during the rites of initiation, their teachers teach them equally. The teachers do not separate the girls and teach them the skills of weaving cloth and healing arts, which one may consider minor because they do not involve much exertion, and the boys, the skills of turning metal and hunting. Female characters in the novel shoot guns and hunt down animals, just as men do in male chauvinistic novels.

Usually in male chauvinistic novels set in a patriarchal society, men have the unearned privilege to control the society and everything that happens in it. The narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* labels this privilege as unearned because it is not based on merit or quality but simply gender. However, because the men refuse to work and prefer to sit under trees drinking, leaving all real work to the women, women overturn the state of affairs in the society and take charge of activities (p. 11). The laziest and most worthless of all the men are the kings, especially, King Kuranche. This is how the narrator describes him:

> Kuranche of all the children of his time was slowest. It was his habit to stay wherever he was left from morning till evening and sit staring ahead of his body. He could not smile. The only expression he had was a constant dull, flat, ever-staring look from which diviners

> themselves could have been defeated trying to draw a meaning...this slowness, it came to be a distinguishing mark upon everything Kuranche did (p. 66).

Kings in *Two Thousand Seasons* are cowards and stooges to the Europeans. The novel condemns all the kings as criminals and the hereditary system as a deviation from the African way. The system of heredity according to him provides an avenue for fools with no intelligence and worth to elevate themselves; even if by so doing they push others down.

Another important image of African women portrayed in the novel is the prophetess. The narrator is a Griot, who sings and tells stories about the history and traditions of the African people and community. The Griot's aim is to teach the youth to be courageous and aspire to an ideal society. In Greek epic, the role of a seer is always assigned to a male (Tiresias). However, this role is the preserve of women in the novel. The character, Anoa, plays the seer who constantly warns the community to be aware of its hospitality and generosity to foreigners who do not know how to reciprocate.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* portrays positive images of African women, as has not yet been done in any Ghanaian literary text. Armah takes two stands in achieving this; that of the radical feminist and that of the postcolonial feminist. The radical feminism he preaches in *Two Thousand Season* extends into his subsequent novels, and yet none rivals the radicalism of this novel. In The *Healers*, *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*: *In The House of Life* Armah portrays images of women with positive characters but no character is ever as daring and radical as Abena, Noliwe, Ngome and Idawa in *Two Thousand Seasons.*

As a postcolonial feminist, Armah argues that women of non-Western societies had a voice and played active roles in every aspect of building an ideal community. He further treats the African women in *Two Thousand Seasons* as equals of men in all aspects: socially, economically and politically. The novel reveals that unity is strength; therefore, it is important for all Africans to come together irrespective of gender, in order to be able to oppose foreign invasion and influence. Gender inequality is not the African way but an imposition by the Arabs and the Europeans.

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