THE WRITING OF DISORDER IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *FRAGMENTS*

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Abstract

The image of African society that the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah dramatizes in his novel *Fragments* is the one of a society experiencing crisis with itself and with its environment. In this unbalanced imaginary society, the personal universe of every character sways between order and disorder. In other words, order and disorder follow each other to give meaning to Man's life. The writing of disorder or disaster is a form of writing whose specificity is to be found in its motley collection and its opening to literary genres. It sets free the writer from the demands of academic English and the universal writing or canons of literature. Thus, it reveals as a writing of self-exposition or self-revelation. Armah uses this technique to castigate Ghanaian political power which grants less importance to art and the role of the artiste in a society in crisis. The disorder which the writer depicts is, in fact, that of Ghanaian civil service and the social anomy of post-independence Africa.

Key-words: chaos, confusion, disaster, disorder, hybridity, order.

Résumé

L'image de la société africaine que le romancier Ghanéen, Ayi Kwei Armah théâtralise dans son roman *Fragments* est celle d'une société en crise avec elle-même et avec son environnement. Dans cette société fictive désaxée, l'univers personnel de chaque personnage tangue entre l'ordre et le désordre. Autrement dit, l'ordre et le désordre se succèdent pour donner sens à l'existence humaine. L'écriture du désordre ou du désastre est une forme d'écriture qui se singularise par sa bigarrure et son ouverture à tous les genres littéraires. Elle libère l'écrivain des contraintes de l'anglais académique et des canons de l'écriture universelle. Ainsi, elle se dévoile comme une écriture d'exposition de soi ou de révélation de soi. Armah utilise cette technique pour fustiger le pouvoir politique Ghanéen qui accorde peu d'importance à l'art et au rôle de l'artiste dans une société en crise. Le désordre que l'auteur décrit est en réalité celui de l'administration ghanéenne, l'anomie sociale de l'Afrique postindépendance.

Mots-clés: bigarrée, chaos**,** confusion, désastre, désordre, hybridité, ordre.

INTRODUCTION

The image of African society that the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah dramatizes in his novel *Fragments* is a society in crisis with itself and with its environment. In this unbalanced and adulterated imaginary society, the personal universe of every character sways between order and disorder. In other words, order and disorder follow each other to give meaning to Man's life. The disorder one reads in African fictional space derives from the cultural clash: tradition and modernity which symbolize the social change or the start of a new era. For this reason, the theme of social disorder plays a significant role in Armah's works. Indeed, Armah portrays disorder in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1970) as a form of confusion, trouble, disturbance, anarchy, dysfunction, dirt and embezzlement. In this view, chaos is the extreme form of social mess. As Blanchot argues: "Disaster does not give a damn to us; it is the unlimited without a look (…). Nothing can stand against disaster; destruction in its pure ruin does not suit it. (…). Disaster is not capital letter, it may render death vain." (2011: 9 translation mine). Disaster helps the individual to bear the anguish of death. It saves human beings from danger, catastrophic or tragic events. In other words, we cannot clearly distinguish the non-chaos of physicians from the chaos of people or common language. The movement of a scientific concept towards a metaphor which stands for "disorder" raises few questions because the word "chaos" has a long religious and literary history as mentioned in Genesis. (Chancé, 2009: 40).

This paper through postcolonial theory intends to show what can turn the social order of the text into social disorder. In other terms, we will show to what extent the writing technique or form of Armah's *Fragments* reveals disorder. In this respect, three points will be analyzed: *Fragments* as a subversive or multicolored writing, *Fragments* as a hybrid or broken novel and stakes of a new literary aesthetic.

I-*Fragments* as a Subversive Writing

In this first part of our work, we will try to show in which way Armah's technique of writing is regarded as a subversive one. The reader sees the presence of an unorthodox writing at the very beginning of the novel:

> EACH THING that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns round. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living. All that goes returns. (1)

This passage reveals that *Fragments* is an uncommon novel. All the principles and rules of the canons literature are trampled down. This subversive writing enables the reader to understand that African postmodern literature which sounds the trumpets of togetherness "is close to craft industry than art, it is very close to talking than writing" (Major, 1984:10 translation mine). From its title Armah's work prepares the mind of the reader to the chaos of his book. Armah depicts the political and social order of Ghanaian society. The reader easily perceives the text as a chaotic or disordered form from the very first lines of the book. In this perspective, the title *Fragments* is a very important sign which foretells the predominance of narrative or structural disorder.

In this use of chaos, *Fragments* falls apart to converse with other kind of literary genres. In a scarred or disfigured society like Ghana, classical writing gives way to the writing of disaster. Here, the fragment is a bribe, a piece or a part of a more extended text which the

writer quotes in his work. What is at stake in the changing Ghanaian society, it is the survival of the society itself. Everything changes in a certain way. This social change is more explicit in Héraclite's words: "Everything flows and nothing remains" (Brun, 1969: 38, translation mine). This vision of the future which carries away everything and which also makes "everything flows and nothing remains" goes along with Héraclite's standpoint about the strife of antagonisms: order and disorder, peace and war, tradition and modernity. Talking about the use of fragmentary, Damien and Moussa write in the introduction of *L'écriture fragmentaire dans les productions africaines contemporaines* (2015):

> The use of fragmentary is a new writing style in vogue which gives the possibility to writers to express freely themselves through an azimuth reconfiguration of artistic work. This artistic work is perceived as a composite, a hybrid, a fractured set (…) of heterogeneous and unusual literary productions. (9, translation mine)

The narrative structure of *Fragments* shows a generic polyphony. It "appears as an amalgam of strong heterogeneous artistic and cultural forms." (Semujanga, 1999: 101). The varied typography, recalls the hybridity of *Fragments*. A house of classical publications usually imposes typographic norms to its collections and writings. Contrary to these well-known writing norms or requirements, Armah's novel is a compilation of a strange writing form. For instance, whole pages are written in capital letters:

> LINEAR, SHARP-EDGED PILLARS, SHAFTS ALL WHITE
> SUPERIMPOSED ON RECIPIENTS OF VIOLENCE,
> VAGUE FLUID FORMS FILING SCREEN,
> CIRCULAR, YIELDING, SOFT, ALL BLACK.
> TITLES
> ACCOMPANIED BY QUIET BACKGROUND MUSIC WITH FREQUENT
> DISSONANT LEAPING SOUNDS BREAKING IT UP
> VIDEO: VIOLENT THRUSTS OF AGENTS INTO RECIPIENTS IN TIME
> WITH THESE MUSICAL BREAKS
> THE RECIPIENTS IN THEIR VISCOUS NEAR FLUIDITY
> DISINTEGRATE UNDER THE IMPACT
> THEN COME QUIVERING ROUND EACH IMPLANTED
> AGENT. (146)

This presentation of graphical devices attracts the attention of the reader. The graphical text is also seen from page 145 to 150 page. These uncommon texts have a great impact on the read. Therefore, the scarred face of the text can impel the reader to have an awkward judgment on the novel as a whole. This aggressive, strange and subversive writing form becomes in the course of the reading a medium of communication. The body and the font of the text vary and fragments which look like journalistic bribes diagonally cross the main text. In this case, the destabilizing aspect imposes on the reader readings from several angles. Closely, the disturbed reader follows the text through parasite fragments. From far, we perceive page make-up as a diagram, a significant layout or a disorder which needs to be deciphered. Different ways can be used to read a text. The reader can focus his reading on the novel as a whole or he can also center his reading on the "meta-text" in the original text. After all, the narrative of *Fragments* is lacerated and overprinted as if some layers were put in palimpsest. A quick skimming permits the reader to see another aspect of the narrative disorder. The pieces of texts are nothing but a juxtaposition of lexemes and a grouping of non-structured phrases. From a linguistics point of view, these fragments are made of dislocated sentences. In this respect, Armah writes a full sentence in capital letters: "WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT SEAT BELTS ARE PROPERLY FASTENED" (54). This strange writing enables us to clearly see the fragmentary or chaotic feature of the novel as the title shows it.

Armah combines his writing with the work of a graphic artist. This is the reason why he willingly decides to write in capital letters the first two words of each paragraph: “EACH THING” (1). This new form of writing is systematically applied to the first two or three words of the first paragraph of each part of the novel as shown on page 1, page 12, page 38, page 72, page 100, page 121, page 131, page 144, page 154, page 175, page 181, page 189 and page 195. As revealed in these pages, Armah plays with words in his novel. Consequently, he combines Ghanaian Akan ethnological materials with English in *Fragments*. The use of Akan culture is seen through the titles of the different parts of the novel: Naan, Edin, Awo, etc…. In addition, the lexemes and the nominal phrases written in capital letters can also be assimilated to titles: EACH THING (1), IT WAS NOT (12), WHEN THE AIRPORT BUS (38). There is then a correspondence between the Akan title and its signifier, the group of words of the paragraph written in capital letters. The writing disorder is clearly seen in chapter 8 entitles Nsu. Armah writes complete pages in capital letters as if these texts were dedicated to the short-sighted people. The overuse of capital letters is revealed in this example:

> 1. OLD MAN. A COMPLETE CYNIC, LIVES FLAT ON HIS BACK AS A MASTER OF PRINCIPLE, EXPLAINING HE WANTS TO MAKE SURE NO ONE USES HIS SHOULDERS AS A LADDER.
> AT ENTHUSIASM RALLY, FOR INSTANCE, HE ARGUES WITH THE INFINITE PATIENCE OF CERTAIN TRUTH (FROM HIS NORMAL POSITION ON THE GROUND) THAT THE HOT PROMISES ARE WORTH NOTHING, THAT THE HERO AS HE RISES WILL GET ACCUSTOMED TO BREATHING THE AIR UP THERE AND WANT TO STAY, NOT TO RETURN TO THE MUD. HE SAYS HE DOESN’T MIND ANYONE GETTING UP THERE, BUT AS FOR KILLING HIMSELF TO GET THEM UP THERE, NO THANKS. (…)
> 4. ANGRY WOMAN, CAUGHT UP IN A LONG SLEEP OF DESPAIR FROM WHICH SHE WAKES OCCASIONALY TO CHANT DREAMS OF AGAINST THE SQUARE (148-149).

Armah uses this technique of writing as a code of communication. It is an efficient method which enables him to draw the attention of his readers. This form of subversive writing is the replica of the neurotic and disorganized Ghanaian society. For Genette, “The replica is a double which stands for something and its image. (…). There is another world but it is like the visible one” (1966: 21, translation mine). The temporal chaos in the novel is then, mimetic of the temporal chaos of a country which is in turmoil and where repetition and “recycling” are the law. The spiral of the text is the structure that expresses Heraclites’ « eternal retour ». Furthermore, the text broods over this fractured writing, descriptions of violence, riots and repressions which alternate with the delirium of the regime. No action of the ruling class shows a slight change in the daily life of the downtrodden. Armah is animated by contradictory and cyclical movements: despair, revolt and melancholy. As such, *Fragments* is a representation of disorder or a heterogeneity which gathers fragments. These inter-related fragments constitute an alliance of words, an overuse of capital letters, and juxtaposition of texts which give a particular look to his novel. In this perspective, the next point of our analysis will deal with the hybridity of Armah’s writing.

II- *Fragments* as a hybrid narrative

This second step of our analysis deals with the dialogic hybridity of Armah's *Fragments*. Here, the novel is an "open book" or a "fragmented novel" made of several literary genres. The reader knows that each sentence, each character has diverse meanings which he is bound to decode. According to his intelligence, he will choose the appropriate method of analysis. He will probably use the novel in a way that is different from the one adopted in a previous reading. (Eco, 1965:19). Armah invites many literary genres, many cultural and linguistic elements borrowed from other texts and he integrates them in his novel. The use of poetry (112, 113, 114) is a good illustration of his use of the fragmentary in the novel. This following excerpt shows that poetry plays a significant role in Armah's novel:

> Say
> Say it
> Say it just this way
> Gently, gently,
> For this was how the maid,
> High-born princess of Amosema
> Brought light from a far, far land
> Unto her knighted village people.
> Say it
> Pastorally, pastorally
> Say.
>
> Say it
> Softly, softly say it.
> The maiden Ekua, royal, exquisite,
> Searched her mother's queendom for a mate
> And found none worthy
> For all said she was arrogant,
> This damsel walking with fairly grace,
> Traipsing, lilting, skipping,
> Pastorally, pastorally
> Say.
> Say it (112)

This passage is a bribe of a poem entitled "The Coming of the Brilliant Light of the New Age to Amosema Junction Village". This poem seen in the previous cited pages is indeed a piece of a long and extended one. Armah invents a colored artistic literary output through the juxtaposition of words and the mixture of literary genres in his novel. Through the use of poetry, he combines poetry and prose to reach a personal goal. The so-called transgression or literary rape of fiction mentioned above is due to the fact that the use of the fragments jeopardizes the unity of the novel because each bribe has in itself its own enclosure. The title of the novel, testifies to this opening, this fragmentation of the novel or rather the coexistence of literary genres. Beyond the utilization of poems, Armah incorporates some elements of oral literature like songs and prayers in text. For example, has use of songs serves to back up his technique:

> Happy are those whose life is today
> and only today
> Sad are the prophets
> and those others whose eyes are open to the past.
> Blessed are they who neither see their painful yesterdays

nor their tomorrows filled with despair:
They shall rest in peace. (32)

Armah integrates songs into the narrative of *Fragments* to reveal himself to his readers. The presence of songs is then another code of communication which the novelist introduces in his text. In traditional African society, a song is a message or a code dedicated to a specific group of people: the Aged, women, men and the clan as a whole. The disorder of this perfectionist song in the novel rests on the narrative chaos. The confusion is very clear in this song. The sentence structure in this song has no semantic value. The violation of grammatical rules is visible at sight in the poem. There is a change in the organization of the sentences. Normal and correct sentences are rare in the song. This song is a revelation of the oral literature fragments in the text:

Some were born so low
fat down on their backs
so cool night and bright morning
they can see their god
up there in his sky.
Some were born on stilts
placed on strong rooftops
so where do you find the wonder
that they don't take so long
to look tall in this life? (75)

The use of songs in the narrative is important because it brings African religion as a panacea of the social wounds which corrode imaginary unbalanced Ghanaian society. The ceremony of libation which Foli performed at the start of the novel permits to maintain social harmony between the world of the living and that of the dead. Foli talks to the forefathers of the clan in this prayer:

Always
There has been a danger in such departures.
Much of our blood has run to waste
yet we will not speak of ways
to stop the coming and the going
for we are not mad with the sorrow of moments that pass.
Always
the danger of death
the death of the body,
death of the soul
(…)
There are dangers in this life
but fathers,
do not fill your grandson here with fears.
The danger of death we have with us
around us everywhere at home.
It is the promise of those gone before.
Let him hear that.
Let him not forget its truth
and give him courage to understand it.
Watch over him, fathers.
Watch over him
and let him prosper
there where he is going.
And when he returns

let his return, like rain,
bring us your blessings and fruits,
your blessings
your help
(…)
let him go,
let him come.
And you, traveler about to go,
Go and return,
Go, come. (5-6)

The length of this prayer clearly reveals the significance of African tradition in Armah's novel. The invocation of the spirits of the dead before the departure of Baako in the US has a dual meaning. Firstly, the narrator calls upon the gods and the divinities of the clan to bless Baako, the spokesman of the youth who is on the route to America to compete his western education. Secondly, it is a way to tell Baako to remain rooted in his tradition during his stay in America. Implicitly, this means that Baako has no right to turn his back to his culture of his ancestors. In other terms, Baako should not be alienated or turned into a neurotic "been-to" despite his long sojourn in America. Baako leaves his homeland with the blessing and the agreement of his kinsmen. As a result, his return home must be a blessing for his community as a whole at the dimension of rain for peasants. "Let his return, like rain; bring us your blessings and fruits" (6). Baako, in fact, is caricatured as a messiah who is bound to lead his people to the Promised Land. His return symbolizes the end of the predicament of his people. This is why everyone is looking forwards to his return home to have a better life. As such, Baako looks like rain water or a source of life of his compatriots. Baako unfortunately worsens the psychological disorder of his people. Although Baako is an artist, he is unable to turn the squalor of his people into terrestrial paradise. He is a victim of the rampant social disorder of Ghanaian society. The Principal Secretary even laughs at him:

> "We don't have modern systems here. This country doesn't work that way. If you come back thinking you can make things work in any smooth, efficient way, you'll get a complete waste of your time. It's not worth bothering about. (…) In any case, you can go to Ghanavision as from tomorrow and start work. Just tell Asante-Smith you have instruction from me. You'll be paid for all the time you've lost" (83)

In this passage, Baako is the embodiment of social order. He decides alone to fight against the social cancer that gnaws his country. Corruption, nepotism, cult of personality and immorality are the tangible signs of this social disorder. Baako earned good diplomas in American highly certified schools, but he cannot have even a position of a clerk in Ghanaian civil service. In this chaotic atmosphere, merit and diplomas have no importance. Here, nothing is more important than the relationship each individual has with the ruling party. The Principal Secretary recommends Baako to the top management of Ghanavision in this way: "In any case, you can go to Ghanavision as from tomorrow and start work. Just tell Asante-Smith you have instruction from me" (83). From then on, disorder is transformed into a good social norm. He who does not comply with this social disorder is regarded as an enemy of the nation. In this view, Baako and The Man are the two fools who stand aloof corruption. They are seen as dangerous people for themselves and for the nation as a whole.

The borrowing of terms or words from other languages is another writing technique Armah uses in his novel. He successfully mingles French with English to give a specific flavor to his text. The abusive use of French in chapter 3 entitled Akwaaba explains the coexistence of languages in the text: "AIR AFRIQUE" (38), "POINT DE RENCONTRE RENDEZ VOUS POINT" (39), "LES TROIS SOLEILS" (40), "Mesdames et Messieurs : le commandant Szynkarski et son équipe vous souhaitent la bienvenue à bord de ce DC-8. Nous allons décoller en quelques instants en direction de Brazzaville. Nous ferons escale à Accra…" (42), "TOUT HOMME CREE SANS LE SAVOIR COMME IL RESPIRE MAIS L'ARTISTE SE SENT CREER SON ACTE ENGAGE TOUT SON ÊTRE SA PEINE BIEN AIMEE LE FORTIFIE" (51). Besides, the use of French, Armah also integrates Spanish notions or words in the text: "TROCADERO" (50), "AVENUE DE SUFFREN" (51) and "Qué paso" (153). This combination of English, French and Spanish highlights the fragmentary aspect of Armah's work. The predominance of French in the text can be explained by the geographic location of Ghana next to several francophone countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Burkina-Faso and Guinea. Beyond, the presence of fragments written in French in the novel, Armah castigates the social cataract of francophone countries. "Yes. As a matter of fact it's beginning to look like a cataract to me" (104). Armah clearly lays bare the social anomy of the francophone countries which share a common boundary with Ghana. He also denounces the dictatorship of Spanish or Portuguese speaking countries when he summons Spanish words in the text. With reference to the above analysis, we notice that Armah's novel is a particular work because of its disorder, hybridity and violation of classical form of writing. In this sense, stakes of a new literary aesthetic will be examined in the last part of our work.

III- Stakes of a New Literary Aesthetic

In this part, the writing of disorder is a particular form of writing. Its specificity rests on its opening to other literary genres. This form of writing is an expression of the writer freedom and an affirmation of his cultural identity. In this view, Armah uses chaos to reveal his true identity to the reader. The satire of the chaotic social ambiance of *fragments* is a mere pretext for the artist to express his freedom. The artist is duty bound to show the way to his people out of suffering. In this particular case, writing is a project of self-consciousness. But Man's consciousness must deny itself in order to know itself. Larson (1972) reveals Armah's identity to the reader when he argues:

> (…) Armah has not completed his trips into hell. And his second novel, *Fragments* (1970) succeeds in attracting again the reader's attention. Its autobiography and events in close relationship with the author's life, makes the plot more striking than the plot of the first novel. (327, translation mine)

The impasse of disorder writing in the text is nothing but Ghanaian social crisis. Postmodern African novelists feel this social standstill in their daily activity. The journey between the text and the referential society enable the reader to better understand that Armah's *Fragments* is a writing of dissimulation or self-writing. Furthermore, the plot of the novel reminds the reader the social tensions and crisis which engender Armah's psychological trauma when he returns home after completing his education abroad. The implicit of the text indicates that Armah is a committed writer who fights alone against the social cancer which

corrodes Ghanaian and African society. These words of Major well illustrate of the non-conformism of the artist:

> Any writing which infringes the laws of a genre or goes beyond its limits, wants to establish its own strategy and it aims at a new or particular effect. (…) The aggression against the genre is often considered as it had a value in oneself: from then on, it corresponds to a well-known and established rule. Although it is the result of a method as seen to some linguists of semiotics, it is nothing but a refusal of writing. (1984: 96-97, translation mine).

Disorder writing in the novel is a fighting weapon which Armah uses against dictators and fake-heroes of his country and Africa. In the novel, the representation of disorder is a theme in vogue in African postmodern literature. According to Major, "To write is to speak"(224). Armah's use of extreme vulgar or offensive language is a therapeutic tool meant to shock and awakens a very decadent and dying society. The society is so decadent that only those who do the wrong things are admired and the upright is treated with contempt (Kakraba: 2011, 312). There is no doubt that is the power of Armah's unconventional writing, verbal vituperations and vulgarity of words that imbue his novel with its strong therapeutic effect. He writes his life experience to allow his readers to comprehend the quintessence of the fight against Ghanaian Establishment. "He projects in the reflexive movement to write about himself in order to better understand his own life. The book plays a role of a mirror which permits to organize clearly the anarchical fluctuations of self." (Miraux, 2007: 22, translation mine). In addition, the writing of autobiography is an introspective driving; it puts in touch the "troubled inside" with the "scriptural outside". On top of Armah's narrative disorder, we perceive the image of non-conformist, the dissident or the Ghanaian political opponent. Armah satirizes the socialist regime of Nkrumah through the writing of social disorder and decay.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, it appears that Armah uses the writing of disorder to reveal his artistic genius. He summons several literary genres in the text and creates a "meta-novel" or a novel within the novel. In this view, the writing of disorder is a writing of dissimilation. Armah hides himself behind the narrative of chaos to denounce the evil side of the Ghanaian ruling system. His language is deliberately crafted to be extremely vulgar, provoking and shocking for a purpose. The major concern of Armah is to achieve a power of persuasion in the imaginations of readers and to create a change in people's mind and behavior. The Ghanaian society he depicts is one in turmoil and totally conditioned to despair (Fraser, 1980). Armah's iconoclastic stand and his writing of disorder aim at turning a rotten Ghanaian society into a democratic one. The study also reveals that Armah's writing method in *Fragments* is a revolutionary approach in Africa Literature. "Armah makes his stand against corruption pointedly clear. He thus asserts a moral power never before seen in African fiction" (Ogede, 2000). In short, the writing of disorder is mind and self-questioning. The writing of disorder is a kind of revolt against the established social order. In this way, fragmentary writing appears as a nonconformist narrative technique which puts face to face many literary genres. It violates all the writing principles known centuries ago. Order and disorder change mutually in the fragmented text (Lèfara: 2015, 140). By implication, any organized society has in its self the germs of its own destruction. In the same way, any disrupt society also has a power to turn its disorder into order.

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