TRANSATLANTIC RECROSSING AND THE SHAPING OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *OSIRIS RISING* (1995)*

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ABSTRACT

Ayi Kwei Armah, Ghanaian writer and author of seven novels, worries about African and African American identities and what remains from it after the forced crossing of the Atlantic Ocean and the western colonization. These two historical phenomena are strongly connected to the problem of cultural alienation which strikes not only the African societies but also the whole Black Diaspora. As most of the writers of the former English colonies, his writing is both an exploration of the African historic and cultural universe and an attempt to restore the inheritance which gradually crumbled off and deteriorated in the contact of imperial cultures. This cultural problem is put with acuteness in his sixth novel, *Osiris Rising*, published in 1995 in Senegal. This novel, which actions take place in the United States and in Africa, is focused on African American and African characters obsessed with the reconstruction of the African past and the redefining of themselves in an environment in which they seem to undergo the torments of a Eurocentric perception of the world. They propose a shift from Eurocentrism and a vision of the world articulated around Afrocentrism which aims at connecting African Americans to Africa through a cultural and philosophic revival.

Key words: Africa, African American, United States, identity, culture.

RESUME

Ayi Kwei Armah, écrivain ghanéen et auteur de sept romans, se préoccupe des identités africaines et africaines-américaines et de ce qu'il en reste après la traversée forcée de l'Atlantique et la colonisation occidentale. Ces deux phénomènes historiques sont intimement liés au problème de l'aliénation culturelle qui frappe non seulement les sociétés africaines mais aussi la diaspora noire dans son ensemble. Comme la plupart des écrivains issus des anciennes colonies anglaises d'Afrique, son écriture constitue à la fois une exploration de l'univers historique et culturel africain et une tentative de restaurer l'héritage qui s'est progressivement effrité et altéré au contact des cultures dominatrices. Cette problématique culturelle est posée avec acuité dans son sixième roman, *Osiris Rising*, publié en 1995 au Sénégal. Ce roman dont la trame se déroule aux Etats-Unis et en Afrique met en scène des personnages africains-américains et africains obnubilés par la reconstruction du passé du continent africain et par la redéfinition de soi dans un environnement dans lequel ils ont l'impression de subir les affres d'une perception eurocentrique du monde. En lieu et place, ils proposent un décentrement de l'Eurocentrisme et surtout une vision du monde qui s'articule autour de l'Afrocentrisme, c'est-à-dire le rapprochement culturel et philosophique des Africains-Américains vers l'Afrique.

Mots-clés: Afrique, Africains Américains, Etats-Unis, identité, culture.

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Introduction

Ayi Kwei Armah is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding writers of the second generation of African writers which comes after the Nobel Prize Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. He is a scholar, a critic, a translator, essayist, poet, and short-story writer. He is mostly known, however, as a novelist. Indeed, from 1968 to 2002, this writer, who was born in Takoradi in Ghana in 1939, published seven novels that deal with postcolonial Africa, African lost institutions during Western colonization and the reconstruction of Black African identity. This last issue is very important in his work as, like his predecessors such as Leopold Sedar Senghor (Senegal) and Thomas Mofolo (Lesotho), his novels show that Black Africa has cultures and organized and stable societies before the destabilization of African institutions by Western imperialists. One of the strengths of his writing is his use of African history and myths to underscore how rich and complex African cultures were before the penetration of the White man into the continent. His writing shows a realistic description of the African predicament in such a way that his novels can be perceived as a sociological report on the social and political situation of Africa. Armah won international recognition as one of Africa's authoritative and articulate writers as he rejected the Western didacticism in his writing while promoting the stylistic devices of African oral narratives. While his first three novels (*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*[1], *Fragments*[2] and *Why Are We So Blest?*[3]) tend to present a pessimistic vision of modern Africa, his historical narratives (*Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers*) show the possibility of African rebirth. This rebirth is perceived through a retrieval of the past and the promotion of African values such as wholeness, beauty and creative life-giving principles.

However, in *Osiris Rising*, the backward glance of his characters into the past has shifted from the sub-Saharan African perspective to that of ancient Egypt and its mythology. This change raises important issues about the reconstruction of a true Black identity. Thus, the purpose of this article is to analyse the question of identity in Armah's sixth novel. With regard to characterization and thematic concerns of this novel, the central question will consist in wondering whether Black Africans and African American can really identify themselves as descents of Egypt as Ayi Kwei Armah's narrator and characters tend to show.

I. African Americans and the recrossing of the Atlantic

[1] Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, London: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1969.
[2] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments*, London: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1974.
[3] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Why Are We So Blest?*, London: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1974.

One cannot introduce Armah's novels without mentioning the polemical edge of his writing. His rejection of Eurocentric interpretation of the world has resulted in a radical and iconoclast representation of Africa and its relationships with the West. From this viewpoint, his recent novels forcefully present a vision which deserves a particular attention. Indeed, whereas his first two historical novels (*Two Thousand Seasons*[4] and *The Healers*[5]) are focused on Black African identity, *Osiris Rising*, his sixth, has a broader perspective as it deals with the quest of identity of Black African and African Americans. The reader early notices in the first pages that the novel is set in America as well as in Africa; that shows the intention of the narrator to remind the umbilical cord between America and Black Africa. It tells the story of Ast, a young African American female doctor who travels to a fictional Black African country named Hapa. This travel, described as a return to her motherland, is made up of a complex programme as she seeks for love, identity, self-knowledge and lifework:

> Selecting clothes and books to pack, Ast was surprised by a sadness crossing the excitement of the coming journey. It passed as quickly as it had come. The urge to return outgrew nostalgia long ago. Yet she remembered a time when her energy ebbed at the idea of goals so far ahead. Sometimes she'd feared the energy she needed for motion might never come[6].

The heroine has never been in this country and doesn't know anybody there apart from Asar, an old African student she met at home at Emerson University. However, her travel to Africa is referred to by the narrator as a return. In fact, through the entire novel, the Middle Passage, this dull journey taken by slave ships from the West African coasts to America, is constantly recalled by the narrator. This forced travel which took Africans from their homeland is still seen by African American descents as their first Atlantic crossing. This is the reason why the heroine's travel can be described as a recrossing of the Atlantic even though the ship is now replaced by the plane, a quicker and comfortable modern means of transportation. It would be useful to remind that the Africans who were forced to work on European's plantations in the New World travelled in hard conditions as they were chained and huddled together in ships driven by unsympathetic White captains. Moreover, as one can easily imagine, some of them did not live by the coast and had never seen the sea before the apocalyptic travel which took them to a faraway land. That has certainly created an emotional

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[4]Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, London: Heinemann, 1979.
[5] Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers, an Historical Novel*, London: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1979.
[6] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Osiris Rising. A Novel of Africa Past, Present and Future*, Popenguine: Per Ankh, 1995, p. 9. Subsequent quotations of this novel are from this edition.

shock and an endless vertigo. The incredible inhuman conditions of these travels were subsequently described in 1788 in the *Abolitionist's Leaflet*:

> Conditions on the Middle Passage were hard. The ship's hull might hold 100 or 700 slaves. Most of the enslaved Africans did not live by the coast. They had never seen the sea before, let alone been on a ship. Many would suffer from seasickness. Men were chained together, to prevent rebellion. Chained, they would find it difficult to get to the buckets that served as toilets. Usually, all the slaves were taken up on deck for fresh air and exercise each day. The hull could be cleaned at that time. But in bad weather, the slaves had to remain in the hold, perhaps for weeks on end. The conditions they lived in can only be imagined[7].

As presented above, the human conditions of this transatlantic crossing were horrible. However, the return of their descents in Africa is not quite easy or simple. Through this novel, Armah makes a connection between the harsh crossing of the Atlantic and a recrossing full of unanswered questions; a burning desire to discover the Promised Land intermingled with the haunting memory of an unknown space. Here, as one can easily imagine, the suffering of the protagonist is not physical but mainly psychological. She is described as an anxious woman eager to go where her heart calls her to go but who feels however excited by the idea of discovering her motherland.

As clearly supported by the entire narrative, Ast would like to reconnect with Asar, her old friend because his lifestyle and ideas about Africa had something genuine and positive that impressed her. This university teacher portrayed as a freedom fighter used to send her anonymous messages of hope and rebirth of the African continent and they bear the symbol of the Ankh. And it is one of these anonymous messages which came in a form of an article that convinced her and prompted her to pack her bags. Entitled "Who We Are and Why", it looks like an ideological pamphlet with both cultural and political insights:

> For centuries now our history in Africa has been an avalanche of problems. 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.
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> 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 the 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 beautyful [sic] 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. (*Osiris Rising*, p. 10)

[7] "The Atlantic Crossing" in *Leaflet of Plymouth Committee of Abolitionists* (1788). Online: "http://discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/routes/from-africa-to-america/atlantic-crossing/" [10/12/2012]

It might be useful to define some of the key hieroglyphic words used by the narrator in his desire to rebuild Black African history in the entire novel. For instance, *kemt* stands for the historical name of Africa, a continent supposed to be united and less chaotic and less vulnerable to external attacks before Arab and European invasions. Furthermore, the symbol of the Ankh stamped on the papers sent to Ast plays an important role in the understanding of the novel, the world it describes and the past the narrator ceaselessly keeps coming out with. Actually, in the Egyptian mythology, the Ankh is a cross which is the symbolic representation of both physical and eternal life. It is known to be a powerful symbol that was first created by Africans in Ancient Egypt. As explained by Ast, "Ankh means life" (*Osiris Rising*, p. 35).

II. Coming back to the motherland: the pitfalls of the quest for identity in Africa

The sight of this symbol by the security service brings the twenty-seven years old heroine into trouble at the international airport of this neo-colonial country because she is suspected of having a link with a subversive group whose leader happens to be Asar. She is arrested and taken to Seth Spencer Soja, the Deputy Director of the security service. This character, portrayed as a blind intellectual, put all his intelligence and expertise in the service of the local dictatorial government ruled by President Utumbo. Like Asar, he is also Ast's old schoolmate. He has desperately tried to have a love relationship with her and would like to take this opportunity to conquer her. It ends up in an unsuccessful attempt of rape in a hotel. The scene is described in Chapter IV as follows:

> The DD held her by the hair. Pressing down with his left hand, he levered himself into a standing position on top of her, yanked her head back and brought up his knee smack against her jaw before she could raise an arm to protect her face. The room darkened. Agony turned to relief. (*Osiris Rising*, pp. 65-66)

Seth Spencer Soja is fully portrayed as a dark and sinister character. The security service he manages is successively presented as "useless and parasitic" and "a real poison" for Happa and his sperm is described as a "sick fluid" (*Osiris Rising*, p. 67). He is allegorical of all the African intellectuals from whom no positive action can be expected by the people.

Furthermore, the violence of this character's attempt of rape can be contrasted with the racial violence that has been the ideological reason behind the slavery trade. In fact, apart from the economical reasons that undermined the slave trade, the violence Black Africans underwent as for the sixteenth century can only be justified by the assumption of White men's

superiority over Black men. Blacks were deemed to be inferior because of their identity and their characteristics such as colour, language and human values. In fact, in 1748, French philosopher Montesquieu clearly stated that it was impossible for Whites to suppose these creatures (Black slaves) to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that they themselves were not Christian[8].

Of course, this is an ideological justification based on a spiritual assumption which is unacceptable in this 21st century. From a historical perspective, the damages (slavery, colonisation etc) of such a way of thinking are no more to be shown all over the world where Blacks can be found. But what is surprising and shocking is the fact of being faced with such consideration in Africa, specifically in a place where racial violence and discrimination is traditionally merely mentioned. In fact, as earlier noted, Ast is African American and Seth Spencer Soja a Black African. They happen to know each other in the United States. However, their reunion in Africa is presented as fratricidal. One can notice that the notions of "soul sister" and "soul brother" which are indicative of the Black Diaspora's solidarity are not recalled here. Contrary to that, the two characters will remind the reader the roles of torturer and victim. The DD is roughly depicted as an allegorical figure of dictatorship and vindication. His aggressive relation with Ast simply shows that some African intellectuals are working against the development and the freedom of Africa.

Ast is not the only character of the novel who is seeking for her roots. Her story is parallel to that of a group of African Americans whose leader is Sheldon Tubman renamed Ras Jomo Cinque. This former leader of an American civil rights movement moved to Africa after the failure of his American Dream. Through his story and the problems he is confronted with, the reader realizes that the myth that each American has the ability to succeed in any area in modern America is put into question. As a matter of fact, race, roots and social background still play an important role. The reader easily understands why this character is obsessed by the quest of roots in the continent of his ancestors. However, while Ast, the heroine, was trying to understand the meaning of the Ankh, the overconfident Ras Jomo Cinque was seeking for "the confirmation" of his royal line of descents. He ends by knowing that the broken Ankh that he possesses is the symbol of the people who betrayed the members of an ancient secret society which fought for the protection of African society and the survival of its positive values. In the characterisation of *Osiris Rising*, Cinque belongs to the category of characters that defend negative and backward values. Like the Deputy Director of the Security

[8] See Montesquieu, « De l'esclavage des Nègres », Book XV, Chapter V in *De l'Esprit des lois*, Tome 2, London : Garnier, 1777.

Service who is an anti-development agent, he symbolizes the forces of evil and darkness in a continent that seeks for the antidote of its stagnation.

The function of Asar, Ast's companion also deserves the reader's attention as he is spoken about, presented or cited in most of the novel's actions. Like most of Armah's positive characters such as The Man and Teacher in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Baako in *Fragments* or Modin in *Why Are We So Blest?*, he shows no interest in political power and prefers the challenge of conciliating theory and practice in his life. He works at Manda's college where he communicates his positive energy to future teachers. Contrary to his first novels in which his promising African intellectuals are split and crushed by the burden of society, Armah portrays this character as the ideal brilliant African intellectual. He is a teacher who concerns himself with Africa's future and who perceives education as one of the battlefields of freedom and development in Africa. His association with Ast ineluctably gives a romantic flavour to the novel. His assassination by the Security Service gives to the novel a sad end but Armah's message about the recovery of African society is optimistic. His novel unmistakably depicts Africa as the matrices of black culture and identity.

III. Myth, Afrocentrism and Egyptology: Black roots in question

From this characterisation in which Manichean division is obvious, two main ideas forcefully emerge. First, as indicated on the cover, Armah's novel takes its narrative structure in the Isis-Osiris myth cycle. It is worth noting that the legend of Osiris, Isis and Seth is one of the most important and powerful story in Egyptian mythology. It is usually told with many variations. It seems, however, that in the original myth, Osiris, who is represented by Asar in the novel, was the husband of Isis (represented by Ast). He was king of Egypt and he civilized the nation by the innovative nature of his realizations. Not only is he the representative of the main Egyptian deity but also he is the god of the regeneration of plants and nature. As for Seth (Seth Spenja Soja, the Deputy Director) he was his brother; he became jealous of Osiris because he was more important and successful than him. This is why he murdered him with the help of conspirators[9].

In the original story, the supernatural hold an important dimension. Contrary to that, in Armah's novel it is the human nature of the characters which is stressed. For instance, Isis the

[9] For a more detailed account of this myth, read: Fernand Comte, *Larousse des mythologies du monde*, Paris: Larousse, 2004, pp. 100-127

goddess of fertility was perceived as a magician who was famous for the use of magical values. But Armah portrays her as a loving wife and a resourceful intellectual who struggles for social change. This is also the case of Asar whose role in the leadership of Manda's college is minor compared with his forceful vision of change. Nevertheless, the story maintains a strong tie with the myth. This is why the Nigerian scholar Ode Ogede observes in *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast. Pitting Imaginary World Against the Actual* that "*Osiris Rising* is an attempt to restore the suppressed African origin of the ancient Egyptian civilization[10]".

The second important point of Armah's novel is the celebration of international cooperation for the retrieval of African past and the development of the African continent. Through African and African American characters, Armah raises the question of Black African and African American identity and the ideal relation of Africa with her Diaspora. Does the African Diaspora have a specific role in the recovery of the continent? And does the continent still have the cultural and spiritual resources to help his former children to solve their problems of identity? From the perspective of the author (and also the narrator), there is no doubt on the possibility of the reconstruction of African history. Africans and African Americans can rely on the collective memory to find accurate answers to their identity questions. Most of the symbols of rebirth through historical research show that there is hope about the retrieval of African past.

With the difference of Armah's other novels, disillusionment and pessimism are not the dominant impression in *Osiris Rising*. In fact, as observed by the few critics who have analysed it, the optimistic dimension of this novel cannot go unmentioned. Nevertheless, the afrocentric background of this novel can be questioned. According to Cain Felder,

> Afrocentricity is the idea that Africa and persons of African descent must be seen as proactive subjects within history, rather than passive objects of Western history. Afrocentrism means reestablishing Africa and its descendants as centers of value, without in any way demeaning other people and their historical contributions to world civilization.[11]

This is the definition and the general philosophy of this movement which encourages the return of African Americans to their African sources. On the whole, as stressed by George J.

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[10] Ode Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast. Pitting Imaginary World Against the Actual*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000, p.129.
[11] Cain Hope Felder, "Afrocentrism, the Bible, and the Politics of Difference", *Journal of Religious Thoughts*, 50 (1993-1994): 45-56.

Sefa Dei, Afrocentric knowledge can been seen as "a legitimate way of knowing and understanding our world"[12].

Armah has certainly been influenced by Cheikh Anta Diop who was contested by French scholars on his research on Black African roots in ancient Egypt. In order to understand how the Ghanaian writer literarily makes use of Diop's ideas, the articulations of his work deserves to be briefly pointed out. Indeed, the Senegalese historian aimed at calling into question the Hegelian argument according to which Black Africa had neither history nor culture. In his works, he endeavoured not only to show that ancient Egypt has negro origins but also to demonstrate the continuity between Egypt of the Pharaohs and the African contemporary cultures. In his historical and anthropological book entitled *The African Origin of Civilization, Myth or Reality*, he strongly affirmed:

> All the earliest scholars who studied Nubia, even those to whom we owe the discovery of Nubian archaeology (such as Cailliaud) conclude that Nubia had priority. Their studies indicate that Egyptian civilization descended from that of Nubia, in other words, Sudan.[] Egyptians themselves – who should surely be better qualified than anyone to speak of their origin – recognize without ambiguity that their ancestors came from Nubia and the heart of Africa. [13]

However, as it is well known, the afrocentrist thought put an emphasis on Egypt, its pharaohs, and its historical monuments. This perception of the quest for identity is problematic for Africans as well as for African Americans, for not only scientific research does not fully support the idea of the kemetic origin of Black African roots but also it tends to show that Africa has no valuable past apart from that of Ancient Egypt. For some critics, such as Oyekan Owomoyela, afrocentrists should rather describe their philosophical thought "Egyptocentricity" instead of Afrocentricity, "for it is largely Afrocentricity without Africa" [14].

Other scholars such as the African American historian Clarence Walker are even bitter in their contestation of Afrocentrism. In *We Can't Go Home Again*[15], he reproaches the afrocentrist discourse for its tendency to occult the questions of slavery and the middle passage while sentimentalizing Africa. In reaction against this position, he affirms that there

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[12] George J. Sefa Dei, "Why Write Back?": The Role of Afrocentric Discourse in Social Change, *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'Education*, Vol. 23, N° 2 (Spring, 1998), p. 200.

[13] Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization. Myth or Reality*, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974, p. 150.

[14] Oyekan Owomoyela, *The African Difference: Discourses on Africanity and the Relativity of Cultures*, New York: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996, p.185.

[15] Clarence E. Walker, *We Can't Go Home Again: An Argument About Afrocentrism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

would be a true reconciliation between the Africans and the African Americans the day when the latter will understand the reasons which justified the selling of African children (by Africa) to the Whites. For him, when the African Americans and Africans can tackle this subject frankly the therapeutic and ahistoric fiction or the racial romanticism which is baptized “afrocentrism” will no more be spoken about. This conviction by which Walker concludes his book shows his personal anger and probably the resentment felt by a part of African Americans whenever the umbilical cord which binds Black America to Africa is evoked.

Conclusion

Through the representation of Black Diaspora in *Osiris Rising*, Ayi Kwei Armah shows the necessity of the dialog between Africa and Black America. His characters, either African or African American, are the living proof of an acute awareness of the importance of history and African mythology in the quest for self-definition. Our analysis shows not only the ideological influence of Black American criticism on Armah’s writing but also that of Cheikh Anta Diop. Fundamentally, the re-appropriation of these ideals does not constitute a problem as far as the narrative strategy and the literary perception of the return to the African roots are concerned. One cannot make, however, a thorough criticism of this novel without considering the limits of the afrocentrist ideology which underlies it. By adopting Egyptian glorious past, the afrocentrist thought tend to tackle certain questions such as myths, history, and leadership which are useful as far as the problems of self-redefinition are concerned. Unfortunately, as noted by some scholars, such as Clarence Walker, it avoids solving in a concrete way the bruises of the past. Its thinkers, writers and novelists, including Ayi Kwei Armah, should endeavour to make the Africans and African Americans (and the Black Diaspora in general) grasp in a practical way its implication on their past, present and future lives. This conscious awareness can accurately help them to solve the quest for identity which has always appeared to every Black man as a complex issue.

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