

Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising*: New Wine in an Old Wine Skin

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Ayi Kwei Armah's career as a novelist reveals two healthy and complementary directions of growth. The first, reflected by his first three novels, essentially takes a hard look at the concept of African independence and criticizes the political class as well as the highly apolitical citizenry for the spate of corruption, which ruined the first republic in Ghana, and ushered in the inauguration of the military in the nation's nascent political arrangement. There is also in the second and third novels a progressive frustration of the intellectual class, which fights to bring about changes. Baako's estrangement from his family in *Fragments* is a sad reminder of the protagonist's isolationist bearing and subsequent ostracism in the world of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Apart from the catatonic fragmentation of Baako's mind and his forcible confinement in an asylum by members of his immediate family, in *Why Are We So Blest?*, Modin, the graduate student on scholarship in America, returns home to partake in the revolutionary struggles against white imperialism, only to be rejected and finally snuffed out by white racist soldiers in the desert. In the same novel, Solo, the reader's window through which we see Modin, suffers similar frustration, although he does not die at the end.

Armah is therefore expectedly angered from his vitriolic vituperations by the pervasive materialist indulgence of his fellow Ghanaians and spares nobody, not even the altruistic "Man" in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. He is further angered by the progressive attenuation of the pre-independence ideals of the ruling class, which have now been replaced by the empty socialist rhetoric of the Osagyefo and other first republic politicians in Ghana. This is the reason for the apparent alienation of Armah as well as that of his fictional protagonists in his first three novels. Thus, against the criticisms of Chinua Achebe, Charles

Nnolim, Leonard Kibera, and Ama Ata Aidoo, anyone desirous of a proper understanding of Armah's temperament, his disaffection for his people, or even his obsession with the scatological images of shit, offal, vomit, dirt, and other excremental symbols in his first three novels should do well to situate the author within happenings and developments in Ghana. That way, Armah can be exonerated from a number of these charges.

In *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, Armah's fourth and fifth novels, the author initiates a radical change in the direction of his writing career. As against the concern with the contemporary social problems of Africa, Armah delves into the past in these two novels in order to proffer solutions to the problems of the present. For instance, in *Two Thousand Seasons*, he traces Africa's problems to her encounter, during the era of the slave trade, with the "white destroyers" and the "Arab predators" and the way that encounter derailed the people from their chosen path. Armah reasons that for us as Africans to know peace, we must return to that truncated path and also unite to fight the white imperialists. Specifically, in *The Healers*, Armah goes on to enunciate a healing process as the panacea to the African problems of disunity, tribal rivalries, and internecine warfares, which at the end serve to weaken the unity of the African people. From being a pessimist, Armah in these novels moves on to become an optimist who now predicates his fiction on the attainment of an African unity in spite of the influence of Europeans. This change in authorial voice from the alienated intellectual to the collective black consciousness is, as Jennifer Evans argues, accompanied by a change in focus from the individual to the communal and from the present to the past.

Osiris Rising, Armah's sixth novel, bestrides the two thematic preoccupations detailed above. While it sufficiently encapsulates the social criticism of Armah's early novels, it also returns to the African past by using the Isis–Osiris myth of the Egyptians to portray creatively the lack of visionary leadership in present-day Africa, more in the tradition of the later novels. The novel does not, however, have the kind of happy ending, which I see as a positive development in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. Unlike the positive futuristic tone of these novels,

Osiris Rising ends on a pessimistic note with the stage-managed murder of Asar, the soul of the revolution in the text by government mercenaries. This development implies the impossibility of Africans successfully imbibing and radiating the essence of the healing process which Armah enunciates in *The Healers*, since reprehensible social vices such as greed, the despotism of African political leaders, and the craving for material aggrandizement by the people still predominate in the African society. Armah further implies that these abnormalities are cogs in the wheel of progress of Africa and their continued presence will continue to obstruct meaningful developments in the continent.

As I have hinted above, although *Osiris Rising* belongs more to the novels of the second phase of Armah's writing career, simply because it moves backward to the African past to borrow a myth to reconstruct the history of Africa and make projections about its present and future, more like *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, it also shares some similarities with novels in the first phase. There is, for example, a sense in which Ast's granny or even Ama Tete, both by their defence of the rich past of black people and their desire to radiate the ideals of the past age in *Osiris Rising*, recall the image of Naana, Baako's granny in *Fragments*, although the former novel lacks the incantatory texture of the latter.

In the same way, Asar in *Osiris Rising* is structured around the same ideals as Baako in *Fragments*, especially their common desire to bring about a better society from the materially debased one in both texts and their eventual frustration at the end. (Again, Juana, a Puerto Rican and Baako's lover in *Fragments*, resembles the character of Ast, Asar's lover in *Osiris Rising*, because they both escape from their parent societies to Africa to find love and regenerate themselves.) Thus, in one sense, one can say that *Osiris Rising*, the latest addition to Armah's growing corpus, while advancing further the author's known ideology of reconstructing the history of Africa, especially at the neocolonial stage, dwells on matters that we have again and again come to identify with the author. It is really a case of a "new wine in an old wine skin."

One remarkable trait of Armah as a modern writer, which is decipherable in all his novels, is his dexterous use of images, myth, and symbols to achieve a synthesis of content and form. While for instance, he uses

the myth of Plato's cave as an explanatory symbol in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and the Melanesian cargo cult as a basis for attacking the prevalence of materialism in *Fragments*, or even Anoa's prophecy of 2000 years of Africa's enslavement in *Two Thousand Seasons* and bits of history about the Asante and their war with the British imperialists in *The Healers*, in *Osiris Rising* Armah uses the Isis–Osiris myth from Egypt in his creative reconstruction of African history. A proper understanding of this myth is therefore important to our understanding of the novel.

As Ama Tete, the African historian, custodian and repository of African culture in the text explains to Ast and Asar in one of their trips to Bara, the spiritual centre of the Akan people, “the companionship of the ankh” (which is emblematic of the Osiris myth in the text) was a well-organized secret society that had socialistic outlooks in ancient Africa. It was made up of the rich and the poor in the society, all brought together by an urgent need to set the society along goals that were geared towards the common good of all. In the companionship of the ankh, equality of all was the watchword; intelligence, life-enhancing values were its standards. Here, there was no royalty of any sort, and an injury to one was an injury to all.

The secret society also had abhorrence for injustice, slavery, and other forms of exploitation of Africans. In its heydays, it had its military wing, which saw to it that white slave merchants and their African collaborators were executed whenever caught. It was highly feared and revered, even by those who had been initiated into its fold. One distinguishing feature of the secret society was the “ankh,” translated to mean life, which was the carved emblem of the society that every member possessed. As a sign of its control over members, any errant member of the secret society adjudged by others to have committed sins antithetical to the society's goal was sent a “broken ankh” signifying his guilt. This was usually punishable by death.

Essentially because of this effective organization in the hierarchy of the secret society, colonial historians have said that it could not have evolved in Africa; that it was probably introduced from the West, since Africans are deemed incapable of any effective organization. By its

patently democratic structure, the society posed a challenge to the colonial operatives in Africa who overindulged in the repression and exploitation of Africans. It was thus to be destroyed in any African community where the secret society was found to be in operation. Ama Tete explains as follows in the text:

It was to work against such continuous disasters (induced by our interaction with the whites) that the companionship of the ankh was born: an ellipse of life linking future with past through intelligent work in the present. This, [...] was no royal society. There were farmers and princes and potters in it, there were masons and cobblers and aristocrats and fishers in it, there were priests and scribes in it. They were in the companionship not because they were peasants or princes or aristocrats or scribes, but because they agreed to work to its aims. [...] Because it was devoted to life, its chosen symbol was the oldest of Africa's life signs, the ankh. (261–62)

She elaborates again:

The companionship risked attack from those ambitious to dominate others. For it respected no social hierarchies, only the fellowship of shared ideals and work. Those whose power was based on force and fraud quickly enough understood that this society of intelligence and work, this society of life, the companionship of the ankh, would end their rule if it survived. They tried to destroy it. (262)

It is, therefore, the myth surrounding this companionship of the ankh, especially the subversive undertones borne by the emblem “ankh” that Armah makes use of to structure his narrative.

In strict chronological sequence, *Osiris Rising* starts by introducing us to Ast, a twenty-seven year old African-American who has just completed a doctorate degree at Emerson University in America, and is also an Associate Professor of African History. Because of the phenomenal influence of her paternal granny, she had come to see Africa as her home, not the stifling environment of America. It was her granny who taught

her at ten to read ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. She later pursued this interest further by doing her doctoral research in the area of Egyptology. This interest in Africa, her history and people, and her desire to travel to Africa and stay for good was fuelled by the meaning and significance of the ankh emblem she received from her granny in America, the spurious misrepresentation of African history and the story of the black survivors in America by the misguided author of the book, *Journey to the Source*, and her desire to reconnect with her lover, Asar in Africa.

The referent society of the novel is an African country under the grip of a neocolonial President Utumbo. This is a country where corruption is the organizing principle of the society. Much like in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, materialism, of an especially monstrous dimension, is the accepted way of life there. Amidst mounting social problems, all products of reckless spending by government, there is a state security service, equipped to the teeth for trapping those characterized as “enemies of government.” All the government’s earnings go into keeping the state security outfit in shape.

A faceless opposition group, using the emblem of the ankh as its symbol, produces, however, subversive articles attacking the inanities of those preparing the ground for a revolution that will usher in an egalitarian society reminiscent of that which was the goal of the companionship of the ankh. Asar, Ast’s lover and also a graduate of Emerson University, is the unacknowledged mouthpiece of this group. In his period of isolation from Ast, he mailed some of the seditious articles to her in America. Again, as in the colonial days when the activities of the companionship of the ankh were regarded as subversive, the activities of the revolutionary group are conceived as threatening the peace of the country and the leaflets directed towards educating the people are outlawed by the state security operatives.

Ast, oblivious of the overmilitarized nature of the unnamed African country to which she is travelling, brings along with her a copy of the outlawed leaflets. Because of the banned political statement, she is taken to security headquarters, which, unknown to her, is headed by Seth Spencer Soja, a classmate of Asar and another graduate of Emerson University in America. Seth, the Deputy Director of the state security

service, is a stooge of the political leaders and rose to his position within so short a time because he knew the right caliber of people in the country. Like Koomson in Armah's first novel, Seth is an embodiment of the derailment of true democratic practice in Africa.

In a way, Ast's coming to Africa to locate Asar and build a home, if need be, worsens the existing tension between Seth and Asar. As Netta Ka, proprietress of the Hapi Hostels where Ast is lodged, and also a former classmate of Asar and Seth explains to her, this tension dates back to their school days when out of some morbid competitive spirit, Seth saw Asar, who was clearly his academic superior, as a rival blocking him from excelling. According to Netta, Asar never really took this rivalry seriously: "He seemed to have no weight at all. There he was winning prizes, playing for the school team, starting a study group. Yet he drew no feeling of importance from anything he did. He floated" (71). Now basking in the euphoria of his newfound position, Seth still sees Asar as a threat. Having failed to warn Ast about Asar, or to make her renounce her love for him, he proceeds to entice her with mouth-watering offers which she turns down. Not satisfied with this rebuff, he pays an unsolicited visit to Ast at the Hapi Hostel and attempts to rape her. We are even told that while they were students at Emerson University in America, Seth had proposed marriage to Ast, who preferred Asar.

Ast eventually connects with Asar, for whose sake she had come to settle in Africa. He lectures at the Teacher's College, Manda, the youngest and most radical of the universities in the country. With his brilliant academic background, most people did not think he would want to become a mere teacher, and even one at such a remote place as Manda, since, as Netta says, "Here, educated people use their intelligence to avoid risk, to accumulate power, money, privilege. We call it security. That makes our choices sound less cowardly, not so greedy" (71). Before taking up a teaching job at Manda, Asar had fought in the wars of liberation in South Africa. It is these qualities of selflessness, unparalleled humility, practical resourcefulness, and clarity of vision that are emblematic of the companionship of the ankh, which Ast also cherishes in Asar.

Asar's presence in Manda soon transforms the place from docility to radicalism. He is the soul of the reforms sweeping through the country,

a personal exemplification of the creed of the companionship of the ankh. Apart from his practical resourcefulness, his untiring organization of the peasants of Manda into a formidable cooperative, he, within his first year in the department of English, successfully canvassed for the splitting of the department into two: the vibrant Department of Literature to which he belongs and the fledgling English Department which fears absorption into the Department of Languages. Because of his personality and commitment to change, he is hated by quite a number of his colleagues, especially expatriate professors and staff. Also, because of Asar, the state security service under Seth identifies Manda as a centre of dissent and keeps it under strict surveillance, believing that it is the source of the series of articles calling for changes and preparing the ground for a major future revolution.

Asar is, however, not deterred by these machinations. As he reveals to Ast who refuses to be discouraged from settling down in Manda to teach and find a home for herself in Africa, a battle rages on in the campus between his group, the innovators, and the conservatives, composed mainly of expatriate professors who resist changes because of their narrow-mindedness and confined academic field of studies. In articulating the goals of the innovators, Armah recalls to mind the position paper Ngugi wa Thiong'O wrote along with Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong in 1968 to press for the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi, stressing the need for a Department of African Literature to replace the Department of English and also for a complete overhauling of the courses to reflect the centrality of Africa in the University.

As Asar enumerates, the innovators have three basic goals:

- (a) Making Africa the centre of our studies.
- (b) Shifting from Eurocentric orientations to universalistic approaches as far as the rest of the world is concerned.
- (c) Giving our work a serious backing in African history, i.e., placing a deliberate, planned and sustained emphasis on the study of Egyptian and Nubian history as matrices of

African history, instead of concentrating on the European matrices, Greece and Rome. (104)

To actualize these grand goals centering around a constructive reconstruction of syllabi to suit African needs and peculiarities, Armah had to make it possible for Ast, after so much waiting, to assume duties as lecturer in history at the Teacher's College, Manda. As an expert in Egyptology and someone versed in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, she is central to the successful defence of proposals written and presented at both departmental and faculty levels for major reforms in the curricula of the programmes in African Studies, History, and Literature, since all these hinge on the study of Egyptology as an instance of African civilization. As somebody who had come to Africa freely to contribute to its development, Ast sees the hostility of the conservative group as misplaced. She never could have thought such things were possible in a university. Against the expectation that the university should be a bastion of knowledge, not resisting "changes that seem reasonable, natural and basic," Armah says, "the academic world, far from performing as the rational part of a confused universe, seemed peculiarly denatured in its own right" (232).

In *Osiris Rising*, Armah turns the university inside out, showing it the way it is. It is not redemptive, not a place free from the corruption and putrescence in the larger society. It is a place that stultifies and kills potential, thereby further retarding Africa. For all the good things Asar is doing to prepare the society for the envisaged revolution, and for all his fight to reform the lopsided curriculum in the university in favour of a greater percentage of African material, he becomes a marked man. For all he is doing to educate the apolitical masses, opening their eyes and ears to the follies of those in government, he is first arrested under instructions from Seth (the arrest is later foiled by students and concerned staff of the university), and later framed by a hired African-American by the name of Wossen, a fake Ethiopian, for wanting to overthrow the government of President Utumbo. He is traced to Bara where he had gone for some community uplifting assignments and killed on the orders of Seth

to the consternation of Ast, his now-pregnant wife, wedded at one of the sessions of the companionship of the ankh at Bara.

The murder of Asar by the state security operatives paints a bleak picture of Africa's future. By extension, this development signals a truncation of the healing process, which Armah's other novels about the African past enunciate. To Armah, the contemporary reality in Africa has evolved against the background of a nightmarish and horrendous violence orchestrated by the neocolonial ruling class, which wants to cling unremittingly to power. In a way, Ast had always anticipated this development. In her thoughts while traveling to Africa, she had a premonition about the eventual killing of reformers and revolutionaries by those who wield power. Armah writes:

Yet she suspected that in its ten thousand disguises Cinque's Zombi corpse still ruled Africa; that those working to remember the dismembered continent were still fugitives in need of sanctuary from the storm troopers of destruction. (11)

It is precisely the fate of Asar to fall prey to the ghostly death-dealing spirit of "Cinque."

In this novel, Armah does not seem to support an exhibitionist programme of black repatriation to Africa in the sense of Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa programme during the post-slavery era in America. Although a greater bulk of the text is about Ast's homecoming to Africa in search of her roots, Armah repudiates the adventurism of "Africa-hungry" returnees who take their discoveries about Africa back as commodities to be embellished and sold in America. This was one reason why Asar tried to discourage Ast from going to meet Ama Tete in Bara. In fact, Ama Tete herself says while talking about African-Americans who indulge in this practice, "others have come searching. What they find they take back to America [...] to sell [...]" (252–53).

As against Ast's altruism and genuine love for Africa, Armah counterposes the activities of the megalomaniac Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano who escaped from America after discovering that he was a black specimen being used for an experiment by his otherwise white friends during the days of civil Rights agitation in America. Having been rescued from a

suicide attempt, he changed his name from Sheldon Tubman, and came to Africa to, in his own vivid imagining, convert African-Americans from their perverted ways to the true African way. Yet, his ideology consists of an odd amalgam of Rastafarianism, Christianity, Islam, and Negritude. Enveloped in a make-believe and fantasized world, Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano is fake and claims a royalty that is not his due. He believes that his ancestors were kings and princes in Africa before they were carted off to the New World during the era of the slave trade. To him, that royal heritage now justifies his present power, although Ama Tete in her explanation of the broken ankh debunks this notion.

As Armah reveals, Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano seems to think that all Africans are polygamous, and have no respect for women. We see these attitudes in his marriages to three wives, the fourth already fled back to America. At no time in the novel is Cinque shown to have accorded respect to any woman, not even the mother figure Ama Tete. To show just how much of a rabble-rouser Cinque is, and perhaps to demystify the mask he is wearing to cover his true self, Armah reveals that he is in league with the state security operatives. He and Wossen, his messenger, were in fact responsible for the framing of Asar. Netta Ka even reveals that Cinque's castle was given to him by the security service. There is thus a significant relationship between the mythical Cinque and Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano, for as Ast tells us:

There was a Cinque in African-American history. An African enslaved, taken to America. Led a revolt, took over the slave ship, tried to force the captain to sail back to Africa [...]

The story has a twist. Some sources say when Cinque got freedom in Africa, the next thing he wanted was to go into the slaving business himself. (80–81)

Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano runs from America where he was engaged in the Civil Rights movement, only to jostle for power and recognition in Africa, claiming royalty where none existed.

Anyone familiar with Armah's other novels cannot fail to notice the same continual concern with the issue of widespread corruption, and crass materialism. In *Osiris Rising*, Armah seems to imply that the major

cause of these aberrations is greed (the greed of members of the political class). We have here a consumer society that has thrown overboard its creative essence. We are too eager to outfit our armoury and security outfits with the latest gadgets produced in America and Europe, or spend taxpayers' hard-earned money to beautify the presidential estate than to pay attention to solving basic human problems. On the information desk at the airport, for example, the clock has stopped working for upward of one year, yet nobody bothers to replace it. On the way to Hapi Hostel Ast discovers potholes, badly kept roads, faulty traffic lights—all showing a very shoddy governmental attitude to public facilities.

This is a country where you need to sleep with ministers or members of the ruling cabinet before you can get a decent house to rent in the city; where you need to know the high-ranking officials at the Ministry of Education before an application for a teaching job can be arranged; where workers idle away in offices and are not reprimanded because they are relatives of their bosses. This is also the country where, according to Netta, a friend who indulges in currency traffic acquires more wealth in two years “than a hundred honest people make in a lifetime.” Yet, as she says again, her friend is “a tadpole compared to the ministers and generals who do this as a way of life [...] Our rulers have made moral issues irrelevant in our lives” (56).

All these examples remind us of similarly grim portraits in earlier works such as *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, two of Armah's novels belonging to the first phase of his writing career. As we have shown earlier, although *Osiris Rising* moves back in time to ancient Egypt to borrow a myth for the effective structuring of Africa's history in a tripartite manifestation of past, present and future, in the tradition of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, it does not have the optimistic ending of these latter novels. Yet, because it advances Armah's constant argument for the historical reconstruction of African history, in the same elegant prose style we have come to associate with him, *Osiris Rising* in all its ramifications is a new wine in an old wine skin.

To reiterate some of the points I have made in this essay, Ayi Kwei Armah is one of Africa's most important writers of this generation. His

sixth novel, *Osiris Rising* published in 1995, after a long break in the writer's career, occupies a special position among his works. It not only draws attention to the continuing relevance of its author, but it also straddles the two thematic traditions of the earlier novels by further advancing Armah's continual argument for the historical reconstruction of African history and his tireless castigation of the materialist indulgence of his people. To that extent, *Osiris Rising* is a new wine in an old wine skin.

To say this does not, however, imply that the novel is merely a throwback or that its author is incapable of saying something new. A critical reading of the novel reveals that it attempts a dialectical combination of the social criticism of the earlier novels with the historical concerns of the later ones to achieve a special blend that is at once unique and original to Armah as a writer. It is also important to stress the point that although the novel belongs more to the historical reconstruction or solution-finding phase of Armah's corpus, it does not radiate the optimistic healing essence of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. My basis for identifying *Osiris Rising* with these two novels is therefore simply that it uses a myth about the African past to reconstruct the present and future of the continent. *Osiris Rising* offers a bleaker view of the possibilities of social transformation.

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