

RECREATING THE PAST: AN INTERPRETATION OF AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *TWO THOUSAND SEASONS*

Nidhi Choudhary

Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Jammu, India

Abstract

*History has often been described as being a dynamic entity rather than a static sequence of events and their consequences. It is no longer simply a cause and effect relationship between actions and results, but rather extends to include the eventualities and outcomes that grow out of such events. History is thus continuously modified, and at any point is merely a temporally determined perspective of what happened, and how it expatiated from events that preceded it, and how it shaped the events that followed. As such, history becomes a mirror, which holds up to criticism the actions that shaped its course. blending fact and fiction, to depict alternative histories wherein they point out how things could have been done in a better way, and how mistakes can and ought to be rectified. Further, such works also illustrate possible solutions that can be used to remedy existing problems, and thus present a substituted reality that depicts an ideal situation. Ayi Kwei Armah in his novel *Two Thousand Seasons* follows this technique to show a glimpse of an Africa in which tradition and native customs are intact, and to this pure land he adds virtues and qualities that render it close to some fantastical Utopia. However, this idealization is not Armah's final goal, and he goes on to demonstrate how this ideal world is destroyed by imperialistic designs, and how Africa is ravaged by corruption and decadence. This paper will attempt to study these aspects of Armah's novel, and will assess the conclusions which he arrives at, and the parallels which he draws with contemporary Africa.*

Keywords:- *Two Thousand Seasons*, Ayi Kwei Armah, alternative histories....

RECREATING THE PAST: AN INTERPRETATION OF AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *TWO THOUSAND SEASONS*

- Nidhi Choudhary

T*wo Thousand Seasons*, written in an allegorical tone, is premised on the idea of historical eschatological ideal. In this discourse, Armah unveils the philosophy of salvation history encompassing the past, the present and the future of the African continent. Armah goes back to the apocalyptic tradition in this novel to envision an eschatological pan-African ideal. The millenarian thought in the novel in a communal pluralized voice is a sardonic examination of African history, making a bold attempt at recreating the lost history of Africa. The novel recedes far back interpreting thousand years of African society talking about African past, African history and their tradition. It is a historical chronicle encapsulating African experience, in a pluralized communal voice cataloguing the disasters that befell Africa. Armah's dissatisfaction with the historical frameworks, led his ambitious project involve in the revisionism and reconstruction in which eschatological historiography concurs with traditional oral epics. The millenarian vision of renaissance and revival in the novel is created by spatial setting, time span and the actions of the protagonists which are epic. The historicised arc of time is operated to bring "reformation" to the present day corrupt African governments. The ideological origin of this project is embedded in the political and social experience of the past. The visionary programme charts an inspirational ideology for the future by engaging the elements that attains mythopoetic thrust. Armah steps ahead of traditional mythical construction and grafts a teleological eschatological dimension.

Africa's millennial existence in the novel is shown equalizing the evocation of myths with factual history. The discourse impenitently becomes the manifesto against white supremacy and contributes to the debunking of western reductive myths and mis-representations in order to weaken the control and manipulation of the imperial powers. This novel significantly adopted the form and voice of traditional oral epics to show deep concern with the continent's past. The strategies of orature were borrowed to produce a historical vision that wrestles against the

generalized stereotypes in the discourses of the imperial powers. The characteristics of oral culture have been integrated into his book because:

In traditional African communities storytelling provides entertainment, moral instruction, and an opportunity to express collective solidarity. It is one of the methods of educating young people by introducing them to the material culture, customs and usages, beliefs and philosophies of their people. Traditional African narrative can therefore be said to embody more than the art for art's sake philosophy. (Obeichina 21)

Cultural continuity is carried on by the oral transmission and Armah consequently by providing this climate adds more poignancy to his literary expression. Adopting the elements of oral phenomena of traditional lore, using witticism, philosophical or moral expositions all these help in the cultural orientation and moral training of the society. Armah has unfolded his concern through falling back on folk tales and myths. As enunciated by Irele in *The African Imagination* (2001), oral tradition is a sort of “true” African literature to which African sensibilities are easily attuned and it is still the ruling communicative mode on the continent. Nevertheless, reverting back to the orality, Armah created the aura of Africanism, the essence called as “the way” which he is relying on for contemporary issues. He extensively indulges in reconstructing the past along with the projection of present times dilemmas. The traces of the tormentation are exhibited, by bringing up the crisis of identity, by interrogating their flaws in the past and consequently searching for the solution to the present crisis. The discordances existing are fictionalized by insisting upon the political theme and showing how the fracture created is widened with each consequent blow. This disquietness is visible in Armah’s expression, he makes an acute insight into the state of fragmentation as action moves from one time zone to another. The summoning of time span in traditional African beliefs was determined by common use of seasons. So, the evocation of time in the novel is also a borrowing from oral tradition, Armah refrains from making practical use of the western calendar year in his novel.

The spiritualist Isanusi in *Two Thousand Seasons* defines the primary goal of the venture undertaken by Armah, that is to answer “an infinity of questions”, not only just about “what went wrong when, how, why?” but more essentially “about what people could do against destruction, how, where, and when?” (TTS 104). Neil Lazarus reads the novel as an experiment at the “re-

mythologization of African history” (217) and Derek Wright writes that Armah’s fiction “bursts the bounds of historical realism, period-setting and naturalistic narrative and moves into the terrain of myth, legend, and racial memory” (222).

The novel opens with a lyrical prologue in which the narrator, who undertakes the role of a griot, the poet-historian of the village, calls out to other skilled and intelligent voices to realize their proper “vocation.” The past is glorified against the methodical denigration by the imperialist forces in the past. The beauty of the novel is that it challenges the version of African history doctored by European intellectuals. As pungently stated by Armah in the novel that “the air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins” (*TTS* 1). European historians yarned out theories to keep Africans lost, the oral form is a form of maintaining continuity with the community, a conscious fight against these theories. Aware of the various European attempts to adulterate African history and destroy the African social essence referred to in the novel as “the way”, Armah took upon himself the responsibility to recover and protect the African tradition and culture. He felt:

That is also part of the wreckage of our people. What has been cast abroad is not a thousandth of our history; even if its quality were truth . . . the haze of this fouled world exists to wipe out knowledge of our way, the way. Western intellectuals have falsified the image of Africa across the world this haze still continues to act as deterrent, as an irritant to reach for the true knowledge. This mist is created by western intellectuals in order to establish their superiority the “haze of this fouled world” is distracting them from their way, their traditional way. These mists are here to keep us lost . . . (2).

In order to clear these mists, Armah makes a conscious movement to recuperate the primal vision synthesizing and assimilating the authenticity of the past experience, digging into the ethos that sustained that past. This task is approached, in Wole Soyinka's words, as “the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social redirection” (*Literature, Myth and the African World* 106). Armah turns back, for cultural retrieval and traditional ethics to the challenges confronting Africa. *Two Thousand Seasons* is a call for a return to a lost African Eden.

The griot calls out to the people to understand that the past one thousand years in Africa have been, first, a movement toward death, and then the other past one thousand years, a movement away from death. Africa has been following alien ways, which are death to the black culture. The prologue announces the purpose of the novel: to rephrase the story of Africa, in particular the story of Ghana, from the moment in history when the people first abandoned the “way” to the coming of the Europeans at the end of the nineteenth century.

The story begins with the coming of the predators who bring ruin, initially it is the Arabs, followed by the Europeans. The pre-colonial African society before the imperial invasion was peaceful, congenial, reciprocative and rich. Enlisting the virtues of the past, the novel implies the implication that in the beginning all African people were one. Collectivism looms large in the novel. The Africans are viewed as one entity whose unity is disrupted with the arrival of destructive alien forces who brutally try to suck out their lives, voiding them of “their way”, their tradition. Arab and European oppressors are referred to as “predators,” “destroyers,” and “zombies” and these names communicate their heinous image. They devoured the blacks of their identity, brought them to their knees, ripping them of their culture. They slaughtered black people’s bodies and annihilated their mind. The predators came as beggars but their appearance was deceptive. They deviously used their religion to hold sway over the weak, turning the natives against their fellow Africans. People were struggling to keep up their individuality as the invaders wiped the African surface with avariciousness. Not only physically but mentally also, they were subjugated by imperialist forces. The destroyers enlarged the fracture between the honest people and “death’s inspired vessels”, zombies, which ultimately led to their fragmentation (*TTS* 7). An ideal Africa was fissured on account of the presence of these extrinsic forces.

The coming of invaders (the British) later in the life of Africa revoked the past painful memories of predators forgotten by most of the people. British made the kings along with their weak minded allies participant in the wheeling dealing and political scheming unscrupulously. The debauchery of the whites is stated amply when they bring things to entertain the crippled soul of king Koranche. King was so overawed to see glittering gifts brought by white destroyers that he welcomed them and met them like long “lost brothers” (*TTS* 80). The rudderless king let loose an orgy of violence in order to gain control over the voices which were against his wishes. The giving of gifts by British portended some misfortune for the whole community. Deviant

practices to hegemonise the local masses and indulgence in abhorrent addictions were on the rise after the arrival of British. Decrepit practices creeping into African community alleged betrayal of the community. The temptation of African royalty to make or seek unfair profits by working in collaboration with colonialism highlighted by Armah shows the faltering of traditional way with the seeping in of the selfish mode of lifestyle. Conspirations, manipulations, plotting, scheming, noxious ambitions which Armah proves in his narrative made the grip of colonization dangerously strong. Koranche thinks himself obliged to fall in with humours and passions of their white guests subjecting everyone to afflictions and additional sorrows. He was indoctrinated to see only the grandeur of the western civilization. “The decaying class of kings and courtiers” (TTS 104) were being multiplied by white destroyers from the sea. This multiplied class becomes mealy mouthed, corrupt and deviated from the martial tenets of the faith.

The British cunningly used the patronage of king Koranche to fulfil their heinous agendas. Episodic agitations at various instances were led to expunge these forces. The king used indiscriminate violence to force his will. The community teetered on the brink of secession due to motley obscurantists. Life was so much more languid before a humungous amount of blood was spilt around a diabolic persona of king. The king tried to maintain nightmarish supremacy by resorting to cheap tactics. Drums were beaten to give preliminary remarks about the white strangers. They were told by the spokesperson that:

the white strangers had come wanting to be our friends to give us goods they had brought in return for ours, and to tell us of a wonderful creature they called god, a creature superior (TTS 78)

The spokesperson of the king, however, was interrupted by Akole, a woman of the duiker clan, who remarks that the people were tired of lies and they were no stranger to the white’s deeds “deeds of thieves, deeds of killers all of them” (TTS 78). She jogged everyone’s memory that “the white men from the sea were homeless brigands and soulless too” (TTS 78). Akole further looks at them as monsters who had come to mow them down, robbing them of their land and crushing their spirits into an endless barren emptiness. Among them there were people who were bent upon preserving their culture and oppose the white destroyers. People flooding with the spirit of truth, who had strength of the spirit, maestro of the spear, the arrow and the bow set ablaze, the white destroyers’ ships. Isansui and his alliance were among those who had the strength of spirit and who came forward to fight the alien forces. After few silent nights the town

saw the destruction of the people of the spirit who dared to set on fire the white strangers' ships. There was shocking silence from the king and his sycophants on this incident.

Armah tried to re-interpret past in terms of present while decoding history afresh. He has underscored that the inadequacies of the past has kindled stumbling blocks in the present. Armah successfully synthesized persistent historical weaknesses of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial with the representation of iniquitous leaders like Kamuzu. Kamuzu represents "the political culture of contemporary Africa" (Ayvior 188). Kamuzu like a parasite attaches himself to king Atobra, princes of Poano, and his fawners. He aided and abetted with them in putting slaves under lock and key and selling them off to white destroyers. He is denied his agreed share of profit which aggrieves him. As written in the novel "Kamuzu does not hate the enslavement of our people. What he hates is his own exclusion from the profits of the trade" (TTS 160). Isansui and his troop used his anger for their mission and vision. When the members of Isansui's alliance stays at Kamuzu's home they find that his house is in perfect likeness with the shelter of white destroyers restating his willingness to act dishonestly in return for money or personal gain.

Strangely, after their mission is a success they find Kamuzu aspiring to become destroyers instead of abolishing destruction. To appease his individual self he is walking around the palace as his owner. He wants to simulate the chief of stone palace which shows the moral bankruptcy of leaders in the past and it links the moral abyss of leaders in the contemporary Africa. Armah enlisted African rulers and condemns them, parodying the leadership in modern Africa. Armah's indictment against this kind of excessively deferential attitudes of African leaders is brought in the words:

Terrifying is the still clear soul's disgust at sight of the once destroyed aspiring not to abolish destruction but in their individual selves to become destroyers. Horrible is the sight of slaves hustling to place themselves on their master's stool. (TTS 169)

There has to be an organised resistance by society at large in present scenario the glimpse of this is showcased in, the protest put up by the group of boys and girls under the auspices of Isansui. They proclaimed and extolled revolution as the best way to restructure society. *Two Thousand Seasons* is a story of triumphs of the spirit and the will, despite appalling horrors, oppression, and betrayals. The white predators are beaten at their own games, their own arms

stolen from them and then turned against them. Treachery does not stop, but there are successes, small movements along the right way.

Armah wrote specifically in agitated reaction to the frustrating post-independence experience of Africans, the disappointment that came with the realization by the people that they have merely exchanged the yoke of colonialism with that of neo-colonialism. Armah demonstrates his dissatisfaction with African leaders. He accommodated his line of thought about current social reality pertaining to the disillusionment preceded by pseudo-independence. Armah has propelled the idea that communal harmony can get us out of this mess because “the only real power a black man can have will come from the black people” (*The Beautiful Ones* 82). With the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons*, however, he shifted his interest in social reality and political leadership towards a deep concern with the continent’s past as “prescription of the correct cure is dependent on a rigorous analysis of the reality” (Ngugi ix). As explained by Fraser that Armah’s aim was to provide “self-illumination” (73) and by looking back at the past one can understand oneself which help in curing the ailment. In order to offset the “communal inferiority” engrained in the African people is possible by boosting their self-respect.

The socio-historical perspective in the novel pinpoints that the “cultural nationalism as an important stage in the process of self-apprehension” (Pandurang 47). The impulse behind his expression is trying to rebuilt “the way” lost in this ordeal, instead of bemoaning the past. It is no use crying over the spoilt milk. To get out of the profound state of crisis into which African existence and consciousness is being plunged into Armah evokes a “sense of the dynamic and internal contradictions of both the past and present in Africa today” (Pandurang 47).

Frederic Jameson in *Marxism and Form* register it as significant that perception of a given experience when considered in relation or in proportion to something else by estimating the similarity or dissimilarity between one thing and another “is at the same time an awareness of what that experience is not” (163-164). In *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah reassembles “the way”, a system of values by propounding that what is not is that which ought to be, or, in Derek Wright’s terms, by balancing out ‘the actual’ with “the postulative” (*Ayi Kwei Armah’s Africa* 238). Armah uses the ingenious hypothesis of an ideal African social ethos of “the way”, as a spring board in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Under neo-colonial conditions for cultural reinvigoration it is brought to awareness that the moral privileging of past above all for retrieving “the way,” is

not the only thing. One should also consider past as “not only a forgotten but the future way, the way of reciprocity and collective endeavour” (TTS 5), but rather as action rather than reacting. They can take inspiration for future, a vision for future from the past.

Isansui beseeches before his death “see the disease, and understand it well. It is important” (TTS 201). Communal redemption is the answer for the afflicted Africa. Armah has invoked the past, brought in notice the traditional which he feels is a panacea of all evils in contemporary society. As stated “It is a therapeutic work which aims to close the wounds left over and festering from centuries of implied cultural abuse” (Fraser, 82) . By being critically aware of their past they can construct a vision for the time ahead this novel. As an ideological apparatus it is trying to recoup from the assault done ideologically and physically by outsiders.

Works Cited:

- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. London: Heinemann, 1988. Print.
- . *Two Thousand Seasons*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1973. Print.
- Ayivor, Moses Geoffery Kwame. *A Saga of Black Deglorification: The Disfigurement of Africa in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels*. Cape Town: UCT, 1998. Print.
- Fraser, Robert. *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*. London: Heinemann, 1980. Print.
- Irele, Abiola. *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa & the Black Diaspora*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971. Print.
- Lazarus, Neil. *Resistance in Post- Colonial African Fiction*. University Press, 1990. Print.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965. Print.
- Ogede, Ode. *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast*. North Carolina: Ohio UP, 2000. Print.
- Obeichina, Emmanuel N. *Language and Theme Essays on African Literature*. Washington D.C: Howard UP, 1990. Print.
- Pandurang, Mala. *Post colonial African Fiction: The Crises of Consciousness*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1997. Print.

Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976. Print.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. Literature*. London: James Curry, 1986. Print.

Wright, Derek. *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of his Fiction*. London, Munich & New York: Hans Zell, 1989. Print.

