

THE FEMININE PRINCIPLE AND THE SEARCH
FOR WHOLENESS IN THE HEALERS

by

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It is possible to divide Ayi Kwei Armah's five novels into two categories, each signifying a definite stage in the evolution of his literary vision. The first three novels, The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born, Fragments and Why are We So Blest? fit into what those critics who find unpalatable the content and imagery of these works would regard as a destructive stage, but which in fact is an analytical stage. The last two novels, Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers fit into the constructive stage. The first stage grows into the second, and the two form the final and summary articulation of a visionary philosophy, which from the start has been geared towards the awakening of a whole people to the reality of its own spiritual death, or "infection," to borrow from Fraser,¹ and to ultimately help it in retracing its steps back to the sources of that infection as a means towards its salvation. The journey has always been the underlying motif, and the destination has always been the way, the path to self-discovery. If the raw material for the search, and the imagery in which it was cast has changed slightly, this is understandable since the author's initial efforts were directed towards a shock treatment meant to force the infected out of his stupor and acceptance, and to point out to him the symbols and symptoms of the disease; to make him better equipped to fight it.

Each of the books is dominated by a hero, who not only steers away from the disease but who also tries either by personal example or by direct action, to lead society to this life-giving path; but is almost destroyed by the same society he seeks to save; in the cases of Modin and Isanusi, of Why are We So Blest? and Two Thousand Seasons respectively, the heroes actually die in the attempt. In The Healers the pattern changes, and the hero not only survives but triumphs over the forces of evil in the society. A second motif which runs through the novels is the central role played by women of all categories -- married women, sisters, mothers and mothers-in-law, grandmothers, girl friends, daughters and prostitutes; even seers and warriors feature in Armah's novels.

Among African writers, Armah and Ngugi are the two who have demonstrated the greatest insight and sensitivity, as well as the rare ability to artistically portray the problems, hopes and fears of the African woman, and to delve

imaginatively into the wells of her being. Armah, however, more than Ngugi, towers above the rest in capturing that enigmatic combination of good and evil in her nature. This topic has been explored in its relation to his first four novels in a paper to be published² in the fourth issue of Nsukka Studies in African Literature. Armah is as merciless, or perhaps as realistic, in handling this topic as he is in handling all those factors crippling the social and spiritual well-being of African nations today. The taunts and jeers of Oyo and her mother, the greed and love of Araba and Efua for Baako, the love, insecurity and support of Juana; the deadly love of Aimee for Modin and the sacrifice and total dedication of the young women in Two Thousand Seasons significantly tilt the scale for good or for bad in the destiny of the heroes.

Armah has a keen eye and a deep understanding of the monumental capacity of women for creativity and for destruction, but in The Healers he makes the female principle the reservoir of the love, care, patience and suffering which are the sources of spiritual healing and self discovery, the major themes of his fifth novel. Both men and women are in search of their selves but the weight of its demonstration falls more on the female characters. Ultimately the individual efforts culminate in the education of the hero, who in Armah's works is usually an embodiment of the whole society. Fraser's statement of Armah's theme therefore involves some misrepresentation in the latter part. He writes:

His essential theme has been the process through which a nation may force its way back to a state of natural health after a prolonged period of spiritual infection. He is thus concerned with the salvation of the people in toto, the reformation of the public will, rather than the redemption of the private soul or mind.³

This is in fact what the Marxist critics, led by Atta Britwum, criticize Armah for not doing. Quite often, however, the over-emphasis on the African communalistic way of existence, as advanced by sociologists and anthropologists, has prevented critics from appreciating the value of personal conviction and action in the African novel. Obiechina did not help matters when he wrote that Ulu in Arrow of God had taken sides with the people against his head-strong chief-priest; when in fact both the people, the chief priest and Ulu itself lost abysmally in this universal tragedy. That is the ultimate irony of that complex tragedy, not the victory of the people, for there is none.⁴ The Ibos, in particular, are an individualistic people although they also respect the communal will. Without the acceptance of this doctrine, the tragedies of Okonkwo and Ezeulu lose much of their meaning. In Armah's

case, there has not been a change of direction towards the communal voice, as Fraser also claims; even the groups in Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers are very select groups to which one qualifies after a rigorous process of specialized education, self-conviction and dedication. What has changed in Armah's book is the locale of the conflict, a shift to, the village and the forest; and the type of heroes; those who have not lost touch with the soil, who have lived and grown in the community, knowing its traditions, its potent forces, both revered and tabooed. The meeting of their followers issues from personal decision not from force or the logistics of sociology. These groups also live apart, work apart and practice an essentially African philosophy in which they have been well grounded. The man, Baako and Modin, in their cosmopolitan environment are too burdened by their own personal problems to be effective. It is this emphasis on native genius rather than the shift from individualistic to communal conflict which separates Armah's earlier novels from the later two. The author may betray an obsession for the theme of national redemption but he invariably anchors its source in the commitment of each individual, either singly or expressed as a select group.

The Healers engages in a practical demonstration of that process of spiritual healing which has dominated all of Armah's novels. In Fragments Juana and Nana are building while Araba and Efua are destroying; but in The Healers Armah's emphasis is on the constructive, the positive, the regenerative. In Fraser's words:

Like most of Armah's books, but more boldly so, it is a therapeutic work which aims to close the wounds left over and festering from centuries of implied cultural abuse. The Healers too is germane to this enterprise -- indeed its very title suggests a propensity to cure.⁴

In The Healers in particular, much of the wound is inflicted, not by colonialism, but by that process of self betrayal for which Armah never ceases to hold Africa accountable. The wounds are inflicted by kith and kin jostling for power. The woman figure, by its very vulnerability is the main victim in this encounter. The healing process takes place on the physical and psychological planes and is closely associated with the search for one's true self. Densu, Ajoa and Jesiwa are all involved in this search for wholeness without which the individual remains restless, unhappy or psychologically destroyed. Densu's search and eventual self-discovery determine the structure of the work, but Jesiwa and Ajoa are crucial in their realization.

Densu is a typical Armah hero in his loneliness and sensitivity. He recalls Baako in these two basic characteristics. Although Densu lives at court at Esuano, he is totally alienated from the interests, values and preoccupations of those he lives with. These were the same values that dominated the annual games, celebrations and festivals, formerly rituals of unity and togetherness, now symbols of:

Competitions, struggles of individual against individual, faction against faction, the sharpening of knives, the search for allies, the deception of bystanders and enemies, the readiness of professed friends to betray those already used in the unending search for more power.

These observations intensify Densu's loneliness, quicken his restlessness. The first guiding light from this dark period is Araba Jesiwa. This friendship differentiates Densu from previous Armah heroes whose loneliness is usually total, because even when help comes it comes from someone as helpless as themselves. Araba Jesiwa comes to Densu at the most crucial stages in his search; before he meets Densu and before he is wrongly condemned for the death of the prince. Araba's life-history is well-known. Born into wealth and endowed with beauty she had, according to the advice of people at court, married an empty aristocrat with whom she was emotionally incompatible. The result of this psychological violence to her true self was a long period of unhappiness, near sterility and a series of miscarriages. Her meeting with and eventual friendship with the healer Damfo had finally cured her from this ailment; the method was a psychanalytical one in which through a series of questions and discussions Araba was led back to the true source of her problem, and gave birth to the prince Appia.

Armah allows Araba to relate this experience to Densu and thus prevent him from making similar mistakes in his own life:

In time I understood what I had to do. I had been false to myself. It wasn't easy. In my blindness I had almost killed my true self. I had embraced false selves and set them up to dominate my real self. They were not even of my own making, these false selves. They were pieces of other people, demands put out by others to whom I used to give respect without stopping to think why.⁶

This choice almost destroyed her erstwhile lively and playful spirit which Armah compares to "a turbulent young river. The natural motion of her soul was dynamic, effortlessly so. Her spirit in its lightness was endlessly capable of flying higher

and higher provided only she could find a life companion able to fly with her." Araba's role is that of a mother and a friend to Densu. She is best placed to educate Densu on the dangers of succumbing to unhealthy pressures from the court, which could cramp individual aspirations. Jesiwa both moulds his personality and also satisfies a deep yearning in him to find out about Damfo whom no one else at Esuano was willing to speak about.

Araba Jesiwa's first discussions with Densu are also significant in other ways. They introduce the young man Densu into the strongest cravings, hopes and fears of most women, those of self-fulfilment through childbirth; the bond between a mother and a child, and how special Appia must be to the mother, thus making him better able to understand Araba's agony over the loss of that son. It is also important that it is through these discussions that Densu finally requests that the speaker introduce him to the healer Damfo. This is also done. Finally, these discussions are a foreboding of the final suffering undergone by the same woman, this time partly in the presence of Densu. If one can construe the greatest obstacle in Densu's life as Ababio's plan to have him executed for murder, then Araba Jesiwa must again be seen as Densu's saviour, for her decisive verdict is profered just at the point of Densu's condemnation, and turns the evidence on Ababio and his allies.

Apart from her influence on the hero Araba's role remains central in the book for more reasons. Her life provides an opportunity for Armah to explore a theme which he has hitherto not handled in his treatment of women in his works. This is the theme of childlessness. His choice of this topic underscores the relevance of most of his concerns to the African experience, and yet it has not been accorded the total imaginative projection, thoroughness and depth which it has received in The Healers. In Flora Nuapa's Efuru and Idu, John Munonye's Obi Asare Konadu's A Woman in her Prime, this theme is central though the treatment remains one of information rather than of psychological exploration and analysis of feeling. Most of these writers have concentrated on the social stigma it carries in the African context, but to Armah the pain emanates from a deeper personal source for the woman:

In the end Jesiwa had come to feel she was gripped by a power too strong for her. She felt herself the impotent prey of an evil power beyond her understanding, able to reach into her being to constrict her love-gift and make it impossible for her to give a home to new life, to be a woman.

In his powerful oracular style the cumulative weight of the sorrows of Araba's agonized years is carried by the repetitive format of her narration:

She talked to him of anxiety -- the terror clutching at a woman's entrails at the thought that she might go through life and die at the end without once seeing a single new life spring out of her. ...She talked to him of waste, the experience of great efforts all reduced to nothing... She talked to him of despair -- the bottomless loss of hope that could turn a vibrant human being into something less than inanimate flesh and bones...

These passages recreating her utter depression are counterbalanced by similar ones reflecting her joy at the end of her suffering:

She talked to him of change, how a life lived to the dull, flat rhythms of despair picked up energy, changed speed and found its ruling sound turned from a self-pitying moan to an endless song of love... She talked to him of renewal of the purging of falsehoods out of the abused self... She talked of the incredible joy of the rediscovery of the authentic self when the self too long exposed to lies was set free at last to roam along the paths to truth.¹⁰

For Araba the conversations have a therapeutic effect; for Densu they catapulted him into the world of adulthood at the age of fifteen, thus aiding his movement to self-discovery. They were to him "memories of the search for the true self, the natural self," a lesson taught without force, deception, or manipulation of others.

Ajoa's role is equally significant in the search for wholeness in The Healers. Early in life, specifically at the age of six she has made her choice of vocation by choosing to live with her father rather than her mother. When taken by force to Esuano by Ama, her mother, after her separation from Damfo the little girl makes a dramatic turn back to the eastern forest. After wandering around in circles like Clarence in The Radiance of the King she is found by a healer picking leaves and is returned to her father. That is the point of her initiation into the life in the eastern forest. From then she works as a mini healer with her father, observing and restoring mind and body like others. She is very central to the healing of Araba after the latter's physical and emotional battering by Buntui. Very early Densu observes that Damfo and Ajoa are never absent from the same house at the same time before he realizes that Ajoa was nursing Araba. Significantly the first sign of life, through

speech comes to Araba in Ajoa's presence. She is rewarded for being the patient restorer of life.

In Densu's life Ajoa also exerts a powerful influence. Their first meeting takes place when Ajoa is brought to Esuano by her mother but then she gets lost after that. Despite her childish response to Densu at this first meeting the author comments:

It was this power of Ajoa over his spirit, this attraction over which he neither needed nor wanted to struggle, that had first brought Densu close to Ajoa's father, Damfo. The more Densu tried to understand this the more he found it strange -- that his relationship with Damfo had begun through Ajoa, and in such an accidental day.¹¹

This strong attraction is an indispensable part of his search for understanding and knowledge. It eventually grows and serves as his initiation into sexuality and manhood. The guava fruit which Densu brings first as a gift to Ajoa, and later plants when he did not find her grows into a tree which symbolizes the growth of their love. Her complete break with Esuano and all it stands for is a good lesson for Densu the novice. Her choice is a perfect illustration of the modus operandi of the healers; it comes by inspiration, not force, deception or manipulation. Her rejection of her mother and Esuano, the new husband typifies the rejection of the temptation of Armah's "loved ones." Ama's separation from Damfo also represents her search for wholeness, for Esuano suited her lively spirit better.

The second and mature stage of their relationship begins after the death of Anan, which filled Densu not just with a sense of personal loss, but also with a sense of guilt, since Anan had died in the attempt to save Densu. Ajoa's nervous energy and restless eyes have now acquired a depth which makes her both a lover and an advisor to Densu. Ajoa understands the life at Esuano and constantly warns Densu against Ababio and the "power games" as she calls it. The escape from the trial at Esuano had resulted in both physical and mental depression from which only the presence of Ajoa rescues Densu:

One thing only remained capable of bringing a small, immediate quickening joy to him: the presence of Ajoa. This was more than a pleasure to Densu. It was a beckoning that said life should be worth surviving for in spite of everything.¹²

With Ajoa's love and tender nursing care he soon recovers from that traumatic experience, for from the nursing of Araba, Ajoa has become a true healer. Densu's own sickness has now

prepared him to see the heavily-laden supine body of Araba Jesiwa. In his thought, "...what horrific suffering for a soul born to fly, this heavy, painful, earthbound impotence" (p. 139). Ajoa has been part of this whole episode, and was initially one of the three people that brought Araba home from the forest. Eventually Ajoa completely fills the gap left in Densu's life by the loss of Anan and leads him across that essential threshold between boyhood and manhood. Her presence was an ever-abiding reality which propelled him forward to life "from the deadnesses of the past." The old woman Nyaneba, in her own special way also contributes to the development of Densu into a complete man and a professional healer.

Esi Amanyiwa the queen-mother belongs to a different order from the other women in this novel. In age and poise she stands alone. She forms the essential link between the two levels of the book, the historical and the personal. Steeled by years of experience and suffering she represents the voice of wisdom and authority in the court at Esuano. She shares with Araba in the agonies of her childless years and lives to witness the brutal murder of her grandson. Her composure and self-possession recall Soyinka's Ma Faseyi and Okpewho's Ma Nwojide, an important and almost passing generation of African women.

Esi Amanyiwa makes one strategic appearance in the course of this story at the graveside of the prince, and offers him her symbolic gifts of her treasured fertility doll, and gold; for like Naana in *Fragments*, the episode is to her part of the inexorable cycle of death and rebirth, and Appia is sure to come back. Her monumental dignity lives in these memorable lines: "Let him go with him...since that is his wish," a brief line which summarily perforates Ababio's hypocrisy and exposes his flamboyant and obscene drama at the mouth of Appia's grave.

Armah portrays Efua Kobri, the next queen mother with even more dignity:

The last to enter the hall was the queen-mother herself, Efua Kobri. She, the elegant brown one, came wearing silk robes as usual, her skin soft as a baby's. Seven female attendants followed her -- she was travelling light today. The last of her train were three fat men -- eunuchs.¹³

He invests her with humility and grace in addition to grandeur; and her eventual persuasion of the famous Asamoah Nkwanta to join in the battle to save the Asante kingdom amply demonstrates this:

...let Asamoah Nkwanta forgive past wrongs. Let him exact whatever further price he thought himself entitled to. But let him not abandon the Asante army, leaving it to bleed itself and the nation to death.¹⁴

In Armah's words, "neither in substance nor in style" could any of the other speakers improve on that speech. Efua Kobra's influence on her son, the Asantehene, is clearly established, so is her domination of the council of the royals. She is an open and consistent advocate of peace; and when the time comes to plead surrender the queen-mother again prevails on her son, and the Asante army is ordered to surrender to the British, to the great disappointment of the warrior, Asamoah Nkwanta.

Apart from character and role the basic underlying symbolic patterns of The Healers also support Armah's deliberate projection of what is most positive in woman. The river is a central symbol in the work and shares its regenerative quality with the female characters. Two clearly distinguished streams flow by Esuano, demarcating the two basic conflicting forces in the work, inspiration, life, against manipulation and death. Nsu Ber the female river is characterized by its calm and gentle flow. Its waters were extraordinarily clear and its bed is made of fine sand sprinkled with pebbles of many colours. Armah calls it "a clear thing of beauty" (p. 3), and Densu calls it "the beautiful one" (p. 19). The second stream is described as turbulent, carrying "a heavy load of leaves, twigs and broken branches" (p. 3). It deposits not sand, but silt, "a thick, muddy ooze." In the author's words, "the female river had a more consistent course." It flowed steadily north-west to meet the male river just past Esuano. Between the female river and the male lay a wide strip of land. This is the field of rituals, and no keen reader can miss the clearly sexual language in which the description of "this strip of land" is couched. Symbolically it is here that the youths crossing into manhood assemble to run races and play their games of strength. Nsu Ber stands for life, for peace as opposed to the strength of the male river, Nsu Nyin. After Densu's wrestling with the giant, he and Anan retire to the field by the Nsu Ber. After turning away from the scene of shooting of the pigeon Densu retires to the same river for peace. Still after the escape of the two friends from the trial by fire, they both head for the trees near the bank of the Nsu Ber. It stands for regeneration, for reassurance.

The female principle also represents the direct opposite of Ababio's obsession with power and manipulation of others. Its creativity works against Ababio's emptiness and death. Significantly most of the women are in the healing profession.

Ama Nkroma and Nyaneba are two examples of such women. Araba's powerful hold over Entsua's art reminds one of Munbi's similar hold over Gikonyo's art.

During the sacrifice of victims of the River Pra it is an urgent female voice which saves the man at the point of drowning. The major dreams and omens which forecast the fall of the Asante empire symbolically are dominated by female figures; but suffering females this time. Their suffering signifies the stifling of creativity and source of life which the queen-mother claims has forced the great one, Odomankoma Kwame, God of all creation, to withdraw the protection he used to offer in past generations. On her advice the controversial hostages are finally released and the Asante army is literally forced to surrender. Historically this may be a right or wrong move, but in the context of the novel it finally leads to the unity of all the black groups brought together to fight for the whites.

The Healers ends in a symbolic dance which ensues from the defeat of the scheming and power-thirsty Ababio mainly by the testimony of an abused but regenerated female; a clear demonstration of the power of truth, tenderness and love over falsehood. Jesiwa's refusal to allow the slaughter of the innocent ram as part of the celebration fits into the feminine advocacy of peace in the whole novel. Armah is therefore as concerned with the history of the Asante empire at a particular point in time, as he is once more with the vital role of women in shaping that human destiny which has always, and continues to mould the course of human history everywhere and at all times.

FOOTNOTES

¹Robert Fraser, The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah. (London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1980).

²Virginia U. Ola, "Ayi Kwei Armah and the Essence of African Womanhood." Paper to be published in Vol. 4 Nsukka Studies in African Literature.

³Fraser, op. cit., p. xii.

⁴Ibid., p. 82.

⁵Ayi Kwei Armah, The Healers (London, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1978), p. 49. Shorter quotations are inserted with the paper.

⁶Ibid., p. 69.

- ⁷ Ibid., p. 73.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 71.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 67.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 66.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 133.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 239.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 239.