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## Reading Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons as an Intertext

### **Abstract:**

*Ayi Kwei Armah (1939-) is a Ghanaian novelist who has written so far seven novels, famous among which are his first The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968). Two Thousand Seasons (1973) comes fourth in order of appearance, but it is the first where Armah plunges into Africa's millennial past. The Healers (1979), Osiris Rising (1995) and KMT in the House of Life (2002) all span a given period related to African history, the last two even go as far as Ancient Egypt with its heliographic scripts, but Two Thousand Season in a number of respects remains an unparalleled book in Armah's oeuvre. This article answers what it means to write a historical novel while the initial intention is to evoke the frustrations of an unhappy present. Armah has started his novelistic career with a book – The Beautiful Ones – that carefully examines the postcolonial reality in his home country. In order to bypass the unhappy state of affair of the present, Armah sought to undo the damaging effects of master-narratives through a mythical construction of Africa's millennial existence. For him, what caused pitfalls from political independences – as evocatively dramatized in The Beautiful Ones; Fragments; Why Are So Blest? – is Africans' trust and sometimes belief in the stories made and circulated by essentially non-Africans. In other words, the reductive clichés, and generalized stereotypes have furnished the imperial powers with the necessary verbal tools in terms of a 'discourse' whereby these powers have been able to carry on and perpetuate its control and manipulation. In this connection, Armah's Two Thousand Seasons can be read as a text wrestling against other texts in the battle of representing Africa. The present study, thus, details on which texts Two Thousand Seasons draws upon, in what way and towards which end?*

**Keywords:** *Intertextuality; African History; Colonial Occupation; Cultural Representation; Millennial Past*

## 1- Introduction:

With *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) readers observe that another phase in Armah's writing career has begun: his immersion in the history of his Akan people can be read as a willingness to depart from the *ex nihilo-nihili* state of the man, Bako and Modin in the three early novels. Right from the prologue of *Two Thousand Seasons* readers find what can be considered a review on Modin and Solo's careers: "The noise the hypnotized make, multiplied by every echoing cave of our labyrinthine, is heavier, a million times louder than the sound we carry" (p. xi) Modin, readers recall from *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), is left bleeding to death not far from a French military base in the Algerian desert. His physical castration can be approached as a metaphor for his emptiness from life juices, a fact that typifies his masculine unproductivity and foreshadows his uselessness for the task of regeneration. The picture, however, is not all bleak as the narrative emphasizes that there are some 'returning casualties' whose coming back to origins make them learn how to undo the chaotic present. Armah's reading of Africa's continental history differs and defies the monopoly established by western narratives. *Two Thousand Seasons* can be regarded as a spiritual biography of the continent. In showing that Africans had have a long history of struggle, and of survival and sometimes material triumphs despite the wrongs inflicted as a result from that struggle, the novelist has already made an unusual step towards a mental awakening. In the prologue, readers note the stress laid on the telling of one's story:

The ears of hearers should listen far towards origins. The utterer's voice should make knowledge of the way, of heard sounds visions seen, the voice of the utterers should make this knowledge inevitable, impossible to lose. (Armah, 1973. xiv)

## 2- Scope and Objective:

In the space of the present article, I attempt to review the tools by means of which Armah projected his people's history, and how his projection has been central to what can be considered his fully-fledged program for a prosperous Africa. How does his system work?—and what determines the scores and shortcomings in following such a program?

As indicated below, Armah's discourse in *Two Thousand Seasons* is predominantly mythical. The framing of the narrative evolves around the deployment of myths, legend, tales, dream-visions, parables and allegories. The novel never tires of drawing from this fantasia-mythical stock in order to impress its reader by showing to what extent the African present can possibly be of instructive consequences. In short, *Two Thousand Seasons* works ceaselessly at debunking western misrepresentations by providing one's own history. For Armah, African history in reality is neither a representation of Africa as a caricature of humanity, nor a world of naïve savages existing outside history, but a rather complex and civilizational entity. In *Two thousand Seasons*, readers find how the narrator becomes the unelected voice of the voiceless by merely evoking history. The community turns effectively from its paralyzing slumber once it learns about its position in space and time. Its reality of a community caught in a life or death tussle, worthy of being waged to defend its life style from the intrusion of alien lifestyles, is determined only when it is set in a historical situation. For apart from learning about one's identity and

individuality, history instructs how to confront life actively and responsibly. Edward Said pertinently observes:

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination (Said, 1994, 9)

In this regard, power itself is subject to history and thus it can be subject to contestation, competition and seizure. Since it is not God-given, power like anything worldly is initially a mental construction. He who wins materially has to win imaginatively first. This is why:

...appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in the interpretation of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainly whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. (Said, 1994, 3)

The writing of the past, in this context, is always motivated with some needs of the present. Differently put, the invocation of the past by a considerable novelists, of whom Armah is one, can be interpreted as an anxiety to settle some old 'scores' and 'answer back' some reductive clichés and misrepresentations as these latter have been inflicted by western domineering powers in the battle over the geography of Africa. The reductive clichés and generalized stereotypes have provided the imperial powers with the necessary verbal tools in terms of a 'discourse' whereby these powers could have carried out its control and subjectification.

Indeed, it seems that what prompts Armah to write *Two Thousand Seasons* is the vocation to 'answer back' or 'counter-write' the colonial discourse. Towards this end, Armah's novel can be considered as a text that wrestles with other texts that when combined all together in an analytic perspective figure in the *casus belli* over Africa. For readers can consider *Two Thousand Seasons* as 'an intertext' or 'a text between texts' (Plett, 1991, 5) For some of the key events in the novel are starkly reminiscent of similar events in other narratives. There is a cluster of allusions, centos, parodies, travesties, collages and other no less important references to master western texts. Chief among these texts is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and a little referred to short story by Conrad titled: "Karain: A Memory" (1897). Similarly, *Two Thousand Seasons* hints at Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana or: The Ecclesiastical History of New England*. (1702) Certainly, not all these cases of intertextualities fall within the same effect. While the relationship between *Two Thousand Seasons* and the texts of both Conrad and Defoe vary between 'inversion' and 'negation', there lies some sort of 'repetition' between Armah's book and Cotton Mather's.

### **3-Contextualizations**

Before developing on these cases of intertextuality and how they variably interact

with Armah's text, there lies the need to stress the cultural aspect of making sense of these books. Since all the works referred to are indicative of certain cultural backgrounds, the task of reviewing them should follow the same line and examine the cultural impact as it is observed from the angle of intertextuality. In this light, reading African historical novels, written by various African writers cannot be fair or objectively satisfactory without considering western narratives (novels) that touch upon the historical realities of Africa. In other words, since "each cultural work is a vision of a moment, we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked." (Said, 1994, 66) This is how Said arrives at his famous investigative cultural method he names 'Contrapuntal Reading'. This last means the act of reading a text "with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts." (Said, 1994, 67) .

#### **4-Approach and Method Followed:**

Hermeneutically, such readings are judicious since the logic which approves the right for one culture to reduce other cultures to inferiority tolerate to these 'inferiorized' cultures a right to answer back and vindicate themselves. There remains only the technical question: how can this be carried out successfully? Michel Foucault's observations prove insightful. For apart from the archaeologies which deal exclusively with the discontinuities of an episteme in one moment of time, genealogies investigate the entire fabric of changing epistemes all through time. Unlike traditional historical schools, genealogy does not seek meanings of isolated events as it scans epistemes individually, that is, as value-free events. What privileges Foucault's genealogical method is the fact that it historicizes the 'problem', not the period (Flynn, 2001, 42). The difference between the two operations lies in the idea that genealogical investigation always "should be seen as a kind attempt to emancipate historical knowledge [from the hierarchical order of power associated with science], to render them, that is capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse."(Said, 1994, 51)

Given this theoretical context, it seems that Armah's way of projecting genealogically the history of his people has been shaped by his predominating deployment of myth. To equalize the evocation of myths with factual history may sound an undue degradation of the serious, and in Armah's case, most enduring task of self-definition and identity. For the sake of appropriate self-definition, it is often presumed that one needs more than fictive means. One has to be, in this logic, fanatically committed to factual history. Such uncritical assumptions regarding factual history, however, do not pay adequate attention that this latter can be ideologically biased and value laden. This explains the modern crisis of epistemology. With post-structuralists' readings of history, it is rather common to find factual history driven towards "ego-history". Perhaps most damaging to objectivity is the moment when the means of representation become considered of minimal value when compared to factual history.

Myths and other means of representations (what can be called: mythico-fantasmatic reserve) can be launched as active participants in the imaginary contestation over the physical and mental space of Africa. With the clarification of the importance of myths in the task of literary representation, a deep investigation of Armah's

representation in *Two Thousand Seasons* can be started. At first, there is an attempt to show how Armah's discourse impenitently and actively contributes to the debunking of Western reductive myths and mis-representations. The political and cultural implications of *Two Thousand Seasons* as an intertext whose cultural project varies between negation and inversion of other meta-texts written mainly by Defoe and Conrad. Simultaneously, as the task of debunking is carried on Armah's mythification is taking place. Armah constructs the myth of a resilient, an ever-battling and undefeated Africa. The myth that *Two Thousand Seasons* ultimately draws is the novelist's own effort at bestowing a new definition to the African self and identity. The over-all achievement of the text is a reinstallation of hope against the delirium and disillusion of the present impasse, so powerfully dramatized in the earlier three novels.

### **5-Two Thousand Seasons as the African Genesis: the Puritans as a Role Model**

*Two Thousand Seasons* projects itself as an African legend epic form. Like most legends, it celebrates the birth of a race and traces its continuity (hopes, achievements, disappointments and failures) through time. Considered from the focal perspective of the present moment, the novel claims history and re-charts geography for a people long wondering amid unconscious forgetfulness and hideous deletion. Moreover, the novel re-appropriates its historical reality over the question of identity and matches the African self to its immediate physical environment. Soyinka reads *Two Thousand Seasons* as centered around "...a theme that is far too positive and dedicated and its ferocious onslaught on alien contamination soon falls into place as a preparatory exercise for the liberation of the mind." (Qtd. Soyinka, 1992, 45) Reference has already made above that *Two Thousand Seasons* shares some affinities with Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, the famous puritan epic. Prima facie, both works aim at one end: the projection of the self as self-sufficiently independent entity. Both, too, deploy the same literary devices to attain this end. In addition, the influence can be viewed in terms of analogy, regarding the special affinities of each writer's position and history. At the time of his death, Mather, the Harvard graduate, left more than 400 pieces of writing, both published and unpublished. As a prolific writer, he was not exceptional; he descends from a family and community known for their extensive writings. Writing, both factual and imaginative, established the puritans' foothold in a land that is basically not theirs. The sheer extensiveness of Mather's *Magnalia* (more than 800 pages in some editions), together with the recurrent repetition, the celebrations, the invocation of secular and religious history, and of course the glamorizing attitude of the style—all these elements normalize the puritan adventure to the New World, and most importantly legitimize their appropriation of land.

Let Greece boast of her patient Lycurgus, the lawgiver, by whom diligence, temperance, fortitude, and wit were made the fashions of a therefore long-lasting and renowned commonwealth: let Rome tell of her devout Numa, the lawgiver, by whom the most famous commonwealth saw peace triumphing over extinguished war and cruel plunders; and murders giving place to the more mollifying exercises of his religion. Our New England shall tell and boast of Winthrop, a lawgiver as patient as Lycurgus, but not admitting any of his criminal disorders; as devout as Numa, but not liable to any of his heathenish madnesses; a governor in whom the excellencies of Christianity made a most improving addition unto the virtues, wherein

even without those he would have made a parallel of the great men of Greece, or of Rome, which the pen of a Plutarch has eternized. (Mather, 1702, 340)

To begin with, there is no material evidence which directly indicates that Armah has read Mather's *Magnalia* before embarking on the writing of *Two Thousand Seasons*. Any objective reader, nevertheless, cannot fail to witness the striking analogy between these two texts. Armah's similarly opens and proceeds with celebrations, repetitions, invocations of factual and mythical histories, and again deploys the same glamorizing style. Furthermore, both texts do compare their respective 'selves' with radical others, be they Romans and Greeks or Arabs and Europeans. Armah's novel opens also with: "We are not a people of yesterday. Do they ask how may single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now?" (Armah, 1973, 1) All along the American experience, there has been an anxiety, perhaps unequalled with other experiences, to justify the appropriation of the land, the expulsion of its native inhabitants, and interestingly enough, to cast the European colonists with an 'Americaneness' from the same terra firma.

In the fourth chapter of the *Magnalia*, and from which the above quotation reads, Mather writes the biography of the governor of Massachusetts colony John Winthrop. It is not for nothing that the chapter is entitled 'Nehemias Americanus'. The appellation 'Nehemias' calls to mind the famous Biblical leader who led the Israelites back from Babylon, ordered the reconstruction of Jerusalem, and gave the city its present famous typological byword: 'the city upon a hill.' As indicated by one commentator, the parallel of John Winthrop with the Nehemias of old had been vital for the justification of the entire puritan adventure in the New World. The parallel is carried on with the help of some technical tools by means of which Mather was able to effect finally the identification of the Biblical past with his grandfathers' 17th century crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. The identification, literally speaking, plays around; first, the stretching exemplariness of Nehemiah as a timeless leader; second, as an archetype to be followed; and third as a 'micro Christ' who fits in with the prophecies of the Biblical telos. Thus past and present combine together, and both envisage the ever renewable future. Nehemias, Winthrop and all the Puritans down to the last one in the line are to figure within the Christian prophecy / myth of the millennium and Jesus' second coming. (Goldsmith, 1999) Instead of being exclusively that dead historical figure, Mather's narrative lifts him to the status of a symbol that not only reflects or projects but principally radiates the entire earthly life of Biblical believers (Israelites, Puritans and present day Americans, all at once included).

*Two Thousand Seasons*, with the exception of some minor details revolves around nearly the same symbolic structure. Anoa's prophecy of "two thousand seasons thrown away to destruction" (p. 12) functions as an African telos, while the nameless narrator with his temporal—atemporal presence embodies the engravings of the community in the portrait of time. The metaphoric web in which the story is narrated helps carry the analogy with Mather's text. Instead of Jerusalem's destruction by the barbarians, the subsequent flight, the return and the reconstruction of the city upon a hill, we read of the intrusion of the 'Ostentatious Cripples from the desert', the escape through the bog-land and the foundation of Anoa city. But Armah's special innovation is that instead of the exemplification of the community in one man or woman in order to symbolize the move from past and present to future, it

is the entire community which represents itself and finds its spokesperson in an anonymous superintending narrator. Even Anoa, the prophetess, is not immortalized for “[she] was not the first, not the second, not the third to speak. [of the prophecy] Hers, however, was a different, fuller utterance.” (p. 13) Other women both before and after Anoa share the same burden and it is their accumulated experience rather than the weird spell that shape the meaning of the prophecy. Unlike the American Calvinists who stand consciously helpless before the surrounding wilderness and seek the redemptiveness of the telos to define their lives there, Armah’s Africans approach their historical reality somehow differently, without being psychologically befuddled—and more importantly, freed from any spell.

But in both Mather’s and Armah’s texts one can notice that time is not conceived only as a linear. On the contrary, time operates circuitously, too. The future can be found in the past, and the present is the reenactment of both past and future. Allegorical figurations help advance the idea that history, while connecting linear time with the multiple separate events, also reflects an eternal-cyclical reality, which is bigger and all encompassing. Anoa, the woman and the city are on one hand the figure whose sayings foreshadow what was to come for the community, but equally on the other, is a symbol that deconstructs linear time in the very construction and survival of the city, named in that woman’s honor. Again, all that happens to the community does not bear very much on the isolated events, nor on the words of the prophecy, but on Anoa’s atemporal experience. Instead of anything else, Anoa’s significance in the novel relies much on her symbolic dimension.

For purposes of understanding this symbolic dimension and how it is successfully carried on literally, one has to consider the role of the ageing—ageless narrator in the story. As readers follow the community’s linear beginnings from incipience to where the narrator chances to stop, that same narrator simultaneously proves that all eventful—factual—linear history either rotates around or falls within the same formula which Anoa once happened to enunciate. If the narrator can be considered a man, that man has to be, in Armah’s creative vision, an ahistorical subject who does not shy before the weight of safeguarding the interests of the community he speaks for. In cultural terms, he must be an intellectual committed to his people’s cause; nevertheless, literally he can be an archetype who parallels other lives and other lives parallel his too. Armah’s emphasis on the spirit rather than the letter of the events pushes the reader repeatedly to think of the mythical spell of Anoa as valid and timeless. The narrator’s vocation which he enjoys in consequence of his representativeness must allow him to transmute factual history into a biography of the entire continent, and once this is achieved every African (living, unborn and dead) sees his or her own biography in that continental account.

Put differently, the narrator can be processed as symbol of Anoa. He makes her prophetic words come true. Yet, the drama is more ambitious than just that. For the reader absorbs the definition of the exemplary African. The narrator symbolizes the African’s role in history, and it is that same role that makes sense of the biography and places it in context. The typical African, say, Isanusi, Abena or any other one in the fifth grove, untie their collective life with the exemplary life of the narrator and thus can eventually identify with him. The source of their personal identity becomes neither their birth right in Africa, nor their kingship connection with the historical narrator, but essentially the tuning of their collective efforts with the narrator’s historical work.

Armah's image of Africa carries the idea of a committed Africa. He is African who emulates the narrator's symbolism. Again, he is African who conceives of the sense of mission by examining the day by day challenges and works for the teleological view which "our way, the way" imparts. The rebuff of the factual reading of events and insistence on circularity instead allows everyone in the African community to work out his or her Africanity as prerequisite proviso towards materializing one's identity. The repetition of the rhapsodic "our way, the way", besides casting a structural unity on the narrative or stressing the particularity of the African locale, also provides the African with the spiritual uniqueness of that locale which is manifested in Anoa's prophecy and the narrator's typicality. In making the meaning of Africa rest on the extended metaphors of the woman, Anoa, plus the—ever present narrator, Armah transfers the mythical past into a resistance to slavery, later to wars against colonial occupations etc... In all respects, Armah expects that the future will vindicate him. All the same, Armah's construction of this particular narrative borrows predominantly from the "mythico-fantasmic" reserve. Such a borrowing empowers *Two Thousand Seasons* to evolve genealogically and shed light only on what is hotly controversial for historians and propagandists alike. Beginning with the first page of the book, and just after the nameless narrator's 'hard-hitting' assertion of his people's antiquity, the same narrator embarks directly on what seems to be his principal assignment: the telling of one's story in the form of a genealogical biography of the continent. The central incident from which the novel originates is nothing short of a quasi-fanciful causality. One despairing resident of "the farthest grove" (p. 9) while dying, utters how it all started. The story of the black race, according to this nameless narrator—revelator started in the dimmest past "on a clear night" with an ancient woman and her seven children" (p. 1) The reader, indeed, wonders if this delightfully 'clear night' is not an allegory that heralds a good omen awaiting the descendents of this woman and her children. They are all the luckier since despite all the misfortune they are destined to meet, there will always be someone who leave a word about their passage in life, trace their origin and hence create a possibility of their proper identification. Already here one notes a typically African myth competing with the Judeo-Christian and Islamic myth of Adam and Eve, as the fathers of humanity. The fratricidal dispute between Adam's own sons becomes the infamous "seven warring factions" (p. 9) which that dying woman narrates.

Readers can observe the writer's anxiety to offer a competent myth of creation and beginnings resembling all people's creation-myths, in order to let his African readers claim their history. The myth of the dying woman with her seven children, again, tactfully negates the Hegelian—Darwinian 'orientalizations' which postulates the development of the black race from the chimpanzee: the lowest grade of progress and thus shows his appropriation by imperialists as a blessing bestowed on him, while he—the ever misconceived African—ought to be thankful for. Such degradations are there with the purpose of maintaining what Achille Mbembe views as "the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the fact of 'absence', 'lack', and 'non-being', of identity and difference, of negativeness – in short of nothingness." (Achille, 2002, 4) Further reading of the novel indicates how Armah envisions Africa's ancestry and its contemporary translation in today's politics of identity in the sweeping narratives of modernity. Contrary to the Islamic and Judeo-Christian myth, Africa is essentially 'Adamless', where male's role is not only unimportant or minor but can be destructive and endangering to 'our way, the way'. It is the legendary Yaniba who with the help of some indescribable efforts



(we are not told how) settled the fratricidal dispute and ended the tough reign of the Fathers. Simultaneously, Yaniba ushered in the commencement of the rule of Women, which Armah finds egalitarian and fertile for the well being of the entire community.

No less instrumental in the project of counter-writing the modern narratives with Armah is the use of rhetorical devices (puns, paradoxes, and the repetitions of key words, the metaphorising of proper names). These devices function not only to convey an outlook, but to provide historic substance to an aesthetic vision that finally figures in the creation of an epic. Once more women play a central role in this scheme. The work of Azania and her group of liberating women in that “night of nights” is nothing short of a miracle in a prehistoric fable. The libertine voluptuaries – the likes of Hussein, Hassan, Faical, Muhammed and the other debauched Arab rulers – were killed in the midst of their adulterous pleasure as by a fateful spell. The scenery leading to their death looks like a fairy tale propagated by a just, all-seeing power handed to women to do the right thing at the right moment.

### **6-The Centrality of the Feminine Principle in Africa’s Self Defintion:**

For Armah, then, drawing on mytho-biography can be an important contributor for knowledge of the self. In all the turning points of *Two Thousand Seasons*, that is, the toppling of Arab rule, Anoa’s prophecy, the crossing of the bog-land, the miraculous escape from the slave ship and the subsequent resistance in the fifth grove, --in all these crucial incidents, it is women who take the lead and execute the redeeming task in the body-politic of the community, a task which men are depicted as inherently incapable of doing. Observed from the perspective of the novel’s prospects as an African ‘genesis’, Armah’s celebration of African woman “indicates that the suppression and exploitation of women are contrary to ‘our way, the way’, being habits that opportunistic bamboozled admirers of white ‘predators’ from the desert.” (Owomoyela, 2002)

That women stand for liberty and redemption from the sins of the entire community is perhaps more than a happy convergence between Armah and Chiekh Anta Diop. Indeed, it is Diop who first brought to the intellectual fore:

The dichotomy between the patriarchal North and the matriarchal South. The Osiris-Isis-Horus myth reflects the virtues of familial harmony and of fertility in which the woman enjoys due respect and pride of place. But Indo-European culture as a culture which had systematically subjected womanhood, had troubles coming to terms with that positive image of the myth. (Okpewho, 1983, 241).

Armah attributes the task of enlightening the African community to women. Women cannot be left on the periphery of pressing issues, as it is the case with other cultures and traditions. With the appropriate use of her womb (seducing Hussein and his likes), Azania bears the sins of the entire community and purges every member anew. For this reason, too, are placed in direct opposition to white women in all respects. The scene where a white woman collaborates with the white slavers is capital for demarcating a difference between white women and their black counterparts. Readers are told that the European woman marks her presence with “first [like] an apparition exactly like a ghost.” As she approaches the enchained

Africans, the narrator denounces her strangeness: “There was space before her, space to her left and right, space behind her: her figure seemed the shape itself of loneliness. It seemed impossible that she could be together with any other being.” (p. 119).

### **7-The African Space Resisting: the Limitations of the Conradian Perspective**

The space surrounding the European woman from the four directions betrays her unharmonious presence in the physical space that is unremittingly rejecting her. Unless she turns to her homeland, she stays out of place, a venomous outcast who is innately incapacitated to be in spiritual communion with any other being including herself. Such line of thinking develops some lines later and reads: “she looked like one trapped in a perpetual nightmare ... Each flitting backward look was a desperate attempt to keep the object of her fear behind her...” (pp. 119-20) reminds the reader of a similar scene detailing Kurtz’s African mistress by Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Similarly, Marlow observes: “And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman... She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent... Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky.” (Conrad, 1902, 87-8) What looks as a simple inversion on the part of the narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* of Marlow’s falsifications is a deeper and more complex reaction than what is thought of at first glance.

As indicated by Chinua Achebe in his celebrated essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, the black mistress “fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman.” (Achebe, 1988, 6) For in Conrad’s novel, and in order to define the presumably civilized European woman, “with a mature capacity of fidelity, for belief, for suffering”, he had had the trouble to contrast it with its antithetic Other: Kurtz’s African mistress. The inversion of the two women in both works—Conrad’s and Armah’s—insists on keeping them in two diametrically opposed constituencies as each charts an identity unique to its own. Armah’s narrative distinguishes itself by benefiting from the whole historical context of the Atlantic slave trade, while Conrad’s willingly and repeatedly dilutes any depth of the sort and endlessly delivers its philosophizing about the vanity of human efforts. Wittingly Edward Siad remarks that Kurtz and Marlow were “to recognize that what they saw, disablingly and disparagingly, as a non-European ‘darkness’ was in fact a non-European world resisting imperialism.” (Said, 1994, 30).

With the narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons*, readers are in a position to realize that the physical space actively participates with the moral one in the rejection of the enslaving European woman. The latter syncretism is made to look in the form of violence perpetuated against the natural order of things—a violence that prompts the same victimized nature to deter its violator, the European woman, humanity in revenge. Little wonder, then, that the woman-enslaver by her strangeness involuntarily cast the enslaved African women with their humanity, simply by being subjects to ‘reification’ in the volatile slave trade.

### **8-Armah’s Historical Mythification versus Conrad’s Mystifying Mythification**

Again Armah’s fictional ‘answering back’ against Conrad’s imaginaire extends

from mere inversions of certain categories to deeper negations of over-all structural combinations of important parts of *Two Thousand Seasons*. Conrad actually treats in some of his little studied fiction the struggle over geography, but this is a dimension that has been inaccessible to readers as a result of his overt mystification and propagation. Nevertheless, the structure of at least one of his least referred to short stories, "Karain: A Memory", bears witness to its intended allegory of one native woman. Armah's narrator also shows cultural clash over physical space can be generated from a dispute over one's honor and one's woman.

King Koranche in *Two Thousand Seasons*, readers find out, sells a number of his subjects to chattel slavery when he is denied Abena whom he intends as a bride for his son, Prince Bentun renamed Bradford George. In his dogged persistence over the elegant Abena, King Koranche has to alter the rules of the 'Dance of Love' ceremony. Rules favourably altered yet Abena while dancing is able to slip "untouched past the dancers of the middle circle." (p. 93) Defeated in his own plans and humiliated in his own son, King Koranche contemptuously invites the dancers on board his white friends' ship and betrayed them to slavery in revenge. That King Koranche bears some striking resemblances with King Korinchi Karain, in Conrad's afore mentioned tale is not a hap-hazard case of intertextuality. Armah must have read "Karain: A Memory" while embarking on this very part of *Two Thousand Seasons* Korinchi Karain is a Malay ruler who turns out to be a slavish lackey who beg some European arms smugglers on their schooner's deck to take him to their land. With the death of his closest and enigmatic body-guard, Karain's memory bursts up unexpectedly and unreasonably before his white friends so much so that he starts unfolding the one mysterious chapter of his life. He could not sleep for six days because he once has betrayed his closest friend Matara on account of one woman, Matara's own sister.

As with Armah's Koranche in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Korinchi Karain in Conrad's story could not have betrayed Matara without the presence of European power in the background. Indeed, it is that presence that sets the stage for a Dutch trader to settle in the vicinity of the Eastern Archipelago. Matara's sister elopes to the Dutch begging for refuge from an unwelcome marriage. She thus compels Matara to go and fetch her. Because of the Dutch fleet (imperial power) in sight, Matara cannot claim his sister back. Some time after, his sister's captor leaves with the captive. Matara and his 'presumably' faithful friend Karain are free to follow the couple and cleanse dishonor. Years of search, they found the couple and work out a little plot to kill them; Matara is to seek out the Dutchman while Karain is to kill "with a sure shot" the sister. The moment that everything seems to go according to plan, Karain falls prey to the beauty that "silences the reason of men" (Conrad, 1897, 52) and shoots his friend Matara instead. From that moment, readers are told, Karain is haunted by Matara's ghost and his spirit has grown restless ever since. His meetings with a pious Muslim pilgrim (his late bodyguard) enables him to forget the apparition haunting him. With the death of this bodyguard, Karain finding no peace of mind except in his white friends' schooner. He practically begs them for a new charm. In order to get rid of him, Hollis (the sailor) provides him with a significant charm: "a Jubilee sixpence. It was a gift, it had a hole punched near the rim." Hollis adds: "The thing itself is of great power – money, you know – and his imagination is struck. A loyal vagabond; if only his puritanism doesn't shy at a likeness..." (Conrad, 1897, 64) As the Jubilee sixpence exhibits the effigy of Queen Vitoria, Karain mistakes it for his mother who had been a native ruler, an acute case

of identity confusion.

Very symbolic indeed is the new charm imparted to Matara's betrayer, Korinchi Karain. Instead of burying his friend's shame, which is his too, by shooting the prostitute sister dead, Karain mysteriously hopes she would acknowledge his sparing of her life and eventually be his. Despised in his presumed love, Karain loses all sense of manhood by keeping the new charm and by being serviceable to the white mercantilists. The charm Hollis provides supersedes the one offered earlier by the Arab and sums up the symbol of the age, capitalism. Both King Karain Koranchi and King Koranche adhere to the ethic of the age as soon as they taste heaps of money. Both prove ready to betray the promise given to their respective communities in exchange of some capital.

It is likely that a central issue of this magnitude remains unacknowledged in Conrad's tale. The reader has to get used to the story's style which is highly ironic in order to appreciate its deeper meaning. The contrasted purposes of both stories prove the judiciousness of a confrontational study of the two works. Conrad's narrative remains marred with reductive oriental images, and his nameless white narrator cast such images with a stock of words like: shades, illusions, apparitions, charms, love, women, drinks and blood. These all escalate the exotic quality of the place and render their referents—the same Malay people—as irrational, flimsy and dreamy creatures. These images reduce oriental people to essential betrayers and lackeys always in the service of whatever prevailing power. Following the domination of Arabs (induced from the workability of their charm over Karain), there comes Westerners' turn to do their best. Again, while there is reference to arms smuggling, there is but little dramatic use of it, if not a deliberate intention to stay silent on the betrayal of native rulers and their reliance on foreign backing.

Only with *Two thousand Seasons* readers feel adequately prepared with necessary contexts and fully-fledged drama. Tracing King Koranche genealogically helps in shedding light on his venomous contempt against his community. Koranche, the narrative announces, descends from a long line of incorrigibly corrupt native rulers (eighteen to be exact) who “usurp undeserved positions as caretakers, in the course of generations [and] imposed themselves on a people too weary of strife to think of halting them.” (p. 64) Suffice it to add that Koranche the boy is the product of King Topre's “copulation with none but his own sister.” For this reason:

Koranche of all children of his time was slowest. It was his habit to stay wherever he was left from morning till evening and sit staring straight ahead of his body. He could not smile. The only expression he has was a constant dull, flat, ever-staring look from which diviners themselves would have been defeated trying to draw a meaning. He could not cry like other children. If he fell – something he did often enough, though how did it from such an immobile postures was always a mystery – if he fell and banged his head against a stone he lay quite still, silent the time it takes a person to swallow his moisture seven times. Then only would Koranche decide to begin to cry. And then he cried with a constricted, explosive violence quite astounding to all hearers. (p. 66)

In spite of the surrealistic quality of the description that details on Koranche's childhood, its moral however is sufficiently significant for situating the boy's future choices and decisions. Brought up without qualities except “a genius for obliterating

the proofs of other people's superiority to him" (p. 67) Koranche cannot hesitate before selling members of his people in spite. After a brief period spent courting the beautiful and wise Idawa, Koranche knew that "in spite of everything the lucky social pomp could do to hide his emptiness the one woman he wanted more than any other, the person who would reaffirm him his manhood, that person felt for him nothing but contempt." (p. 73) Denied in his last chance to prove his dubious manhood (the double refusal of Idawa and later Abena) Koranche becomes an outright betrayer, courting the regards of the Whites.

The plot similitude between Conrad's story and Armah's is remarkably complex. On the surface level, both stories dramatize the life of corrupt native rulers whose motif behind betrayal originates from a woman's unrequited love. This is only partially valid and by no means can cover the distance between intended authorial meaning. Conrad's tale goes on insisting that Karain's friendship to Matara and his commitment to his cause remains undisputed till suddenly and inexplicably, falls prey to a queer sensation (since it cannot be love) and betrays his friend. This unexpected reaction is all the more damaging since it confirms the orientaling images like "Orientals are inveterate liars, they are 'lethargic and suspicious', and in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race." (Said, 1978, 39) With Armah's historical depiction, there exists undeniably a clarity of vision, for if Koranche is a born betrayer that is not only because he inherits his defects from an awful ascendancy, but principally because his defects themselves are the result of a natural error. (his being the result of an essentially illegitimate union).

While this is uncovered, the narrative does not give the impression that such a deplorable case is the final thing and the story has eventually attained its projected objective. If reading is limited to this stage, as Conrad's implied reader is supposed to do at least as far as this story is concerned, then one would miss an important dimension in the story and risk a simplistic reading. Because contrary to Conrad's narrator and right from the start of *Two Thousand Seasons*, readers can trace that often unacknowledged, but existent, however feeble, other part. This part is equally crucial in the incidents that the narrative engages with: that is the human cost of such aggression (be it slavery or colonial occupation) and – more importantly – resistance to it. This dimension is obvious even in Conrad's setting too. The miserly supply of arms and ammunitions in "Karain". In Armah's story, there exists those Koranche's trips to Poano and his secrets invitations to the Whites to visit Anoa city. Isanusi, from the position of a court speaker and upon "hearing the news of secret visits between the king and the white men, asked questions in open court." (p. 99) With little success, but unlike Conrad's portrayals, Armah's Isanusi resists and does not leave matters to themselves.

Indeed, it is Armah's project to historicize that very stage of the community's journey through its millennial past. The novel's style takes the reader almost irresistibly to read through the last page. The prose breathes the air of slavery times and the omniscient narrator keenly places us in the midst of the tragic drama down to its minutest detail. This is achieved with the focus on the slave-hunt, the middle passage, the geographical exploration of the African coasts etc... What the narrative enfolds as history stays revelatory. Every sad occasion the community comes cross shapes an opportunity for positive knowledge and needful experience.

## 9-Inspirational versus Incomprehensible Physical Spaces: Aramh reads Defoe

Once on the island to which the community of the newly freed detainees (those sold by Koranche and later escaped the slaving ship) turns, intimacy with the physical space is strengthened. Shelter, food, soap, the construction of canoes, even plans of return home together with a determination to pursue the fight till total deliverance—in short, everything low and lofty comes in magnanimous ease and thorough harmony with nature. The ever present narrator records that "... there was every tree, every plant to serve the needs of work, of shelter, of food and of healing too." (p. 144) In all these fantastic elaborations we can follow the collision of Aramh's text with another master narrative, this time, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (). The Africans portrayed in *Two Thousand Seasons* do not handle themselves as savages observed with a glass from afar by Crusoe as they eat human flesh "with merriment and sport" on the occasion of some unspeakable rites, performing "postures and genstures...stark naked, and had not the least covering upon them; but whether they were men or women, that [he] could not distinguish." (Defoe, 1969, 134)

It seems that Aramh's narrator does the corrective task of satisfying Crusoe's curiosity in revealing these alleged savages' proper identity. This is simply carried on by dramatizing that part of the narrative in the jungle of a nearby island. In that jungle the community was not performing a nasty ritual in the contentment of some lusty merriment but was principally preparing for the sophisticated work of revering slavery as a power system. Even back in the fifth grove and around the stone city of Anoa, Isanusi is readying his group for the work of enlightenment and knowledge, thus dispelling the negative image of Africans 'eating human flesh' and 'dancing stark naked'. More than simply debunking Orientalists' narratives, such perfect closeness to nature is but 'Africano-graphy' where the physical space defines the social one; and when this is done, the African self justifies and legitimizes itself beyond any other discourse.

Bernth Lindfors attacks *Two Thousand Seasons* as a "xenophobic oversimplification used to be found in B-grade films manufactured in Hollywood during the Second World War, in which fanatical kamikaze pilots and fat, stupid, goose-stepping German generals represented all that was reprehensible in the world." (Lindfors, 1992, 271) Isanusi and his group of freedom fighters are compared with these fanatic kamikaze warriors, yet Lindfors for some reasons cannot see that history actually vindicates Aramh's community's intellectual growth to maturity and consciousness. Confined in one of Mussolini's top-security prison, Antonio Gramsci explicitly expresses similar echoes with Aramh's detainees. The idea out of incarceration, Gramsci makes explicit in one of his letters, is simply to cut up any possibility of knowledge and ensure a "great listlessness instead." To overcome and resist such severe intellectual conditions, Gramsci resorted to nature:

I wouldn't be surprised if a tiny, timid little rose were to come out at the end of this year. The thought gives pleasure, since for the past year I have been interested in cosmic phenomena. Perhaps as they say in my native region, the bed is placed in line with terrestrial fluids; and when I am resting, the cells of my body rotate in unison with the whole universe. I've been anxiously waiting for the summer solstice, and now that the earth is bending toward the sun...I feel much better... I feel the cycle of seasons, linked with

solstices and equinoxes, as if they were flesh of my flesh...The weather seems to have a body ever since the dimension of space was denied me. (Gramsci, 1970, 150)

Gramsci, as he makes known in other letters refuses sources of intellection that come from a fascination with books. Like Armah, for Gramsci it is one's historical experience which is a derivation from one's contact with nature that shapes understanding and hardens intellectual rigour for better apprehension of social reality around. Nature, or better, one's setting and space of living, dictates that man can be at his best when he is in harmony with the primal laws of that same space. The cosmic synchronization, however feeble or unperceived, plays a vital role in guiding a given community towards its egalitarian ideals. In extreme and desperate cases like Gramsci's or Armah's community in the slave ship, nature assists and supervenes man's senses in order to comprehend reality (knowledge apprehension) so at the end deliverance material threat, not "...illusions of the Garden of Eden" can be achieved. Space, then, has influential effects, and critics like Bernth Lindfors seem to underestimate its potential to objectively assess reality.

### **10-Conclusion:**

Culturally considered, *Two Thousand Seasons* attempts to treat the political crisis of modernity by presenting the opinion of those who are on the other side of the power-game. That presentation is the expression of "the problem of political desires in subjects whose identity is rooted in social injustice who can no longer count on the magic of progress to redeem that injury." (Brown, 2001, 15) Apart from its technical merits in reversing the inhibitive impacts of European master narratives, Armah's novel demonstrates his inability to break free from the traumas inflicted by these master narratives. The manner in which his narrator appears haunted about his identity (witness the heavy recurrence of the "they" and "theirs" almost in direct opposition to the "wes" and "ours") indicates how far that African identity is initially a western invention. Denying or "writing back" to solely refute orientalizations can become a counter productive way of spreading knowledge about the self. Edward Said has long demonstrated that "Occidentalism" cannot be a solution to Orientalism. 'Reciprocity', one of Armah's key African concepts, goes counter to his 'overstating' the case of African identity as essential and historically separate from other identities.

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