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Sara Chetin

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Abstract

Despite the increasing interest in African women writers' concepts of femaleness, few critics have examined how male writers have portrayed females or have questioned what the implications of these portrayals suggest. It seems apparent that a large number of African women writers have been motivated to present a female perspective somewhat as a response to the various male writers' distortions concerning femaleness. Whether these distortions reflect a conscious attempt to uphold the traditional view of African women's subordinate status in society or whether they merely indicate a lack of awareness of the female point of view is irrelevant. What is crucial is that certain male writers' concepts of femaleness perpetuate specific stereotypes instead of opening the way for new values and new ways in which people can understand themselves — and each other.

13. James Ngugi, *The River Between* (Heinemann, 1965); *Weep Not, Child* (Heinemann, 1964); *A Grain of Wheat* (Heinemann, 1967).
14. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (Heinemann, 1977).
15. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Making of a Rebel' in *Index of Censorship*, Vol. 9, No 3, June 1980.
16. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (Heinemann, 1976) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* (Heinemann, 1982).
17. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (Heinemann, 1982).
18. Izamide Hazely, 'Ngugi's Images of Women' in *West Africa*, 14 November 1983.
19. Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price* (Collins, 1978).
20. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Allison and Busby, 1979).
21. Op. cit., p. 168.
22. Buchi Emecheta, *A Double Yoke* (Ogwugwu Afor, 1982).

SARA CHETIN

Armah's Women

Despite the increasing interest in African women writers' concepts of femaleness, few critics have examined how male writers have portrayed females or have questioned what the implications of these portrayals suggest. It seems apparent that a large number of African women writers have been motivated to present a female perspective somewhat as a response to the various male writers' distortions concerning femaleness. Whether these distortions reflect a conscious attempt to uphold the traditional view of African women's subordinate status in society or whether they merely indicate a lack of awareness of the female point of view is irrelevant. What is crucial is that certain male writers' concepts of femaleness perpetuate specific stereotypes instead of opening the way for new values and new ways in which people can understand themselves — and each other.

Ayi Kwei Armah's second novel, *Fragments*,¹ raises some interesting ideas that few critics have appeared to acknowledge. It is a novel full of

various female characters whose significance cannot be divorced from understanding Armah's central intention. The four main female characters in *Fragments* are portrayed as having some kind of influence on the protagonist's destiny. Armah depicts the spiritually and morally barren environment of Bibani (the Akan word for this is everywhere) where Baako, the committed and alienated hero, falls victim to the destructive force of his powerlessness and despair. Unable to realize his own life-giving, creative potential, Baako descends into madness, a madness that reflects his dislocation at the hands of a powerful force which he appears to have no control over. Baako emerges a passive hero and, given the pessimistic tone on which the novel ends, it appears unlikely that Baako will ever recover. Baako's grandmother, his mother, his sister and his girlfriend are all attributed with a certain strength and they all appear to want to save Baako from his misery. But towards the end of the novel when Baako is trying to make some sense of the madness that is imprisoning him, he states: 'Women destroying, women saving' (p. 180). Is this Baako in one of his more paranoid moments, or is this Armah's way of shedding light on the implications of the type of strength he has attributed to his female characters? As well as being the healers, the potential savers, are the women also part of the destructive forces that seek to undermine the very essence of Baako's faltering psyche?

Armah's most sympathetic portrayal of a woman in *Fragments* lies in his characterisation of Naana, the blind, old grandmother, whose wisdom is contained in her desire to adhere to the traditional way of life and whose fear of the changing values depicts her supernatural strength to 'see things unseen'. Naana is not only the moral voice advocating a return to traditional values in the face of the 'silent danger' (p. 196) which threatens even her existence, but her 'opening' and 'closing' chapters structurally set the stage for the mythical action that informs the novel. Against the background of decay, disruption and fragmentation, Naana's narrative seeks to contain the natural cyclical rhythms of life's essence:

Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns around. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return. (p. 1)

On one level, the natural, rhythmic cycle remains intact as the novel closes with Naana's last, resigned words: 'I am here against the last of my veils. Take me. I am ready. You are the end. The beginning. You

who have no end. I am coming' (p. 201). But despite Naana representing the mouthpiece for the soul of her people, she has become a victim of the madness that threatened to cut 'into easy pieces eternity and the circle of the world' (p. 200). She sees things denied to others, but is afraid to speak:

The witches saw things denied to others; beyond that they talked of what it was they had seen, and were destroyed. It is a long time since I heard of any witch thrown out of her secrecy, but souls are broken all the same. If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence? (p. 2)

Afriad to use her visions, her potential strength to recreate herself, to have her soul 'find its home', Naana becomes passive, resigned, and her wisdom is essentially useless. Armah uses her to reinforce an image of the suffering, helpless woman who absorbs man's fears and serves as a receptacle to which he posits his hopes:

Afraid to raise more laughter against myself, I shook my head with the perfect understanding that was not in it. I have not understood the words at all, but the sounds, above all the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings, and the women's voices, many, many women's voices always there around him to catch his pain and make it into something almost sweet, that was all familiar to me somewhere. And also beneath it all the thing that went on always and would not let me escape, heavy like a sound of doom, and also I knew. (pp. 9-10)

It is Naana that Baako searches for in his desperate need for comfort; it is Naana who becomes trapped by Baako's impotent despair. Her 'witch-like' power is contained; she poses no threat to the evil changes occurring around her. Baako identifies with Naana because of her suffering and resignation, not because of her potential strength. She dies a disillusioned old woman, still trying to contain the madness around her. She achieves nothing; she fulfils the role befitting an old, helpless woman. Armah could not have chosen a better character to symbolize the collective unconscious of a destroyed, uprooted people whose fate lay in their blindness, whose inevitable doom is epitomized by their silent wisdom that remains engulfed by their decaying illusions. Victims of Time, they are betrayed by their own unrealized potential:

What a thing for you to laugh at, when we grow just tall enough and, still clutching the useless shreds of a world worn out, we peep behind the veil just passed and find in wonder a more fantastic world, making us fools in our own eyes to have believed that the old paltriness was all. But again we hold fast to the new shadows we find. We are fooled again, and once more taste the sharp unpleasantness of surprise, though we thought we had grown wise. (pp. 200-201)

Armah is not merely interested in showing how the political and economic exploitation by the invisible white Christian colonialists affects the lives and consciousness of a people, but he also wanted to depict the existential anguish which threatens to destroy man in his search for basic human values. Armah doesn't appear to condemn Baako for his passivity and 'spiritual dislocation' at the hands of a changed society where the old values are dying. Rather, Baako represents an eternal victim, frightened and unhappy, and Armah doesn't indicate that his conflicts will ever be resolved. In fact, Armah depicts Baako as a man trapped and powerless under the influence of greater forces that seek to manipulate his psyche and control his destiny. This becomes apparent from the folktale Baako tells Juana on the beach after hearing Akousa Russell's 'poetic' variation of the myth. Baako prefers the traditional, undistorted purity of the Mame Water and the Musician myth:

'The singer goes to the beach, playing his instrument. These days it's become a guitar. He's lonely, the singer, and he sings of that. So well a woman comes out of the sea, a very beautiful goddess, and they make love. She leaves him to go back to the sea, and they meet at long, fixed intervals. It takes courage. The goddess is powerful, and the musician is filled with so much love he can't bear the separation. But then it is the separation itself which makes him sing as he has never sung before. Now he knows all there is to know about loneliness, about love, and power, and the fear that one night he'll go to the sea and Mame Water, that's the woman's name, will not be coming anymore. The singer is great, but he's also afraid, and after those nights on the shore, when the woman goes, there's no unhappier man on earth.' (p. 120)

Baako, in an unconscious way, lives out and becomes trapped by the myth. The tale forewarns of the misery of his own dependence at the hands of the sea goddess whose strength — and inevitable destructive power — lay in her ability to control Baako. Juana represents the sea goddess and, despite her characterization as a sympathetic healer, Armah also depicts her as destructive due to the very impotence of her healing powers. The only critic who appears to have seen the significance of the myth is Gerald Moore, but he doesn't take the significance of the myth to its logical conclusion. He sees Juana, 'a goddess linked to the sea and the phases of the moon' as part of the imagery that represents 'the promise of regeneration from madness or death'.² But I question the optimistic tone which Moore seems to have attributed to Armah's conclusion. To me, Juana's symbolic sea and moon goddess significance doesn't evoke the 'promise of regeneration' but represents a death-like destructive force from which Baako is unable to escape. The ending is

pessimistic, nihilistic, and perhaps sheds light on Armah's distorted concept of female strength.

On one level, Juana is a very sympathetic character. The reader, like Baako, is drawn to her because of her sensitivity, her acute intelligence at understanding the society around her, and her commitment to healing, despite the enormity — and hopelessness — of the task. Armah portrays a woman who is not aware — like Naana — of her potential strength. It is interesting to note that Juana's name echoes Naana's. Both women, in one way, complement each other as they are both healers and are both helpless. But whereas Naana represents that traditional wisdom connected to warmth and light, Juana signifies a harbinger of danger because she symbolises another powerful cycle, female in nature, that threatens Naana's traditional 'sun' strength:

...I was sure that I was beginning even now to see the sun again. And then they came and broke my peace, saying I had been sitting out there in the cold for hours. Surprised and angry that they were moving me another time, I was sharpening words to tell them I had only come to take in this heat of the sun, till one of them, was it Efua? said in her gentle voice words that touched my soul with fear.

Night fell long ago, Naana. (p. 1)

Armah casts Juana in a spider-like role whose ability to cast 'black shadows and dark, orange light' (p. 141) renders Baako powerless due to her strength that follows the cycles of the moon. The mythical significance of the moon reveals itself at the structural level of the novel. The thirteen chapters could represent the lunar year; Baako and Juana make love in the Gyefo chapter (the Akan word for Full Moon).³ This is when Baako's strength is at its fullest. When Juana leaves, he begins his descent into madness, represented by the Iwu chapter (the Akan word for Death). Like in the Mame Water and the Musician myth, Baako and Juana meet 'at long, fixed intervals' and her absence not only signifies his despair but also represents the continual dependence Baako has on Juana — a dependence which does not free him, but only imprisons him. Armah doesn't appear to imply that Juana's moon cycle power is complementary to the natural strength of the sun, so it doesn't seem likely that the moon cycles hold the potential for life-giving, regenerative possibilities.

Yet Juana is unaware of her power over Baako, which makes her an even more dangerous symbol. She appears as the caring healer but Armah depicts Baako as becoming self-destructively attracted to the alien, fearful, cold 'black shadows' that seek to control and manipulate him. It is ironic that Baako rejects Akousa Russell's version of the Mame

Water myth — a version that celebrates colonialism — while becoming dependent on his own Mame Water, Juana, herself a foreigner. Perhaps Armah consciously intended the double irony here as he creates a very ambivalent picture of Juana. He appears to have distorted the very essence of Juana's mythical power: Juana, the healer, the comforter is unable to heal, her alien will not realizing the force of its own potential. Armah has turned her powerlessness into a powerful, destructive weapon. When Juana first meets Baako she feels strange and is immediately drawn to him, although the 'uncomfortable pulse' throbbing through her body signifies something ominous: 'Indeterminate at first, the hum gradually approached understandable sound: a soft and steady vibration saying you you you you you you' (p. 100). Juana is attracted to Baako's 'unfixed, free-floating, potential' attitude, but is upset and disturbed by the unpleasant flavour, the 'dangerous freedom' involved with becoming close to him. But she acts on Baako's invitation and provides the physical temptation to which Baako succumbs. Juana herself is a victim, like Baako, but despite the fears that draw the two together and despite their inability to recapture their lost Garden of Eden, it is Juana's 'fallen state', her own hopelessness that threatens to annihilate Baako:

She searched in herself for something that might make sense, but there was nothing she could herself believe in, nothing that wouldn't just be the high flight of the individual alone, escaping the touch of life around him. That way she knew there was only annihilation. Yet here she knew terrible dangers had been lying in wait the other way — other kinds of annihilation. How could she find the thing to break down his despair when she had never conquered hers? There would be no meaning in offering him a chance to swing from present hopelessness to a different flavor of despair. (pp. 190-191)

These 'terrible dangers' are linked to Juana as the sea goddess. The reader first becomes aware of Juana's identification with the sea (the moon's cycles control the movements of the water) in the chapter following Naana's warnings of the impending doom she felt when she heard 'the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings...' (p. 9). Despite Juana's feelings of estrangement, defeat and futility, she recognizes her physical and spiritual 'need for flight' in order to escape from 'all the reminders of futility' (p. 12). She turns away from the closed, decaying symbols of civilization and heads toward the sea, being attracted by the power of her own speed. Not only do cars connote power and status in the novel, but the intensity of speed is a recurring image in *Fragments*, especially when Juana and Baako are together. Juana is always

driving, always in control. Passing the various symbols of society's decadence, 'Obra Ye Ko' (Life is War), SMOG (Save Me Oh God), etc., she approaches the sea whose sound 'came over with a complete quietness that filled the ear like something made entirely for it' (p. 15). Reminiscent of Eve's lost garden of Eden, she 'descends' to the sea and reflects on her 'restlessness whose pain never ended but got dissolved in the knowledge that the fugitive could never leave the causes of her pain behind' (p. 28). Even the name of the second chapter (Edin) where this action takes place sounds like the Biblical Eden where the Original Sin was committed, a sin that resounds in the collective unconscious of a fallen people. Juana's personal inner turbulence is caused by the moral decay around her, 'reminders of the impotence of victims and of the blindness of those who had risen to guide them' (p. 31). She absorbs the pain and suffering around her, conscious of the fact of people's 'useless lives ... doomed to an extinction started long ago' (p. 31).

On one level, Armah evokes the Eve archetype to illustrate Juana's destructive power. Was it not Eve, tempted by the serpent, who ate the forbidden fruit of the 'tree of knowledge' and tempted Adam to follow her example? Armah, like many writers, appears to have used this theme which essentially holds Eve (woman) responsible for Adam's (man's) fall from innocence. The seductive power of the female is a force not to be reckoned with. Juana's role as healer initially brought Baako to her, but he would never be able to escape the consequences of his actions. They make love in Juana's natural setting, the sea, and toward the end of the novel in the Obra chapter (the Akan word for Life), the 'Catholic pagan' Juana is left absorbing Baako's 'desperate intensity' against a background of Christian images, symbolising the 'impending disappointment' created by an alien religion. I feel that the significance of the Obra chapter is intended to be somewhat ironic given the imagery Armah is using. The promise of life is always there, but 'there was a desperation here so deep that it was beginning to be indistinguishable from hope' (p. 105). As Juana leaves the hospital, the desperation, 'the disturbing things' become transformed into hope: the unused room would bring Baako closer and would hopefully help the healing process. But throughout the novel, Armah uses rooms as a means of escape, not as a means of communication and growth. Characters are constantly disappearing into rooms, unable to confront the malaise which is disturbing them. Similarly, Juana preparing the unused room could signify Baako's escape — into Juana's control. And isn't his very dependence on the sea goddess one of the reasons for his misery? Being unable to live without her, Baako is unable to live within himself.

Juana's intention to heal becomes even more ambiguous at the end of the novel when she is encouraging Baako to take his pills — pills designed to narrow consciousness. (He had been given similar pills abroad 'to counteract the consciousness expansion effect' (p. 102).) Juana encourages the narrowing, the blinding of Baako's consciousness as opposed to finding a solution to reconcile the expanding, visionary insights he has. By losing his vision, he loses himself within Juana, the harbinger of evil, foreign technology.

Armah's concept that Juana, on a mythical level, could represent the destructive, powerful temptress as understood basically through the Eve archetype interestingly manifests itself in various forms throughout the novel. The sea symbolizes woman and man's rites of passage: «Here we're supposed to do it all when we're born, anyway. The first swim and the first fuck. There's a saying there's no way you can get out of your mother without» (p. 125). Skido, with whom Baako later identifies, dies in the sea. The fish are trapped in the 'bag net, vaginal and black' (p. 128). Juana prepares the 'unused room' (p. 194) for Baako, unaware that she will be trapping him. The song the child sings reflects the women's loss, a 'long lament for one more drowned fisherman' (p. 128). Juana and Baako make love in the sea where his movements 'often seem to escape his control' (p. 122). They watch helplessly as Skido drowns and, going 'toward the lights and the dark river' (p. 141), they try to recover his dead body, but Juana is unable to save:

She had to admit she was concerned with salvation still, though she permitted herself the veil of other names. Too much of her lay outside of herself, that was the trouble. Like some forest women whose gods were in the trees and hills and people around her, the meaning of her life remained in her defeated attempts to purify environment, right down to the final, futile decision to try to salvage discrete individuals in the general carnage. (p. 123)

Misguided by her alien illusions, Juana, the foreigner, cannot save Baako but can only give to Baako what she herself represents:

He moved deeper, searching her for more of her warmth, his head filling with a fear of nameless heavy things descending upon him, pushing him to seek comfort in her. He pulled her completely to himself. She was warm against him, but in a moment he became aware she too was shivering. They lay together, neither moving. (p. 143)

The novel ends with Naana's lament about the fragmented nature of the traditional cyclical order of things, and although her death will join her to her ancestors, Armah appears to hold no hope for Baako's salva-

tion. Baako is under the influence of the deathly moon goddess' cycle, a cycle that does not complement Naana's cycle, but symbolises things 'only broken and twisted against themselves' (p. 196). Salvation appears to be an illusion, a shadow which people grasp at due to their own fear, but a shadow which they are unable ever to capture due to their innocence at the hands of destiny: 'But again we hold fast to the new shadows we find. We are fooled again, and once more taste the sharp unpleasantness of surprise, though we thought we had grown wise' (p. 201).

The only character who appears to have grasped the impossibility of salvation is Ocran, Baako's old teacher. Ocran's lament corresponds to Naana's wisdom, but his wisdom has not rendered him powerless like Naana. Ocran survives, a cynical old man, condemned to loneliness. He advises Baako that the only way one can survive in this world is to be *alone*: 'Salvation is such an empty thing when you're alone,' Juana remarks, unable to heal. But Ocran gives the clue to what salvation is about — something Baako, and Juana, will never realize due to their dependence on each other: '«You don't find it in the marketplace. You have to be alone to find out what's in you. Afterwards...»' (p. 194). And Ocran also warns Baako that the people 'you have to be careful of are the impotent ones' (p. 193). Is this Armah's way of warning Baako not only about himself, but about Juana as well?

In one sense, Armah appears unable to see women as anything apart from healers — and destroyers. Despite his ambiguous characterization of Juana, his concept of the female's destructive strength becomes less subtle when viewed in terms of Baako's mother and sister. They are portrayed as manipulating parasites and are held responsible for the various tragedies which occur. Was Efua's symbolic meeting with Juana by the sea perhaps Armah's way of forewarning the readers of the destructive female power which would collectively contribute to Baako's disintegration? Despite Efua's good intentions toward her son, Armah depicts her as the misguided Mother who realized only when it was too late that she had placed 'a curse' on her son. She retreats into the self-sacrificial role of Motherhood whose good intentions did nothing but contribute to Baako's despair. Similarly, we are made to blame Efua and Araba for their greedy, materialistic values which provoked Araba's son's death. Like Baako, with whom the baby shared blood, innocent victims become sacrificed on the alter of materialism. And at one point Araba cunningly explains to Baako how she can manipulate her husband with her 'secret weapon', her sexual organs: 'The male falls in the female trap; the woman is always cleverer...' (p. 86). The woman as spider, the

'bag, vaginal nets' reappear... The misguided Mother? the scheming Wife? the wicked Temptress? If women can't be savers, then they must be destroyers...

Perhaps it has to be left up to the African women writers to create female characters with depth and insight. And although many male writers, including Soyinka, Achebe, Awoonor and Okigbo, have used the Mame Water myth, I doubt many female writers would find it appropriate. Most African women writers today are concerned with correcting the distortions created by male writers and freeing women from the stereotypes that have, for so long, imprisoned them in a limited universe that perpetuates their own negative self-conceptions.

NOTES

1. Aya Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (London: Heinemann, AWS 154, 1974). All page numbers refer to this edition.
2. Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1983), pp. 249-250.
3. *Ibid.* The meaning of the three Akan words used for chapter titles were found in the above text.