Abstract
With crusading and, probably, feminist zeal, Sara Chetin in an article entitled 'Armah's Women' sought to expose Ayi Kwei Armah's male biases in his presentation of the female characters in his novel, Fragments. Interestingly, however, Ms Chetin's own biases made her blind to some of the novel's possibilities: or to put it another way, to read as a woman may well be an inevitably dualistic exercise in simultaneously revealing and concealing. Thus under the ironic gaze of a deconstructive surveyor, a feminist reading becomes just another moment in the multilayered unfolding of the text's possibilities. And it is with a profound awareness that I in turn cannot possibly be free of bias that I wish to express disagreement with certain claims made by Ms Chetin. I am male and West African - but I suspect that this confession is not an adequate explanation of my particular biases.
‘Armah’s Women’ by Sara Chetin: A Rejoinder

With crusading and, probably, feminist zeal, Sara Chetin in an article entitled ‘Armah’s Women’ sought to expose Ayi Kwei Armah’s male biases in his presentation of the female characters in his novel, Fragments. Interestingly, however, Ms Chetin’s own biases made her blind to some of the novel’s possibilities: or to put it another way, to read as a woman may well be an inevitably dualistic exercise in simultaneously revealing and concealing. Thus under the ironic gaze of a deconstructive surveyor, a feminist reading becomes just another moment in the multi-layered unfolding of the text’s possibilities. And it is with a profound awareness that I in tum cannot possibly be free of bias that I wish to express disagreement with certain claims made by Ms Chetin. I am male and West African - but I suspect that this confession is not an adequate explanation of my particular biases.

Placing Armah among certain male writers whose ‘concepts of female-ness perpetuate specific stereotypes instead of opening the way for new values and new ways in which people can understand themselves - and each other’ (p. 47), Ms Chetin proceeds to discuss Armah’s female characters with a view to uncovering the stereotype that lurks within each of them. Thus, according to Ms Chetin, the hero’s grandmother, Naana, who in my view embodies those spiritual values which modern Africans in their headlong rush for material things have discarded, is seen by Ms Chetin as merely a ‘suffering, helpless woman’ (p. 49), i.e. as an instance of the chauvinistic male portrayal of the woman as feeble.

Even more interesting is the discussion of Juana, the Puerto Rican doctor who becomes the hero’s lover. According to Ms Chetin, Armah portrays Juana as ‘a destructive force’ which seeks to cripple Baako’s creativity by making him excessively dependant on her seductive power. Juana is Eve, the temptress (p. 53), and, one might add, a version of the seductive enchantress of such poems as ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ who enthrals the hapless knight-at-arms and then abandons him drained and bereft of purpose. Says Ms Chetin: ‘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 per-
haps sheds light on Armah's distorted concept of female strength' (pp. 50-51).

Ms Chetin's views on the other, less sympathetic, female characters is predictably more disapproving. In her view, Armah portrays Efua and Araba, Baako's mother and sister respectively, as 'manipulating parasites' who are 'responsible for the various tragedies that occur'. Efua is portrayed, she says, as a misguided mother who realizes too late that she has placed a curse upon her son and then 'retreats into the self-sacrificial role of Motherhood' (p. 55). As for Araba, who uses sex as a means of manipulating and controlling her besotted husband, she is the grossest violation, according to Ms Chetin, that Armah inflicts on the image of women.

In conclusion, we are told that Armah distorts women because his view of them is essentially simplistic: if women can't be savers, then they must be destroyers. Ms Chetin concludes:

Perhaps it has to be left to the African women writers to create female characters with depth and insight.... Most African women writers today are concerned with correcting the distortions created by male writers and freeing women from the stereotypes that have, so far, imprisoned them in a universe, that perpetuates their own negative self conceptions. (p. 56)

In my view there is one overriding problem in this account of Armah's women: it abstracts the women characters from the meaning-giving context of the novel's themes. In particular, Ms Chetin fails to 'balance the equation', so to speak, in not considering Armah's male characters - especially Brempong, Baako's uncle, Foli, and, to a minor extent, Baako's friend, Fiifi. For the simple but important truth which Ms Chetin chose to ignore is that Armah's characters - men and women - are selected and designed to represent his view of society. It is unfair to upbraid his portraiture of women while forgetting their function as symptoms of a social malaise that afflicts both men and women.

Fragments has many inter-related themes, and one of the subjects that Armah, as a male writer, is interested in exploring is that elemental pull which women exercise on men and how that profound need can be exploited and debased by the woman in certain social circumstances.

The Marne Water myth - which is so important in the novel - crystalizes Armah's view of men's need of women. I agree with Ms Chetin that the myth appears to invest women with power, but this is not necessarily the seductive and ultimately dangerous power of Eve or Circe. This power is more ambivalent and indeed the Mame Water myth offers a view of the relationship between men and women which is richer and less sexist than what is found in many myths of the Western world. Let us remind ourselves of the conclusion of the 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 only. 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 this 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.

‘It’s an amazing story.’

‘The myths here are good,’ he said. ‘Only their use...’ His voice died.

The woman causes the man much pain, but she is also the source of his creative energy. The myth expresses the tension that, in its view, lies at the core of romantic and sexual relationships. Woman is man’s home or mother (the sea) to whom he is inevitably drawn for security and consolation.

She is, however, also the source of great pain, for she is of an alien element (the sea); she is different, other. Man has come out of that element, but is no longer of it. Thus when woman retreats into her element - which she does not out of malice, but because it is the order of nature - man is forlorn. In this view, the relationship between the sexes is - at least for the man - one of alternating joy and pain, satiety and frustration, ecstasy and creative agony.

Now, the society which Armah offers to the reader’s contemplation is one in which greed and vulgar materialism have replaced those values which are enshrined in the old woman, Naana. Thus Sara Chetin’s description of her as ‘a helpless old woman’ is in a way accurate. Helplessness - and helplessness is a major theme in this novel - is not simply a matter of her being old and a woman; it has more to do with the fact that she stands for values which modern Africa chooses to ignore. She is the elegiac unheeded spokesperson for values which, though profoundly relevant, have been discarded. Her world is still the world of unbroken circles, of continuity between word and thing, the dead and the living, the spiritual and the material. If she is helpless the fault does not lie with the author who is merely revealing the terrible gulf which has opened up between Africa’s past and its present; the fault lies in the society which, fascinated with Europe’s shining toys, pays no regard to its own more spiritual treasures.

In a very real sense, the old woman’s antagonist is the young man Brempong (the name means ‘mighty one’). While she offers treasures which nobody, except Baako, appreciates, he, on the other hand, hero of the new Africa, offers those goods which society now cherishes: cars,
fridges, imported drinks, material wealth. Brempong of course is the hero of the cargo cult, the bringer of things from abroad.

In this environment of greed in which mothers are willing to risk the lives of their newborn offspring for material gain as is evident in the untimely ‘outdoor ing’ ceremony, relationships between men and women also become vitiated. The relationship can take the form of a superficial game such as is played by the beautiful Christina and Baako’s friend, Fiifi, in which girls trade sex for evening rides, disco sessions, expensive drinks and, sometimes, jobs. But this vitiation of the male-female relationship can take on a more sinister form and this is what Armah demonstrates in the character of Araba, Baako’s sister, for whom marriage has become a species of war in which men and women try to outdo each other. For Araba sex is a ‘secret weapon’, the final means of coercion by which she is able to conquer her hapless husband. If the Mame Water myth indicates a natural need of men for women, what Armah is revealing in the character of Araba is a perversion of that need - itself the result of a more general perversion of society.

In my view, Ms Chetin misreads Armah most seriously when she groups Juana with Araba and Efua as just another predatory female, whereas in fact the quality that is most emphasized about Juana, the expatriate psychiatrist, is her helplessness and not her power. She is the outsider who sees too clearly the agony of a people betrayed by their leaders and preying on one another, but she feels unable to offer any lasting help.

Where then was the justification for the long effort to push back into this life those who had found it harder than the woman and had fallen down into things set deeper within themselves? What justification for sending the once destroyed back to knock again against the very things that had destroyed their peace? (p. 42)

Surely, the relationship between Baako and Juana ought to be seen as a desperate search by two powerless visionaries for a corner of sanity in a society that is fragmented into meaningless moments. Far from wanting to entrap and confine Baako in her spider’s web, Juana is only too aware of the insufficiency of shielding him from his responsibilities towards his family and society. And yet she is also aware that to abandon him to his family and society is to shove him to his destruction. Thus always she is tormented by doubt as to how to deal with this acutely sensitive and intelligent man who is so out of place in his environment. ‘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 flavour of despair’ (p. 271).
We come now to consider Efua, Baako’s mother. Certainly, this woman participates in the perversion of human relationships which is one of the author’s indictments against modern Ghana; but perhaps more than any other female character she contributes to our awareness of the puzzle that animates the novel. She brings out the crushing complexity of the choice which Baako has to make. Efua may be venal and greedy - as is evident from her role in the ‘outdooring’ ceremony for Araba’s baby - but she remains Baako’s mother to whom the son owes, according to tradition, a certain debt of material support. And herein lies the difficulty, the complex subtlety of the cargo cult analogy. When we first meet Efua she is anxious for the safe return of her son who has gone away to be educated in foreign lands. It is she who asserts as a self-evident truth that ‘children are the most important things in this life’ (p. 57). Thus she would seem to participate in the circle of birth, procreation, death and rebirth which is so lyrically expressed by Naana in the opening pages of the novel. But, as Naana herself makes clear, Efua’s expectations of her son are too materialistic, too predatory and totally lacking in the spiritual.

Naana, the old woman, is honest enough to add that she too has had dreams about the material comforts which Baako’s return may bring. The suggestion is that there is nothing wrong with such expectations as long as they do not become paramount or so pressing as to crush the son.

Thus Efua is both the continuation and vitiation of a long tradition in which children have it as a duty to provide for their parents and extended family. And Armah’s presentation of the mother always conveys this density or irony: she is mercenary but Baako cannot entirely ignore her. One of the first things she asks her son on his return is when his car is coming so that her ‘old bones can also rest’. At one level, she is making him play the Brempong, but at another, she is reminding him that a son ought to be concerned about his mother’s comfort.

 Appropriately, one of the most painful moments in Baako’s life is the occasion when his mother finally decides ‘to leave [him] alone’. She takes him to the site of a house she has started but has not been able to complete.

“That is the last thing in my soulcleaning, Baako,’ she said. These stones and the sand, they were mine. I started all this, thinking I was building something you would come and not find too small. I was hoping you would come back to me, take joy in the thing I had begun but will never end, and finish it. That was the meaning of my curse on you. Forgive me. Now that we have both come and seen this, I won’t accuse you anymore. Again I’m a mother, confessing what strange feelings you’ve sent through me. It’s over now, Baako. Can you understand? We can go home now.’ And still that happy laugh, all the way to the bus stop, waiting in the sun for whatever would come. (p. 257)
The incomplete house brings Baako to a sharp realization of the extravagance as well as the solid reality of what he owes to Efua, and makes him aware of the inadequacy of his individualism.

Thus, it is through the character of Efua that one of the central questions of the novel is posed: Where does the sensitive individual draw the line between his own needs and inclinations and the demands of family and society - especially where otherwise legitimate demands are tainted by ostentation? If the character of Efua was as crude and one-dimensional as Ms Chetin makes her out to be, there would be no problem: she could make no claim on Baako which we as readers could respect.

Clearly, what Ms Chetin’s interesting reading of *Fragments* exemplifies is the danger of approaching a literary work - especially one as subtle as this - with an ideological militancy that reduces the text to a series of stereotypes. For clearly Ms Chetin ignores the qualifications which the author has built into the text and which give it its full meaning. Naana is helpless not because she is a woman, but because she is the discarded representative of an old way of life. Juana does run the risk of making Baako too dependant on her, but she is only too aware of this danger and indeed her prescription for Baako is richer than Ocran’s prescription of artistic aloofness. Efua’s destructive demands on her son represent the contemporary expression of an ancient arrangement. The only really simple female character is Baako’s sister, Araba. Ms Chetin suggests that Armah blames the women of the novel for the central character’s difficulties, but surely it is clear that Baako is also partly to blame for realizing too late the insufficiency of his individualism, and for failing to define for himself how he can meaningfully connect with a society with which he is clearly at odds, but to which he is profoundly indebted.

My views may be nothing more than the prejudiced rantings of another male, but if this dialogue with Ms Chetin has thrown even the dimmest light on the novel, *Fragments*, then perhaps therein lies the value of both her essay and this rejoinder - as instalments in an ongoing discussion.

**NOTES**