

Angela M. Fubara

Angela M. Fubara (PhD) is a lecturer in English Studies at Rivers State University of Science & Technology, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. E-mail: fubaraangela@yahoo.com

Memory, verbal onslaught and persuasive eloquence in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*

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Language dissects thought. In language fortified with calculated verbal vituperation and persuasive eloquence, Ayi Kwei Armah takes his audience down memory lane—a retrospect (in the characteristic manner of the Sankofa model) into the original identity of the African. Sankofa dwells on the idyllic past which serves as a model for a restructured future. One hears the evocative voice of Anoa's prophecy of two thousand seasons, wandering along other ways and finding paths of living way. The way is glaringly replete with verbal bullets with which Armah dwells on the Blackman's indulgence. This gives rise to the flagrant losing of "the way" to the "predators" and "destroyers" in *Two Thousand Seasons*. In his advocacy for a restoration to the forgotten way, Armah's verbal onslaught provokes sharp awakening that propels the people to a positive action to recover the lost way into "understanding the mind beyond despair to healing work". In *The Healers* therefore, Armah's in-depth philosophies led by the master healer, Damfo and the trainee healer, Densu provide keys to the restoration of black people and racial renewal. The focus of this study is Armah's eloquent intellectual expressions: evocative poetic lamentation, prophecy, symbolism, and studded imagery of brutality, servitude and restoration. The work concludes by demonstrating Armah's achievements with the deployment of linguistic weapons. Has he succeeded in making his reader / audience see clearly the Blackman's annals of misdemeanor and the consequences? How realistic is his redemptive posture into *Ebibirman*, the liberated community of black people? This is the crux of this paper intertwined with *Sankofa*. **Keywords:** Ayi Kwei Armah, cultural activism, memory, post-colonialism.

1

Two Thousand Seasons (1973) and *The Healers* (2000) present Ayi Kwei Armah's survey of African history and vision for the future. Some of his previous works *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (1968), *Fragments* (1971), *Why are We so Blest* (1972), even his later work *Osiris Rising* (1995) all border on the concerns of black people. Armah begins in *Two Thousand Seasons* with the outpouring of anger over Africa's historical, political and social image battered by foreign infiltrators. The account commences *in media res* to depict Africa as it was in time immemorial, by the deployment of the ancient *griot*, Anoa, the female ancestor from whom the race takes its name. Armah very frequently relapses into memory with Anoa's unseen prophetic communal voice, "we": "We are not a people of yesterday", thus "linking memory with unseen tomorrows" (*Seasons* xi, 1). He builds this narrative on Anoa's prophecy of full millennium which is 2000

seasons: one thousand seasons of catastrophic experience and loss of “the way” and another one thousand seasons in search of recovering “the way”. His fifth novel, *The Healers* lays emphasis on this recovery of the way through a philosophic healing process led by the master healer, Damfo. Armah also creates an incisive array of factors culminating in the fall of the Ashanti Empire as a microcosm of the dissection and balkanization of Africa by Arab invaders and white imperialists in *The Healers*.

Through this recovery of the past and futuristically repositioning Africa devoid of encumbrances of foreign domination and internal decay, Armah adopts the concept of “Sankofa” which dwells on the idyllic past as a pedestal for a restructured future. Alexander Dokubo Kakraba correctly notes that Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* conceptualizes and deploys the old traditional Akan notion of “Sankofa literally translated to mean it is not a taboo to go back and fetch what you forget” (51). By the deployment of Sankofa motif, Armah calls for the restoration of the people’s standards through remembrance of the way, which involves taxing the memory. To engage the memory and people of the way Armah employs linguistic weapons aimed at shocking his audience into positive action to recover this lost way. In this poetic passage where Armah repetitively employs the word “remembering” the reader has a feel of the Sankofa model:

All our conversation with Isanusi turned about a central understanding: *remembering* the thousand of our people’s existence, *remembering* thousand upon thousand of days spent journeying [...] *remembering* ancient and present assault against the soul of our people and *remembering* the harsh division—yet to find resolution—suicide contention and desperate flight [...] we have been a people fleeing our true destiny. (*Seasons* 157, emphases added)

This idyllic past as Okpewho aptly observes “has had to give way to a tone of painful criticism” (13). The painful criticism is couched in what this essay calls “verbal onslaught” skillfully enmeshed in bitter figurative eloquence and persuasive expressions. Many scholars see these expressions as nasty (see for instance Wole Soyinka, Hugh Webb, Isidore Okpewho and Lemuel Johnson). Soyinka comments that “the human sensibility tends to recoil at Armah’s painful utterances” (5) while Okpewho sees his words as mostly intemperate. Kakraba has this to say: “While many critics laud his (Armah’s) narrative style and technique, others like Frederisen [...], Wright [...] focus and criticize him for what Brown [...] describes as soaring novelistic indictment of post colonial society. Others like Chinua Achebe see Armah to be too pessimistic” (48). Webb sums up that *Two Thousand Seasons* represents Armah’s literary warfare aimed at the articulation of values that would enable African people to move forward collectively and fruitfully.

The focus of this work therefore examines Armah’s intellectual expressions hinging on his evocative poetic lamentations, prophecy, studded imagery of brutality and

servitude. The work will also give insight to symbolism of decay and restoration in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. The study concludes by unveiling Armah's repositioning of Africa free from encumbrances and clutches of imperialism, internal segregation, and corruption consequent upon colonialism and neocolonialism using his trailing device of Sankofa model.

2

One may call *Two Thousand Seasons* poetic narrative replete with figures of degeneration and regeneration, while *The Healers* focuses on the imagery of disease and wholeness, manipulation and inspiration. Beginning from the prologue in *Two Thousand Seasons* we hear the lamentation of Anoa's evocative voice which only the discerning poetic mind can at once decipher and fully understand with concentrated reading and re-reading. It says that the spring water (Africans) that flows to the desert heads for extinction. Thus in this prologue Armah in a commendatory tone delineates Africans as spring water but the invaders he spews venom at depicting them as deserts: "Spring water flowing to the desert where you flow is no regeneration [...] Giver of life, spring whose water now pours down, pours down destructions road [...] your future is destruction" (*Seasons* xii).

The desert can only take but never gives; therefore no spring water changes the desert. The invaders are depicted as annihilators: "whatever waking form they wear, the stench of death pours ceaselessly from their mouth. From every opening of their possessed carcasses comes death's excremental pus". The voice questions: "would you have your intercourse with these creatures from the graveyard?" (*Seasons* xiii). This outpouring of venom is in reaction to the period when alien forces invaded Africa who before then had lived an affluent and self-sufficient lifestyle. These invaders and infiltrators are depicted as predators who "came as beggars and received generosity turned snakes after feeding from their host". The passage below is Armah's poetic portrayal of the predatory Arabs, also typical of the white destroyers from the sea:

With the predators' devotees, servant of a servant—using god, force is goodness. Fraud they call intelligence. [...] In their communion there is no respect for to them woman is a thing, a thing deflected to fill each strutting mediocre man with spurious, weightless sense of worth. With their surroundings, they know but one manner of relationship, the use of violence. Against other people, they recommend to each other the practice of robbery, cheating at best a smiling dishonesty [...] they themselves have become sharp-clawed desert beasts preying against all. They plant nothing. They know one thing: rape [...] they leave to others careful planting, the patient nurturing. It is their vocation to fling themselves upon the cultivator and his fruit to kill one and carry off the other—Robbery with force: that is the predators' road, that is the destroyers' road. (*Seasons* 40)

A literary mind, in spite of the bitter outpouring of words, enjoys the poetic melody of Armah's eloquent expressions. The passage demonstrates a few of Armah's verbal onslaughts mostly coded in figures in presenting the predators and the white destroyers.

Armah's shocking attack on the invaders reverberates with key phrases which characterize them: "fraudulent", "violent worthless people lacking in goodness", "a people who perpetually indulge in robbery". They are rapists cloaked with indolence. It becomes difficult for a normal life to exist under such suffocating environment especially with a people who had been morally upright and self-sufficient depicted as people of *the way* whose "way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness [...] Our way knows no oppression. The way is hospitable to guests. [...] Our way produces far more than it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction." (*Seasons* 39)

Above are the characteristics of "the way" imbued with reciprocity: giving and at the same time taking. The spring water unwittingly flows to the desert and heads for destruction. Hence some people of "the way", the Africans in contact with such crippling evil, are influenced and consequently turn imbeciles used as destructive stooges against Africans ("the people of the way"). Armah's verbal attack designated these stooges as zombies, ostentatious cripples and askaris. They are Africans who embrace the new faith and turn against their kith and kin serving the conquerors.

One may ask what is a zombi or who is a zombi? Maximilien Laroche reveals that a zombi is African "Living-Dead. [...] The zombi remains in that grey area separating life and death. He moves, eats, hears, even speaks, but has no memory, and is not aware of his condition" (51). The concept of zombi is culled from Haitian narrative where a soul is bewitched through a spell cast on him. The zombi becomes "a beast of burden, exploited mercilessly by his master who forces him to toil in his field, crushes him with work and whips him at the slightest pretext while feeding him on the blandest of diets [...] zombis can be recognized by their vague look [...] a trait characteristic of the spirit of death." (Laroche 51)

Whether zombies, askaris, or ostentatious cripples, they are all seen as categories of zombism under the servitude of the invaders in various demeaning levels. Armah possibly uses this zombi concept to demonstrate the depth of debased existence of the people of "the way" who embraced the invaders' faith. Typical of Anoa's figurative prophecy, this people have become "a spring blindly flowing, knowing nothing of its imminent extinction, ignorant of replenishing reciprocity." (*Seasons* 17)

The women of "the way" are used as sex objects and are raped and abused. After months of public pious abstinence of the predators during Ramadan and Idd, they threw themselves into their accustomed orgies of food and sex. The women, in a calculated and determined will contrive the destruction of the predators at the height of their sexual ecstasy. The episodes are presented pictorially with a skillful descriptive

eloquence which scholars see as nasty. We will however relay some of them to buttress Armah's embittered verbal weapons.

The women set up predators with food and sex, drugged them with *dawa* which stole their consciousness sending them to their early graves:

the predators licked lovingly from the youngest virgin genitals—lick with furious appetite. [...] A woman named Azania, at the height of predator's sexual orgy took a spear and pushed it with energy of seasons and seasons of hatred shown only as love, pushed it hard through the askari's right side, so hard it went through him into the Arab's panting breath threading him also in his right side. The two, the predator and his askari were thus fused together when the agony of death usurped their sweeter pain. (*Seasons* 21, 23)

The women ingeniously destroy numberless predators in the height of their sexual orgy, predators who had used their feminine bodies as objects of indulgence and erotic pleasure. The predators lay in humiliated "glory of their vomit [...] in a viscous paste of the shit and their own slimy urine [...] seven predators buried together, sewed into sheets of cloth upon which they had stretched their bodies in expectation of unwonted entertainment." (*Seasons* 4)

The extravagance of similar and even worse passages depicting images of brutal attack and counter-attack abound such that to replicate them here would appear immodest. However this bit demonstrating the venom with which the women react to the rapist predators will suffice. Armah portrays these immodest, filthy episodes to provoke anger that would propel his African audience to action, to reposition the continent to shake off shackles of foreign menace.

The unconvertible Africans who refuse to be stooges (zombified) determine on an exodus away from the predators. They take a long odious journey, passing through grasslands and forests to find a new habitation. They finally settle by the sea coast. This they believe will give them respite to live like people of "the way". Unfortunately not long after, they are attacked by another alien force, the white destroyers no more from the desert but from the sea. These people become more vicious than the predators. Armah uses the phrase "the white man" to catalogue all the atrocities they wrecked on Africa with their technological superiority. Isanusi, a strong believer of "the way" gives a repetitive enumeration of the white man's intent on Africans:

The whitemen wish to destroy our mountains.

The whitemen wish to wipe out our animals.

The whitemen want to take [...] our daughters and brothers and turn them to slaves

The whitemen want us to obliterate our remembrance of our way [...] to follow their road, road of destruction. (83–84)

These are the wishes of the white invaders that come from the sea, whose greed and destructive characteristics the people see as incredible and monstrous.

Typical of the white destroyers, they capture and enslave the youth represented by eleven females and nine males who later liberate themselves and again wreck vengeance on their captors. Packed, stuffed and chained in the ship bound to the white destroyer's destination, there is an outbreak of disease in the ship. Some slaves who become very sick with disease are thrown into the sea. One of the terribly sick, known as the "soft voiced one" suddenly exhibits extraordinary skill and attacks the zombi slave-driver, John. He had been so sick in the ship "with worms eating him so near to the surface of his skin". He suddenly appears to have been revived. In that revival posture he attacks the zombi slave-driver and brings all the bile and dead blood from his body into his mouth and this mixture he vomited forcefully into the slave-driver's now captived mouth: "the sick man shared death with him allowing not one drop to escape. Choking, the slave-driver swallowed death with breath remaining life. Then he fell on the floor with the "soft voiced one" still inseparable from him" (131-32). Through series of thinking, speaking in "silence" the captives sink the ship and get their freedom. "Silence" becomes a motif in the narrative signifying moments of serious deep thought and planning which manifest in concerted action of counter-attacks for freedom.

The youth find Isanusi in the fifth grove. Isanusi is declared mad by the zombi king Koranche, acting like his cohorts, the kings, because Isanusi speaks the truth about the white destroyers. Under the leadership of Isanusi the liberated youths form a formidable group of freedom fighters. They liberate other slaves with collective will and effort, demonstrating a revolutionary optimism that destroys the destroyers of "the way". This connectivity and collective action are what Armah advocates through the eloquence in this passage: "Against the death brought by whiteness only the greatest connecting force will prevail: The working, working together of mind connected, souls connected, traveling along that one way, our way. Connected action: is the beginning of our journey back to ourself to living again the connected life, traveling again along our way, the way." (133-34)

These words appearing as the voice of the youth, reverberate Anoa's evocative futuristic projection of finding the way that "we people of the fertile time trapped in smallest self have one vocation, that is to find our larger now healing self" (19).

In *The Healers* Armah delves into the philosophy of healing, a process of completely ridding the people and the system of devastating forces that appear to have not only maimed but also ruined Africa. As noted earlier, the healers in this novel are led by the master healer Damfo. He is assisted by the trainee healer Densu with Damfo's young daughter Ajoa. The healers aim at healing individuals for the bigger work of healing and full revival of the African past, and also for the quest for the ideal racial future as Anoa had evocatively articulated in *Two Thousand Seasons*.

The imagery of destruction vigorously lamented, and that of healing mooted in *Two Thousand Seasons* now becomes a unifying factor in *The Healers*. Lindfors correctly states that “the novel itself is unified by the imagery of disease” (91). In this novel Armah re-invents the history of the ancient Ashanti Empire as a depiction of the destruction of African continent consequent upon Western incursion. The imperial conquest is made possible by internal decadence hinged on what he distastefully designates as manipulation. The manipulators are symbolized by the Ababios. These are people mostly from slave descent who push themselves to positions of authority, and also the local politicians who work intimately with the imperialists. The imperialists Armah presents as the source of manipulation, and their creed is “divide and rule”. The empire thus becomes diseased through manipulators. The key evocative words that run through *The Healers* are “manipulation”, “inspiration”, “disease” and “wholeness”. What does Armah designate as manipulation, inspiration, disease and wholeness? The following description shows some aspects of a manipulator: “Ababio ensures that those he dealt with moved in ways profitable to himself. A human being was to him nothing but to be tricked, lied to, manipulated and shaped by force or guile into becoming a usable ally in spite of himself. If that failed then a human being becomes simply an object to be destroyed.” (49–50)

This characteristic equates to another level of black destroyer. The narrator, tells Densu the learner: “When different groups within what would be natural community clash against each other, that is *disease*. That is why healers say that our people, the way we are now divided into petty nations, we are suffering from terrible *diseases*.” (*Healers* 82–83, emphases added)

Damfo in Armah’s words and in well articulated expressions teaches Densu the qualities of a healer, making it clear that healing is work and not gambling. In his words: “It is a part of our work to heal individuals. The smaller part of our work is to seek the healing of our people, the black people [...] it is the work of inspiration not manipulation. [...] The work of healing is for inspirers working long and steadily in a group that grows over generations until there are healers where ever our people are scattered, able to bring us together again.” (*Healers* 269–70)

Damfo demonstrates the healing of individuals with Araba Jesiwa. Jesiwa’s son Appiah, a royal, is gruesomely murdered by the giant Buntui, an idiot who has a small head and massive body reminiscent of a zombie in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Appiah is murdered through the manipulation of Ababio using the zombi-like Buntui. In this encounter Jesiwa is maimed. Damfo finds her in the forest and rescues her; but she is in a state where she is physically broken, spiritually distraught and speechless. She is gradually nursed and healed by the healer. Jesiwa’s case appears hopeless but Damfo’s patient healing therapy brings her back to perfect health. Using the device of fleshing the memory through eloquent verbal skills, Armah also demonstrates how Damfo had earlier healed this same Jesiwa when she was forced into a loveless marriage to a

royal, because she herself is a royal as well. This marriage resulted in misfortunes and childlessness, and consequently she went into depression culminating in a devastating physical and mental ailment. Through patient nursing along with philosophical guidance; she became perfectly healed.

The account of a helpless situation that transforms into expectant hope and success is conveyed in *Two Thousand Seasons* through women as well. The people of “the way” in their flight from the predators, zombies and askaris encounter a devastating problem. At a certain point of their journey, the male pathfinders get discouraged, disillusioned and die. Fear, helplessness and hopelessness possess the people. However, two young girls, Noliwe and Ningome, take over the leadership. Their valiant action gives reality to expectation: “Following the path Noliwe and Ningome had taken we moved slowly and steadily. [...] Noliwe and Ningome had made the transition without making it in a special way.” (*Season 55*)

Through the encouragement of these two girls, who confidently take over the leadership role of path-finders for the people, they finally arrive at their new location near the coast. This account demonstrates another scenario of hopelessness where women are used to recover hope and expectation. Armah deploys these accounts in the two novels as symbolism of recovery. With determined will, hard work and patience goals are achieved.

Another striking symbolism in *The Healers* hinges on the destruction of the kum tree. “The tree stood in the centre of the capital”, an unshakable huge giant tree, and it “was a fitting symbol of mighty Ashanti family with its wide branches.” (*Healers 250*) This tree suddenly falls and breaks to pieces. Hear what the narrator says: “The great tree simply fell of a sudden [...] shattered into tiny pieces—a thousand and tiny fragments—as if whatever force had brought it down was not content to break it, but wanted to pulverize it completely.” (*Healers 250*)

The symbolism of the fallen tree foreshadows the fall of the Ashanti Empire before her final collapse through the manipulation of the imperialists and their local cohorts led and made possible by the royals. As the kum tree, a living symbol shattered, so did the Empire. Armah’s antagonism and contempt is now focused on the royals who form usable instruments for the collapsed Empire. Chieftaincy is presented as a parasitic and manipulative institution. He therefore depicts royalty as disease. In the chapter entitled “Kings” he presents the royals as stooges and things to be manipulated, lured with inconsequential gifts, drinks and reduced to idiots. There is a biting authorial disapproval of the kings who model their lifestyle on the imperialists, see the following satirical note: “It’s a name borrowed from the whites. Among the royals that’s the new style. Look, there is Opanyin Benstil from Gomoa, only these days he likes to call himself Benstil. Mister Benstil Field Marshal. It is a great title among whites I hear. The field marshal wore a bright red coat, cut in the style of Whiteman’s clothes.” (*Healers 250*)

Armah also vents his anger at the British using a note of parody on John Glover, a British, whom the Fante ethnic groups employ to lead them in a battle against their kith and kin. Armah's satirical eloquence reduces Glover and by extension the British to a figure of ridicule (*Healers* 255–56).

3

Alexander and Theophilus in their paper on "Armah's Novels of Liberation" conclude that Armah demonstrates that he is a revolutionary and belligerent insurgent who intends to utilize his words to liberate Africa from shackles of imperialism. Again, the motivating factors behind Armah's exertion are conveyed in a dialogue with Kofi Anyidoho during the Fifth Du Bois-Padmore-Nkrumah Memorial Lecture. In the interview following this dialogue, Armah reveals: "I wanted to work in the liberation movement so I dropped my academic aspiration and pretensions to be a writer and set out trying to be a real liberator." With this statement one can understand why Armah's verbal expressions can be likened to weapons of war. The use of these bullets in letters is Armah's battle and quest for a radical change, providing a blue print for positive futuristic repositioning of Africa. He thus offers issues of reconstruction for Pan African re-unification free from external forces of imperialism. His linguistic, intellectual, verbal onslaught has a purpose: not only to motivate but also shock his audience into activity like his predecessor, Fasseke, a "master of the masters in the art of eloquence" (*Healers* 51).

The use of symbolism of the *collapsed* kum tree depicting the final *collapse* of Ashanti Empire is apt and convincing. His artistry in the events surrounding Jesiwa's life, the successful healing of her bones and restoration of her sanity symbolizes the final triumph of the healers. He also uses Noliwe and Ningome's valiant efforts to demonstrate that fearlessness and perseverance should be a virtue and an indispensable weapon for healing and bringing all the black people together into what he (Armah) calls "Ebibirman: the community of all black people" (*Healers*, 84). This convincingly demonstrates that women are veritable instruments to achieving this goal. Armah has therefore imaginatively restructured Africa free from its balkanized state of imperialism and decadence. He has accomplished this in a well-articulated eloquence, through the Sankofa model and device which is to find the truth of the past, come back to the present and look towards the future.

The challenge lies on the shoulders of all black people to strive, and persevere to implement Armah's blue print of collective rebuilding and repositioning of Africa and the entire black race.

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