



# What is Africa doing with the Novel?

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The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life.

— Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (2007)

The burden of this paper is to attempt to answer the question: what is Africa doing with the novel? But I must admit that as deceptively simple as this question looks and sounds, it is a complex one; and its answer is manifold. Africa is doing so many things with the novel. In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said has deeply explored the role of the novel in the colonial and imperial enterprise of Western colonialism. He argues eloquently that “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world, they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (p. xii). In fact, the history of Chinua

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a corrective novel of prime importance and an embodiment of that history is relevant here. Conceived as a response to the denigration of Africa in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), *Things Fall Apart* seeks to correct the negative colonialist constructed image of Africa. A reading of *The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa* (1970) reveals a summa of the damage that narratives, travelogues, and novels have done to the image of Africa. This is not to say that narratives are not good; they can be useful. Narratives or storytelling serve as conduits for the transmission of knowledge and culture in Africa. There is also the phenomenon popularly known as "the Empire Writes Back"—thanks to Salman Rushdie. It is a form of re-writing colonial texts, questioning the colonialist assumptions underpinning them; beside that, it offers decolonized writers the opportunity to bring new interpretations to bear on colonialist narratives. These re-written colonial texts reflect reactions—which have been described controversially, I think, as "postcolonial"—to colonialist actions.

### **The argument**

But my interest in this paper is predominantly in the formal aspect of the novel: the various literary devices which African experimental novelists deploy in these novels in their attempt to domesticate it. What has prompted this question, which is the subject of this paper, is the unmitigated compulsion on the part of the Western critical establishment and some Western-educated African critics to assert that the novel is alien to African forms of expression and that it is a Western import. My position is that whether the West is the absolute origin of the novel form or not, Africans have been writing novels that easily stand in comparison with the best novels anywhere in the world. What, then, should

preoccupy critics and scholars of the novel, in my view, is to subject the modern African novels available to us now to an honest textual probing to find out whether the modern African novel extends the frontiers of the novel form as a whole or not. Therefore, to my mind, the productive question to ask in comparison with the compulsion to prove the origin of the novel and how it eventually ended up in Africa is: What is Africa doing with the Novel? As Kwame Appiah argues, "African novels do not need justification; they need as do all novels, analysis, understanding—in short, reading" without prejudice (in Gates, 1984, p. 146). Armah also makes that point in "The Lazy School of Literary Criticism" (25 February 1985) in a forceful manner. And that is precisely what I have been doing with selected works of Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kojo Laing, Ousmane Sembene, Wole Soyinka, and Amos Tutuola. But for reasons of space, I shall limit this paper to Armah, who is the epicentre of my study of the African novel. I have chosen Armah as the epicentre of my project not because he is the point of origin of the modern African novel, or African literature for that matter, but because I consider him as one African writer who is deeply involved in what one can describe as total (African) literature. Armah is an accomplished novelist, poet, and critic who has singlehandedly engineered the establishment of a co-operative publishing concern, now responsible for publishing and marketing his books. Per Ankh, the co-operative publishing establishment, like Armah himself, is based in Senegal, Africa. Armah's whole personality, that of a model of the African people—inseparable from Armah as artist and thinker—is constantly growing in stature as a great educator, a mentor, an awakener and a liberator, of Africans. If Armah is an African novelist, it is not just because he writes about Africa, but because he writes about it in an African kind of way; the way in which *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973, 2000) is a novel of Africa ra-

ther than simply about Africa. I think it is no exaggeration to say that Armah writes Africa itself and not *about* Africa. Further, and more importantly, just as Africans exist in the interstices of each others' lives, so does Armah live in the interstices of African culture and experience.

## **Methodology**

The paper offers a close textual spadework of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, exploring his creative and critical appreciation of African elements and the ways that appropriation functions to bring into being a novel form that can be described as demonstrably African; a novel genre that arises from African historical and cultural matrix, and it is understood in terms of that origin. Scrupulous examination of the challenges and techniques of Armah as an African experimentalist novelist and explication and analysis of this novel will replace the platitudes and clichés of critical pronouncements which have hitherto dominated discussions of the modern African novel. The study will deal comprehensively with what Armah has made of the novel, how he has reinvented it to "bear the burden" of African culture and worldview. I shall treat Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* in this paper as a representative African novel. Armah's writing is layered so that to understand *Two Thousand Seasons* one needs to go back to his works before it. His works are linked and organically connected. Content and form are inseparable in his novels, but they are more so in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Subsequently, a discussion of form implies a discussion of content vice versa. However, in this paper, my concern is more with form and the grammar of the African novel than content.

Critics might ask—and legitimately so—what difference my study is bringing to the existing critical literature on the African novel? What is my contribution to the study of the African novel? I

am aware of works by critics and scholars, Africans and non-Africans, on the African novel, as my bibliography shows. What is missing in the existing critical literature is the directional underpinning of the African novel. There has been no focus on the discovery of the philosophical foundations of the immanent experimentation in the African novel. Hitherto, we have been more concerned with the collection of words that we articulate and read in the African novels, to the neglect of the abstract and underlying deep structures which regulate their meanings. Therefore, my opinion is that it is this grammar of the African novel that must be our critical preoccupation. This is my major assignment in this paper- what are the philosophical and social arrangements that inform the on-going experimentations in the African novel, if any?

In his third novel, *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), Armah has made a critical and revolutionary declaration and statement of principle in the name of Solo Ankonam—an artist who is in constant search of the appropriate and effective artistic medium not so much to reach the ordinary African people, but, more importantly, to create what Bertolt Brecht describes as an “alienation effect” in his African readership. To this effect, Armah writes:

Why not simply accept the fate of an artist, and like a Western seer, close my eyes to everything around, find relief in discrete beauty, and make its elaboration my vocation? Impossible. The Western artist is blest with that atrophy of vision that can see beauty in deliberately broken-off pieces of a world sickened with oppression's ugliness. I hear the call of that art too. But in the world of my people that most important first act of creation, that rearrangement without which all attempts at creation are doomed to falseness, remains to be done. Europe hurled itself against us—not for creation, but to destroy us, to use us for creating itself. America, a growth out of Europe, now deepens that destruction. In this wreckage there is no creative art outside the destruction of the destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art, revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction (Armah, 1972, p. 231).

This declaration has radically changed the direction of Armah's writing and social activism; it is not mere rhetoric. He breaks with

the western elitist concept of art as it is expressed in his first three works; "the Euro-African novels," with apologies to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. This declaration, Armah's artistic manifesto, is politically loaded and signifies secondarily the aesthetic ideology of Brecht and Benjamin. It requires a careful unpacking and qualification. Even though the declaration might echo Brechtian and Benjaminian artistic thought, the ideas it implicitly expresses are derivatives of African aesthetic thought as well: the traditional African insistence on the functionality of art. Armah is a novelist, a critic and an intellectual activist who gives active and sustained support to what he describes as "changing Africa's social realities for the better" (26 August 1985, p. 1753). The conviction that the continent of Africa can be changed for the better permeates his writing and activism: a conviction that finds powerful expression in *Why Are We So Blest?* spilling over into, and again in, *Two Thousand Seasons*. For Armah, it means the recasting of the tool he proffers for the execution of this project: the novel. He is no longer interested in a work of art which conceals the reality of the African condition. His preoccupation now is how to get the social arrangements hidden beneath such works of art across to the ordinary people. Further, he is calling for the debunking of the Western art form that defines the author as a specialist so that the author also becomes a producer in keeping with African aesthetic practice. The author's solidarity with the African people is derived then from the identity of both as producers. Indeed, a critical look at the life of Armah clarifies this point. Essentially, Armah contrasts two artistic traditions here to insinuate two worlds: the Western world and the African world; they are worlds apart, separate. The former is individualistic and the latter is communalistic. According to Armah, the Western world is based on the Cartesian injunction that "I think, therefore I am." It is a world grounded in individualism, believing strongly in independent action as opposed to co-operation. It is a world where the human being is

considered as a separate being from others or as having an independent existence.

That the Western novel form is incapable of the task of healing Africa's multiple fractures is contained in the precursors of *Two Thousand Seasons: The Beautiful Ones Are Not yet Born* (1968, 2008), *Fragments* (1970; 2006), and *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972). As explained in the epigraph, Armah is well-informed of the falsity of the view that the novel developed as a form created by the isolated individual and, therefore, it legitimizes reality based on individual experience which from the African worldview. From the African communal point of view, what is real is formed by the relation of the individual to the collective. The declaration itself suggests that Armah has a good idea of what the ideological formation of the Western novel is. And it is that knowledge, coupled with what he had intended to do with the novel, which fuelled the cataclysmic declaration in *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972). Given the communal African cultural consciousness, the poetics of the Western canonical novel is grossly incommensurable with the representation of African reality. It is the opposite of established norms and values of the African world. For Armah, therefore, the legitimizing of the Western novel form in African literature stands in direct opposite to African cultural reality. What, then, is the African world that Armah is bent on nurturing in his writing and activism to supplant the Manichean colonialist world of the West in the representation of African reality?

### **The African World**

The African world is implied in Ankonam's declaration, but it is given full expression in the craft of *Two Thousand Seasons*, the successor of *Why Are We So Blest?* The African world is a communal one where the injunction is "I am, because we are." The sense of community that is said to characterise social relations among in-

dividuals in African societies, of which *Two Thousand Seasons* is a template, is a direct consequence of the communitarian social arrangement. This sense of community, which has become the cornerstone of Armah's writing and activism, is a characteristic that defines the community's "Africanness." No person is an island in the African communal world. As Susan Morgan, my dissertation supervisor puts it, "no island is an island." This is true of the African communal world Armah projects in his work and activism. For Armah—a person who has always conceived of himself as fully situated in an African world with African obligations and a commitment to Africa's future, a commitment which is fully consistent with his writing and activism—there is the need to "destroy" the colonial structures of oppression and replace them with African models for the purposes of the African project: the "remembering" of Africa. Armah is of the view that it is incumbent upon Africans to engage seriously in a cultural clearing of the post-colonial landscape of Africa to make way for the cultivation of African models. According to the logic of Armah's manifesto, if that is not done the cultivation of African models will get stifled, thereby stunting the continent's growth and development. The anecdote of Aboliga the Frog in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and the novel's stifling, life-denying structure are metonymic of the consequence of the inability of the Nkrumah regime to replace "the European colonial economic and social model" (Armah, 1968, 2008, p. 14) with an African one. The same can be said of *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?* However, it is out of them that *Two Thousand Seasons* emerged like a plant in search of light. Let us now turn to *Two Thousand Seasons* and the call to Africa to come back to "the way, our way."



## **Two Thousand Seasons: Come Back Africa**

*Two Thousand Seasons* is a revolutionary new departure from the theory and practice of the Western canonical novel form. Like a subterranean stream, this novel has eaten its way by degrees through the Western—informed literary structures of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest?* to erupt and achieve its status and identity as *Two Thousand Seasons*. *Two Thousand Seasons* is not a rejection of the novel form, or the elements of the novel as such; if anything at all, it is a rejection rather of the Cartesian individualistic consciousness that is the foundation and spirit of the Western novel. What takes place in *Two Thousand Seasons* is that the elements of the novel are injected with elements of the African communal ideology which, for instance, lends characterisation or point of view in this novel an African communal agreement. As opposed to the highly individualizing character of the Western novel, which Benjamin graphically depicts above, in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah seeks to communalise the novel form and create a democratic space in it in consonance with African communitarian cultural practice. Therefore, he assumes the position of the craftsman of the communal voice, the communal consciousness more concerned with the collective, rather than the individual sensibility that inhabits the Western novel. The vast majority of Western literary narratives consist centrally of the stories of one individual in isolation or of a limited number of interacting individuals. That is a representation of Western way of life. But Armah's about-turn, clearly exhibited in *Two Thousand Seasons*, also redefines what it takes to be an artist in modern day Africa. So, what many critics lament as the decline of his writing actually becomes the foundation for something positive, which could be seen as the redefinition of who an African author is, as well as a radical recasting of the novel structure. I suggest this is what happens in his post—*Why Are We So Blest?* novels. Armah's choice of point of view, mode of characteri-

zation and use of language in *Two Thousand Seasons* reveal not only the value system of the African communalistic world. It also brings to the fore the promised revolutionary recasting of the novel form.

The point of view of this novel—the communal “We” perspective—is a clear demonstration of the African worldview. It is an attempt to break out of our imposed Euro-American worldview, thereby liberating us from a dead ontology which prevents us from experiencing our world, the African world. One of Armah’s most important tasks, so far as his writing and activism are concerned, is the attempt to free Africans from the Euro-American worldview which prevents us from experiencing our African world as it really is, rather than what the Euro-American world thinks it ought to be. Generally, the choice of a point of view from which a story is told is arguably the most important single decision that the novelist has to make, for it fundamentally affects the way readers will respond emotionally and morally, to the fictional characters and their actions. Armah’s choice of the communal “We” point of view in *Two Thousand Seasons*, a point of view which is inclusive of the narrator as well as the people of Africa, indicates to the reader that we are a community and that each and every one of us is part of this community precisely because as a community we do not stand apart from one another. This is the point Foli emphasizes in his libation in *Fragments* prior to Baako’s departure for further studies in the West where solipsism is the rhythm of life:

Where you are going

go softly  
 Nananom  
 you who have gone before  
 see that his body does not lead him  
 into snares made for the death of spirits  
 You who are going now,  
 do not let your mind become persuaded

that you walk alone.  
There are no humans born alone.  
You are a piece of us,  
of those gone before  
and who will come again  
a piece of us, go  
and come a piece of us.  
You will not be coming,  
when you come,  
the way you went away.  
You will come stronger,  
to make us stronger,  
wiser,  
to guide us with your wisdom.  
Gain much from this going.  
Gain the wisdom  
to turn your back on the wisdom  
of Ananse.  
Do not be persuaded you will fill your stomach faster  
if you do not have others' to fill  
There are no humans who walk this earth alone (1971, p. 5).

The significance of Foli's libation is this: Onipa Baako was raised for living in cooperation with his community. Now he is about to travel to a "severely competitive and acquisitive society" (Busia, 1962, p.34) to further his education. The prayer, then, is to remind him of who he is and what obtains at the country where he is going to study. His uncle is telling him through the libation that he should always remember that he is part of a whole. He is not alone and he must never consider himself alone wherever he finds himself; hence the libation ends on the emphatic tone of finality: "There are no humans who walk this earth alone."

This communal "We" rhetorical pattern begins right from *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* through to *Two Thousand Seasons*, giving structure and meaning to Armah's writing and activism, to the extent that it has become a leitmotiv of his writing and activism. The last paragraph of the inspiring speech of "the new man"—Kwame Nkrumah then—ends on the note of the litany of

community and co-operation which is a feature of Armah's art. Hear him: "[a]lone, I am nothing. I have nothing. We have power. But we will never know it; we will never see it work. Unless we choose to come together to make it work. Let us come together... Let us... We.... We.... We.... Freedom.... Freeeeeeeeedom!" (Armah 1968, 2008, p.138). So, the communal "We" perspective implicitly acknowledges the existence of others whose existence is a given. This is because, by the very fact that I am in the world, I am already involved with others I might not even know. I do not have to prove that they exist in order to make sense of them, because I cannot make sense of myself without them. This is the African world and the African worldview: the worldview that Foli drills into the mind of his nephew prior to his departure to the West, the citadel of individualism, to study. As the narrator tells the audience at the end of *Two Thousand Seasons*: "[t]here is no beauty but in relationships. Nothing cut off by itself is beautiful. Never can things in destructive relationships be beautiful. All beauty is in the creative purpose of our relationships; all ugliness is in the destructive aims of the destroyers' arrangements" (1973, 2000, p.317). This quotation is also a reiteration of the absolute need for African Unity, what Armah describes as "remembering the dismembered continent"—the absolute need to repair the damage inflicted on Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884 -1885. Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* that works of art—particularly novels—helped to create national communities by their postulation of and appeal to a broad community of readers. "Fiction," Anderson writes, "seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (1983, 2006, p.36). In other words, literature in general, and the novel in particular, has the capacity of bringing people together: it has the capacity of mentally closing the distance between individuals or

communities at the level of the imagination. Thus it is that a reader of *Two Thousand Seasons* in Umtata, South Africa, for instance, does so under the presumption that there are fellow readers of this book in Abeokuta, Nigeria, or somewhere else in Africa or the African diaspora. Similarly, the craft of *Two Thousand Seasons* and the author's choice of the communal "We" perspective to address the African people in an incantatory manner are consciously made to awaken in the hearts of the African people that feeling of unavoidable solidarity which binds human beings to each other, creating an African imagined community. The feat of the twenty courageous men and women, for example, is suggestive of what contemporary Africans ought to do to restore Africa to "the way, our way."

The plot structure of this novel—the circumstances surrounding the capture and the subsequent struggle of twenty gallant African men and women to liberate themselves from captivity, and their return to the continent to work to bring it back to consciousness—serves, potentially, to awaken the African people from their colonially induced lethargy. It reinforces the call on the African people by the communal narrator, the voice of the community, the source of its knowledge and its traditions, to come back to "the way, our way," something that the very existence of the African people depend on. The narrative, which is representative of the African narrative, in this case is not filtered through the consciousness of a single observer, or what Jonathan Culler describes as "contaminating intermediaries." It is the narrative of Africans by Africans for Africans, presenting a critical challenge to the codes and canons of both the theory and the practice of the novel and its criticism as they have been developed in the West. Characterization in *Two Thousand Seasons*, which is also rooted in the African communal ethos, is a rejection of the solipsistic philosophy that underpins the Western canonical novel form. Character and characterization in fiction, so we are told and taught, should be com-

plex, rich, developing and many-sided, but Armah's characters in *Two Thousand Seasons* in particular embody none of these prescriptions. This is because they are products of a different cultural consciousness, not because—as critics who are schooled in the theory and practice of Western literature assume—they are defectively drawn. They are true to a kind of cultural experience different from the Western kind. The point here is that *Two Thousand Seasons*, as a new departure of the African novel, is a radical experimentation in the service of African reality. It is a radical rejection of the imposition of the Western form of the novel, which is a Western ideological formation and, therefore, a representation of Western thought. And as a representation of Western thought, it is without doubt embedded and interwoven in Western worldview, the worldview of which the poetics of *Two Thousand Seasons* is a divestment. The communal ethos is the fundamental truth from which point of view and characterization are derived in this novel. It is the very foundation of *Two Thousand Seasons* and it is Armah's philosophy of life. He lives it. Looked at critically from *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* through to *Two Thousand Seasons*, it is clear that Armah's writing up to *Two Thousand Seasons* was a conscious struggle to return to what he describes in *Two Thousand Seasons* as "the way, our way," of which the novel itself is symbolic. What immediately arrests the attention of the reader of *Two Thousand Seasons* is the incantatory rhythms and repetitions in the language of the novel and the presumed presence of a live audience to which I now turn.

### **The linguistics of the world of *Two Thousand Seasons***

*Two Thousand Seasons* is a text, but its style is one preserving recognisable oral patterning. It is a conscious simulation of an African oral storytelling session, demonstrating characteristics of an

oral expression: namely, an implied active audience, and audience participation, repetition and modulation of voice for communicative effect, co-ordination and syntactical parallelism. Therefore, what the reader comes into forceful contact with right from the beginning of this novel is the presumed presence of an implied active audience as well as the magisterial attitude, attribute and tone of the communal "We" narrator. The narrative is intermittently interjected by members of the narrator's alert audience in this case to announce their presence and their active involvement in shaping the narrative, their narrative. The following interjections are exciting:

Who was it prophesying? And what was it she said to pierce our comfort, the ease of ages? (1973, 2000, p.34).

and

Who asks to hear the mention of the predators' names? Who would hear again the cursed names of the predator chieftains? With which stinking name shall we begin? (1973, 2000, p.50).

or

... why break our ears with all the names, all the choices? (1973, 2000, p.153).

Audience participation and response—what modernity calls "call and response"—is an integral part of African spoken art. But in the context of the craft of *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah has given it a creative artistic processing to give the novel an African attribute, thereby domesticating it. What the reader experiences in this novel is a conscious provocation of the presumed audience by the communal "We" narrator to announce their presence. This is not necessary in a live performance, because African art is an interactive, vital, integrated, and a communal everyday activity, and this is precisely what Armah aims at in this novel. As Robert Fraser

points out, Armah has evidently become increasingly concerned with the democratic

basis of his art. There has been a marked effort to reach out beyond the confines of the literati and the university intelligentsia to the larger potential reading public, and hence hopefully to recapture some of the wider ancestral appeal of the oral artist. The translation of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* into Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa, might be taken as one instance of this. The relative directness and wide appeal of his later novels must be seen as another. The direction which his style and narrative manner have taken can hence be viewed, not so much as the result of pressures which have accumulated within the art itself, as the product of a growing awareness of the social context within which the professional artist in Africa must operate (1980, p.x).

This concern—the search for a simplified kind of writing distinguished from the hieratic, the search for the kind of writing which will make it possible for the artist to be in touch and stay in touch with the ordinary people of Africa—pervades the writing of Armah. It is profusely demonstrated in the craft of *Two Thousand Seasons* through the deployment of the techniques of orality: repetition, parallelism, co-ordination, transliteration of Ghanaian vernacular expressions to create and sustain the appearance of an oral storytelling session. What Armah is concerned with in *Two Thousand Seasons* is to reach a larger audience, the ordinary Africans. This is because there are intelligent Africans, ordinary people, who want to know what is going on around them, and Armah thinks he has a duty to reach that constituency; or at the least, to create an artistic piece which will be intelligible within their own constituency. I think Solo Ankonam speaks for Armah in *Why Are We So Blest?* when he says: “[m]any nights I have dreamed of stories I would like to write, words which would invite the reader to nod with recognition and say, “Yes, in just this way I too have experienced the things he writes about.” (1972, p.14; emphasis mine). As Toni Morrison writes:



the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered. In the same way that a musician's music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience... Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance... To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken ... to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book—is what is important (1984, p. 341).

This is the indwelling creative principle of *Two Thousand Seasons*: to make the African people partners in the production of *Two Thousand Seasons*. Like Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, Armah shares the belief that knowledge must not only be lived, it must also be used in the service of humanity. So, as Robert Fraser points out, Armah is not interested in the people who just give his works academic treatment, the literati and the university intelligentsia; his perspective in *Two Thousand Seasons* is not academic. His objective is to use his writing in helping to change "Africa's social realities for the better" (Armah, 25 August 1985, p. 1753). He is acutely aware that words by themselves do not bring about change; change has been the function of sensitized and educated human beings. As such, he is keenly focused on affecting his readers and eventually turning them "into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 777). *Two Thousand Seasons* explicitly invites the active and committed participation of Africans in advancing the agenda of the social transformation of the continent. His interest is in creativity and creative people, and he thinks the Western colonialist system of education does not instil in the Western educated African the sense of work.

For Armah, “the end of a Western education is not work but self-indulgence. An education for worms and slugs” (1972, p.161).

What Armah asks is that the African intellectual must face the social reality of Africa and work to change, in his own words, “Africa’s social realities for the better.” Unfortunately, he does not think Western education is crafted to serve that purpose. His argument appears to make him a traitor to his class of education: he went to Achimota College in Ghana, then Harvard—one of the most prestigious universities in the Western world and a citadel of Western civilization—and finally Columbia, the latter two being in the United States. However, in the case of Armah, a novelist and thinker who is wary of the slavish imitation of ideas and epistemological structures having external origin, his apparent rebellion against Western art draws sustenance from African epistemological sources. His ideology is Africa. His revolution is Africa and Africans. So he seeks to pursue the writing of a novel genre which possesses some degree of inherent agency in consonance with traditional African literary practice. Art in Africa is functional.

Of all the techniques of oral storytelling, repetition as a mnemonic device and performativity is central, giving rise to what Ong describes as “formulaic expressions,” which figure widely as an oral stylistic device in the novel (1982, p.34). So far as oral communication is concerned, memory is important to the highest degree, hence the need for repetition to trigger off memory. Considering the objective of Armah, by the power of the craft of *Two Thousand Seasons*, to make Africans literally hear the crucial all-African call to return to “the way, our way,” memory and its revival become inevitable. This is exhibited in the simulation of the dynamics of the spoken words on the printed page, thereby bringing alive the cadences of spoken speech. Take the following excerpts, for example:

Know this again. The way is not the rule of men. The way is never women rulingmen. The way is reciprocity. The way is not barrenness. Nor is the

way this heedless fecundity. The way is not blind productivity. The way is creation knowing its purpose, wise in the withholding of itself from snares, from destroyers (1973, 2000, p.76).

or

Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness. Our way knows no oppression. The way destroys oppression. Our way is hospitable to guests. The way repels destroyers. Our way produces before it consumes. The way produces far more than it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction (1973, 2000, p.76).

The repetition of “the way”—seven times in the first excerpt—and the highly rhythmic, balanced patterns aid recall by reviving memory. Co-ordination and parallelism, common features of oral style, are also distinctive characteristics of the style of *Two Thousand Seasons*. The narrator’s skill in self-expression and ability to communicate freely with others by word of mouth is demonstrated in many ways in this text. Let us deliberate on the following:

We heard also of the attempts of other white destroyers to reach other places. Here. We heard how they had reached Simpa, Anago, Bomey and Ahwei, but How they came to Anoa—ah, disastrous coming—we had not heard... (1973, 2000, p. 130).

or

Ah, blind illusion of nostalgic spirits. Ah, self-murdering deafness of ears forever cut off from the quiet, reasonable call of our way (2000, p.234).

The manner and the context in which “ah” is expressed on all three occasions is one of the effective ways of the narrator’s orality, as well as their ability to induce empathy from their target audience: the African people. Further, that “ah” may also be taken as the wistful sigh of a momentarily dejected man: in this case, the narrator. The point is that in the oral style of narration the voice of the narrator is subjected to strategic modulation for communicative effect; body language and facial expression form part of the oral communicative process. But these cannot be expressed in a

written form. So Armah resorts to the representation of the oral technique of voice modulation in the narrative of *Two Thousand Seasons*.

*Two Thousand Seasons* is a comprehensive expression of "the way, our way" to which it is fervently calling colonially misdirected Africa to come back to. Not only is *Two Thousand Seasons* itself an African literary expression of "the way, our way," but this African literary expression also contains the habitual character and disposition of the African people: namely, our anthropology, economics, history, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, traditional medicine, traditional system of social and judicial administration and so on. For example, the style of the novel demonstrates a consciously worked out linguistic strategy of transliteration without subverting the semantic and syntactic structure of the white man's language, all in an effort to suggest possible solutions to the language problem in Africa. That is why in the novel time is reckoned in seasons so that years become "seasons"; and the following English names are given Ghanaian vernacular expressions: castle becomes, "the stone place," ; kitchen becomes, "the cooking place," and so on. There are also a sprinkling of Akan words and expressions like "twapea," (chewing stick) and "poano" (seashore). To extend my argument through the train of thought of Gerhard Fritschi, for an oral culture the brain must suffice to store and transmit the cultural code of the group. Further, to keep knowledge from being forgotten it is not only necessary to subject it to frequent repetition, but also "to structure information in such a way that man's psychic apparatus accepts and retains it" (Fritschi, 1983, p.13). It is this thought and understanding that informs the crafting of *Two Thousand Seasons*, a novel that is potentially written for the ear. African history and myth are also raised to the level of art in the experimentation process of this novel.

## History and myth

*Two Thousand Seasons* is a composite of African history, African myth and an exhibition of individual artistry and talent, thereby giving the impression that African literature is the doing of African history and myth. Ghanaian oral tradition has it that once upon a time, in the Anlo area of the Volta Region of Ghana, a chief collaborated with the slave-raiders to capture twenty young men into slavery. The young men were told that the white slave-raiders were going to entertain them on their ship. They believed it and followed them into their ship only to be taken away. Essentially, then, the story of the twenty young African men and women captives could be a true story, given a radical artistic twist to make an important point: Africans are their own saviours. Further, Armah draws on the history of migration in Africa, focusing on the migration of the Akans, which is also a historical reality. However, African myth is the foundation of the formal structure and the communicative strategy of the novel. There is a sense in which Armah feels the need for Africans to cultivate a system imbued with African value systems to replace the oppressive and slavish Western model. The proverbial number seven, a product of established African mythologies, not only serves as a framework of the novel, but also as a symbol of unity and in this case African unity. It is a lucky number which is also factored into the speeches of the communal leadership in the novel. These resources are not the invention of Armah; they have been in existence in the African cultural discursive setting. They are communal cultural resources, a fact which Armah himself has repeated over and over again. He writes: "[t]he myths of Africa are a storehouse of images, symbols, words, narratives and ideas that we are free to use, if we feel called to such work, for invoking a future made of the best values we can know. What we can take there is the opposite of what the killers offer us today... (1971, 2006, p. 262). And these are myths familiar to the African people. In this way, Armah's choice

of myths in *Two Thousand Seasons* is dependent on their familiarity to the African people. According to Ralph Ellison, the Black American novelist, they can be simple or elaborate, but they are the connective tissue between the narrator and the reader or the audience. They embody the values, the cultural generalizations and the philosophical precepts by which the people live. The narrative of this novel is predicated on the history of Akan migration, as well as Akan folklore, and the reference in the narrative to the old woman and the seven children has to do with the seven clans of the Akans. In the narrative of *Two Thousand Seasons*, they are representative of the African people. As Busia correctly points out, "Africa is a vast continent, inhabited by communities that have had different historical experiences. One should be chary in describing as African culture the traditions and way of life of any one community." "But," he continues, "we often understand the greater from the smaller—moving legitimately and logically from the particular to the general—and the experience of one African community may help us to understand, by comparison or contrast, the problem of the larger whole" (1962, p.7-8). I think it is in this sense that Akan culture must be seen as a trope in the narrative of *Two Thousand Seasons*.

*Two Thousand Seasons* is doused in African culture and thought; and, the only issue that appears to be detraction from its "Africanness,"—even though I don't think that does detract *Two Thousand Seasons* from its stature as the African novel *par excellence*—is the language question in African writing. Armah is keenly aware of, and disturbed by, 'the language question'. In truth, it shows in his use of the English language in this novel. A characteristic of Armah as a creative writer and a thinker is that he has the habit of using his novels to express his thoughts about critical issues in Africa and African literature, all the time suggesting approaches that can be carried out. The language question in African literature is one of such critical issues. He agrees absolutely with

the need for African writers to write in an African language, an African lingua franca. However, given the linguistic confusion on the continent, he thinks the way forward, typical of him, is a thoughtful continent-wide solution geared towards finding a permanent solution to it. Anything short of that, for him, amounts to "looking into the rear view mirror" (29 April 1985, p.832). Another crucial observation one can make about the novels of Armah is this: just as African oral traditions and narratives are capsules of knowledge about Africa, so are the novels of Armah; they are encyclopaedic so far as knowledge about Africa is concerned. As the Dangme people of Ghana always say about Klama Cult, their oral tradition: "Klama is our school." Indeed, it is a capsule of knowledge about the Dangme people of Ghana: their history, their philosophy, their traditional medicine, their oral literature and so on. The only problem I have with the cult is that it is an elitist traditional institution. But that is another matter. The point here is that in traditional Africa works of art are designed with special regard to purpose and practical use and this is an important principle which Armah factors into his creative writing, without the elitism associated with the "Klama School," for example. This is also a practice one finds in the composition of Black-American Blues songs which provide a dossier of aspects of Black American history not available in history books. Armah puts premium on the functionality and accessibility of his creative writing and *Two Thousand Seasons* is a classic example. I think what is missing in the critical appreciation of Armah's writing is our inability to fathom the driving force behind it: the African has to be made aware of their state of alienation in order to be able to change their social conditions. The principle that links Armah's writing and social activism into a coherent whole has been the idea of process, that nothing is determined, absolute and fixed, but subject to influence and change. Consequently, for Armah, the pres-

ent dire condition of Africa can be changed. And I dare say that the process of change is in progress on the quiet.

As I have hinted at the beginning of the paper, Ayi Kwei Armah is not the only African writer notable for experimentation in fiction in African literature. Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kojo Laing, Amos Tutuola, Ousmane Sembene, Wole Soyinka are some of the names that come to mind. The experimentation of most of them, if not all, involves the incorporation of African oral traditions into the novel form. Therefore, their novels, which are subjects of experimentation, ostentatiously deviate from the Western-received ways of representing reality, either in narrative organization or in style, or in both, to change our perception of that reality. Moreover, one cannot credit the technique of deploying African oral traditions in the African experimental novel to any particular writer, because these writers put them to different uses, as their works clearly testify. It is a clear demonstration of tradition and individual talent at its best, I think. The experimentation of Armah and Ngugi in particular is dictated largely by demotic considerations: the need to reach the "common people." This is uppermost in the scheme of Armah's writing. The late Ousmane Sembene, an established novelist, resorted to cinematography precisely because he had wanted to communicate with the ordinary people, to close the communicative gap between African literary production and the ordinary people. What is holding back African novelists like Armah from going into cinematography is that it is extremely expensive with an extremely. However, I have a feeling that the idea is receiving serious consideration and that Armah and Ngugi are just awaiting a favourable moment. I think the novels of Armah, for example, are structured to lend themselves to cinematographic construction when the time arrives. The on-going experimentation in African fiction has been the subject of negative and sometimes condescending evaluation which must be addressed, even if pa-



renthetically. It might clear up some cultural, social, and historical misunderstanding of the experimentation and the direction of African fiction and African literature generally.

### **The African experimental novel and its criticism**

The poetics of *Two Thousand Seasons*—a novel genre of “the way, our way”—demonstrates among other things that criticism is an accepted, inevitable part of literary creativity; that literary creativity is participatory and communal, to the extent that it can be argued that the idea of the author is a modern day capitalist economic invention in African literature, and that authorship in traditional Africa is vested in the community. The reason is that works of art are considered communally produced and owned. However, the logic of modern day capitalist social and economic structure, as well as the seeming “death” of African oral tradition as a result of the invention of printing and writing, has contributed to the creation of the idea of authorship in modern African writing. Theirs is a calling and the raw material they use in their works—Armah keeps hammering this point in his utterances—have already been created. What is required is the application of their individual talents in the literary assembling of these literary parts in their works. The authorship of *Two Thousand Seasons*, for example, I would like to believe, does not assume to be the origin of the narrative of the novel in the sense in which Foucault attacks the concept and authority of the author in “What is An Author?” (1984). Presumably, it is the function of the community of which the narrator, not necessarily Armah, forms a part. I think the author-position of Ayi Kwei Armah in the scheme of *Two Thousand Seasons*, a paradigm of the African novel which draws literary nutrients freely from a reservoir of “sources and resources of African literature,” is purely economic. This, in my opinion, is reasonably

so. That Armah is involved in the paratextual elements of his work must not be interpreted to mean that African writers or most African writers do the same. Historically and ideologically, *Per Ankh* was, and ought to be seen as, an urgent demand that needed to be dealt with by Africans and their writers, and that Armah happened to be the prime mover of the idea was one of the travesties of our history. But I think that the establishment of *Per Ankh* is a declaration of the need for Africans to be independent of external manipulation. What Armah does best is that he uses his activism and writing to remind his people constantly of critical social problems, all the time suggesting carefully thought through solutions as well. One of the themes that receive such mnemonic handling in *Two Thousand Seasons* is the community and the communal ownership of artworks and, indeed, knowledge and its production in traditional Africa and, consequently, the absence of what Armah calls “the stamp of ownership” (2010, p.131) syndrome in traditional African literature and philosophy. *Two Thousand Seasons* does not only give clear and loud expressions to these thematic statements; the novel itself is an example as well as a collection of examples of what is and what ought to be as well as what must be done. It is—to borrow the phrase of the Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera—Africa’s “map of existence” (2000, p.15).

The point needs stressing here that in this African novel a collective narrative agent occupies the protagonist role. And the protagonist is the community, not an individual as it is expected in the Western solipsistic novel. As Uri Margolin claims in his essay “Telling in the Plural: From Grammar to Ideology” (2000), an essay which makes reference to Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, among predominantly Western novels, in Armah’s novel the individual is represented as part of a collectivity or an African cultural self; and this is a reality in African cultural practice. So it is that a character like Isanusi, an individual, has devoted his life to the service of the we-group in the novel. In all of this, the narrative as

a whole is primarily the group's narrative. The we-group in the narrative of the novel share group concerns and act on those concerns jointly. To hammer home the point further, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, there were calls from all over the world congratulating him. In a response to one of such calls on CNN, he said something like this: "I do appreciate your calls, but I'd like to make one thing clear: what we are experiencing today is the work of a group of South Africans of whom I am just a part. And so the credit is for the group: Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and others. I think that must be made clear." Finally, when Dr. Rosemary Brown, the first Black Canadian elected to public office, remarked: "[u]ntil all of us have made it, none of us have made it," she was expressing a fundamental African social philosophy of communalism and oneness. This is an important part of the make-up of *Two Thousand Seasons* and, therefore, the African novel.

That said, permit me to quote Robert Scholes on the aberrations in the criticism of the novel in general and therefore the African novel in particular:

[a] recurrent tendency in criticism is the establishment of false norms for the evaluation of literary works. To mention a few instances in the criticism of fiction, we can find Henry James and Co. attacking the intrusive narrator in Fielding and Thackeray; or Wayne Booth attacking the ambiguity of James Joyce; or Erlich Auerbach attacking the multiple reflections of consciousness in much modern fiction. The reasons for these critical aberrations are most clearly diagnosable when we see them as failures in generic logic. Henry James set up his own kind of fiction as a norm for the novel as a whole, because he was unable or unwilling to see the term novel as a loose designation for a wide variety of fictional types. In a similar though opposed fashion, Wayne Booth set up eighteenth-century rhetorical-didactic fiction as his norm. And Erlich Auerbach set up nineteenth-century European realism as his... .. since even the very best critics of fiction—men of sensitivity, learning, and acumen—can go wrong when they seek evaluative principles that cross generic boundaries, we should consciously try to guard against monistic evaluation by paying

really careful attention to generic types and their special qualities (1977, 43-44).

There are critics of fiction today, students of Henry James, Wayne Booth, Erlich Auerbach, following the footsteps of their teachers and admirers, totally ignoring the importance of genre theory, particularly in their criticism of experimental African fiction. They refuse to accept the fact that the experimental African novelist works in a tradition (African), and their achievements can be most clearly measured in terms of the tradition (African tradition) in which they work. As a genre, the African novel, like all genres, "brings to light the constitutive features of [African society] to which [it] belongs" (Todorov, 1990, p.19). So there are windows on the African experimental novel which enable the critic to peep into it and search for knowledge and understanding. But as "failures in generic logic," these critics are "unwilling to see the term novel as a loose designation for a wide variety of fictional types" of which the African novel is one. As a consequence, they end up finding rigid Western templates against which all novels, irrespective of their cultural and social context, are forced to fit. But now there is a forceful eruption of positive critical opinion emanating from the Western critical establishment concerning the critical evaluation of the novel, an occurrence which amounts to saving the right. I am referring here to Margaret Anne Doody's comprehensively researched *The True Story of the Novel* (1997).

The title—*The True Story of the Novel*—of Doody's book is very interesting. It is of critical interest because it implies the hitherto critical concealment of the true story of the novel. But, according to Doody, the truth about especially the origin of the novel must be told. As she writes:

I had long felt dissatisfied with the version of the history of the novel on which I had been bred in the 1950s and 1960 (p. xvii). If writers and critics who, like myself are undeniably Western want to explain to ourselves and others who we are and what we in the West have been doing and

thinking during our history—say in the past couple of millennia or so—we need to be ready to correct and amplify the story that we tell ourselves. Otherwise we will mislead ourselves and others (p. 3).

It is from the preceding reason that *The True Story of the Novel* is told. Doody ends her well researched book on this note:

[w]hat my sort of interpretation of the genre itself, of the novel as Novel, does not allow is our making narrow definitions of the genre and shutting out half of the prose fiction of the world. My reading will also not allow national and temporal boundaries to be the perdurable affairs they are often imagined to be. Like Herodotus, I wish to show that Asia and Africa were (and are) in contact with Europe, and to assure us that our literary history depends on a mixture, an interchange of all of these—with , it must be added, the Americas, Pacific Islands, New Zealand, Australia, and so forth. The history of the Novel is never pure. The stories told by the Novel are not “pure.” They are stories of mixture and variety, of boundary crossing and changing. The novel itself is not “pure” and refuses ever to pretend to be so... (1997, p. 484-485).

Apparently, it is in collaboration with the critical sentiments Doody expresses in *The True Story of the Novel* that Terry Eagleton writes Chapter One—“What is a Novel?”—of *The English Novel: An Introduction*. In this introductory chapter, Eagleton, like Doody before him, exposes the critical malfeasance about the origin and the definition of the novel in an objective and scientific mode of argument. For example, he writes:

[t]he point about the novel ... is not just that it eludes definitions, but that it actively undermines them ... It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together ... The novel quotes, parodies, and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestor into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them ... The novel is a mighty melting pot, a mongrel among literary thoroughbreds. There seems to be nothing it cannot do (2005, p.1).

At this point, a work that pops to mind is Ama Ata Aidoo’s seemingly problematic *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). Is it a novel or not? If it is not a novel, then what is it? The author herself claims—wisely, I

think—she doesn't know and that she has left it to the critics to determine what it is:

I never describe it as a novel myself. When I have been forced to describe *Killjoy*. I have said it is fiction in four episodes. As to its verse-prose style, it was almost an unconscious decision. There was no way I could have written that book in any other style. It seems that there were different tempos in terms of the prose, the narrative and what constituted the reflections of the major character. It seems to me to be the most appropriate way to have written that book. As I said earlier on, I leave the critic to say whether it is a novel or not (James, 1990, p. 15).

What Ama Ata Aidoo has left out, consciously perhaps, is that traditionally African literature is a composite of drama, prose, and verse: what a critic described as "total art." The three main genres live together. Like *Two Thousand Seasons*, which is the subject-matter of this discussion, *Our Sister Killjoy* draws deep from the African oral traditional rich literary storage. A characteristic of African oral traditional artistic products, which *Two Thousand Seasons* abundantly demonstrates, *Our Sister Killjoy* displays signs of possessing some degree of inherent agency. *Two Thousand Seasons* is certainly a statement or verb, that itself constitutes the actions it describes. The important point here is that modern African literature owes a lot to its African oral traditional heritage and this must be taken into account in the discussion of matters of literary antecedents. In his classic essay on the novel—"Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" (1981), a work that, in my view, leads the way in suggesting the system of methods and rules applicable to our understanding and appreciation of the novel, Bakhtin has said as much as Doody and Eagleton: the novel is a fluid art form. Like Doody and Eagleton, in "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin gives proof of the novel's unique nature by contrasting it with the epic. According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is unique in that it is able to embrace, ingest, and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a

novel. Analogically, then, the Novel, a complex genre, is comparable to a huge sprawling river and the streams that flow into it to swell it—the genres of the novel. One can, therefore, argue that the Novel is a confluence, a flowing together, of genres of the novel. That is to say, the African novel is, and must be seen as, a genre of the overarching Novel. This brings us to the next critical issue: the question of influence.

Influence, which immediately evokes originality and plagiarism so far as literary creativity in Africa is concerned, is “a dynamic principle of creativity.” It is the oxygen of creativity, and apart from God, no human being is known to have created anything out of nothing. It is a means to an end and this is the reason

[a] discussion of influences upon a work of imaginative writing [ought to] consider how far they have been ingested into the texture and general outlook of the work (or works) and also how they have been transcended by the writer (or writers), if at all, in finding a distinctive identity of voice or aesthetic effect. The fact of influence, that is, becomes more meaningful in critical observation when its scope and nature are defined in relation to the responsive individuality of use within the new hosting framework (Jabbi, 1980, p.51).

I am not a creative writer and I do not claim to be one, but I have always considered the role of influence in creative writing or creativity generally comparable to what petrol or gas does in a motor engine and therefore the motor car. It passes energy into the motor car to enable it perform a function: transport people from one point to another, for example. What happens is that the petrol gets used up in the process, but the function would have been performed anyway. And at that point what interests us is what is achieved by means of the petrol and not the petrol per se. I think that this is what occurs in creativity or imaginative writing by a good writer who is influenced. Influence helps the good writer or creator to give birth to a unique piece of work. No good writer, therefore, is diminished by being influenced. But much as influ-

ence is the fuel that propels the creative machine, it is not a one-way traffic. It works both ways. For instance, according to Shils, “[t]he laying open of Africa to explorers and colonisers was followed by the bringing back to Europe of works of African art which were assimilated into and changed greatly the tradition of European painting and sculpture” (1981, p.260). As Soyinka reveals, Shils’ claim is “manifested so robustly in the works and artistic manifestos of Gauguin, Kandinsky, Brancusi, Cezanne, Picasso and so on” (1999, p.33). This is well known in Western critical circles, but it appears to be wilfully ignored as a result of Western critical proclivity for malfeasance. In all of this, the African novel is the most traduced. But the truth is that the borrowing of artistic ideas and forms, adapting and adopting them to bear the burden of African experience, is ours through history. And this has been partly the sub-text of African critical reaction against the negative and unproductive criticism of the African novel. I think given our history of Western colonization and the subsequent imposition of Western values and practices particularly through a carefully crafted Western system of education, what Gauri Viswanathan (1989) describes as “mask of conquest”, it cannot be denied that African culture is made up of some elements that must have been appropriated from Western colonialist culture and have become part of our African tradition. Nobody denies that historical inevitability and reality. In the words of Kofi Busia:

[s]urvivals of extremely old cultures can be found alongside recently borrowed inventions and ideas. The old and the new are both part of Africa as it is today. The talking drum belongs as much to contemporary African cultures as does the telegraph or the jazz band; the baby at its mother’s back as much as the baby in the pram; the lineage or clan as much as the trade union or the political party; the chief as much as the president. All have been accepted and incorporated into the ever-changing and growing cultures that constitute Africa’s way of life (1962, p.39).



But the fact of the matter is that—and this is the logic that underpins Armah's writing and activism, neatly capsulated in the declaration made in *Why Are We So Blest?*—Africans have a rich residual African cultural heritage our writers can and do defer to. And *Two Thousand Seasons* is an obtrusive example. That Africa must be re-cultivated in its own image, for Armah, is a task that must be taken seriously, and he has made an example of himself. It is no exaggeration to say that he has dedicated his writing and life to the important work of reclaiming Africa.

The reclamation of Africa in its own image at once implicates the concept of identity which, I think, must be critically looked at in the context of this paper. According to Alan Dundes (May 1984), the word *identity* derives from the Latin *idem* meaning 'the same.' And yet, he goes on, it is obvious from all of the scholarly discussions that "identity" depends as much upon differences as upon similarities. He cites the claim of Heraclitus and much later St. Thomas Aquinas, referring to the metaphor of the flowing river, that at any one spot it is the same river but never the same water, while Locke and Hume refer to animate objects to exemplify the notion that identity remains constant even if the physical constituents change. He concludes that the same principle can be applied to group identity. I am of the view that the same argument can be made of African identity in particular, regardless of the ravages of the colonial enterprise. The pot in which salt is stored is never short of the taste of salt when the salt is used up, so goes a Dangme proverb. Identity is hardly absolutely destroyed when a people take on other identities. Let me say here in parenthesis that the claim of Heraclitus and St. Thomas Aquinas about the metaphor of "the flowing river that at one spot it is the same but never the same water," ties in with the arguments of Doody and others about the novel and its genres like the African novel. Hence the argument that the African novel is the same novel but it is different: it obviously entails contrast with, and re-

cognition by subscription of, the overarching novel. And that is what defines the African novel.

One lesson that *Two Thousand Seasons* teaches is that in the African traditional society a work of art is not an individual but a collective production. Art in all its form is a social activity, as the production of *Two Thousand Seasons* has clearly shown. Armah's experimentation, which *Two Thousand Seasons* makes an attested copy of, is a fundamental challenge to the logic of solipsism—the theory that self-existence is the only certainty, absolute egoism—which the Western canonical novel portrays is non-African, anti-African and exclusive. His experimentation with the novel, therefore, is to give the form an inclusive and populist innovation to make it an affective and effective communicative utterance in keeping with the requirements of works of art in traditional Africa. In writing *Two Thousand Seasons*, the novel that gives full expression to the *Why Are We So Blest?* declaration and "the way, our way," Armah turns to African literary antecedents what Kwabena Nketia describes as "the gems of the [African] past" (1964, p.62). One of such "gems" that Armah has dialogued with was *Chaka*, a historical epic written in 1909 by the Sotho author Thomas Mopoku Mofolo (1876—1948). A critical reading of his essay—"The Definitive Chaka" (1976)—does not leave any doubt at all in the reader's mind that Armah was in Lesotho to talk with the people to get a first-hand knowledge about Mofolo and *Chaka*. The result of that research was creatively processed into the crafting of *Two Thousand Seasons*. Indeed, he has left windows on the novel to enable the sceptics—those who think that Africa is bereft of literary models and that the idea of literary antecedents in (literary) creativity is strictly Western European—to peep into them and see things for themselves. The loud presences of Isanusi—Chaka's witchdoctor and a diviner—and Noliwe—Chaka's fiancée, two prominent characters in *Chaka*—in *Two Thousand Seasons* are evidential although their roles differ in this novel. But that is to be

expected since entering into dialogue with literary antecedents is considered to be a valuable route to originality, making it new. What is happening in the experimentations in African literature, and I think this is also true of other formerly colonized countries, is that the writers have launched a canonical counter-discourse against the literary models, norms and values of their colonial education. And the reason is that the remaking of Africa demands African epistemological models and not the Western colonialist models that have spawned the atrophy of the Continent. This is uppermost in the minds of African artists and intellectuals and it bears repetition, I think, that it is the point of Armah's powerful and unforgettable declaration in *Why Are We So Blest?*

### **Conclusion: Praxis and Two Thousand Seasons**

In conclusion, then, my answer to the eponymous question that sparked off this discussion, using *Two Thousand Seasons* as the representative African experimental novel, is this: African writers are seriously in the process of domesticating the novel. And like Wilson Harris who has rejected the conventions of the Western novel—a rejection which is exemplified in his craft of *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), Ayi Kwei Armah—unlike Wilson Harris—has in a radical manner discarded the Western canonical novel form and replaced it with a potentially democratising and democratic novel, presented in a mode suited to the ordinary African people, the ultimate objective of the experimentations of Armah and Ngugi. *Two Thousand Seasons* is a clear example of a radical novelist engaged in what is basically a democratic enterprise. He incorporates the communal traditional storytelling structure into the narrative of this novel, deferring to a strategically composed oral style that provokes a state of immediacy, a direct appeal to intuitive understanding of the message of the narrator by the reader. The praxis-oriented nature of *Two Thousand Seasons* demands that

the narrator must succeed in conveying their meaning to the reader. The success of the narrator in getting their meaning across to the reader is a mark of the triumph of the narrative as a communicative utterance. I think that is what Armah aims at in the narrative of *Two Thousand Seasons*, a novel which, both in content and form, illuminates the African worldview.

In the oral storytelling tradition in Africa, the tradition in which *Two Thousand Seasons* is deeply steeped, the storyteller is not apart from the audience; they live with the audience and within the narrative as well through the value system of their society. Armah has incorporated this artistic principle into the narrative of *Two Thousand Seasons*. He is present in the novel, and his presence is sensed and felt particularly through his deployment of the communal “We” perspective, characterization and praxis—something serving as an example to be copied. Unlike *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest?*, which are cyclically structured and closed forms, *Two Thousand Seasons* is in sharp contrast with them, providing no final events to close the narrative, no tying up of loose ends, nothing is fixed at the end. It is open-ended and optimistically futuristic:

Soon we shall end this remembrance, the sound of it. It is the substance that continues. Soon it will end. Yet still, what a scene of carnage the white destroyers have brought here, what a destruction of bodies, what a death of souls! Against this what a vision of creation yet unknown, higher, much more profound than all erstwhile creation! What a hearing of the confluence of all the waters of life flowing to overwhelm the ashen desert's blight! What an utterance of the coming together of all the people of our way, the coming together of all people of the way (1973, 2000, p. 317).

Meaning, therefore, that there is a future for a United Africa, but it is contingent upon hard work and cerebration by African intellectuals.

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