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## Africa and its Other Self: the Diasporan Identity between Mirage, Myth, and Ideology in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising*

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### **Abstract:**

*Osiris Rising* is a seminal work that addresses the topical issue of the contribution of the African diaspora to the rebirth of the continent. This reconnection is far from being a naive and illusory dream as it is motivated by practical projects sustained by a sound political vision. The unity of all the afro descendants and their brothers of the continent is at the same time a psychological healing from the centuries-long trauma self-hatred, and denigration. It further advocates a political revolution in a continent whose main problem is division.

**Keywords:** Other self, Diaspora, Psychological disturbances, Self-hatred, Revolution

### **1. Introduction**

If there is almost no doubt that the ethnic and genetic origins of African Americans, and other Black communities in many parts of the world can historically be traced back to Africa, the identity(ies) of these 'brothers' from the diaspora remain(s) a much-debated issue. While some writers claim that the Africans from the Diasporas have no common identity with their ancestral cultures from Africa, others argue that the psychic and physical reconnection with 'home' to which these diasporan Africans belong culturally is the latter's hope of giving a new sense of purpose to their lives. The imposed nationalities they have acquired have never really accepted them as full citizens with fair political, cultural and economic rights.

The contact between Africans and their Diasporas has yet never been totally severed. Many messianic and political movements have tried to reconnect the two communities. The result so far has not produced any real return back trend. During the colonial time, lots of ideologies used by African leaders were inspired and developed by the Africans from the diaspora: Pan Africanism, Negritude. Literatures, songs and tales by these Africans would urge their people to return home. The Harlem Renaissance used Africa as one of its key symbols and myths. Notwithstanding that, in Africa, the first generation of African writers failed to address the issue though some references may randomly be noted in the Negritude movement, which elsewhere borrowed many of its essentialist theories from the literatures of the diaspora. They were rather concerned with assuming a cultural heritage that had for too long been denigrated. The second generation of African writers shifted to more urgent issues of accounting for the crisis subsequent to independences and the bad management of the new African leaders. The focus was no more external (the former colonial masters) but rather redirected internally to Africans to assume responsibility for the ordeal of the continent. The mentions made of Africans of the diaspora was therefore rather scanty.

With Ayi Kwei Armah, the unity of all Africans from the continent and from the other parts of the world is a literary motif that colours all the works of the Ghanaian writer. The themes of slavery, colonialism and their traumatic effects on the inhabitants of the continent and the diaspora have relentlessly been narrated and can be accounted for in his titles and narrated stories. One would be tempted to say that division among the Blacks, which fueled slavery and colonialism, has become an obsessing metaphor whose demons can be overcome by the unity of all Black people over the world.

Notwithstanding, the concept of diaspora needs some clarification as it may be heavily charged with ambivalence in a world of physical and cultural connections and with economic and political immigration movements. By diasporans here we are not referring to those Africans who leave Africa willingly generally after independencies to settle down in western countries, and whose nationalities they sometimes acquire. These are fortune hunters or asylum seekers from new dictatorial regimes whose management they see as worse than western imperialism and colonization. By diaspora in this study, we mean those Afro descendants whose ancestors were taken away on a forced voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. Considered as the estranged brothers, their return back home buys into several ideologies from melanic unity to renewed Renaissance of Africa. They are expected to contribute to that political and cultural renaissance. Should these Africans be reasonably regarded as part of Africa? Are they only claiming that cultural historical brotherhood and therefore express any need of a return back? These questions are all the more pertinent as the image of Africa that is presented to the world is a rather bad track record that can deter anyone outside the continent from making return plans or being sensitive to any ideology of reconnecting with the ancestral origin. The reluctance of the diasporans to undertake such a project of coming back to Africa is also fueled by the fact that the very 'brothers' or 'sisters' to whom these Afro

descendants are willing to come back to are themselves moving heaven and earth to get to the western world. Africa in the Medias is indeed reduced to a cascade of calamities. To what extent can the dream be alive and therefore be analyzed? What are the political, mythological, imaginary motives of this need for a return back? Why is it becoming a common motif of a certain literature?

As the present study seeks to highlight the deeper causes that explain the attitudes of African Americans towards Africa, we will resort to categories of arguments developed by history, sociology and psychology. In so doing, we pledge to analyze the respective images of Africa for these diasporan figures and reversely the way Africa perceives these other Africans outside the continent. Do the respective images correspond to the reality? In which ways do both representations idealize reality? This study analyzes the continuities and changes in the images of Africa and its Diasporas.

## 2. Haunting Imagery of Slavery and the Dispersal of Africans

### 2.1. Slavery and the Diasporic Figures as a Literary Obsessing Metaphor

The least that can be said about Armah's works is that the theme of slavery and the diasporan figure is an obsessing association in the writer's literary universe. The concern with this topic is so pervasive that one-character wonders why the hero Baako, that alter ego of the writer in *Fragments*, is so preoccupied with such an issue which the former deems outdated. Africa is independent and free now and Asante Smith who is the boss of Ghana vision finds it hard to understand Baako who always puts the issue at the center of his reflexions and artistic creations. The latter answers that the issue is a continuing legacy that can be observed in the Blacks' attitudes ever present, in the attitudes of the people, the authorities and the leaders. This painful historical experience has left indelible marks on the imagination and psyché of the post slavery and postcolonial subjects. African writers have room, in their productions, for these 'brothers' of the diaspora whose ancestors were uprooted from their communities. Soyinka's *The Interpreters* has its diasporic figures, so does Achebe's *A Man of the People*. For the new generations, writers like Adichie Chimamanda Ngozi (*Americanah*), Noviolet Bulawayo (*We Need New Names*), Taiye Selassi (*Ghana Must Go*), etc. whose stories are often set in non-African contexts make regular references to the Africans of the Diasporas.

In Armah's narratives and stories, slavery is an overriding motif, i.e., a repeated item that runs through the author's works with variations on the theme. These works analyze the continuing psychological legacy of such a practice on diasporic characters who clearly show signs of the effects of that traumatic history on their psychés. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, there are clear allusions to ancestral African leadership who took part in the slave trade and used the fruit of that betrayal for their personal egoistic enjoyment. The postcolonial leadership is only perpetuating that long tradition of self-betrayal. The narrator traces their current betrayal of their people's hopes to that of their ancestors who sold their own people to foreigners for their material comfort: 'And yet these were the socialists of Africa, fat, perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who had sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade.' (131). The same narrator relentlessly recalls the sick minds of those leaders who indulged in that trade for mere valueless objects: 'He would have asked if anything was supposed to have changed after all, from the days of chiefs selling their own people for the trinkets of Europe' (149).

In *Fragments*, the same preoccupation runs through the text as the narrator tries to channel present attitudes of African leaders and people to the betrayal of the ancestors who sold their own sons and daughters to foreigners thus contributing to the 'breaking' and 'split [ting]' of their own people (199).

Naana pronounces prophetic words about the return of betrayed and lost sons as symbolized by Baako: 'All that goes return/He will return' (1). Juana, a Puerto Rican in the same novel, attempts a problematic return back 'home' but fails to reconnect with it in a successful way. In *Why Are We So Blest?* Netta finds in Modin an anchoring to reconnect with her roots but is soon disappointed with the latter's tight relationships with the oppressor's community symbolized by the Oppenhardts whom he misleadingly considers as friends to the African he is. The critic Robert Fraser has studied the intertext of the 'American and Black revolution' rhetoric in *Why Are We So Blest?* The novel recaptures that revolutionary context in the narratives of its African characters. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, the narrator keeps reminding his narratee the melanic brotherhood of all people in the world who have a black skin: 'That we the black people are one people we know. Destroyers will travel long distances in their minds and out to deny you this truth' (3). The same narrator criticizes division among Africans which he regards as a fatal disease:

Pieces cut off from their whole are nothing but dead fragments. From the unending streams of our remembrance the harbingers of death break off meaningless fractions. [...] Beware the destroyers. It is their habit to cut off fingers from the hand itself uprooted from its parent body, calling each fallen piece a creature in itself, different from ears, eyes, noses ... (1).

He recalls the breakup and scattering of Africans in many parts of the world because of the slave trade: 'That our people are scattered even into the desert, across the sea, over and away from this land [Africa], and we have forgotten how to recognize ourselves?' (1-2)

### 2.2. Narrating the Continuing Legacy of Slavery: from Displacement to Reconnection in *Osiris Rising*

Armah's fifth novel narrates the imaginative recrossing of the Middle Passage, this time back to Africa. The narration is replete with several sequences where the trauma of slavery is still felt in most of the descendants of former slaves. An analysis of the personalities and behaviors of the characters of the diaspora account for those disturbed personalities. They are fragmented minds who seek for sanity and a meaning for their lives.

The novel reveals a poetics of a collective psychological unease. If in other books by the same writer characters are fighting to make a living in a problematic world to which they have become strangers, in *Osiris Rising*, the fate of the Africans of the diaspora is summed up by the title of the article about the ankh, that symbol of Africa's redemption: 'Who are we and why'. The lament over one's condition in a world that is not theirs is a constant concern. Chapter one sets the tone of that poetics of an existential malaise. Ast's grandmother is a silent and sad woman. She is often impenetrable as she keeps to herself as if she were unable to convey her feelings, giving only cryptic and enigmatic answers. The narrator speaks of a 'soul's withdrawal', of a 'hardened face' (1). When Ast as a child asks to know more about the symbolic statuette her grandmother keeps in their house, the old woman utters a few words that say much about the existential and psychological state of her mind: 'Do you know that our people were sold into slavery?' The descendants of these former slaves like Ast may have forgotten that part of their history. But it is still vivid in the old woman's mind. The question raises several intractable concerns in the mind of the little girl. The search for the answers to these concerns will shape her future adult life. 'Who sold us? What did such a betrayal mean? Was it dead history? Or does it still have the energy of news, with power to shape the future?' (1). The narrator accounts for the young girl's psychological state of mind and says that these questions were 'unsettling the balance of her soul' (1). Instead of crippling her energy, of turning her into a bitter, sad, and humiliated personality, Ast sets to find answers that will take her to where these sad events of the lives of her ancestors started: 'home' in Africa.

The novel *Journey to the Source* whose narrative is inserted into the novel *Osiris Rising* using the *mise en abyme* technic shows the effort of a slave heroine who tried seven times to escape back to Africa. In spite of the tortures inflicted on her for attempting to run away back to Africa, she never gave up trying until her eyes were gouged out. The author of the fictive novel is urged to give to his original narrative a storyline that distorts the original version and presents the historical figure as some sort of psychologically disturbed character. The final version imposed by the white editor on the African American writer takes out the cruelty of the white master which is replaced by the madness of the African heroine. This editorial 'arrangement' clearly betrays the return myth as a manifestation of a collective dissatisfaction, a discourse of frustration and loss of identification with this forced American identity. This revisionist editing of a fiction inspired by a poignant inspiring historical event is regarded as a ritual of self-betrayal by Ast.

Ast has several questions on her mind for which she has no answers. The early chapters convey that atmosphere of an incomprehensible world. Contrary to some African-American characters who accept their world as it is and are happy in it, Ast is very eager to find answers to the questions that assail her mind. Her own parents find it hard to cope with the grandmother's concerns as regard Africa. She keeps symbolic objects that anchors her to her African origins which are full of meanings. But Ast's father and mother regard these objects as relics to get rid of and the old woman herself is suspected of having strange concerns and interests. She is indeed concerned with not giving names that perpetuate their slavery legacy. That is why she imposes the name Ast on her grand-daughter, a name who's meaning the girl would learn later and like even more.

The author of *The Journey to the Source* is enjoying his success after betraying the history of his ancestress. He is content with enjoying the fruits of this story that has betrayed the vision of his ancestress. In the early chapters, Ast is still trying to find answers to several questions. 'Why should vision be denied coming generations descended from this woman who tried seven times despite despair to retrieve a stolen future', 'Are we to see human beings as commodities too?', 'Was the article his signal ... but the answer to a necessary call? Was any justification possible for the abandonment of a friend in love?' (3, 6 and 11). She spends nights pondering over issues for which she has no satisfactory answers. So, the early Ast does not have a clear life program. She only has questions for which she needs answers. It is the search for answers to the questions that will take her back to Africa. But the unanswered questions contribute to create the effect of a tense and unsatisfactory mood of the narrative on the reader.

The deeply affected personality of Ast by the American society echoes the disturbed psychological growth of other diasporan characters like Juana, Netta in Armah's other works. Each of these figures is described as living a life of dissatisfaction caused by a vivid sense of injustice and a lack of perspectives at political, social and emotional levels. They therefore seek meanings to their lives at the professional level, companionship for life in love, and other social commitments.

The African American Netta has a brief love affair with Modin but is soon disappointed by his naivety. Juana is the lover of Baako soon after he arrives in Ghana but her leaving him alone speeds up his decline into psychological troubles. Ast finds both life goal and love in her companionship with Asar. She comes back hoping to do something useful and meaningful for herself and for Africa. But she soon learns that the way to Africa is a perilous adventure as the Destroyers are still reigning and the way is still paved with the worst intentions by unknown adversity. The companionship of the ankh that she has joined is working for no immediate gains: theirs is only seed time far from harvest and easy love consumption. The message of the story is an invitation to Africans of the diaspora to come back. But when they come, it will be to contribute to build a united country where the legacy of the slave trade, the balkanization of Africa into 'fifty idiotic neocolonial states' (10), colonialism and tribalism or ethnicism that are its byproducts, will be ruled out. Ancient Egyptian mythology is recalled to serve as a unifying symbol and myth of one Africa inhabited by all Africans at home and abroad. The fictionalization of the project of reconnecting with home is an echo to the nurtured project of a return back to Africa as materialized by the return trend to Liberia and Sierra Leone, the religious movement of Ethiopianism and Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line project. This commitment to the unification and rebirth of Africa is the antidote to the feeling of inadequacy, worthlessness, and impotence.

*Osiris Rising* is yet no self-celebratory narrative. It is almost a counter narrative to an Afrocentric or negritude claim of a 'they' against 'us' narrative with all the blacks on one side the non-blacks on the other side. Here the naive

melanic brotherhood is countered by the abuses of local traditions, the felony, stupidity and treachery of 'brothers' turned enemies against their own people whom they claimed they have come to work with for the redemption of the continent. Here is a narrative of self-betrayal, of the inhumanity of brothers against brothers. Even the legendary hospitality and solidarity of Continental Africans towards their African-American brothers are used against the former to betray the African revolution. This is far from being the narrative of a black race that is united against a common external enemy. It raises fundamental questions: what is a racial community, a black community that encompasses territorial and geographical heterogeneity?

As for the conscious and positive diasporan figures that people Armah's novels, they go through a qualitative change. From a state of futility, depression, loneliness which reflects the historical background in their respective countries, they go through a radical change once they effect a return back home looking for love and life work.

### 3. Narrating the Diasporan Life

*Osiris Rising* narrates the impossibility for Afro descendants to feel at home elsewhere outside of Africa. It also warns that the return back movement will be no leisure travel for these Africans of the diaspora.

#### 3.1. Being Black in the Western World

The African of the diaspora is a permanent victim of some negative feelings of poor self-perception and a feeling of being out of place. This denigrating image of self develops into self-hatred or indiscriminate violence as a consequence of the traumas he/she has been through for several generations. Armah's novel delves into the psychology of a suffering minority. The existential homesickness that the member of that minority displays is the consequence of the displacement imposed on him by the slave trade. The new dwelling place where he has been taken to against his will and which has become his home is not, in actual facts, his/hers. The feeling of strangeness, of otherness, of alienness is conveyed through an aesthetics or a poetics of the unease. A whole rhetoric of unease therefore prevails in the novel studied. NWT, Ast's grandmother, displays an impenetrable face to the point of being compared to a close door. The only moment she smiles is when her granddaughter asks her to explain the meaning of the Ankh symbol. She speaks in monosyllabic words and leaves to the interlocutor an undecipherable face: 'Then her face hardened as if the answer had closed a window on it'. When she is willing to answer, it is by another question: 'Do you know that our people were sold into slavery?' Her granddaughter describes this attitude as the 'great soul's withdrawal' (1). The story of the 'African', that character who dreamed of returning to Africa and unsuccessfully tried to affect that travel back, sums up the common story of thousand slaves who tried to run back believing naively that they could join the homeland. Though they failed to achieve their dream, their examples inspire succeeding generations. Her descendent, the author of *Journey to the Source*, lives in no fairer society. But contrary to his ancestress, he has found some fulfilment in his new home. He is eager to improve his material living condition even if this must consist in betraying the collective fight of his people who are kept in modern forms of bondage. He indulges in lots of 'compromises' with the system that blind him to the problematic identity that is his. He is part of the 'crumb-hungry' Africans who are ready to betray their community for their 'unthinking profit'. His life is reduced to seeking material wealth, in becoming a 'commodity' that can be sold. He has this to say to Ast who complained about his 'commodifying' the African-Americans' history: '... a commodity is precisely what our history is ... Whatever has any value is a commodity. Your sweet soul is a commodity. We're products ... That's how we survive, live, thrive. Here in America. Now.' (6)

*Osiris Rising* presents in several instances diasporic figures who aspire to be what they cannot be, who deny or reject their identities and community. By this attitude, they show a personality disorder which is a consequence of racism. These disturbed characters materialize the existential self-hatred paradigm of the African American literature as evidenced by this topos in the heroin of Toni Morrison's debut novel (*The Bluest Eye*), Ralph Ellison's existential hero in *The Invisible Man* or Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas.

The story of the 'African' slave inserted into the main narrative and the discussion between Ast and the African American author of *Journey to the Source* shows how the system imposes its values and norms on artists and artistic productions. Here aesthetics prevails over ethics and the narrative strategies and formal devices of the novel are being imposed on the author. His original ideas and the collective myths of his community are distorted or denied to serve the purpose of dominating cultures which can thus perpetuate their domination. By accepting the ideas that are imposed on him, the author of this novel *mise en abyme* is infusing self-denial and hatred, shame of one's true collective history to his people into his narrative. There is a philosophical ring to the discussion between Ast and the author about artistic production. Art does not consist in blinding the social uglinesses. It must show them as they are as a way of denouncing the society that creates them. For Adorno indeed, 'art must take up the cause of that which is branded ugly'. By ugly we refer also to moral ugliness which the hypocrite society tries to hide to itself and its members. But the philosopher has a strong recommendation: 'art has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image.' (T. Adorno: 1984: 72). In *Journey to the Source*, the society which is responsible for the madness, ugliness of the world of slavery is exonerated from its responsibility in that crime against humanity. This philosophical conception of artistic production reflects Armah's conception of creative writing. His whole literary career has consisted in revealing the ugliness of the world in which his characters live, the history and causes of that ugliness and the way out of it.

By meekly submitting to the demands of the editor, the black author adopts an auctorial posture that O. Tobner has summarized in a formula: 'Black Skin, White Discourse' (in B. B. Diop:2005: 11), a reference to Frantz Fanon's seminal book, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

In a context of domination such as the American society, to abide by the unjust, binding norms and abstain from any action to change the unbearable *status quo* is to help strengthen and perpetuate the system's grip on its defenseless victims. *The Journey* reveals the relationship that Blacks have always had with the world of slavery: that of being a mere commodity or playing a role in the functioning of its commercial system. We are here in the 'reified' society Marxist philosophy has so finely analyzed, and which transforms human beings into thing-like beings. (Harris, Kiernan & Miliband: 1983: 463). To achieve the goal of commodifying human beings, they will have recourse to the divide and rule policy which consists in opposing their African victims between field slaves and house slaves. It is the same device that is used in the fictionalized story of *Osiris Rising*. While the majority of African Americans are victims of the American society, a few elected members of their community, like the author of *Journey*, receive prebends as a grant for their betrayal of their community as a whole. But such a material fulfilment is no emancipation. Under current conditions of systemic racial inequality, to be granted crumbs of the system for a selfish material comfort is a form of betrayal and capitulation.

Such a vision of life which reduces one's life to the material survival, to Ast's analysis, 'owed its force to something peculiar and specific: the circumstance of living in America' (6). According to that analysis, the only African of the diaspora who is happy and finds some fulfilment in his life in America is some sort of deranged and delusional individual who is trying to make up for the spiritual vacuum by an inflation of the satisfaction of the body needs. Sheldon Tubman is such a psychologically unstable African. He desperately looks for friendship and approval in the American white community but ends up being emotionally destroyed when he realizes that he will never be accepted as one of them. He is shattered when what he had considered as his love affair with Adele Morgan is none. She, like David Weiss, are using him as a human guinea pig for their research experiment on 'The Black Man's Mind'. He tries different desperate attempts to make a meaningful life which always end in disappointments:

The misadventure [with Adele Morgan and David Weiss] destroyed Sheldon Tubman's universe. He lost energy. Company brought him pain. What he felt he needed most was a hiding place – remote, inaccessible, peaceful. [...] He tried suicide. He slit both wrists and plunged them in a sink full of water. He was discovered unconscious and taken to hospital. The Sheldon who emerged after fragile healing was different from the gregarious star. [...] He disappeared. Rumor said he had entered a Trappist monastery in Canada. Someone reported having seen him at a Baha'i seminar in Bhutan. He became a Muslim for a spell. Then he joined an Authentic Yoruba village founded on principles of Negritude and based in the Mississippi delta. (95)

The suicide as presented here is an extreme form of lack of self-esteem or self-hatred that have become a dominating thematic trope in the diasporan literature. Depression and fatalism subsequent to systemic racism and lack of perspectives have overcome the capacity for resilience of the black community. Self-inflicted deaths, self-destructive attitudes pervade Toni Morrison's novels from *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola's longing for the eye's nature cannot give her is a form of suicide, to *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved* (1988). *Osiris Rising* narrates the lives of many diasporan figures who live in a context of psychic and identity dissatisfaction and suffering. Part of Cinque's psychological confusion is shown in his histrionic and megalomaniac personality. The conglomerates of names he adopts suggest the search for a mistaken identity.

All the experiences Ras goes through, i.e., Islam, Christianity, Rastafarian rituals, many other sects, negritude, etc. are only a refuge against a visionless and meaningless life, desperate attempts to face an unsatisfactorily life in a society that has never been his and which has never accepted the diasporan figure as a full member of the American society. Sheldon Tubman finally ends up in Africa strutting up his walk like some glorified Guru or deranged fanatic promoting values and traditions he has hardly finished learning. He believes these sick values will reestablish him to some semblance of dignity that he is denied in America. The African-American characters of the novel have all experienced this loss of dignity and unsatisfactory mode of life. The painter Bailey, Tubman alias Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano, Earl Johnson alias Wossen the fake Ethiopian prince, the latter's boss Reynaldo Kent, the Lees, a couple of dentists who have settled in Africa to make a living, Jacqueline Brown the innocent and naive young girl who is encouraged by her grandmother to take the trip back to Africa which the latter has not been able to do, all these characters have experienced this feeling of being strangers to an insane cultural and political society.

All the diasporan characters of *Osiris Rising* share this sense of unease as long as they are in the USA. The only difference between these characters is their attitudes in front of this general malaise in this country their ancestors had not chosen to come to. While some see the way out of their lives of confusion in integration in the American lifestyle, some others are for the option of leaving for Africa. Ast sums up this dilemma: 'Sometimes it came down to a series of yes no choices. Africa or America.' (132). A fellow like Sheldon Tubman alias Cinque consistently chose America but when he feels rejected, he finds refuge in Africa without the slightest positive vision to change his life for a better and meaningful sense. Ast has always chosen Africa like the Lees, the painter Bailey etc. For Ast, the decision has never been a difficult one. She has always felt that life in America was no option for her. She has never considered her diasporan life as separate from her

African identity in this rhetorical question: 'Do you see diasporan life as separate from African life?' (129). The violence some of these diasporan figures often resort to and the other irrational attitudes (drug addiction and dealing, religious syncretism, etc.), from a psychological and psychoanalytical perspective, reflect their subconscious wills of rebelling against the hypocritical norms of an unfair society.

It is possible to trace the archeology of that violence in the black community to the 'stagolee syndrome' or complex which consists in translating one's frustration into antisocial behavior. Molefi K. Asante explains the myth that sustains all behaviors that rail against evil with violence, seeks to achieve revenge and victory by all means necessary:

Stagolee represents the radical impulse to challenge an authority that seeks to repress freedom, improvisation, and harmony. The direct – action orientation of stagolee is found in Marcus Garvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcom X, and

Martin Luther King, Jr. But Stagolee does not have King's religious emphasis; he is instead a symbol of uncensored, unself-conscious force, pulsating with unpredictability. This mythoform is a recurring pattern in every aspect of African culture in the United States. (Asante: 1998: 118)

As the prototype bad boy or man, the stagolee figure is the embodiment of a myth that emphasizes toughness. 'Stagolee is the ultimate projection of the black phallus into the white belly of America' (Asante: 1998: 119). Violence becomes the only means to restore a sense of human dignity. It consists in systematic rejection of anything that comes from the system that alienates them and their community. 'Negroes who are constantly confronted or threatened by discrimination and inequality', Asante argues, 'articulate a sense of outrage. Many react with hostility, sometimes translating their feelings into antisocial actions.' (Asante: 1998: 120)

But contrary to the revolutionary violence that figures like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and John Henry advocate, the violence that Reynaldo Kent and his cohort Wossen are involved in achieves no positive goal for themselves and their community. It is generally directed against the black community itself destroying its own members. It consists in drug selling, robbing, murder, a sort of visionless and gratuitous violence which is a desperate attempt to make one's living at the expense of others, of taking by force what one is not allowed to achieve by honest means. This develops into forms of nihilism expressed in self-destructive attitudes as a consequence of the failure of the society to function on fair rules, of delivering its goods equitably. As we can see, it is no innate violence, no genetic disposition of the blacks for antisocial behavior. For Ast, the option of returning 'home' has always been clear. Her words 'America isn't home to me...' (110) echo Malcom X's that 'being here in America doesn't make you an American' (in Asante: 1998: 53).

It is not enough to wish to come back. The African of the diaspora who has the will to come must be prepared to face a number of obstacles that have to be overcome if he is to make a meaningful life back here.

### 3.2. The Problematic Return

Far from being an easy and happy homecoming, the returnees are confronted with a number of setbacks that they had not thought of. First, they come back 'home' feeling like lost souls which they hope to heal by some needed companionship. They long to travel on useful roads with a redeeming companionship. They come back with the optimism of the lost brothers/sisters confident that the family will welcome them open arms. But they soon realized that things are not that simple. In *Osiris Rising* Ast feels that, at best, she is not fully accepted as an African by close friends and, at worse, is openly rejected and regarded with suspicion. Her ordeals start at the airport where her plane has landed. The intense interrogation she goes through at the airport shows clearly that she is *persona non grata*. The hostility towards the visitor by the first people she gets in touch with foreshadows a troublesome stay in the country as is clear in the following heated argument:

Bring one [chair] and sit down, her [the agent] said pointing left.

- What's happening?' Ast asked as she sat.
- We do the questioning, he said, flipping a switch. (14)

This is only the start of a series of trials that makes her lose her calm and patience. The least that can be said is that it is an unexpected welcome for someone coming with so much hope and enthusiasm. 'She had wished for a different welcome. She would have spent the first days in quiet solitude, then made inquiries about where to go to live, to work, perhaps to love' (16). From the airport, she is taken to a higher security post where she goes through a long, tiresome and irritating questioning by the country's security boss. The latter happens to be Seth Spencer Soja, a suitor in her student days at Emerson. She regards what she goes through as 'harassment' (30). When Seth tells her that she is in these security headquarters for her own protection, she sarcastically tells him that she does not feel safe with him for her first day in Africa. 'The only threat I'm under is from you' (30).

Ast comes to Africa hoping to find love, brotherhood and useful work that agrees with her dreams and convictions. She would like to go local and merge into the local people but is usually reminded her American citizenship. The first taxi driver who takes her to the hotel asks her if she is 'a black American'. Surprised she answered him: 'Does it show?' (48). So everywhere she interacts with people, she is relentlessly reminded that she is an American and not an African.

The only Africans of the diaspora that are welcome in Africa are those who serve the interests of local neocolonial authorities. They are offered positions of power and material means as long as they contribute to tighten up the control of the postcolonial dictatorial regime over their populations. These Africans of the diaspora see in the more conscious ones like Ast their enemies. These negative figures come back sometimes motivated by the best ideals. But when confronted with the hard realities of the continent, they revert to past habits of violence, betrayal and unbridled materialism they have developed in America at an early age. They all come with dreams of reconnecting with their roots and making something useful of their meaningless and visionless lives in America. They unfortunately end up in countries as hopeless as the one they left behind. Sheldon Tubman renamed Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano in the tropics is a typical case of Africans of the diaspora whose professed ideals are only a thin smooth layer on the polish that hides their true corrupt minds. He comes to Africa after many unsuccessful attempts to be fully integrated into the American reified society. Earl Johnson alias Wossen, the fake Ethiopian Prince, when faced with troubles in America runs back to Africa for refuge. When faced with the hardships and material deprivations of the postcolonial states, these diasporan figures become easy preys for neocolonial authorities who use them as agents for their dictatorial regimes. The character Netta explains to Ast the vulnerability of these figures:

Foreigners are sometimes more vulnerable than people born here. They can be miserable without jobs. Some are elated when offered villas and monthly allowances. A few African-American visitors... got trapped that way. I know two who came burning to revolutionize the world and start the rule of justice. The security fellows watched them until they got

broke. Then [the authorities] hit them with the money. Think of it. They came wanting so much to escape slavery in America. They ended up joining the slave dealers here. (68)

Their revolutionary and idealistic zeals cannot withstand trivia and insignificant pleasures like 'hot dogs. Hamburgers. Mayonnaise', 'ketchup', (80). They soon go homesick and find it hard to resist the temptation of going back to the USA or compromise their ideals for these things which the local authorities use as baits by providing them with these products. The erstwhile revolutionaries are easily turned into agents of the authorities, spying on the population for the security services for 'lot of perks: flats, hotel, suites, petrol coupons, cars, money' (68). Of all the diasporan figures of *Osiris Rising*, only the Lees and Ast have resisted the government's payoffs and accepted to work to change things by themselves. SSS has proposed a suite to Ast at the Southern Hilton Hotel and many other fringe benefits which she has turned down (145).

What is ironic and painful, though, is that once back in Africa, the diasporan characters feel rejected by their brothers and sisters of the continent. Ast, for instance, feels rejected by the local people who do not understand her commitment to settle in a small hinterland village with all her academic credentials. Nobody seems to believe she means business when she tells them she has come to stay. (102). He who is the secret reason why she has chosen this part of Africa does not seem, at first, to accept her as part of a common life project. He has good reasons for his distrust of the motivations of Africans from the diaspora. For him, it is easy and almost natural for an African born and educated in Africa to come back home even after a long stay abroad. The situation is different for an African American. 'Nothing [in Africa] to attract anyone not born in my situation' (102). But Ast firmly claims her African identity. '[...] Let's say I'm looking for the way home. I know where I've come from isn't it. I'd like to think I've come to the right place' (110). What Asar fears make Africans from the diaspora ill-suited to live and work in Africa is the issue of material comfort. They are not prepared to face the hardships of a life of material deprivation that is so rampant in Africa (111). To that argument of Asar Ast has an answer which she utters in a rhetorical question: 'But what of people whose aim is fulfillment, not [material] satisfaction?' (111).

There are other reasons why Asar is reluctant to include Ast in his political activities. To seek for change in neocolonial Africa is also assimilated to subversive acts by the neocolonial rulers, an accusation which often ends with the elimination of the activists. 'Suppose you're in a situation where chances of survival are not high. Is that any situation to invite friends into?' (244). Most other people see in those returnees' tourists or at best brothers or sisters who have come just to have a look out of curiosity. When Ama Tete the historian meets Ast for the first time, she asks the African American a question that says much about the historian's opinion about the African of the diaspora. 'But tell me, are you a tourist or are you coming back?' (252).

As a historian whose reputation has reached circles of these Africans of the diaspora, Tete is often consulted with by the latter for information about themselves, their origins which information they 'export' back to America to display for personal boasting: 'Others have come searching. What they find they take back to America' (252) for TV shows, documentary films, etc. To that attitude Ast opposes her life goal which does not consist in digging up secrets about origins to boast about once back in America. 'What interests me ... is not information for export. I'm trying to create ... to decide on a meaning for my life. I think that meaning begins with being here. Living here' (253). Roots thus regarded by these holiday returnees have no positive value. It is the relevance of ancestral values for present and future times that matters. 'It is not what roots look like that is important. It's what roots do. If we let them do their work, they'll send amazing springs of creativity into the universe. But I've seen Americans scratch around hoping to dig them up for exhibition. It's one more way we keep rehearsing our murder' (243). These Americans who have for long been denied any past outside the time of slavery have a deep rooted and emotional attachment to their roots. Roots in these circumstances may be a reaction to boost their collective pride and sooth their wounded ego. But Ast's commitment teaches a new lesson beyond the first emotional reaction which brings no solution to the real problems. Her quest is not motivated by mere curiosity. She is back to work with companions in a constructive aim.

The same suspicion is reflected in the question of the character named The Mystic Comrade to Ast when they meet for the first time. 'How long will you be here?' (197). When the African-American answers that she has come to stay, Maanan Djan warns her that such a commitment needs further consideration: 'Isn't that [decision] premature?' (197). It is the routine question that Asar himself had asked Ast in their first encounter when she came back. The rhetorical question he asks here says much about what he thinks of her project of coming for good: 'You plan to return, don't you?' (110). All these attitudes show that Ast is regarded as a foreigner, almost an intruder who will surely find it impossible to stay for long. When Asar tells her clearly that 'you're an American' (111), her frustration shows out clearly. 'To you that [to be an American] means I'm inoculated against wanting to live in Africa. Why?' (111). Disappointed and almost angry of knocking against closed doors, she wants Asar to explain why he excludes her from any long-term project about African renaissance. He gives her the following explanation: 'Admit there's the question of convenience. From where you live, there are no genuine problems of basic material survival in America. The big problems there are about what people there call satisfaction. How to make more of a privileged existence' (111).

What the painter Bailey, who is another diasporan figure of the novel, refers to as the 'diasporan confusion' (129) is a consequence of the feeling of being rejected by the very society many try hard to identify with, i.e., the American society. When back to Africa, these African-Americans experience the same feelings of being rejected and even stigmatized. Ast almost reproaches Asar of not being cooperative and helpful. She finds that he does not believe in any alternative life in Africa for the Africans of the diaspora:

Of course, I've felt repelled by America. Throughout its short story I see America fighting societies trying to break free of meaningless lives. It is a repulsive legacy. But revulsion is not my motivation. I am here because I see possibilities of

a better life, not to be picked up and consumed, but to be created, lived. I want to work to make that life real. Why is it that because your ancestors were not shipped across the ocean and mine were, you can be working every day for a more human life but you don't think I should be interested in doing the same? I won't give up. I'll keep searching. I'm willing to put energy, everything I've got, into that search. But I need help, not discouragement. (112)

Anger, frustration and disappointment are the common lot of these diasporan figures. What pains her even more than this social ostracism is the feeling of abandonment and rejection by those she feels particularly close to. What Ast does not understand is that this suspicion is more than justified. The local people have been used to Africans from the diaspora who come back with ill-motivated dreams: power, money. This illusion of power they are denied in their faraway homes they hope to find and live in Africa as Wossen the fake Ethiopian Prince sums it best: 'Best thing about this country is how easily you get close to the power set. Now you know in Washington you don't get to walk into no White House without a heap engraved invitation. Here they come and call you, and a half hour later you're face to face with the Number Three or even the Number Two boss' (128).

The negative picture of the diasporan figures is fortunately counterbalanced by some other characters who, having lived in the same frustrating context of violence and exclusion, are committed to a new ideal they want to contribute to make effective back home in Africa.

#### 4. The Condition of A Revolution

The revolution that is sought after will be achieved through steps that are carefully presented in *Osiris Rising*.

##### 4.1. From Dispersal of the Black Population to the Melanic Unity

If there is one single message that A. K. Armah has strived to convey to his readers since his literary career started in 1968 with *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and from which it has never deviated from, it is that of African renaissance out of the ashes of slave trade, colonialism and neocolonialism. His works relentlessly recall the painful remembrance of past betrayals, present willful blindness and visionless future. The writer's work has narrated the causes of the present failure, described the crisis subsequent to this failure in his earlier novels like *The Beautiful Ones*, *Fragments*, *Why Are We So Blest?* With *Osiris Rising* whose narrative program is to cover 'Africa past, present and future', the writer is suggesting alternative ways with cultural weapons that artistic imaginations can provide to Africa. By revolution here we do not mean, in a first instance, a concerted military campaign or armed conflict. The philosophy of the book is anti-coup as Asar shows (116). What is suggested is a national liberation with lasting effect and social justice. This will be possible only if this revolution is an act of culture which echoes Cabral's view that 'if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, nation liberation is necessarily an act of culture.' (Cabral: 1975: 43)

Revolution will therefore consist in removing Eurocentric science and propose a new curriculum of African studies, literature and history. In this new system, students will be familiarized with oral tradition, literature of ancient Egypt, other cultural experiences (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, etc.), the training of students in creative writing, of teachers to be producers of literature. These ideas are presented in the author's documentary and non-fictional works (*Remembering the Dismembered Continent* 2006; *The Eloquence of the Scribes* 2010).

The fiction of African revolution understood as social justice for lasting positive change stages several forces. Readers are presented with the group of Asar, Ast and their colleagues. Against this group, we have the neocolonial forces and their watchdogs. Professor Wooley represents the typical colonial agent through his role of academic upstart. His role is to keep the system working at the cultural and intellectual levels. He represents the old colonials in the academy in his role of Head of the department of African Studies. He is a secret agent working for the preservation of the colonial order disguised under the cloth of an academic. He connives with Seth, Cinque and Wossen the fake Ethiopian prince to frame Asar as a coup plotter and kill him. By this act of felony and murder they hope to annihilate innovative minds and positive change, a familiar scenario in Africa. So, in this fight, there are local and diasporan brothers who have clearly chosen to side with the enemy. This is the zombie askari picture that Armah's works have familiarized readers with. They are present in *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers* who serve in the colonial forces to subdue the resisting African communities.

The most important weapon to achieve the cherished dream of African revolution is the unity of all Africans. Through his most committed characters Armah shows that the present division of the continent into 'fifty idiotic neocolonial states' (10) is the surest way to the doom of this continent. The solution he proposes to regain the lost glory of Africa is unity, the bringing together of millions of Africans scattered throughout the four corners of the globe.

Armah's novelistic universe claims a melanic revolution whose actors will come from Blacks around the world. An onomastic analysis suggests a pan Africanist revolutionary zeal. Names of characters working together to achieve African renaissance suggest their varying ethnic and geographic origins. Manda is the experimental locus of that African revolution and the metonymy of the whole continent with actors from the western part of the continent like the malinke Lamine Djata, Kamara, the Akan Ama Tete, Mensah, Kojo, the Bantu or southern part of the continent like Dineo Letsie, Bantu Rolong, etc. Very often, the device consists in mixing names of various ethnic groups like Iva Mensah, Ndeye Kamara, Netta

Ka probably an allusion to the common ancestry of these various ethnic languages. This revolution is both intellectual, cultural and rational. It is led by Asar who is an intellectual, a visionary with revolutionary credentials.

To these names which appear as a metaphor for the pan Africanist revolutionary ideal must be added the names of diegetic places where these fictive events take place: Manda, Bara, Aru, Majini, Pale, Kerlo, Khatte, Teye, Maji etc. In Armah's novel, Ancient Egyptian culture is reconnected to present Africa through the names of characters and places. It is taken for granted that most African cultural values and practices are Egyptian, that Africans are descendants of Ancient

Egyptians and share everything with that ancient Cultural Revolution. Egyptian mythology is the main intertext of that novel which is an imaginary reconstruction of any Egyptian mythological text. Ast who is an American citizen brings the diasporic contribution to the preparation for the future renaissance.

#### 4.2. Contribution of the Diaspora to African Revolution

In the mind of Ayi Kwei Armah as it shows out in the words of his narrator, the redemption of Africa is unconceivable in the present political state of affairs. There will be no salvation outside the unity of all African progenies. This includes the Africans of the continent and those of the outside world referred to as the diaspora. The concerted action of Ast and the group of intellectuals of Manda is the metaphor and myth of that melanic unity that is so much sought after. With her, the circle of Africa's self-defense comes full. Despite the Manichean tone of sections of the narrative, no revolutionary violence is advocated as the way to end the action of the destructive neocolonial forces spearheaded by Seth. The revolutionary battle is rather fought in the academy between curricular innovators and the neocolonial academic rearguards. Although this cultural fight against the destructive forces may seem a questionable alternative due to the violent nature of that aggression, Asar sees no violent solution to solve the antagonism. His revolution therefore remains a series of battles that are fought within the precincts of a university by professors. This is 'seed time' where ideas are planted by intellectuals and cultural thinkers for future harvests. Ast acts as a metaphorical bridge between Africa and the diaspora. This interconnection is the harbinger of future positive change in the story. Africa serves as a cultural matrix to the diaspora which is appropriately represented by a female character who will fecundate Africa, a scenario that contradicts one of the fundamental figments of the Negritude movement: that Europe should fecundate Africa which implies that without these foreigners Africans would remain sterile at the cultural level.

*Osiris Rising* represents a dialogue between Africa and its sons abroad through the discussion between Asar and Ast. Ast is after knowledge (History, Egyptology) but this knowledge and vision must go along with action in the political and economic life of Africa. 'I know I want to do the kind of work you describe ... Innovation, creation, revolution, everything necessary to remake Africa. Using, as you say, living essences brought up from hidden roots' (243).

If Ras and his associates like Earl Johnson come-back dreaming dreams of power, material wealth which they are denied in America, Ast wants to be part of a life program that aims to destroy these dreams so as to help Africa get back on its feet. Ras claims he has come to help rebuild Africa's greatness. As the narrative unfolds, readers realize that the latter's motivations are rather revealed as those of a 'hustler using Africa to cover ego needs' (137). He ends up ironically allying with the internal enemies of Africa, those fighting against the people for selfish profits. Tubman (Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano) and Johnson (Wossen) are the traitors to the African cause. They are instrumental in the murder of Asar, the leader of the group working to end Africa's oppression. After this tragic denouement, we better understand the reservations about many diasporan returnees. Ast has proved her loyalty to the group and her commitment to the myth and ideal of African renaissance. She has made a significant contribution to the change of the curricula at the University of Manda. She is also at the forefront of protecting Asar, the leader of the group and her lover. By her role in the story, the baby she bears, Ast represents the positive diasporan participation in the struggle for unity. The death of Asar is the part of sacrifice she has to endure in the struggle that portends hope for future rebirth as ideas outlive those who created them. By accepting Ast in their midst, the group of Manda is reconciling Africa with its lost progeny, reuniting all Africans in a symbolic way. The so much sought-after unity is reestablished. The contribution of the diaspora is precious in the final outcome as it is implied by the intertextual reference to the Egyptian myth. The divine Isis in the mythic text renamed Ast here bears Horus who will avenge Osiris his father as the hypotext announces. This is the clear message of the narrative: the redemption of Africa will not be possible without the contribution of all Africans, those who stayed on the ancestral lands and those who left but are back to stay, to work to rebuild the greatness of the collective 'home'.

The unity of Africans from the continent and other Africans from the diaspora is not to be explained in mythical or emotional terms. It is given practical usefulness as its local and diasporan actors are historical allies in the sense that they have experienced the same human sufferings. There should not be any reason for excluding these Africans from taking part in the struggle for Africa's development if they are trustworthy like Ast as Tete clearly explains. 'No one bent on rebuilding Africa wants to discourage African Americans from working and living here' (269). Asar's reluctance to welcome her in their midst is justified by valid reasons which have been extensively analyzed in earlier paragraphs. This solidarity of victims unites them for common purposes as Armah shows in an article:

The Negroes who live in the United States and in Central or Latin America in fact experience the need to attach themselves to a cultural matrix. Their problem is not fundamentally different from that of the Africans. The Whites of America did not mete out to them any different treatment from that of the Whites who ruled over the Africans (Armah: 1969: 36).

The revolutionary ideal is conveyed through a specific rhetoric and literary form. The narration blends various strands of writing. We thus have figurative, analytical and documentary narrative forms. The text unites the language of documentary drafting that enhances realistic reading to myth and allegory. It thus takes the novel beyond the genre boundaries and extend it to further metaphorical limits.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study has investigated into the relations Africans from the continent have with afro descendants of the different Diasporas. In the process, we have analyzed the image of Africa such as perceived by these Afro-descendants. Their representation of Africa sustains several of their fantasies, myths and ideologies. By putting these diasporan figures as the main characters of his narrative and analyzing the ambivalent relations they have with Africa, Armah is addressing an issue which, if it has largely been addressed by many other afro descendent writers, is still no easy a topic for most

African readers as it recalls painful memories of a self-betrayal. He has yet avoided the pitfalls of a naive representation of that relation by his ambivalent narrative which shows Africa and the diaspora with their good and bad guys. Some use Africa as the cover for their sick ego that is denied any dignity in the diasporan world; the others come back looking for a meaning in their lives and the desire to contribute to the renaissance of Africa out of the ashes of internal and destructive foreign forces. But the main lesson is that the reconnection is still possible and both Afro descendants and Africans from the continent will benefit from this reconciliation at psychological, social and political levels.

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