

## Reunification and the Search for the African Identity in Armah's *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*

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**Abstract:** Ayi Kwei Armah is an African writer who is preoccupied with the question of Africa's future in his novels. In this paper, we shall posit that in his two novels, *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*, The House of life, he articulates the view that the return of the diasporic Africans to the continent is a crucial step in discovering their African identity. We shall further establish that Armah sees the reconnection and identification as pre-requisite ingredients for the regeneration and restoration of the African continent.

**Key words:** Identity, reconnection, regeneration, reunification

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### INTRODUCTION

Armah (1995) is one of the African writers who is obsessively preoccupied "with the question of Africa's future". In his current two novels: *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*, *The house of life*, he continues with his radical novelistic vision and struggle of finding an African solution to the decolonisation of the African continent. Anyidoho (1992) posits that "The creative mind behind Ayi Kwei Armah's work is one engaged in a continuing dialogue with Africa's tormented history. Sometimes, it is a content to merely recall the facts, however, terrifying and despairing they may be. Often, it queries the facts of history, analysing them with the careful eyes of the post-mortem surgeon. But beyond the dual role of the recorder and analyzer, there is the ultimate role of the visionary re-creator." Anyidoho (1992) further argues that the search for the African identity is portrayed in the artist figure in his first novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and is a continuum notion in all his other novels. Although Anyidoho (1992) also observes that the search for the African identity in Armah's first three novels, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?* is weakened to a degree by the constant paralysis and impotence of the artist figure, he recognises that Armah overcomes this in his fourth and fifth novels *Two thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. In *Osiris Rising* and *KMT* Armah, no doubt, is a re-creator. These novels are functionalistic and serve as the climax to the search; therefore, they are the doors to the African identity. This thesis will prove that in these two novels Armah articulates the view that the diasporic Africans' return to the African continent is a paramount initiation in rediscovering their true African identity. In other words, Armah aims at reconnecting the disconnected (Armah,

2006). He also views the reunification and identification as part of the solution process which will culminate into the reconstructing and transformation of Africa from imperial dominance into the regenerated ancestral home. We shall prove that in these novels, Armah advocates for both cultural and intellectual return.

### DISCUSSION

In *Osiris Rising* which was published in Armah (1995), postulates that reunification of Africans in the diasporas with the African continent is a crucial step in rediscovering their true identity. The significance of the return (reunification) is expressed in Ast's internal monologue:

That was the key-creativity. But such crimes had shaped the country she was born in that she wasn't sure creative beginning could survive. True, the shaping crimes had yielded tremendous wealth. And certainly, wealth had given springs to a dynamic innovative drive. But this vast energy was wasted in the same powerlust that had deepened the destruction of Africa and turned her ancestors into captives in a country crowing freedom. She knew she will return. (p1)

Ast admits the American environment is not conducive for her self-realisation, therefore, the need for what Ashcroft (2009) refers to as "recuperative return" to Africa. Her return which will mark her reunification with Africa is not an end in itself, but a prerequisite and crucial step in her search for the African identity. It will create the necessary space and the enabling atmosphere for, what Kwadwo Osei-Nyame (2009) terms, "the desire for self-

legitimation” and “self-rehabilitation”. The self-rehabilitation and identification is consequential to the final product which is the regeneration of the ancestral home, Africa. However, according to Armah (2002) the achievement of this renewal depends heavily on the motives, perceptions and interpretations of the returnees. Ast and Sheldon Tubman, alias Ras Jomo Cinque reunite with totally different aspirations, commitments and interpretations. Until the end of the novel, each considers his or her motive as the more significant one. Jomo has a spiritual elucidation for returning to Africa “The same power that sent us wandering into the furnace of slavery in America, that same god has pointed the way back to the cool, fresh waters of our royal home, Africa” (*Osiris*, 141). Jomo fails to recognize that the era of regeneration and life in Africa requires only the creative ones, that is, the Healers and the Fundis, those visionary seers that would lead Africans to the craftsmanship of the soul, but does not the royals. The period of regeneration is a period of sacrificing. The age of the royals ended in Armah’s fifth novel, *The Healers* as Ast fittingly points out to Jomo “Africans moved away beyond that nonsense about kings and queens ages ago” (*Osiris*, 154). Earl Jonson, the fake Ethiopian and a disciple of Jomo expresses similar misconception when he describes the revelation that came to him like Moses in the Bible, “I saw me in a robe of gold. The writing said I was no dam negro but a Ethiopian prince” (*Osiris*, 127). Earl demonstrates his ignorance about the protagonists of the Ethiopian civilisation and shows that he is consumed by the manipulated and distorted history of Africa by Europeans.

Jomo and Earl see their reunification with Africa not as an opportunity for recuperation but as a chance to exploit other Africans and some diasporic returnees like Jacqueline Brown. Consequently, when Ast and Bailey plot Jacqueline’s escape and they inform Jomo that Jacqueline is gone “home”, Jomo grows furious. In his indignation, he tells Ast, “You are a lost sister.” He queries Ast, “How can you send a young soul to the hell of America?” (*Osiris*, 153). The rhetorical question demonstrates clearly Jomo’s failure to perceive that not all diasporic Africans can reunite and accommodate the harsh realities in Africa. The cause of Jomo’s outburst and hellish indignation is not that he has reconciled himself so well with Africa, but that Ast and Bailey conspire to deny him of his lascivious and lecherous craving to add one more irreconcilable soul to his harem of wives, an act which epitomises the hedonism and exploitative era of the royals in the African society. Jomo’s reconnection with Africa during the period of regeneration and recuperation is obviously a misplaced one and has very dangerous ramifications on the individual or individuals. As Ogede (2000) observes “In fact, the satiric attack launched on Ras Jomo Cinque owes its penetration primarily to

Armah’s use of Bailey as a spokesman. Bailey represents Cinque’s journey to Africa as representing not merely an attempt to take backward glance, but, more appropriately, as an attempt to make a permanent retreat, to plunge into the safe harbors of a delusionary notion of self.” When Tete tells Ras that his ancestor, Apo was himself a freed slave who betrayed the Per Ankh but he was not a royal, he is visibly shocked and erupts angrily, “Hell, all lies, lies,” and continued with his delusionary misconception and misinterpretation of the reunion as he opines, “Made up to discourage us, descendants of Africa’s kings, from returning to rebuild Africa’s greatness, Africa’s manhood” (*Osiris*, 269). Regardless of his outburst the fact that he is completely disappointed and disillusioned by the revelation is registered by Tete, Asar and Ast. And Ast reflects on the impact of the disenchantment on Jomo as she tells Tete, “You smashed his new life. If you’re right, he’ll have to scrap everything and begin again. He’s been through it once. It almost killed him. He can’t stand to do it again” (*Osiris*, 270). To Armah both Jomo and Earl are culturally dislocated personalities with obsolete understanding of the reunification. Ogede (2000) argues, ironically, that “In Africa Cinque has indeed reached a new level- has made progress- in his journey toward aristocratic self-importance, as we see during his journey to meet the renowned historian Tete at Bara,” and he continues with his ponderable argument “when Cinque is unconscionably driven in a luxurious Mercedes Benz, while his four wives are stuffed in a dilapidated Volkswagon Beetle. The thing that makes Ras Jomo Equiano Cinque’s action reprehensible is not just that he creates a fictitious past, an illusion of his origins into which he escapes, but that he assumes male supremacy and expresses a psychopathic sadomasochism in his dealings with the women in his life”. Armah proves that Jomo’s mission to Africa is far less about roots than about a quest for power, a mission for his personal healing (Ibid: 137). It is the epidemicity of such mindsets that Armah wants to exterminate or in the words of Amuta (1981) “exorcise... of the unsettling hangover of the phenomenon commonly referred to as the “colonial mentality.”

On the other hand, Ast sees her return or reconnection to Africa as a prerequisite and developmental course of action and preparation for the final identification. Again, she views the reunification with the ancestral home as an indispensable and concrete effort to bridge the historical gap between the diasporic Africans and those on the continent. The first phase of her grounding for the reunion with African begins in the early hours of her childhood. Like Tete, she is groomed and primed for the reunion by her grandmother, Nwt, the first companion of her soul. Ast meditatively communes with Africa long before she comes to Africa. The second phase of her initiation to reconnect takes place when she comes

to Africa. Her resolution to plump for Africa and Asar rather than Set and America also reflects her yawning understanding of the reunification. In a dialogue, she tells Asar, "Let's say am looking for the way home, I know where I have come from isn't it. Ast indicates that the return is not an end in itself. A returnee ought to look for the "way home," that is, find her true identity. Her conviction that the return creates the podium for the search for the African identity and that she is on the right trail noticeably comes out when she confesses to Asar that she needs someone who will guide her, "someone who knows the way, and is already moving there," and when she finally selects Asar, she does so with conviction, "Yes, you". She selects the right companion of her soul to steer her exploration for the African identity because Ast and Asar are connected, and Asar is already a significant and committed member of the Companionship of the Per Ankh. She once more demonstrates a clearer understanding of reunion with Africa in the following interlocution with the Mystic Comrade which is characterized with periodic narrator intrusions:

"I don't so. I need to live in a place where I can do work I believe in."

"What about people?"

"If those I've met so far are any indication, I can't complain."

"Things move slowly here," the Mystic Comrade said. "I came warned."

"Coming from America, you must be used to faster rhythms."

"Okay," Ast said, "So it's faster rhythm over there. But in what direction? I'd rather walk toward an objective I can live with than fly in the opposite direction."

The Mystic Comrade's smile looked sad. "You're very close to Asar."

"I did like to be."

"You're in love, aren't you?"

"More than that." The question had caught Ast by surprise.

"I think I'm in love with the same ideal he's in love with." (*Osiris*, 197)

Ast acknowledges that she cannot be in love with Asar without being in love with his ideal, love for Africa and the inclination to sacrifice and die for it, the true symbol of the African identity. Therefore, Ast's love for Asar is symbolic of her love for Africa. Similarly, her rhetoric answers to Asar's question on survival, "But what of people whose aim is fulfilment, not satisfaction?" (*Osiris*, 111) also epitomises her better understanding of the reunion and marks a sharp distinction between her and Jomo. While Ast is ultimately looking for fulfilment, that

is, the desire to be part of the regeneration process, Jomo is looking for satisfaction, which is the hedonism, profligacy and self-gratification of the kings and enslavers. Ast's absolute reunion with Africa is realised when she tells both Asar and Tete, "I am trying to create... to decide on the meaning for my life. I think that the meaning begins by being, living here" (*Osiris*, 253). She again reiterates the notion that the reunion is a precondition for the identification and regeneration. The never-ending and nagging questions from Asar, the Mystic Comrade and finally Tete are part of the preparation and initiation into the Per Ankh which according to Ogede (2000) means "The House of Life" and was the name of the cultural and intellectual institutions ancient Egyptians established for the preservation of their ancestral heritage". Her preparation and initiation are very vital. They strengthen her towards the frustration, deprivation and danger she faces soon in the novel. It is this grounding that makes her understand and consequently accept Asar's death at the end of the novel and strengthens her against the evil machinations of the manipulative character, Set, the quisling of the neo-colonialist administration. Consequently, her journey to Bara is of symbolic and monumental significance. Bara is the house of knowledge and it is where Ast finds her African identity. Her initiation into The Companionship of Ankh also begins in Bara under the tutelage of Tete. To quote Ogede (2000):

According to Armah (1995), the New World Africans who go to Africa can be classified into two categories: On one hand are those who go in search of self-renewal, individual power, and personal healing. The second group are those genuinely seeking for communal involvement, for bonding; those who want to carry out work aimed at turning the whole society around. Though each group holds the belief that meaning, value, and love can be found only outside the alienating malaise of Western society, in Africa what distinguishes them is that the first category of people seek these things exclusively for themselves, while the second group not only wishes those things spread out to everyone in the society but works actively to realize the objective. It is a distinction between self-centeredness and modesty, between primitive acquisitiveness and a commitment to giving and sharing.

The opportunist, Ras Jomo Equino Cinque and his android Earl Johnson belong to the first category of returnees while Ast belong to the second group as she demonstrates that she is committed to the total regeneration of the ancestral home, Africa.

As observed earlier, in *Osiris Rising* the African identity is expressed by the level of creative consciousness of an individual (Ast) that corresponds with a group's (Companionship of the Per Ankh's) commitment to Africa, the preservation of her core values and working "for life and creation, against death and destruction" in Africa (Osiris, 264). Therefore, the regeneration process requires the creative collective effort of a group but not the individualistic effort constantly expressed by Jomo. Although Armah (1995) appreciates the immense contributions of the individual members of the Companionship of the Ankh, he articulates the view that the individuals' efforts must be inseparable from the collective effort. *Osiris Rising* is another of Armah's carrion call for unity in the convalescence of Africa's image. Anyidoho (1992) critiquing Armah's novel, *Two Thousand Seasons* proclaims that "Armah's concern with unity as prerequisite for African identity and strength finds special expression in various departures from traditional values and ideals. He continues,

One of the most significant revisions of old values may be in what I have identified as *collective heroism* (Anyidoho, 1992), most fully realized in in *Two Thousand Seasons*. The novel is clearly epic in scope and in intent, being concerned with the destiny of a whole people and making elaborate use of history, myth, and legend. But when it comes to characterization, Armah's workparts company with the traditional epic design. There is a firm refusal to trust the destiny of a whole people to a single person. In his communal ideal, he sees the hero's path as running contrary to the spirit of the way, the living way of interrelationships and, above all, of reciprocity.

If the idea of collective heroism was fully realized in *Two Thousand Seasons* as established by Anyidoho, then it receives Armah's consummate attention in *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*. To Armah, the Companionship of the Per Ankh is the symbolic representation of the true African identity and since it represents life and regeneration, only the creative ones like Asar, Tete, the Mystic Comrade, Ast, etc that can identify with it, and consequently Africa. Tete initiating Ast into the Companionship marks her final identification process. Ast, the African-American's reunification and subsequent identification with Africa brings immense human and intellectual resource, the quality of resource that is needed to spark the regeneration process and to restore Africa's image after years of colonial lies, destruction, and distortion of her history. This is articulated in the essential function Ast plays in the formulation of the new course structures in the

University of Manda which aims at injecting more African materials into the curricula. Ast's reconnection marks, therefore, both cultural and intellectual return.

Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the most consistent African writers in terms of his novelist vision of confronting the recurrent African problem of decolonization. The idea of the return and the quest for the African identity are central themes in his seventh novel, *KMT: The House of Life* as well. In this narrative, the return or the reunification and identification are crucial and indispensable as a result of the cultural alienation orchestrated by the Europeans through an educational system which tends to celebrate everything European but demonises everything African. This education, according to Armah (2006), is "designed to do little better than to induce African children to become increasingly insensitive to African realities, while striving to become hyper-sensitively attuned to European values." The years of synchronized and cognisant historical distortions, contortions and lies require the need to reconstruct Africa's history. The reconstruction or re-Africanization must generate a history that will recuperate and restore Africa's true cultural identity and image, but not the colonial legacy (history) which tends to Europeanize the African, whom Lindela Imana refers to as "... a new of African thinker with navels securely buried in Europe" (*KMT*, 134). The reawakening also calls for the overhauling of the whole educational structure, "moving from the old charlatanism that was our education" (*KMT*, 114). Ayivor (2005) observes that "Armah identifies "this institutionalised ignorance we call education" as the dominant corrosive destabilizing historical factor that has been undermining Africa's racial civilization and socio- economic growth since the Pharaonic period". In other words, the Europeanization of Africa's education system does not only consciously dislocate the African from his or her root and cultural identity but socio- economically enslaves him or her. Therefore, in this narrative Armah prescribes the need for a communal African academic renaissance and a return to the study of Egyptology and the hieroglyphics. In this novel, Lindela and Jengo's visit to Yarw is symbolic. It is the same as the reunification experienced by Ast on her return to Africa and Bara in *Osiris Rising*. Lindela Imana expresses her spiritual bound with Yarw on the way long before her physical contact with the place she has never been before:

I could understand the feeling, steady all the way to the junction, that this was familiar territory. I'd been here before. What I could not understand was the persistence of this feeling after Jengo turned the car onto the track to Yarw. We were on our way to a

place I'd never seen, yet the further we drove into this landscape, the stronger my impression that I'd been here, too, before (*KMT*, 126).

The spiritual connection that Lindela experiences with Yarw is similar to the spiritual acquaintance between Ast and Africa long before she comes to Africa. Lindela's spiritual connection with Yarw is equally significant in the sense that Yarw is "The House of Life and the symbol of the African culture and identity." The spiritual bond marks her identification with African values. Jengo and Lindela's visit to Yarw also marks their search for the African identity as Jengo articulates it, "Finding out who we are. Who've been (*KMT*, 132). In *KMT*, the return also means going back to the traditionalists, the root, source or house of pure indigenous African knowledge. In this novel Armah continues to illuminate the idea of collective heroism or collective responsibility in the search for the true African self, which Lindela alludes to as "clearing new paths to better directions of our own" (*KMT*, 135). It, therefore, calls for not only the union of scholars and traditionalists represented respectively by Professor Jengo and Lindela Imana on one hand and Djily Hor and Astw Konate on the other hand, but also a collaboration of both men and women as evident in the exchanges between Jengo and Astw and Hor (*KMT*, 131-132). It requires the harnessed effort of people "moving in the same direction" or spirits "sharing the same vision, and knowing how to work" (*KMT*, 132). According to Armah (2002) to be able to rediscover the African identity, the African academic scholar and the traditionalist must work harmoniously without mistrust. This notion clearly comes out when Lindela engages Professor Jengo in a dialogue:

"Suppose you're right, the wall get broken down, and confidence is somehow established between traditionalists and academics. What do you expect to happen?"

"Honest conversation. For the first time, genuine contact between the traditionalists and us, academic scholars doing research, needing to know what they know."

"Each group will have to learn to accept the other as an extension of itself. That's an awfully difficult assignment."

"But not impossible..."

Unity and trust are the bridges that connect the scholars and the traditionalist as revealed in the novel and the effort of the two groups leads to the restoration of Africa's true history, a history that is devoid of European distortion. The revolution that will culminate into the re-Africanization and the restoration of the African identity

requires the concerted effort of the scholars and the traditionalists. In this novel, the search for the African identity is synonymous to the search for the self, a communal self with a collective identity but not the "isolate self" (*KMT*, 141).

Anyidoho (1992) commenting on Armah's first five novels observes in his article "Literature and African Identity: The Example of Ayi Kwei Armah" that "In Armah's work, there is symbolic value to the use of names. Personal names, especially, frequently serve as keys to the cultural and social identity of the characters. The loss or retention of a true African consciousness and identity is often indicated by the name a character bears". In Armah's two novels under discussion, the names of the purveyors of the re-Africanization of the continent are symbolic of their consciousness and a testimony of the socio-cultural identity, whether they are on the continent or diasporic Africans. In *Osiris Rising* and *KMT* the names of the characters that form the Per Ankh and the companions in the house of life testify to this assertion. Like *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah uses a plethora of African names that cut across the entire African continent. Names like Asar, Ast, Maanan Djan, Bai Kamara, Ndeye Kamara, Duma, Lamine Djatta, Dineo Letsie, Kojo Boanye and Moko in *Osiris Rising* and Lindela Imana, Jengo, Djily Hor, Astw Konate and Maty in *KMT* have African origins and are Armah's articulate expression of what is African. The diversity of these African names also depicts the global African perspective of Armah's articulation. What is remarkable in *Osiris Rising* is Armah's use of the Egyptian names Asar and Ast, a novel in which he begins to expand his notion of the return to include the return to man's earliest civilization in Egypt, Africa's civilisation. In the case of Ast, her grandmother Nwt resists her parents' effort to name her after some European saint and finally gives her the African name Ast, the name of the most intelligent divinity (Osiris, 8). Anyidoho further argues that "With Armah's central characters, names begin to take on special significance beyond the expression of identity. They lead us into the very center of the character's being, his fundamental conception of the self as a basis for action or inaction" (37). Of course, the characters mentioned are not flaccid but very vigorous, provocative and active agents of the process for "clearing new paths to better directions of our own" (*KMT*, 135), that is, the restoration of the African ideals and identity. They are the fundis, those visionary men who will lead man into the craftsmanship of the soul.

In both novels, Armah contends that the search for the identity is inextricably tied to the search for a global African language. Armah prescribes hieroglyphs as the universal or global African language, a language the heroines of both narratives spiritually identify with. Ast is

introduced to hieroglyphs at the age of four by her grandmother Nwt first friend of her soul. It is this language which opens later doors to her soul (*Osiris*, 7). The introduction to hieroglyphs lead to Ast study of World History for first degree, Egyptology for her second degree and her focus on Kemet under the thesis identity and social justice in the philosophy of Ancient Egypt. It is her exposure to hieroglyphs which sets the direction and finally accelerates her decision to return to Africa (Ibid, 8). The language, therefore, has a spiritual appeal for Ast. Similarly, Lindela admits she experiences the full power of the ancient words when she translates the inscription on the copper pendant Astw gives her. She surmises, "As the words came together, and as meaning flowed from their union, I felt the message reach me as a calm and direct call, soul to soul, across ages and spaces" (*KMT*, 158). She is spiritually rejuvenated and replenished by the hieroglyphic text and does not experience exhaustion throughout the translation period. She is completely animated by the text to search for the African self.

### CONCLUSION

In *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*, Armah (1995) demonstrates his consistency in his novelistic vision. The novels are articulate and eloquent expressions of an African scribe's constant desire to interact and to set an agenda for the global African community. In both novels, he draws the consideration of blacks all over the world to the need to reconnect with the continent or return to their root, a requisite stride which will hugely contribute to the search for the self and consequently the

African identity. The reconnection and the identification are two indispensable and obligatory ingredients needed to kick start the regeneration of the homeland and restoration of Africa's image.

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