

The Figuring of Diasporic Africans in Continental African Literature

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Although the African presence in African American literature has received considerable scholarly attention, the images of the African American in African literature have not been given the critical attention they deserve. Our presentation examines the figuring of the African American in the fictional works of African prose writers. We shall survey the presentations and examine whether there is any discernible pattern in the presentations. We shall try to account for some of the historical and sociological imperatives behind the images. Our argument is that while some African writers present stereotypical images of the African American, progressive African writers attempt to deconstruct stereotypes of the African American circulated in mainstream media outlets by presenting formidable characters from the African Diaspora. The writers' projects are executed with different degrees of success but open up for our understanding the need for more concerted dialogue between the continent and the Diaspora in enhancing social liberties and the welfare of the black race. I argue that given the overabundance of stereotypes of diasporic Africans, it is small surprise that young African writers present a clichéd view of African Americans, while old texts suggest the impossibility of dialogue between the Diaspora and the continent. However, more recent writing indicates an improvement in the way the African American is figured. This is true especially among ideologically aware writers who place their characters within the rank historical contexts of the struggle against slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Reading is a process of reconciliation in the sense that the text and the reader cooperate in the mutual construction of meanings. I choose African literature because African art offers us a unique tool to negotiate the attitude of continental Africans towards their brethren in the diaspora. This is especially true because formerly colonized people communicate indirectly – through mimicry, jokes, satire, and irony - to express their profoundest thoughts and voice their frustrations (Bhabha 93-101). It would be in popular texts which operate above the maxims of formal diplomacy such as novels, jokes, oral literature and drama, rather than in government policy documents, that formerly subjugated peoples would more genuinely express themselves and speak candidly with one another. Despite the broad scope of my topic, I choose to explore African literature as a whole to reject tendencies to limit dialogue between continental Africans and their diasporic brethren to restricted geographical sections of Africa which are prioritized as the origin of Africans in the diaspora. My take on the issue is that were it not for disruption by slavery and colonialism during a moment when African communities were migrating and circulating in and across different parts of the continent, the African people would have moved and intermixed more intimately. More fundamentally, black communities across the continent suffered under slavery, and a tendency to focus on a specific area where African Americans originated from the continent would be a

vindication of both Eurocentric boundaries and a neglect of brethren transported to other parts of the world, where they may have been killed or castrated according to the customs of places such as the Middle East. Further, as seen shortly, stereotyping of diasporic Africans is spread across the continent just as beneficent literatures emerging from the continent. This argues for a pan-Africanist perspective.

The image of the African American beamed to Africa is usually through pop culture products that stereotype the black Diaspora. The African American men are presented as violent and perverted while the African American women are either over-assertive or artificially beautiful. African Americans are presented in images that seem to tease the continental Africans to envy those who were enslaved. Wilson et al have noted that although the “magic bullet” model of communication – which assumes that media can directly affect our attitudes and lifestyles directly – has been contested, it remains true that negative and one-sided stereotyped portrayals often reinforce attitudes (2003: 47). While their focus here is on the reinforcement of bigotry in the Diaspora, in the African continent the media reinforce among the blacks myths of prosperity in the West and a sense of self-deprecation. The changed scenario in the presentation of the black community in the West takes a long time to reach Africa; hackneyed images are still circulating in movies and TV comedies that are already out of fashion in the West. The situation is complicated by a monologic presentation because while in the West media voices contest and the people are directly in touch with the American reality, in Africa the presentations of the West are Eurocentric and there is no access to Western reality against which the images can be contested and subverted by the spectators.

In some misrepresentations of the African Americans in literature in local languages, I hear more frustration at the inaccessibility of the brother in the Diaspora than condescension and cynicism. For example, in Kenyan writer Ken Walibora’s Swahili short story “Kipara-Ngoto” (Clean shaven, like the knuckles of a clenched fist) the African American features briefly as a metaphor of ludicrous character. The narrative is jocular, but it reveals profound issues about the relations between diasporic and continental Africans. The story is about a badly behaved city boy, Matata (Swahili for Trouble) who is taken to the rural areas to see whether he can be reformed. The story figures him with metaphors and references to foreignness and artificiality. The narrator, a rural boy and cousin of Matata’s, associates the urban boy with popular music icons and he presents his cousin chewing gum continuously, a city habit. What is intriguing is the way the African American is brought in as a metaphor to complete the ludicrousness of the urbanite:

Baba aliporejea kutoka kazini jioni, alimkuta mgeni mheshimiwa
kajiwetaka kochini, asoma *James Hadley Chase* kwa sauti kubwa kama radio.
Ungemdhani Mwamerika Mweusi anatingo. Shabash! Kimombo kilimtoka cha
ajabu! (62)

When dad returned home from work in the evening, he found the guest of honor lodged on the coach reading *James Hadley Chase* in a loud voice like a

radio. You would have thought him a Black American in a public-speaking exercise. Alas! Strange English issued from him.

In calling Matata “mgeni mheshimiwa” (guest of honour, or guest to be greatly respected), the narrator is engaging in ironically worded sarcasm. The irony is sharper and more caustic in the original language, where the term would be reserved for a highly respected person, usually an esteemed leader in public functions; in a private space like the home where the action is taking place, there cannot be a “mgeni mheshimiwa”. The narrator has quite little respect for Matata, whose strange habits he finds laughable and, to him, the strangeness of Matata can only be comprehended by putting him in the context of the behaviour of African Americans. To understand the attitude to African Americans as displayed in this text, it is imperative to remember that in a metaphor, the vehicle (the concept we compare the subject with) is more familiar and concrete than the tenor (the subject of discussion). In this metaphor, it is assumed that we know African Americans in a woeful mode more concretely than we know the badly behaved city boy among us. We can only comprehend his conduct by seeing it through what we know about African Americans and their habits.

Although the unreliability of the narrator is not well brought out in the story, we can assume that, told by a child, the story registers more than it is aware of. It could even be holding in high esteem Matata and his African American ways, but as a figure of protest against commonsense. Unconsciously, the narrative indicates the source of the image of the African American to be popular texts that the narrator has interacted with – popular music, advertisements and novels. The text also shows that texts by African Americans reach only a small fraction of Africans that the majority would not want to associate with – the city middle class with a warped sense of morality. Dreadlocks an expression of Rastafarianism and a manifestation of remnants of racial identification with Africa in the Diaspora which has influenced the continent, too (McKoy 2006), are forbidden in the rural Africa that Matata finds himself in. African Americans, then, are associated with that bourgeois class that celebrates rootlessness. In the narrator’s metaphor, we also hear a sense of frustration at his inability to understand Matata’s hybrid language. In fact, there appears to be a subtle admiration of Matata’s city way but the language puts off the narrator from his relative. The implication here is that Matata’s incomprehensibility is seen as an African American phenomenon. This indicates that the African American language is misunderstood in the continent by the poor who cannot meaningfully interact with the materials. There is thus need for African Americans to speak the languages spoken by the majority in Africa and collaborate with local artists in creating music that African people, such as the young narrator, in the story would comprehend.

Although we cannot say that authentic Africa is limited to the rural areas, it is in the rural Africa that, according to more recent texts, that the African American can fully realize his or her potential. When Brother Lumumba returns to Africa in Ghanaian writer Kofi Nyidevu Awoonor’s *Comes the Voyager at Last* (1992), he does not recover his repressed subjectivity in the city, where continental Africans themselves are alienated and steeped in contaminated narratives. The city has become a site of obscurantist theorizing of little practical meaning to the African. Lumumba is hosted by a garrulous city Ghanaian, in a

town where you would be thought a genius by your friends if you wrote for the newspapers in a kind of English that nobody understands. As presented in the text, the city Africans are superficial, having watched enough films and seen some happy-go-lucky Americans who come to visit. The Africans seem to admire the American accent just for the heck of it, not for the substance expressed in it. A case in point is Baba, who seems to regret that he was not around in the eighteenth century to have been captured as a slave:

Baba simply loved everything about United States. He's never been there and he'll never probably go, but he loved the American or Yankee way. Being somehow older than all of us, he saw the GIs who used to be at our base at Takoradi. He loved their way of dressing, their life-style, the way they walked, talked, bullied, spent money and all. He loved everything about them. There's no cowboy film that has ever come to our city's cinemas which Baba hadn't seen.
(80)

The text indicates that Baba's attitude is neither accidental nor incidental. It is achieved through systematic brainwashing through films, the educational system, and tourism. These are what Loius Althusser calls the "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA). In the essay entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser indicates that a hegemonic culture uses means other than official repression and coercion (such as the military, the police, courts) to make people follow its oppressive will. The American military are not in Africa to capture slaves, but the way they behave entices the people to volunteer themselves to slavery. The media and cinema help to complete in the people the need to volunteer themselves to a hegemonic system. Thus, Brother Lumumba's stay in the city yields little reconnection with Africa. It is not until he goes to Eweland that he recovers his race memory. While earlier writers indicated little possibility of reconnection, Awoonor celebrates – if in an idealistic recreation of home – the recovery of Lumumba's repressed history. For him, "home" as a physical construct may have been destroyed, but it survives as an imagined construct stored in the memory and which can be reactivated into existence. This is a process that the modern African, also ruptured from the cultural memory, has to undergo to achieve completeness of being. Indeed, as McKoy notes, the remnant consciousness exhibited by Lumumba is the mediation between the continent and the diaspora. To me, neither can claim more authenticity than the other; for in continental Africa, the postcolonial subject homeliness is as contested as the imagined homes in the diaspora. The audience for this narrative, then, is not only the African American seeking reintegration but the African who has been uprooted as well. It is productive to note that although he has been physically ruptured longer than continental Africans, Lumumba dances better than the Westernized African. The narrator lyrically captures this moment of contrast between the supposed uprooted and those at home:

The drums have taken over now. This is the time when dancers talk with the drummers, their companions and the music. Brother Lumumba dances as if he has danced this all his life. The Brown chap dances as if his waist is broken and his torso broken crushed by the burdens of revolutionary ideals...The dance is

long. The partners begin to sweat. Brother Lumumba is erect but possessed of a grace which hides the volcanic outbursts of his rhythmic sense. In this dance it is clear he is home. (100)

Awoonor is not against revolutionary ideals per se, but he supports activities that are rooted in the community's collective memory, rather than theoretical impositions. It is the African American who leads the Africans in the recovery of this hidden memory.

The African American who comes out in literary texts of the 1960s that figure diasporic characters is either a caricature or a pervert. Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) presents African American Joe Golder as a laughable homosexual. Physiologically white but labeled black because he has some Negro blood in him, Joe's dilemma as an American is figured in terms of sexual aberration, and as Eldred Durosimi Jones notes, Joe is a "figure who hovers between comedy and tragedy" (199). He is not only as foreign as Pinkshore (the Englishman in the late colony), and Peter (the German American and the foreign artifacts that Soyinka ruthlessly laughs at, he is also a death-causing curse in the postcolonial Africa. He affects British manners to deride Africans for their nationalism, and exploits his black ancestry to claim a right to criticize Africa as an insider. Returning to Africa does not yield any happiness to him; his attempts to tan himself black by lying in the sun yield little results while the artistic wish to be presented as black do not yield satisfaction. At the time the story comes to an end, he still feels a motherless child.

An early Ghanaian text, Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964) presents the failed return of Eulalie, the African American woman, to Africa. When she is married to Ato Yawson and goes to Africa both are rejected by the community. Eulalie seems to have a romantic picture of Africa and is unprepared for the gritty realities of the continent. A dramatic voice that frames Eulalie criticizes African Americans who are ashamed of their skins but indicates the role the white dominated popular cultural production has played in culturally colonizing the formerly enslaved people:

Kill the sort of dreams silly girls dream that they are going to wake up one morning and find their skins milk white and their hairs soft blonde like them Hollywood tarts. (24)

In managing to step out of the images presented in Hollywood to go to Africa, Eulalie has consumed Western media with a subversive gaze. But even without aping the white 'other', she does not embrace her black self. She remains an ambivalent figure which cannot be integrated into African cultural mores.

As noted by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, Aidoo is challenging the myth of an easy relationship between Africans and African Americans to draw "the reader's attention to the seriousness of the problem at hand" especially regarding gender (223). The African man would like to peddle the lie that African women are submissive. She also emphasizes the dangers of romanticizing Africa. Conservative forces are at work within the traditional community to lock out the diaporan African. The society would like Ato to

marry within the continent and refers Eulalie as “Black-White woman/A stranger and a slave” (22). It is pertinent to note that it is fellow women who voice this rejection and condemn her modern education. Aidoo suggests the conservativeness of tradition which refuses to accommodate its own because they have a different world view. From the text, there seems to be little possibilities of African Americans’ reintegration into African culture. They, indeed, accentuate the educated African’s alienation into “ghosts” of modernity.

In the popular media images that reach Africa, the African American woman is presented as exotically beautiful in a way that would make the continental woman regret enslavement. In Nigerian Ike Oguine’s *A Squatter’s Tale* (2000), we encounter a young African, Obi, who has watched a bit of television before coming to the US. For him, African American women are sex objects devoid of any subjectivity. He does not interact with them, though, before concluding that they are better than the black women at home. He rates Lagos women lower than “the lovely African American women I saw driving by on Grand Avenue, or an exotic au pair from Austria” (155). It is notable that the figure of the African American is exploited by the male to deride continental African women. Cameroonian Makuchi’s *Your Madness, Not Mine* shows the devaluation of the African American, thanks to the media which distort the black diaspora. In this collection of short stories, Makuchi captures the gender, ethnicity, class and linguistic tensions in the postcolonial Cameroon. Her story “American Lottery” dramatizes the various levels of marginalization that a black person suffers in the current era of corporate capitalism. Paul, the narrator’s younger brother wins the “Diversity Immigrant Visa Program” lottery that grants a visa to the United States of America. Paul’s sudden disappearance from the narrative the moment he leaves for America marks his dehumanization and exile. The story also studies the silencing of the African Americans by Africans whose imagination is limited to whiteness. The narrator laughs at her own community which seems to figure Paul’s success in the US in terms of getting not just black friends from the continent, but a white girlfriend. Narrator lingers at the description of the imaginary photograph that the village conjures into existence and sees itself admiring in the near future:

Soon, we will receive pictures taken with his brothers and sisters: Cameroonians, Nigerians, Ethiopians, Eritrean, Egyptians, Black South Africans, Kenyans, Senegalese, pictures with some Black Americans, and of course a picture with the inscription on the back that says, “a friend” – a white woman, her hand around his waist as they both laugh and show their teeth to the camera. She will look so beautiful, almost too happy, as she holds firmly onto my little brother, our African son. And then the years will go by. And the parties will fade into bitter memories, figments of our imagination. (92)

While expressing the deluded excitement of the villagers, the story suggests the artificiality that Paul could be living in. Through her satirical tone, the narrator leads us to questions the logic behind the visa program:

Some bogus thing about an American immigration lottery that to
thousands of aliens! Who are aliens? Where do aliens come from? I ask myself.

When we first meet the character, he is expressing a shared desire among the post-colonial subjects to relocate to the Western metropolis. Although the people are aware of the exploitation and denigration that the West has visited upon their country, they see the metropolis as their home. The Anglophone part of Cameroon wants to go “home” to England, while the Francophone section desires to go to France. The writer focuses on the irony of a community that denies their own homes to construct illusions of home in exile. Paul’s dream has a sense of novelty because he does not want to go to the traditional destinations of the postcolonial:

No, America was the place to be....He needed to go away to a place where murderous thoughts would not be invading his everyday dreams....to a place where he would stop feeling, thinking, or believing that secession was the only option open to a minority(76)

The narrator regrets having not hidden the forms that facilitate Paul’s alienation. She feels guilty of condemning her brother to the invisibility the black person is reduced to in America. Despite the alienation that awaits Paul as “a permanent Resident Alien of the United States of America” (93 – 94), the community is beside itself in celebration of his supposedly good fortune:

America! Their own son, their own friend, their kinsman, was going to America. The frenzy, the joy. Imagine. He will soon be rolling in dollars, their tongues wagged. The very bed on which he will lie will be made of dollars, they chanted.

The irony resides in the way the story is structured. We have already been shown in the story what America does to the “aliens” who go there. Peter, once a dreamer of the “American Dream”, knows what America does to its black victims:

Then his brother who had left for America when he was barely ten had come back home for the first time after thirteen years, THIRTEEN YEARS! And bored holes, like those left behind on plantation leaves after the passage of hailstones, in his perception of America and the world. His brother had shattered a dream, a child’s dream. His brother had come back home a different person, a stranger: the way he walked; the way he smiled at people; the way he talked, the way he talked to people, the way he ate, what he ate, when he ate; the way he dressed, what he wore...Who was this person? Peter had wondered. (80)

The narrator has shown the readers that the reason behind the village’s celebration of uprootment. Through media products, America has been able to market the positive aspects of its culture while suppressing the negative elements. So brainwashed is the community that the people no longer know places by their real names but by names branded on them from films and soap operas shown on the national TV.

Ghanaian novelist Armah’s *Why Are We So Blest* allegorizes the exploitation of the African, especially the conscription of the continental African to backpedal African

Americans' progress, as a form of pervert sexuality. When Modin arrives in America as a student on scholarship, the American academy wants to brainwash him to see himself as different from the community that he left at home. Modin's attempts to correct his benefactors' warped view of Africa as an empty space where only a few intelligent people like Modin can come from are met with hostility. This tells us that the West is not keen on truth about Africa, and would indeed welcome lies. The centrality of the African Americans in the novel is in the way they attempt to save Modin (whose name means "The Black Man" in Ga language spoken in Ghana) from the destructive racist forces. This is through Anata, the voice of reason in the novel, who advises Modin that the only thing that can come out of his interaction with white people would be destruction:

They just want to mess you up. If you are dumb enough to treat them seriously, that's just what they'll do to you. (121)

It is instructive to note that the warning is repeated moments later with the words "dumb" and "mess you up" reproduced:

You have no business trusting any one of them. Listen, if you can use them, good luck to you, but don't get involved. There is nothing like friendship between us and them. You get involved with them, you are just dumb, that is all. They'll mess you up. (123)

Thus to get involved with white people is to be "dumb", and the beginning of one's destruction. He fails to follow Anata's advice and ends up being stabbed by his professor, Jefferson, when the latter finds him having sex with his wife. Against Anata's advice, Modin also falls in love with a white girl, Aimee Reitsch, in a relationship that culminates with his genital mutilation at what the novel calls the desert of mortification. Armah here engages in racialized criticism of whiteness in Manichean aesthetics. According to the presentation, people are good because they are black, while they are bad because they are white. African literature avoids criticizing people for things that they cannot change and are not responsible for.

In a short story entitled "Woman from America", South African novelist Bessie Head celebrates the possibilities of reconnection between the traditional African woman and the modern African American women. First published in 1966 by the British paper *The New Statesman*, the story narrates rural African women's reaction to the arrival of an African American woman into the village. Her marriage into the village is mentioned not because it has any significance to the plot, but to indicate that she is there to stay. To create, an illusion of reality, it is told in the form of an oral narrative by one of the women. The visitor is intimidating to the African women, but unlike in Soyinka's *Interpreters* the split is in the African community, not the returnee:

She descended on us like an avalanche. People are divided into two camps: those who feel a fascinated love and those who fear a new thing. (110)

Despite some people's wish that she would leave (later contradicted by the narrator who indicates that everybody admires her), she seems to be in Africa to stay. It is productive to note that although the African American woman does not get to speak in the narrative, her worldview is presented faithfully by the narrator who seems to belong to the group that wants her to stay and feel at home in Africa. The narrator is naïve and sometimes contradicts herself, which gives us a more believable presentation because she does not manipulate details to achieve a political position. In authorial statements, she expresses her belief that even if African Americans eat sophisticated food in the Diaspora, they feel a connectedness with Africa:

Black people in America care about Africa, and she has come here on her own as an expression of that love and concern. Through her, too, one is filled with wonder for a country that breeds individuals about whom, without and within, rushes the wind of freedom. I have to make myself clear, though. She is a different person who has taken by force what America will never give black people. (112)

Kenyan Rebeka Njau's *The Scared Seed* (2003) textualizes in various ways the problems women have suffered under patriarchal political dominance and inserts the role African Americans have in liberating the still colonized women of Africa. Ellen has come to Africa as a missionary but her contribution to the Church, which has deep connections with the state, is "paid back" through the pastor's attempt to rape her. The ingratitude and greed of the church is underlined in the pastor's lecherous attempt which parallels other acts of violence against women by the patriarchal traditional society and the state. The main character in the story, Tesa, is raped by the head of state who has also perpetrated ethnic war that affects women most. Ellen is shown in instances of the narrative which indicate possibilities of healing after tribal cleansing, participating in the reconstruction of Africa. Her moment of self-realization comes when she abandons the church and joins women in a traditional shrine that is also threatened by the state:

Ellen felt gratified to have had the opportunity to be around the women who knew how to use their power calmly. She was fascinated by Tesa's music and was moved by her ability to relate to people at all levels. She admired her talent and skill in training the young village boys and girls. Within a short time they had learned to sing and create pictures which expressed their feelings, and told stories of joy and sorrow. (174)

Underscored here is the need of direct grassroots negotiation. African Americans with direct relations with Africa are likely to be interacting with the westernized and power-wielding elites, as Ellen previously did. They will be given honors by the authorities which want to exploit their western connection for funding and business, as the pastor tries to do with Ellen to export gourds to America. The text seems to argue that the diasporic African has a duty to deconstruct the formal structure put in place to oppress the ordinary African by the state and its organs. The creative potentials learnt in Africa and taken to America in painful circumstances can be reinvented to assist the African continent:

Her mother, she recalled, had been a skilful craftswoman. She had made fabrics and rugs using fibre plants which had grown in her backyard. Ellen had learnt the craft and she decided to pass the knowledge to the women before she left for the USA. (174)

Rebeka Njau here shows that the intellectual resources stolen from Africa through slavery can be restored to the continent through training. Ellen's mother is a symbol of skilful diasporic Africans that retained their connections with Africa and passed on skills to the next generation. The skills, according to the text, should be repatriated.

Similarly, Armah's *Osiris Rising* presents a profound return of an African American to the continent while criticizing cogently the superficiality of some physical journeys to Africa. For the text, the return should be more spiritual than physical and egoistic. Armah, criticized for his tendency to institute easy dichotomies, complicates the relations of characters so that now being black does not necessarily make one qualified as the custody of virtue. The novel tells the story of Ast, who goes back to Africa to join her friend Asar in bringing change to the dilapidated continent. The fact that the setting is called Hapa (the Swahili word for "here") in Bara (the Swahili word for Continent) indicates that Armah wants the return not to be seen as to be to any single countries whose existence is as a result of slicing up of the continent by the predators, but as a Pan-Africanist project. The novel prioritizes the ancient Egypt as a source of rejuvenation of Africa. This gesture underlines the need to recover narratives that have been repressed by slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. Ast gets the inspiration to return to Africa from a book *Return to the Source* and disassociation with colleagues who distort their people's history to both deodorize history and get monetary and social-status rewards from capitalistic institutions. The text is distorted by the publishers to advance a colonial Eurocentric ideology. Through this act, Armah shows the possibility of a diasporic African being used to advance the interests of the captor. It is clear from the text that meaningful negotiations between races should be one where the parties mutually together, not a scenario where the powerful manipulate the weak. Armah also criticizes African Americans who would accept to be arm-twisted by capitalistic institutions.

A history professor different from the author of the fictional *Return to the Source*, Ast understands the place of reconnection and how forgetting has been employed to debase her people. For her, the place of her birth does not matter but the direction that the black people are moving and negotiating with one another is more fundamental. Speaking to Asar, she insists she is an African because of a history longer than the period in slavery:

In the end, my being born in America doesn't make a lot of difference. It means my great-great-great grandparents were captured and transported over here. Yours weren't. I prefer not to forget several thousand years of our common history because of a few centuries of separation. (102)

She wants to contribute to change in Bara by changing the curriculum in Manda College, which at present is Eurocentric. Manda is the Kiswahili for "agenda". What is underlined

here is that the return should be agenda-based. In fact, Armah excoriates African Americans who go to Africa as a mere adventure because soon they start feeling homesick, missing petty things like Ketchup. Others go to Africa to fulfill hedonistic desires. African Americans like Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano are a disgrace because they combine ideologies that are in conflict with African consciousness and modern demands to fulfill their hedonistic desires. Contrary to Derek Wright's reading of Armah as calling for a return to "the cult societies of the African past" (166), the text is critical of any past-for-past's-sake project. Through Jomo Armah is critical of the worship of the past that compromises women's rights. Indeed, Jomo is portrayed as a hindrance to fruitful return of African American women that he wants to add to his harem in the name of African traditions. Modernity, according to the novel, should be harnessed to benefit the populace; not as a tool, as it is at present, of terrorizing and repressing them.

Armah sounds a warning to African Americans that they can easily be co-opted to serve the forces that they set out to fight. We are told of returnees who are bought over by Seth's regime:

I know two who came burning to revolutionize the world and start the rule of justice. The security fellows watched them until they were broke. Then they hit them with money. Think of it. They came wanting to revolutionize the world. Think of it. They came wanting so much to escape slavery in America. They ended up joining the slave dealers here. (68)

While Armah's earlier novels are told by a detached narrator presenting the characters perspective unmediated, the story in *Osiris Rising* is focalized by Ast, the African American returnee. She is what Leif Lorentzon, in a narratological reading of the novel, calls a "filter character" (181). This kind of narrative perspective gives the story a human face, as opposed to the impersonal narratives we find in Armah's other novels. But the choice of the African American character to focalize the events is more than a narratological choice; I would like to read a deeper ideological imperative in giving the African American the agency to shape the direction and depth of an African novel. It is through her center of consciousness that we see the depravity that Africa has been reduced to by colonial and neo-colonial predators. At the same time, Armah uses Ast's analytical skills as a PhD in African history to diagnose the situation in Africa critically and offer practical solutions to the problems in Africa. While maintaining aesthetic distance, he is able to deliver informed statements about Africa to his readers without appearing to be preaching at us. The novel is also oral, and by prioritizing Ast's perspective it celebrates the African oral mode that is still retained in African American communication. Ode Ogede has noted Armah's use of narrative technique and playfulness without detracting us from the central concerns of the novel (147). Through the African American character who gives the novel its aesthetic distance Armah is able to achieve at once his didactic imperative and aesthetic presentation of sociological and political details.

To conclude: It is clear that the few times they appeared in the African literatures of the 1960s, African Americans were stereotypically presented as speaking an odd language

and as alienated “ghosts” who could not dialogue with continental Africans. Armah’s work which came out in the 1960s treats sex as an allegory of racial politics in global Africa. In *Fragments* and *Why are We So Blest* he presents African American women as sources of power and creativity. Continental Africans who ignored these visionaries are eventually destroyed. The images are one-sided in the sense that they ignore the diversity of African Americans. Armah’s later writing *Osiris Rising* presents both positive and negative African American characters. For their part, women writers from the continent have emphasized in their later writing the possibilities of global African women’s community. Early writing is obsessed with marriage, a motif that seems to be dying away. But popular culture in Africa still stereotypes African Americans, in gestures that call for intensive education, dialogue and collaboration between continental Africans and African American artists. From the literatures, the ordinary continental African has a deep respect for diasporic Africans while the elites want to co-opt the African Americans in the project of suppressing democracy in Africa. Artistic work by African Americans reaches only a minority that the populace would not identify with. This helps entrench disassociation from diasporic Americans. Diasporic Africans should learn the languages of Africa so that their dialogue with the continent is not limited to the elite. Young continental writers should be taught to subvert the stereotypes of diasporic Africans trafficked by the media.

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