Review

The Undoing of the Black Race: Transgression of traditional religion by money in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragment*

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In the context of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragment* (1969), the undoing of the black race means the falling apart of ancestral rites. By taking the Ghanaian traditional religious beliefs as a sample, the author depicts the disintegration of the black race’s social, political and economic system. He skilfully develops the impact of money and colonization on the Ashanti community. Armah shows how corruption and nepotism, which overwhelm the Ghanaian society, are offshoots of materialism, which banes people with insufficient time to spend on their ancestral rites. Because traditional religion is a focal point in the fiction of the Ghanaian writer - like his Nigerian counterparts Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Elechi Amadi- Armah uses ancestral religion to defend and prove the authenticity of the African culture.

Key words: Ancestral rites, money, corruption.

INTRODUCTION


J.B. Danquah’s assertion explains the importance of ancestors and the gods in Ghanaian communities. But is the traditional religion as important up to the level where Armah counterposes it to a direct solution to westernization? How does Armah succeed to develop his point of view?

The aim of this dissertation is to focus on the "Undoing
of the Black Race” in term of transgression of traditional religion by money. It is the case study of Ayi Kwei Armah’s Fragment. For a better understanding of the work, this paper is divided into three sections: Tragic Lyricism, Disintegration of the Black Race and Transgression of Ancestral Religion. In Section 1- Tragic Lyricism, themes of continuity and endless world will be discussed. Section 2- Disintegration of Black Race, deals with the discontinuity of the circle between the world of the living and that of the ancestors who are no longer considered as saviours. The last section, section 3- Transgression of Ancestral Religion, criticizes the introduction of money in the African culture which affected Africans and developed corruption.

Tragic lyricism

In Armah's Fragments, we find the expression of tragic lyricism or lyric. In the most common use of the term as any fairly short poem, uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling. Many lyric speakers are represented as musing in solitude. In dramatic lyrics, however, the lyric speaker is represented as addressing another person in a specific situation; instances are John Donne’s ‘Canonization’ and William Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ as developed by M.H. Abrams (2005: 153).

Here, lyric or lyricism has a link with the hero’s grand mother- the representative of the traditional Africa, expressing her strong personal feelings about the change brought with the colonial encounter. Naana’s condition determines it. Tragic lyric is symbolic in this work. For instance “the tragic hero, like Oedipus in Sophocles' Oedipus the King, [who] moves up to pity because, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but he moves us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves” (Abrams, 2005: 332).

Naana as was discussed is complaining about the social, cultural and political decay in Africa through the Ghanaian experience. Although she is not the heroine in Fragments she plays an important role as the guardian of the remaining ancestral traditions. Her wailing complaint reminds me Aristotle’s tragic hero. Aristotle says that “the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad but a mixture of both” (331).

The introduction of the old lady in Armah’s work shows clearly the author’s preoccupation on one hand to adopt slightly and skillfully the Elizabethan tragedies to his writing- “A few minor Elizabethan tragedies, such as A Yorkshire Tragedy (of uncertain authorship), had as the chief character a man of the lower class, but it remained for eighteenth- century writers to popularize the bourgeois or domestic tragedy, which was written in prose and presented a protagonist from the middle or lower social ranks who suffers a commonplace or domestic disaster. Since that time most of the successful tragedies have been in prose and represent middle -class, or occasionally even working- class, heroes and heroines” (333). Armah (1969) on the other hand develops, through Naana, the philosophy of self- accusation or auto- evaluation via a vision of regeneration. In Naana’s lyrical language the reader notes a certain fear of a menacing chaos born with the colonial clash of culture as she keeps on insisting that “where you are going…. do not let your mind become persuaded that you walk alone… There are no humans born alone… There are no humans who walk this earth alone (3-4). Naana’s lyricism translates her consciousness; she seems to represent “the values of the old Africa being swept away under the influence of Western ideas” (Span33/Gillard.html, 03/06/2003:1).

Through Baako’s grandmother’s lyric, Armah succeeds to point out the irresolvable problem of cultural clash between the Western values and the African ways of life. Naana’s philosophy of cycle and continuity is expressive. This female character is aware of the danger linked with her grandson’s departure to Europe when she affirms that always there has been a danger in such departures because much of their blood has run to waste. The danger here is a certain fear, not of the death itself but the death of the body and the soul. Naana thinks that such departures are dangerous because she affirms that most of their blood has run to waste. For her, Baako is a victim, a kind of escape goat sacrificed by his pairs.

Moreover, the concept of madness raised in “For we are not mad with the sorrow of moments that pass”, is an appreciation of Naana’s lyrical vision towards the general people’s viewpoint on Baako’s behaviour. Since he refuses to accept bribes and to behave like the other ‘been- to’, he becomes a hermit or a marginal over-weening fighting alone for a noble fight but against the whole society’s will. Baako’s mistake is his stubbornness to defeat a whole community. He has thought that he alone can change the system. As a consequence, he was forced to be mad. Naana through her Lyricism emphasized on Baako’s fatality as nearly the same as in Efua’s baby’s farewell. When Efua says “Cruel Death took you from our hands” and “The blow was hard, the tears bitter” (1969:187-188), the lyrics are meaningful and expressive of a dual feeling. Both feelings share the same root: that of the non-respect of the traditional religious beliefs.

The idea of unity introduced by Efua when she says: “You will never leave our hearts till once again we are all united in the bosom of our Lord”, reinforces Naana’s belief “not only that those who go away will return, but also that there is a continuity of life in death, and that contact with the dead must be maintained.” (Gillard. html, 2003:1). Baako’s grandmother insists on the cyclical
aspect of the world and continuity. She does not begrudge her offspring for the divisive pressure of the clash of cultures. She makes a kind of confession by saying: “My spirit is straining for another beginning in a place where there will be new eyes and where the farewells that will remain unsaid here will turn to a glad welcome and my ghost will find the beginning that will be known here as my end” (196).

Naana’s viewpoint on the death is clear. She will travel. When there is no use she said, the spirit in us yearns for the world of other spirits, travellers who have crossed over from this side, just as the spirits themselves hope and wait for the new one coming. She concludes at the end of the novel with the mere thought of the endless world: “...you are the end, the beginning, you who have no end, I am coming” (201).

Armah uses the character of Naana to represent the values of the old Africa. Through lyrics, he succeeds to point out the clash of culture between Europe and Africa. As it is said by Garry Gillard (Gillard.html, 2003:1), “The novels of Ayi Kwei Armah provide an opportunity to study a confrontation between European and African patterns of thought. This confrontation (and its effects: the original confusion and disillusionment, followed by fragmentation and disintegration and then by compromise and consolidation) is a principal thematic concern running through the novels”.

To sum up, as stated in the above quotation, Armah’s intention is to denounce the change occurring during the colonial encounter through a highly stylistic device. Naana’s lyrics strengthens the idea of the disintegration of the Black race or the collapse of the traditional order including tradition, custom and culture.

Disintegration of the Black Race

The black race’s disintegration takes root when the recognition of the “community of ancestors living underground is limited to reverence by the African themselves” (Ezebaye, 1975: 238). In Fragments for instance, these ancestors are not considered as serious saviours as in Achebe’s or Amadi’s earliest superficial faith in their traditional beliefs, though Naana keeps on reminding them that: “The circle was not broken... The departed ones are still watching over those they left here above. Even Foli felt their presence. His soul within those hours left the heavy body so as to be with the departed one’s, to ask their help upon the head of the one about to go. Nothing was said then that was not to be said, and nothing remained unsaid for which there was a need” (3).

Naana’s dialectic alludes to the belief in the ancestors and the role they are supposed to play to their children. Baako’s uncle Foli, is cited because he belongs to the generation which will constitute the elders after Naana’s death. For the time being, he is the one performing the rituals. Surprisingly, Foli, who is assumed to be the old traditions’ protector, is the first one who destroys them by cheating the ancestors. He refuses to pour the schnapps destined to his fore-fathers. The narrator describes Foli’s act with strong voice: “The pig Foli, in spite of the beauty of the words he had spoken, remained inside his soul a lying pig. A shameful lot more than a whole half bottle of the drink had remained outpoured, and now he went and took from among his many shiny things a glass to pour the traveller’s drink of ceremony for Baako” (6).

Foli’s greed for drink will break the welded circle existing for years between the world of the livings and that of the dead. His drunken gluttony then, contributes to the subversion of the relationship between the ancestors and their offspring.

Naana’s reaction at that point is quick and effective because she knows the importance of the offerings. She takes the schnapps and offers the libation herself. Armah describes the scene in the first person singular to demonstrate the importance accorded to the sacrifice by the representative of the bygones who thinks that she can stop the undoing of the Black Race.

Naana is ready to fulfill her mission. As long as she is alive, she will not accept any marginalization of the ancestral rites. The negligence of the new generation (represented by Foli and Korankye) to perform the traditional rituals gradually destroys the members of the community and the remaining African ancestral religious beliefs. Naana, who is aware of the situation, tries in vain to make her society understand that the helpful traditional religion is collapsing. Armah uses this old lady as an eyewitness of the fragmentation of the African ancestral values. She attests that things are no longer what they used to be. That is why the Nigerian researcher Ode Ogede (1991) has argued that: “It is not a coincidence that in Fragments, it is the old woman Naana who witnesses and report the origin of the decline of spirituality both in the episode in which Foli... drinks up the wine for the supposed ancestral libation... and at the ceremony marking the outdooring of Araba’s child where Korankyce cheats the ancestors in the same manner (532-533).

Ogede insists on the fact that Naana is the voice of the elder who has witnessed the threatened ideal past. He also adds that Naana laments the erosion and distortion of African civilization by an alien system of values and reveals her respect for the order under siege. Naana’s role as a guardian of a cherished traditional religion introduces a feminist theme in the novel. Armah ascribes life-sustaining potentials to women. Female characters such as Juana, the Puerto Rican psychiatrist, and Efua who follows the prophet are illustrative.

To conclude this point, I can affirm that the disintegration of the Black race is precipitated by the young generation who do not care about the survival of the old order. These youngsters are more concerned with
material things rather than wasting their time on ancestral values. They think that money is above all.

Transgression of Ancestral Religion

The transgression of the ancestral religion is made here by money. The attempt to outdoor the new-born baby only five days after its birth is a travesty of traditions and, naturally, Naana is astonished to hear it by crying out: "Five days. The child is not yet with us. He is in the keeping of the spirits still, and already they are dragging him out into this world for eyes in heads that have eaten flesh to gape at (97).

This act, as Naana understands it, contributes to the degeneration of the traditional religious beliefs of the Ghanaians. The fake ceremony in Fragments directed by Korankye, to atone the anger of the ancestors, does nothing but inciting them. Naana concludes that the infant will not last long. The society underestimates the ancestral rites for materialistic reasons, for Araba and her mother are eager to celebrate the baby's birthday just after the payday when every worker get his salary, without thinking about the child's fate and the survival of their customs. The priority for them is to amass money. With only Baako as her confident, Naana cries out: "Baako, how can I say what is in my soul? Often a quick child like that is only a disturbed spirit come to take a brief look and go back home. But I am too old. Let me say this to them and inside their hearts they will take the infant life just to lengthen mine" (97).

Naana, who is considered as the "eyes" of the ancestors and the guardian of the traditions, reveals a great secret to Baako. She knows that the infant will not stay because of his mother and grandmother's haste, and she laments the fact that the new generation does not respect the traditional religious system since it cannot differentiate a witch from an experienced elder. Ogede (1991) links Araba's child's death to the abuse of tradition: "The death of Araba's child is attributable to [the] abuse of tradition; as the abuse of tradition provokes the anger of the ancestors, they withdraw their protection, thus allowing humans to become vulnerable to antagonist forces" (533).

Tradition is a very long process, which must not be interrupted. The disintegration of traditional religion in Fragments can be attributed to several factors among which the transgression of the ancestral religion by money. Instead, the society in Fragments is greedy for money and other material objects, thus forcing Naana, the conservative guardian of the ancestral beliefs to complain about the explanation people give to her. "Always and everywhere the same words that bring a sickness to the stomach of the listener. The world has changed... And they think it is enough to explain every new crime, to push a person to accept all..." (98).

Naana does not accept change as a justification for the Ghanaian abuse of traditional rites. For her, the absence of any good-will shown by the new generation towards tradition is the deep rooted cause of the undoing of the Black race. The introduction of money contributes to the quick and easy collapse of the Ghanaian traditional values.

The corrupted society in Fragments refuses to offer to the ancestors, the required quantity of offerings necessary to obtain their blessings. Step by step, with what they have called "change", the Ghanaian community in Armah's second novel abandons a great portion of its civilization.

Conclusion

To stress on the disintegration of the Ghanaian traditions, Armah deliberately starts his novel with Naana and finishes it with the same character. The use of this old lady is significant. She represents the ancient order characterized by its mystical rites and rituals, in a context where nothing can be done without consulting the ancestors. Naana's crucial role, which is clearly defined in the last chapter of the book, is that of a town-crier who laments the changed order and warns about the undoing of the Black Race.

The rejection is almost total because even Naana the remnant of the past is seen as a bothersome elder. Her offspring want her to die so that they can bury her with all the remaining ancestral beliefs. Through Naana's monologue, the author decry the symbolical subversion of traditional religion. He presents traditions as a fragile object; when it falls down (from a certain distance) it will break into (useless) pieces.

The book ends with Naana's concluding idea concerning the cyclical property of the world. She says: "I am here against the last of my veils. Take me; I am ready. You are the end, the beginning, you who have no end, I am coming" (201). This idea of everlasting life is the author's concern. The world is considered as a transitional camp, where human beings are tested before joining the definite world of the ancestors, for life is endless and eternal.

Thus, Ayi Kwei Armah succeeds in presenting a disintegrated ancestral way of life in Fragments. He has shown, through the characters of Naana, Efua, Taraba, Foli, Korankye and Baako, how Ghanaians have progressively lost their ancestral values in the rat race to embrace a new way of life in their look for money that created an unthinkable corrupted network.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflicts of interest.
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