

**Ayi Kwei Armah's
Two Thousand Seasons :
From the Epic to Menippea**

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A.N. Mensah, one of Ayi Kwei Armah's critics, writes that one of the central problems in discussing *Two Thousand Seasons*¹ is to decide what kind of work it is.² Another problematic issue is its racial or rather racist dimension that has made of Armah a controversial writer both in the Arab world and in the West. The recent development in literary theory makes it worth while to raise up these interrelated issues. In our view, Armah's narrative / discourse in *Two Thousand Seasons* is Menippea . It is this category of narrative that makes for the multiplicity of styles in Armah's novel, which critics as various as Wole Soyinka and Derek Wright have observed each in his own way without being able to place it in a particular genre. What is Menippean narrative, and how does it come that it has fed to Armah's novel? Bakhtin's theory of the Menippean narrative can help us answer the two questions. According to him, the Menippean narrative belongs to the carnivalesque genre³ and we know, for instance, that among Armah's own people, the Akan, the Menippean / satiric spirit once found expression in the Apo ceremony, an eight-day festival during which, according to Bosman, a "perfect lampooning liberty" was allowed , and the people sang "satirical Balldas" about " the Faults, Villainies, and Frauds of their Superieurs [sic], as well as

Inferieurs [sic] without punishments”⁴. R.S. Rattray one of the early anthropological students of West African societies, also observed this festival in the 1920's. A Takese priest at Tekiman described the meaning of the festival to him :

Our forebears [...] ordained a time, once every year, when every man and woman, free man and slave, should have freedom to speak out just what was in their thought of them, and not only their neighbours, but also the king or chief. When a man has spoken freely thus he will feel his sumsum (soul) cool and quieted [...] the King of Ashanti may have killed your children and you hate him. This has made him ill, and you ill, too; when you are allowed to say before what you think; you both benefit. That was why the King of Ashanti in ancient times, when he fell sick, would send for the Queen of Nkoranza to insult him [...]. It made him live longer and did him good.⁵

The Akan folktales, usually referred to as Anansesem, is another genre in which the Menippean/satiric spirit manifests itself. In his observation of these folktales, R.S. Rattray makes the following pertinent remark :

A very striking anomaly (in the Akan folktales) has passed without notice or comment - I refer to the peculiarity presented by a people normally decorous in speech and conduct, whose folktales nevertheless often contain the most Rabelaisian passages, who would yet consider it highly improper to relate these passages if divorced from the occasion and context in which they are nightly publically paraded. (Emphasis our own).⁶

As he goes to discuss the Akan folktales, Rattray makes clearer the ground on which he has compared them to “Rabelaisian” literature. Among other things, he cites their “vulgarity and coarseness”, their profanation of the sacred, their inclusion of dramatic sketches, and

the “roars of laughter” to which they give rise as they satirize “abuse” public dignataries involved in misdeeds. Rattray compares the Akan storytelling evenings to the Apo ceremony that “period of perfect lampooning liberty noted by the Dutch historian of the Gold Coast two hundred years ago”.⁷ Rattray’s prefatory remarks about the Akan folktales remind us of Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque aspect of Rabelais in *Rabelais and his World*. One of the conclusions to which Bakhtin has come in the latter work is that while Rabelais had taken his cue from the revived Greek and Roman Menippean writers in renaissance Italy, it is to the French carnivalesque folklore that he turned to write his Menippean novels.

We can hold the same argument that Bakhtin develops about Rabelais, and Dostoevski (in *Dostoevski’s Poetics*) in our analysis of Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*. Armah might well have read, Western Menippean writers like Horace, Persius, Juvenal and others, but in writing his work he has turned to indigenous sources of Menippeae like the “Satirical Ballads” of the Apo, the Anansesem, and the Akan tradition of abuse poetry known as the halo. The integration of the latter elements has made for the combination of satire and social utopia, epic and adventure, the sacred and its profanation, symbolism and gross naturalism, multistylism and multitonality that we find in *Two Thousand Seasons*.

Two Thousand Seasons starts as follows :

Springwater flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration. The desert takes. The desert knows no giving. To the giving water of your flowing it is not in the nature of the desert to return anything but destruction. Springwater flowing to the desert, your future is extinction.

Hau, people headed after the setting sun, in that direction even the possibility of regeneration is dead. There the devotees of death take

life, consume it, exhaust every living thing. Then they move on, forever seeking newer boundaries. Whenever there are living remnants undestroyed, there lies more work for them. Whatever would direct itself after the setting sun, an ashen death lies in wait for it. Whichever people make the falling fire their aim, a pale extinction awaits them among the destroyers (p. IX)

Stylization here tips over into imitation of the traditional Akan dirge of Ghana as the novelist himself assumes the mantle of a dirge singer. Akan "funeral dirges", writes Kofi Awoonor, are not for the ears of the dead. They are for the living... "(They) are vehicles of self-lamentation, philosophy, ideas of morality and ethics, and comments on the total human condition".⁸ In the passage we have quoted from *Two Thousand Seasons*, we have a kind of choral lament over the loss of sense of social direction. Akan people are identified with different water sources, so the dirge singer(s) addresses them collectively as "spring water" reminding them that they are "flowing" in the direction of the "desert". "White desert" is a particularly sinister image in the Akan oral tradition. The "desert" lies in the direction of "the setting sun", a vernacular term for the West. It "takes", "consumes", and "exhaust", offering in return only "destruction", and "extinction". Drawn by the brightness of the West – "the setting sun" – the African "springwater" moves steadily toward "ashen death" and "pale extinction".

The prologue's choral dirge singer(s) moves to the sermonization of the "seers, the hearers, the utterers", in short the African artists to know how they have come to be "mere mirrors of annihilation" when their mission is that of guardians of the sacred word and the visionaries of their own times. The speaker(s) recognize(s) that in the "destruction's furious whiteness", a reference to the domination of whites over blacks, it is "easy for unheeded seers, unheard listeners, easy for interrupted utterers to

clasp the immediate destiny "(XIII) and give up to despair. Yet, just as in traditional dirges, Armah's dirge singer's decries any surrender of hope and remembers that "against all that destruction some yet remained among us unforgetful of origins, dreaming secret dreams, hearing secret voices of our purpose" (p. XV) .

The prologue's dirge singer breaks into the remembrance of origins in the first chapter of the novel called "The Way". According to J.B. Nketia, one of the principal themes of the Akan dirge song is that of "the Ancestor". Nketia writes that « from the point of view of lineage, the theme of the Ancestor emphasizes that the members are not a people without a tradition, without history of which they could be proud. The deceased and the living are not "displaced" persons or people with no bonds with a group of Akan people they can call their kinsmen [...]. It is for this reason that a mourner might wish to say in her dirges : "We are from creation./ It was my people (the dirge singer's) who first came here [...]"⁹ Armah's dirge singer echoes Nketia's mourner when he tells us that "we are not a people of yesterday... This land is ours, not through murder, not through theft, not by way of violence or any other trickery. This has always been our land. Here we began (pp. 1-5). When exactly was the beginning of the African people? Those who seek the certitude of historical time are contemptuously instructed to count first the "stars visible to their eyes alone", then the sand on the seashore, and finally to "number the raindrops in the ocean". Only then will they know "how many seasons have flowed by since our people were unborn » (p.1). The paradisiacal origins are thus veiled in myth, and Armah mentions one of them "the ancient woman and her seven children". (p.1)

The reason why the dirge singer's remembrance is concerned with beginnings is spelt out in the prologue : "A people losing sight of origins are dead. A people deaf to purposes are lost" (p. XIII). The remembrance purports to be a corrective to more conventional

and Western-oriented histories of Africa, because, we are told, the "air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins" (p. 2).

J. B. Nketia has also shown that another fundamental theme of the Akan dirge is the message whose main content is gift exchange. According to Nketia the exchange of gifts, in the old Akan society, in which personal communication was neither easy nor quick, the commonest way by which someone living away from his friends and kinsmen could keep in touch with them through reciprocal exchange of greetings and gifts which were sent through a messenger - usually someone who happened to be going to the desired destination. The message greeting or gift was a mark of goodwill and fellowship, a sign of love. "The expression", "send me a message", or "send me something" (that we find in Akan dirges) was and has come to mean a desire for fellowship and love; it has an emotional significance".¹⁰

There are three indispensable obligations in such a system : giving, receiving, and repaying.¹¹ These obligations must always follow each other and one of them ceases the others should cease too. Such are the principles that Armah imagines to have prevailed in his utopian world. As long as the black people had held to all three of them, they lived in harmony, but no sooner had they ignored them than they were subjugated by Arab "predators" and European "destroyers" with the complicity of African potential slaves "the ostentatious cripples"¹².

In the second chapter, Armah's narrative acquires a virulent edge that takes it close to what in the Akan-Ashanti orature is known as Halo (abuse/satiric poetry). While the narrator continues to evoke the past lamenting his people's tragic flaws on the one hand and celebrating their resistance on the other, he makes the intruders and their collaborators his satiric targets. What are the

characteristics of halo poetry and to what extent are they reflected in *Two Thousand Seasons*? Kofi Awoonor answers the first question when he writes that

*Halo goes back in time, being the poetic medium for satire and direct abuse. While the social code of the community forbids slander and wanton abuse, the halo is permitted slander, operative as a means of social control, and an avenue for dissipating animosity and other hostilities that may endanger group solidarity... The poet on either side digs into the family history of leaders and comes up with slanderous details about them. These are put into song. Sometimes the poets make up stories. Exaggeration is the hallmark of the halo.*¹³

It is not difficult to realize that the hallmark of Armah's novel is also exaggeration; it digs, like halo poetry, into the African historical encounter with the Arabs and Europeans to bring up slanderous details about them. The other feature that *Two Thousand Seasons* share with halo poetry is its inventiveness and its fantastic imaginative power. In this respect, much of what is said about the Arabs "the Predators" is made up, invented to scandalize the Arab leaders. Most of the Arab intruders in the novel bear names echoing those of contemporary Arab leaders e.g., Hussein and Hassan. The insults that Armah trades up about the Arab ancestry takes his novel close to the scandal press (scandal being also one of the functions of Halo in traditional Akan community), in the West.

Halo poetry reminds us of the Dirty Dozens in the Afro-American tradition. Clarence Major defines the "Dirty Dozens" as "a very elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult other's relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give in to anger is the loser".¹⁴ Things are different in Halo contest. According to Awoonor, it is the "villager (who are

the judge and (who) determine which side is the winner",¹⁵ and since the judge carries with him his own familial or clan biases no one really wins. The Halo poets fight it out until they are tired of it and give up. We can move from here to argue that critics of *Two Thousand Seasons* like the judges of halo contest carry with them their critical biases. As they wrestle with it, some have enough emotional strength to appreciate its artistic achievement while others, like Derek Wright, drop it out of anger either because it hurts their racial sensibilities or because it does offer itself to easy appropriation.

We have previously identified the plural narrative voice of the novel as belonging to the choral lament. We can now add that the "We" also belongs to halo poetry. Awoonor reminds us that Halo contests are waged in groups. The leading Halo poets of opposing sides have songsters or (Viviwo) for they teach their songs in secrecy and preparation for the appointed day of contest. Collective narrative voice in *Two Thousand Seasons* suggest a group of Vuviwo with Armah as the leading halo poet trading insults and satiric attacks with identifiable Western philosophers and writers who conceive of Africa as a dark continent.¹⁶

Two Thousand Seasons is also a literary satire, i.e., satire with a literary object as its target, in the sense that it turns the traditions of African epic (and all epics for that matter) upside down. African chiefs and kings are qualified as "ostentatious cripples" in Armah's novel. At first sight, this epithet may seem fortuitous.

But placed in the context of the African tradition, it suddenly assumes the function of a subtle allusion to the crippling quality which is very often the hallmark of such African legendary heroes as Sundjata in the Mandingo epic. To the extent that the narrator's defining of the world of the beginnings as that of "the brothers and mothers spread connected" (p.7) over the land fits Bakhtin's view

of the epic as consisting of "the first" and "the best",¹⁷ it can be claimed that *Two Thousand Seasons* is an epic which incorporates elements of parody or mock-heroic to turn the heroic tradition inside out.

Armah also parodies the African praise song or what is usually referred to as appellation poetry, which is one of the corollary genres of the African heroic tradition. A pertinent example is provided in the false praise of Kamuzu whose name incidentally points to today's Kamuzu Banda of Malawi known as "His Excellency the Life President Ngwazi (i.e., hero) Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda".

Osagyefo courageous, skilled one who arrives to pulverize the enemy just when the enemy is exulting in imminent victory;

Mzee, wisdom's own keeper;

Kabiyesi, leader of men;

Kantamanta, faithful one who never broke an oath;

... Katachie, commander supreme!

Thirty such resounding appellations Kamuzu accepted for himself with overflowing joy... " (p. 269)

Although, as indicated above, Kamuzu is reminiscent of Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, the praise names used in the mock-adulation obliquely extends its area of reference to include such other African leaders as Osagyefo Nkrumah and Mzee Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. As for the "thirty appellations" in the mock-praise song, they suggest both the 30 heads of state who founded the OAU and the thirty pieces of silver for which Judas Iscariot sells out Jesus to the Romans. These appellations are as "resounding" as Judas's silver coins, and Kamuzu's fate is in no way different from that of the archetypal betrayer. Kamuzu was hanged on the public square for "presumption". The parody of the

praise song, however, can be seen not in this symbolism, but also in the sound and fury of the praise names signifying nothing but the foolishness of a Kamuzu-Macbeth. Kamuzu's tale, like Macbeth's in Shakespeare's play, is a tale of an idiot strutting the stage when suddenly "the first brilliance of that night's explosion began to light the skies." (p. 271) Soyinka calls such antics as Kamuzu's "the play of giants" an overstatement to signify on the grandeur of the African leaders. (1984) Kamuzu is like his ancestral predecessor, "Bulukutu, he who gave himself a thousand grandiose, empty names of praise yet died forgotten in the memories of laughing rememberers (pp. 63-64).

When we read Armah's novel we can not help remembering the following verses of Amega Dunyo, the Akan halo poet satirizing about the easy manners of a woman who has given her attention to another fellow halo poet :

*Come and hear the voice of slander
You clutch the earth like a leather bag.
You run like the bush rope
Beneath your stomach is the hyena's ravine
Will this too insult the poet?*¹⁸

We have shown in the course of our analysis that it is the same call as Dunyo that Armah makes to "predators, African "ostentatious cripples" and European "destroyers", that is to come and hear the voice of slander exposing their scandalous behaviour; and that the interrogative mood of Dunyo's satirical verse has a similar counterpart in Armah's slanderous prose. We may reproach Armah having made up stories about what he calls "predators" (Arabs) and "destroyers" (Westerners). But then we should remind ourselves that he is imitating an oral genre whose hallmark, Kofi Awoonor writes, is "exaggeration". In this tendency towards exaggeration, making up stories, or to use an Afro-American term "Signifyin(g)",

Halo poetry and for that matter *Two Thousand Seasons* aligns itself with the Akan narrative genre of Anansesem wherein the convention binding the Anansefaro (the storyteller) to his listening audience is made clear right at the beginning of each folktale by the disclaimer : "we do not really mean, we do not really mean what we say". It is with this disclaimer in mind that we should read those episodes of Armah's novel that are freed from the constraints of history to yield them up to abuse.

In the concluding passage of *Two Thousand Seasons*, the halo/dirge poet(s) or the Ananse faro / storyteller combines bitter invective with a positive statement which encompasses both the present and the future of Africa :

Soon we shall end this remembrance, the sound of it. Soon it will end. It is the substance that continues. Yet still,, what a scene of carnage the while destroyers have brought here, what destruction of bodies, what a death of souls!

Against this what a vision of creation yet unknown, higher, much more profound than all estwhile creation! What a hearing of the confluence of all the waters of life flowing to overwhelm the ashen desert's blight! What an utterance of the comming together of all the people of our way, the coming together of all people of the way (p. 321).

By closing with the same images and symbols used pessimistically at the beginning of the novel, Armah unifies his material and emphasizes the change in outlook brought about by the "remembrance" of those who made the "return" from slavery and initiated a movement which leads him to present the most hopeful and positive vision to be found in Armah's works. The affiliation of Armah's novel to the Apo and Anansesem suggests that the bad sides of the story are belabored so that the listening/ reading audience can learn the wisdom of history so as to turn their backs on the examples of folly that the same history provides. The happy

end is there to remind us that the instances of folly unfolded in the pages of the novel, just like the tomfoolery of the Apo and Anansesem is temporary, are a mere aberration in the "larger circle of regeneration" bound to "become again *communitas*".¹⁹

If Armah's novel, as we have shown above, contains both epic and Menippean/satiric elements, which of them constitutes, to use Jakobson's term "the dominant".²⁰ Our view is that *Two Thousand Seasons* illustrates well Bakhtin's point about the capacity of Menippean/satiric narrative to "absorb and rework other genres (while) remaining true to its basic, unsettling, unseemly drive". In what ways have the Menippean elements altered the epic quality of Armah's novel? We shall start our argument with Derek Wright's observation that *Two Thousand Seasons* presents us "a rogue's gallery".²¹ Wright is pertinent in his observation in the sense that he has previously noted that Armah's novel reaches out to what he calls epic "griotature". However, he has failed to go into the reasons behind this shift in Armah's narrative. According to us, it is Armah's incorporation of Menippean elements that have made for the displacement in the epic journey to which Armah's chroniclers invite us at the beginning of the novel into the realm of the picaresque populated by rogues of various sorts, "predators", "Ostentatious Cripples", "Askaris", "Dotard rememberers" and "Destroyers".

The transforming effect of the Menippean elements can also be observed at the level of the novel's setting. In their lament of the past, the chroniclers takes us to the "world of the beginnings", but their shift into halo poetry in the second chapter of the novel changes our perception of this epic temporal removal which functions then like those satirical prose works which are presented as tales of visits to strange lands through which the present-day society can be criticized. The main targets of Armah's satire are the contemporary African leaders. But Armah's novel is not simply

political satire, it is also literary, and as such it departs from what Julia Kristeva calls "epic monologism"²² to involve itself in parody or to use an Afro-American critical term "Signifyin(g)" on the African heroic tradition whose royal holders are dismissed as "dotard rememberers". The latter have not been true to their mission as "masters of eloquence". Instead of preserving the tradition (the Way) they have undermined it by becoming pimps for the African leaders, cultivating what Ali Maszrui calls "the monarchical tendency in African political system"²³ through epics like *Sundiata*. In the light of all this evidence, we are now in the position to affirm that *Two Thousand Seasons* reaches to the form of epic narratives in its imitation of the Akan dirge song, but its absorption of elements from the Akan satirical tradition has greatly altered its epic quality to lean it heavily toward Menippea. As such it remains true to its time because, as Bakhtin reminds us, the emergence (after tragedy and epic) of Menippean literature in antiquity came as a new response to the unpredictability of society in Mediterranean cities. The renewal of Menippean writing like Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* in contemporary Africa can be considered as being timely for our continent is not poor in examples of social unpredictability.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Lusaka : East African Publishing House, 1973) Subsequent pagination references are to this edition.
2. A.N. Mansah, "Style and Purpose in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*", in *African Literature Today*, ed. Eustace Palmer and Marjorie Jones (London : James Currey, 1991), V. 17, p. 12.
3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R.W. Rostel (Ann Arbor, Mich : Ardis, 1973). See also the discussion of

the Menippean discourse in Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York : Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 251.

4. Cited in R.S. Rattray, Ashanti (London : Oxford University Press, 1923), 251.
5. Ibid, p. 154.
6. R.S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1930), p. IX.
7. Ibid., p. XI.
8. Kofi Awoonor, *The Guardians of the Sacred Word* (New York : Nok Publishers, 1974), p. 12.
9. J.H. NKETIA, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (Achimota, 1955), pp. 25-26.
10. Ibid, p. 48.
11. Cf. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift : Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Society*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York : Norton Library, 1967).
12. According to W.E. Abraham, the Akan consider that slavery in the result of laziness. One of their proverbs goes as follows : "I am in need, please to this for me", that is how some became slaves'. Cf. W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press), 1969, p. 73.
13. Kofi Awoonor, pp. 6-7.
14. Quoted in Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey* Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 68.

15. Awoonor, p. 7.
16. Cf. Patrick Brantingler, "Victorians and African : The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent", in *"Race", Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1986).
17. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin : University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 13.
18. Amega Dunyo, "It is in the hands of Destiny", in *The Guardians of the sacred Word*, ed. Kofi Awoonor (New York : Noew York, 1974), p. 57.
19. Robert Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1984), p. 70.
20. Cf. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", in *Style in Languages*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeck (New York : Technology Press, 1968).
21. Derek Wright, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa*, (London : Hans Zell Publishers, 1989), pp. 238-239.
22. Julia Kristeva, pp. 47-48.
23. Cf. Ali Mazrui, "The Monarchical Tendency in African Political Culture", in *Violence and Thought* (London : Longman, 1969), pp. 206-230.