

## **Warding off Death and Ensuring Life Continuity: The Case of the Carrier-Hero in the African Novel**

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### **Introduction**

The purification “ritual” of the pre-literate African society despite its re-emergence in modern African literature does witness some basic changes in its appropriation of the novel form, especially the African novel. In addition to what Ruth Finnegan has described as an “overlap”<sup>1</sup> between the oral and the written in traditional societies in the modern world and which Soyinka did refer to as the “survival pattern”<sup>2</sup>, the changes have been necessitated by the imperativity of the transformed African society from the traditional (in most cases, feudalist) to the modern (capitalist) society. This is consequent upon the opening-up of Africa to the capitalist economy of the West and the subsequent emergence of the middle-class. Indicative of these changes is the fact that the survival of colonial and post-colonial African society is particularly hinged on prevailing socio-economic conditions, no longer determined by the society’s ability and, or willingness to carry out its “traditional duties” to the ancestors or some traditional gods or deities.

Accordingly, Death in both the colonial and post-colonial African society is conceived both in terms of direct physical extermination, and socio-economic strangulation of society. Similarly, the social pollution caused by the accumulation of societal sins is now strictly regarded in terms of the socio-political and economic corruption that pervades the modern African society encouraged by the emergent middle-class: politicians, government officials, businessmen cum-compradors of the multi-national companies. So, has the role of the officiating high/chief priest been taken over by the African satirical novelist who celebrates the carrier-hero in his work?

My main task in the present study is to take up the efforts made by pre-literate African society in warding off death and in ensuring life continuity, peaceful co-existence and progress through ritual cleansing which are again guaranteed continuity in modern (written) African

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Art Dialogue and Outrage*, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988.

literary work. Further to this, I will attempt to discuss some of the heroic deeds performed by the carrier-hero which the modern African society needs to bring about regeneration.

In this regard, therefore, this current research is to be based on a series of analyses, explanations and illustrations done in the context of a synthesized approach which utilizes to advantage cross-referencing from both oral and written literature in Africa. The study will rely to a considerable extent, on the Yoruba culture, because I got myself sufficiently informed and immersed in the life of these people during my field work as a visiting PhD student attached to the University of Ibadan in the Oyo State, the Yoruba homeland in Nigeria.

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*; Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Kole Omotoso's *Sacrifice*, are used as an illustration of the African novelists' treatment of the carrier-hero. In examining closely this literary discourse woven around the carrier-hero in purification rituals and its re-emergence in modern African literature, attention is focused on the latter, as he moves from pre-literate to contemporary Africa.

### **Purification Rituals and the Carrier-Hero in Pre-literate Africa**

Ritual on a more general note, involves many different kinds of performance expressed in varied ways. In the pre-literate African society ritualism was simply the articulated, complex and highly institutionalised structured activities involving objects, events and the like, employed under circumstances particularly specified for communication with the supernatural forces believed to be the source of all effects<sup>3</sup>. In a similar vein, Grimes had earlier regarded ritual as "transformative performance revealing major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes"<sup>4</sup>. Grimes had associated ritual with social transitions, and went on to draw attention to the basic difference between ritual and ceremony, according to him, "ceremony is linked with social states"<sup>5</sup>. Turner was in total agreement with Grimes when he opined that the performances of ritual were distinct phases in social process whereby groups adjusted to internal changes and adapted to their external environment<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1979, p. 244.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe*, University of New Mexico Press, 1979, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, New Delhi: Concept

Equally important is the role, the place, and meaning of mythology in this self-rejuvenating process of, especially, the African society. Femi Ojo-Ade on the relative significance of mythology opines that:

Mythology is present in many people's heritage. Like religion, it serves the multiple purpose of supplying strength, of enriching life, and of helping society to establish a way of life whose survival depends upon the faith and mystique thus created. In short, oral tradition is not an old practice but the beginning and continuity of a culture. It consists of the essence and experiences of a people passed from generation to generation, always with a didactic thrust because, from the very first, Africa has placed the human being and the community at the center of life<sup>7</sup>. (My emphasis)

It is in the light of my discussion on transformative performance (ritual and myth) above and the vital position it occupies as a life sustaining tank of a society, particularly African society that the African cosmology, purification rituals, and the carrier-hero will now be explained.

The Yoruba, and indeed, African concept of the universe recognises three distinct but related "worlds". These are the world of the Unborn, the world of the Living, and the Ancestral world. Every man, it is believed, must pass through this three-stage cycle in his complex journey of being. The Unborn leaves its abode at the point of conception to be conceived by the woman (the living). It is then born into the world of the living where he lives until he crosses to join the ancestors in the ancestral world. The ascent of the spirit of the departed is only made possible when the spirit is liberated through the shedding of blood, that is, when a live animal<sup>8</sup> is sacrificed on behalf of the departed by his people on earth.

The world of the living is the only phase in the cosmic continuum that is visible, concrete, physical, but that has its fortune or fate determined by the more powerful Ancestral world. The ancestral world is the "final abode" of man, while the world of the living is a mere "transit camp". It is in this regard that the Yorubas refer to the world of the living as "a market", that is, a place of perpetual transition where one briefly pays a visit and returns "home" (that is, the ancestral world).

The relative peace and progress experienced in the world of the living are solely determined by, and measured in terms of the ways and manners the living carry out their duties

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Publishing Co., 1979, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Femi Ojo-Ade, "Madness in the African Novel : Awoonor's *This Earth My Brother*", *African Literature Today* 10, 1979, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> The idea behind the "shedding of blood" of a live animal as a necessary bridge that makes the crossing of the departed spirit to the Ancestral world possible predates the communal feasting that usually follows the burial or the departed one. The communal feasting or post-burial celebration is necessitated by the belief and the assurance the spirit of the departed is now liberated to join the ancestors through the "shedding of blood".

to the ancestors. If the living carry out their responsibilities according to the expected traditional norms the better for the society; failure on the part of the society to live up to its religious and social responsibilities to the ancestors would, quite naturally, lead to supernatural severance bordering on extermination. It is the ancestors who control the bulk of the essentials that make living (existence) possible.

The human society (the world of living), according to Femi Osofisan<sup>9</sup>, periodically accumulates a burden of “sins”. These sins are believed to be dangerous not only to its existence but also to its progress and peaceful co-existence as well as pose a threat to umbilical cord that links or joins both human society and the ancestral world together. This belief has resulted in the society’s sincere effort to evolve, through seasonal ritualisation, some measures capable of ensuring the society’s salvation and continued existence.

The quest for this assurance through ritualised seasonal purgation and consequent salvation has led most African communities like Ibadan (in “Oke Badan” festival) and Ile-Ife (in “Edi” festival)<sup>10</sup> to evolve annual purification rites in order to purge the societies of all physical and spiritual pollution that could otherwise sever the filial relationship between them and the ancestors.

Both “Oke Badan” and “Edi” festivals have the same intent and purpose, spiritual purification. Equally important and of relevance to me in this study is the mode of the ritual cleansing. While the Chief priest of “Oke Badan” solely performs the ritual, followed by a communal consummation amidst provocative song, verbal assaults, chants and invectives bordering on obscenities, “Edi” festival, on the other hand, is a little more involving. The high chief prepares an offering (ebo), into which the society’s sins accumulated over the past one year are invoked. Then a selected volunteer-carrier, “Tele”, usually an alien, is made to carry the offering on his head in a ritual procession through the town into the sacred grove at the outskirts of the town.

The implication of the carrier-hero in the affairs of his people is shown through the fact that by the singular action of shifting the burden of societal sins on his head, he automatically embodies the sins of the society, the sacrificial lamb “that carries away the sins” of his society<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Femi Osofisan, “Tiger on Stage : Wole Soyinka”, *Theater in Africa* by Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (eds), Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978, p.166

<sup>10</sup> Ile-Ife and Ibadan are both Yoruba towns in the South-Western Nigeria. Ile-Ife is believed to be the original home of the Yorubas, Ibadan the most populous black city in Africa, is the capital of the Oyo State, Nigeria.

<sup>11</sup> Echo of the Biblical John the Baptist’s in introduction of the Saviourss, Jesus Christ.

As the carrier, “Tele”, moves through the town, its people would troop after him and shout loud their misfortunes, sins, crimes, diseases and all, praying the carrier to carry away these unwanted lots. People would religiously speak their wishes to pieces of items like pieces of paper, empty cans or whatever rubbish they could lay their hands on, and throw this at the carrier as he moves through the town sweating under the heavy burden of “sins”<sup>12</sup>.

Oyin Ogunba has this to say on the ordeal of a traditional carrier:

He is secretly arrested on the evening of the ceremony and, in the course of the rite, subjected to a humiliating treatment, with rubbish and other filthy things thrown at him or heaped on him by virtually every member of the community. The treatment can also be brutal for he is sometimes dragged along the streets and may die as a result of the ordeal. His function is to carry to the river, just before midnight, all the sins and filth of the community during the past year. To this end, he is often treated with a potion which temporarily takes away his commonsense so that he rejoices at the brutality being done to him<sup>13</sup>.

The above description is, definitely, a variant of Edi-festival carrier. As part of the implication of the carrier role, usually, a “Tele” or carrier was not expected to return from the sacred grove alive. What is of significance in the case of scape-goat motif, which particularly informs the carrier notion and transformative performance, is the society’s need to feed on a ritual victim. In fact, the latter is apparently relatively innocent by virtue of his being a complete stranger captured for carrier purposes as is the case with “Tele” in “Edi” festival, or a volunteer who is selected. That volunteer is usually selected, from the community’s strongest breed as was the case in old Oyo kingdom. Osofisan gives more details about that when he says:

The salvation of the society therefore, depends on the exercise of the individual will, all of which constitute the apparatus of the society’s self rejuvenating process<sup>14</sup>.

Later development shows that the primary preoccupation of the annual ritualised purification of the society had its horizon extended to accommodate the social and political purification of the community in which the festival takes place. This second mode allows a community to identify certain individuals whose unbecoming and unethical way of life could cause the society untold hardship. Such characters are identified, and as soon as the actual purification ritual is concluded by the high-priest as is the case with “Oke Badan” and “Edi” festivals, members of the community, especially the youth, dance and sing round the town.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. “The carrier in Ijaw-Culture” in Robin Horton’s “Sew Year in the Delta” *Nigeria Magazine* 67. 256-296

<sup>13</sup> Oyin Ogunba, “Traditional Content of the Plays of Wole Soyinka” in *African Literature Today* 5, 1971. p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> Femi Osofisan, op. cit. p. 166.

On this occasion, the youngsters, the professional chanters and singers are “licensed” to say, chant, or sing “anything” no matter how obscene, scandalous, slanderous, or libellous it is. They could congregate directly in front of the house of the erring member (s) and chant or sing his/her crimes for everybody to hear. The culprit may choose to change for better, or quit the community altogether. This was to predicate the birth of satire in communities where purification rituals are practised. For example in Yoruba alone, every traditional community celebrates the “cleansing” festival on yearly basis; and in order to ensure spiritual efficacy, the “cleansing” festival is usually linked with the annual worship of specific deity whose importance is linked with the survival and sustenance of the community concerned.

What the ritual cleansing achieves in the spiritual realm through the ritual victim, the direct verbal assault via the use of invectives on erring member (s) of a traditional African society also achieves socio-politically. This way, pre-literate African society was able to rid itself of both spiritual and social pollution in its conscious effort to promote sanity, progress and peaceful co-existence. It was to mark the beginning of satire in African literature.

It is possible to arrive at this conclusion because a critical examination of the spiritualised function of a satirical butt (even though an enemy of the society) would reveal in a rather complex but interesting sense, that he is a carrier of some sort. In a way, the satirical “victim” conjures a somewhat magical figure of binary opposition and mediation. Through his “crimes” which are diametrically opposed to the well being of his society, he is an agent of social and spiritual pollution. For this reason, he is made an object of satirical attack – he suffers humiliation, ego assassination and consequent ejection from the society. Through this “process of atonement” for the crime of an individual against the society, the polluting agent becomes a mediating agent chosen by the society for purposes of purification and rejuvenation of the polluted and “dying” society.

### **The Carrier-Hero in Contemporary Africa I (Ghana)**

The four novels under consideration in this study are post-independence African novels. Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments* are eloquent expressions of an overwhelming despair brought about by the shocking discovery that there is, after all, according to Dan Izevbaye,

[...] not much difference between the former white rule and the new black rule. The change of rulers has not meant a change in the circumstances of the governed, but a continuity of oppression<sup>15</sup>.

Still more pungent on the shocking discovery is Armah's realistic assessment of events in his society. The following excerpt is from a scene after the coup:

In the life of the nation itself, maybe nothing really new would happen. Now men would take into their hands the new power to steal the nation's riches to use it for their own satisfaction... Now people would use the country's power to get rid of men and women, who talked a language that did not flatter them... But for the nation itself there would only be a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, pp. 190-191).

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, as well as *Fragments*, we are able to situate and, or locate the thrust and the focus of the author's romantic agitation and protest against the post-colonial reality of the Ghanaian society. Armah's thematic preoccupations in the two novels revolves round the abysmal despair of a people trapped in abject poverty and which there does not appear to be any solution or hope whatsoever.

*Fragments* is the picture of a truly fragmented society. A society with a lost origin or past, whose present is peopled with an unusual menagerie of "madding crowd", and whose future is black and bedevilled by despair. *Fragments* like *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, offers a thorough exposition of a grossly corrupt, high materialistic modern (Ghanaian) African society. A completely decadent society where the true African values and moral ethics are lost; where "insanity" is the order of the day and where the sane is compelled to doubt his sanity.

In *Fragments*, Armah portrays an artist, Baako, who is overwhelmed by the suffocative and immoral demands of his society. The tragedy of this emergent independent African society is made more acute by the narrator when he shows that the failure of Baako is measured by his conscious unwillingness to compromise with the passive state machinery of a corrupt regime. The author registers his protagonist's disillusionment with this society where art is used to destroy and, or enslave the poor and enrich the powerful and the wealthy; where political leaders use the masses as ladders to mount the power-rostrum, but once in power, they merely use all the advantages at their disposal to advance their own selfish interests.

Armah presents his various themes through the use of shifting points of view and stream of consciousness. The novel clearly spells out the dilemma of the artist in the post-colonial

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<sup>15</sup> Dan Izevbaye, "Issues in the Reassessment of the African Novel", in *African Literature Today* 10, 1979, p. 25.

African society. The artist had assumed that independence would usher a new humanist phase with a definitive plan-of-action to ensure set-goals, and where other elements in the society will be free to make their contributions to the new states. The novel, *Fragments*, similarly captures the disillusionment and despair resulting from Baako's (the artist) discovery that political leaders and other government functionaries are not, in the least, interested either in the progress of their country or of the masses in general.

In a brief discussion Baako explains to Ocran how an artist should contribute constructively and gainfully to the educational emancipation of his society, the potentials of creative art for communicating with an illiterate society (*Fragments* pp. 114-115). These potentials are to inform Baako's production of two film-scripts, *The Root* and *The Brand*. Baako in the scripts essentially treats the subject of tyranny and the different types of resistance, in addition to the possibility of emancipation as one would expect the obstructionist policy of the men at the top who are responsible for the futility of Baako's efforts; Ocran's remark is pertinent here:

Nothing works in this country. What can you expect? The place is run by these so-called elite of pompous asses trained to do nothing. (*Fragments* p. 116)

Ocran then throws a warning at Baako, his former art student:

If you can back thinking you can make things work in any smooth, efficient way, you'll just get a complete waste of your time. It's not worth bothering about. (*Fragments* p. 118)

Furthermore, Asante-Smith is blind to the simple fact of continued enslavement of Ghana and her citizenry through the never-ending recruitment of expatriates. This spiritual blindness is made the more revealing in his empty and contradictory statement:

Look, we're a free, independent people. We're engaged in a gigantic task of nation building. We have inherited a glorious culture, and that's what we are here to deal with. (*Fragments* p. 209)

In a society where, as the artist-Baako describes it, "maimed people and sickness walked down every half-hidden path" (*Fragments* pp. 190-191), the artist ought to be given the opportunity to help. But in this case where appreciation of artistic vision is not among national priorities, the singers of masters' must, necessarily, find some "more important" things to occupy their lazy time. For example, there are "Founder's Day, Liberation Day, the Freedom Festival of Youth [...] Independent Day [...], taking picture of the Head of State [...]" (*Fragments* p. 213), while at



Ghanavision, engineers are like decorative pieces of furniture as they “wore white-white or suits and sat balancing phones behind new furniture [...]” (*Fragments* p. 188).

Apart from the preoccupation with the conflict between the artist and society, we also have Armah’s uncompromising attack on the post-independent elites of Africa and their relationship with the common people. One of the numerous examples of moral atrophy of the elites is the television sets that are meant for the rural areas, but which are shared among the top officials of the corporation (Ghanavision) and other super government agents.

The betrayal of the people by the new political class is vividly portrayed by Armah in the endemic nature of the corrupt, irresponsible, base, hypocritical and spiritually blind emergent ruling class. Rather than strive towards the creation of an egalitarian state, the elite diverts his energy to creating for himself an abnormal standard of living, which consequently ruins the nation’s economy. Armah contrasts the wealth and comfort of the new elite with the abject poverty of the masses, the desperate and hopeless lives of numerous people in the village (*Fragments* pp. 190-191); Mrs. Brempong and the women whose child narrowly missed being crushed by the shell tanker (*Fragments* pp. 31-33).

The cultural mulattoes are also criticized for running after foreign values and perpetuating their status as a permanent ruling class. The intention of the ruling elites is to mystify the grossly marginalised masses compelling them to look up to them (the elites). Mr. and Mrs. Brempong and the guests at the “outdooring” ceremony (*Fragments* p. 259), Efua’s beach divine, among others, constitute the elites of “pompous asses”. Mrs. Brempong’s generous mass of wig (*Fragment* p.60), her husband’s dark woollen suit, symbol of the assorted cargo quality (*Fragments* p.81). There is also the suggestion that the light-blue Mercedes car neatly “tucked” away from the harsh tropical sun which belongs to Armah’s edition of Soyinka’s Brother Jeroboam, partly explains the milking-hold the pastor has on his gullible flock.

Armah sees the growing habit of the ruling elites to educate their children in exclusively special schools as a conscious attempt and desire to, permanently, establish an African-colonialist generation. Efua’s school with the advertisement of a boy and a girl, both Africans but very light skinned, standing and facing a long flight of steps on the one hand, and on the other, the old nursery rhymes are satirized by the author to reinforce not just the extent of the degree of the “molatoid” cultural values, but the genesis of the socio-mental colonization and cultural dislocation of modern African society.

The government's full awareness and acceptance of guilt for its being responsible for the painful and paralysing lives of the masses become apparent in its attempt to persecute the makers of the T-shirts with "strugglers" on. Armah, among other things, attacks inefficiently (*Fragments* p. 118), and comments through the Principal Secretary on the futility in the decadent post-colonial African society. The author attacks god-fatherism (*Fragments* p. 68), and class segregation as witnessed in the hospital scene (*Fragments* p. 107), the frowns on the abominable but trendy practice of dragging dead children into the "In Memoriam" pages of News papers and laments the "inability" of Africans to learn from past mistakes.

It is equally interesting to note that the malady that pervades the Ghanaian society is consciously given a domestic colour and touch in events that take place in the protagonist's homestead. Through Naana, Armah condemns Baako's family members' obsession with "newness" and traces this to the source of the heinous crimes committed against African traditional values (*Fragments* p. 283-284). Naana's prophetic accuracy is more than confirmed in the consequences of the premature "outdooing" ceremony for Araba's child (*Fragments* p. 138-139). Efua and Araba are greedy and excessively materialistic (*Fragments* p. 125). Naana blames Baako for the ignorance of his role as maternal uncle (*Fragments* p. 139-140) and that Araba's husband, Kwesi, is an accomplice in the tragic error for yielding even if it is to avert Araba's use of her "secret weapon". The old woman feels compelled to prevent tradition from being desecrated by the short-sighted and greedy young generations. Hence she intercedes on behalf of the ancestors when "the pig Foli [...] puts his greed before the appeasement of the dead ones" (*Fragments* p. 9).

The discussion so far is intended to show Armah's novels under reference grave thematic implications for the purpose of validating the symmetries of his artistic ritual design in *Fragments* as will be shown shortly. Therefore, most of what follows will be directed at the particular, but undeniable mythical antecedents in *Fragments* in particular, and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. In addition, relevant examples shall also be drawn from Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Kole Omotoso's *Sacrifice*. The religio-traditional concept of a continuous circuit of passage through a world of ancestral spirits, into which the dying are reborn and from which out going spirits become the world of living's new births, is given a mythical, albeit ironic dimension in the "ghostly return of the cargo-bringer, Baako. In *Fragments* as well as in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, spirituality and regeneration receive a rather traditional and

partly ironic treatment as evident in the return of the singer from the sea in the Mammy Water myth. In each of these cases, remarks Derek Wright<sup>16</sup>, “the cyclical journey is placed in the context of calendrical ritual”. Wright emphasizes further:

The decline of the Nkrumah regime is played off against an end-of-year purification rite, the birth and death of Araba’s child hinge on the autumnal equinox which marks the changing of the Akan agricultural year<sup>17</sup>.

The metaphoric projections in the two novels hold out respective prospects of purification and sacrificial regeneration silhouetted against purely negative or destructive actions, which are woven around religious motifs. Thus in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* the anonymous man returns from a purifying sea journey to obviously decadent world, while both the carrier’s purgative sea passage and Mammy Water’s regenerative sea-cycle are measured against Maanan’s decline into madness. Similarly, Naana’s despair of the modern African world and resigned withdrawal into the next in *Fragments* are antecedental to Baako’s continuing despair in the cargo-blind Ghanaian post-independence society and his escape into madness.

The refusal of a dignified, revered old age and death to Naana, according to Wright, essentially implies also the denial of her personal immortality since she is forgotten even before her death. Wright puts it more succinctly thus:

The neglect of one end of the continuum interferes with developments at the other: the circle of death and birth, the ancestors and the unborn, is abruptly broken, the wheel on which “everything goes and turns around” halted<sup>18</sup>.

The implication of the broken circle is evident in the economic “anaemia” and subsequent strangulation of the masses through reckless political and economic mismanagement of the newly emergent middle-class, which constitute both the socio-existential “pollution” and imminent death of modern (Ghanaian) African society.

The “Innocent” Baako, a visionary and messiah must either offer himself or be offered as a propitiating (sacrificial) lamb. This is a necessary safety valve for the purpose of purging the society of its hydra-vices, and of ensuring restoration of life, stability, love, progress and economic buoyancy.

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<sup>16</sup> Derek Wright, “African Literature 1: Problems of Criticism”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.52

<sup>18</sup> Derek Wright, “African Literature 1: Problems of Criticism”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2, 1990, p. 55

## The Carrier-Hero in Contemporary Africa II (Nigeria)

In development quite similar to Armah's *Fragments*, Wole Soyinka's young interpreters in *The Interpreters* are determinedly prepared to build the newly emergent independent Nigeria. They have variously been moulded by the Nigerian society and they in turn are attempting to remould and transform the society through different media<sup>19</sup>. Kola uses the canvas, Sagoe the newspapers and Bandele the teaching profession. Egbo seeks to dominate men and use them as material to model the kind of world he would like to live in, even though he is apparently unsure of the kind of what world he desires to create. Sekoni the scientist, wishes to transform the world through technology. His frustration, however, turns him into a carver through which he achieves self-actualization. Shatto A. Gakwandi puts the whole idea of art as a necessary escape route in the following words:

Art becomes a consolation and the act of creating compensates the artist's frustrated desire to change the world: he creates his own world, which he has power to order<sup>20</sup>.

Nevertheless, the other "interpreters", who are not capable of self-expression through art, readily identify their anxieties with kola's Pantheon, which enables them to attain an understanding of their social reality and their destinies. A knowledge which enables them to become reconciled to their human limitations.

Each of the young "interpreters" in his own term is demoralized and disillusioned by the very society he intends to save. Like Baako, they find themselves cleverly schemed-out or excluded from all positions of influence by vested interests because they refuse to soil themselves by not participating in the corrupt system, which they so much abhor. Like Baako who is completely submerged by the choking materialistic demands of his family in particular, and his cargo-conscious society in general, the "interpreters" find themselves drifting outside the main current of events.

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<sup>19</sup> Kole Omotoso, *Vospominaniia O Nedavnem Bume Fella Delaet Vybor*, Moscow: Publication House M, Rådugà, 1986, p. 43

<sup>20</sup> Shatto A. Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*, New York: Africana Pub. Co, 1977, p. 67

Baako's vision, aspirations and methods of implementation not only prove inadequate like those of the young friends in *The Interpreters*, they are dialectically opposed to that of his society, hence the disillusionment in either cases. While Baako escapes into madness, the "interpreters" resort to the pursuit of individual artistic self-fulfilment. Even though Albert Ashaolu attributes Baako's failure to the fact that he is "a lone reformer" and therefore bound to fail: "[...] regardless of the high ideals he upholds and strives to propagate in [...] society [...]"<sup>21</sup>; the real issue that informs the thematic focus in Armah's *Fragments* is much more fundamental than mere agitation either against the soloist reformer, or in favour of collective heroism. The social milieu and the carrier-motif, which inform Armah's *Fragments* and Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, are strikingly similar because they are deep-rooted in the two African authors' psychic projection, and desire for a propitiating carrier or carriers to wash away the "sins", and remove the "pollution" suffocating the modern African society. The propitiating role of the "interpreters" becomes all the more telling by the manner the young men's resourcefulness are, like Baako's, made to waste, the degree of disillusionment and Sekoni's death through an accident after his bitter disappointment to get his rural electrification project approved by the government.

It is obvious that right from the beginning of the narratives in either novels Armah's Baako or Soyinka's young interpreters are the chosen carrier-heroes. Thus the traditional values of orderliness, sanity, truth and genuine unconditional love, and communalistic spirit embodied in the partially blind old Naana, are either lost or deliberately ignored by Baako's society. Naana Laments: "Great friends, they have taken to forgetting the ancestors themselves [...]". (*Fragments* p.263)

But again, this traditional sanctity and values are made to re-incarnate in Baako, only to suffer the same fate of deliberate rejection, neglect and frustration.

Kole Omotoso, the author of *Sacrifice* and many other narratives, is one African novelist whose works have not received much attention from critics despite the sheer number of novels he has turned out, the populist thematic significance coupled with the popular outfit of some of these novels, among others.

My choice of, and the relevance of Kole Omotoso's *Sacrifice* to the carrier-hero concept becomes all the more obvious in the protracted self-sacrifice (bordering on a conscious and instalment self-destruction) by Mary, a professional prostitute, who chooses to slave and sweat under the weight of several men in the bid to ensure Lana Siwaju, her only son, a decent

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<sup>21</sup> Albert Ashaolu et al (eds), *Studies in the African Novel*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1986, p. 129

education and an enviable profession – a medical doctor (a life saver). The title *Sacrifice* readily draws a conclusion on the scape-goat motif in which the novel is hinged. From Omotoso's view of post-colonial African existential reality, the society is continually in need of salvation from itself.

This act of salvation is, definitely, not a mass act; it comes about via the vision and dedication of individuals who, untiringly, pursue their vision in order to ensure the continuity of their society's existence in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save. Often, these individuals, like Mary, end up as victims of the society which benefits from their vision<sup>22</sup>. I have pointed out earlier in this article that Wole Soyinka particularizes the five young friends in *The Interpreters*. Often, it is seen as a universal theme in Jesus-Christ of the Christian world. Mary's sacrifice and devotion, as a matter of maternal responsibility to Lana's survival and brilliant career as a medical doctor and the subsequent rejection by her son, culminating in her suicide, make Mary the sacrificial lamb. This aspect of Mary's role readily agrees with Eldred Durosimi Jones' carrier concept:

[...] a man (or woman) who in the eyes of the world is out of his mind. His conduct is inexplicable [...] without this type of self-sacrificing man (or woman) society cannot be saved from itself<sup>23</sup>. (My parentheses)

At the news of Lana's likely employment as a clerk to a "fine-medicine" man, Mary in a fit of anger, defines her role in Lana's life and existence:

Did you think I spent my life slaving under men to educate you only to see you selling "fine medicine"? Do you know how much I have spent on you up to date? [...] Are you too young to realise that I'm sacrificing myself for you and only you? [...] (*Sacrifice* p.24) (My emphasis)

Lana, indeed, owes his entire life to his mother's sacrifice. At pregnancy his mother had made a solemn vow should the baby turn out to be a boy: "I will still do my best for you" (*Sacrifice* p.35). Mary honours this vow in her unique sacrifice to ensure the survival of Lana, to procure a meaningful existence for him even when this is at her own mental and physical expense.

*Sacrifice* is Omotoso's attempt to concretise what otherwise would have been mere abstractions via the Past, the Present and the Future of Africa. Thus, the author encapsulates the

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<sup>22</sup> Dereck Wright, "Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction", in *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 21, No. 2, Dictatorship and Oppression (Summer, 1990), p. 110.

<sup>23</sup> Eldred D. Jones, *Wole Soyinka - Nigeria (Twayne's World Author Series, A Survey of World Literature)*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1973, p. 54

same through metaphorical projection of events that wrap up both Mary and Dr. Lana Siwaju, her only son. Omotoso's contention in *Sacrifice* is that Africa's Past is bad and infectious. For this reason, he calls for the rejection of the ugly Past and he insists that we recognize and accept our Past together with its ugliness. The Past must, however, be prevented from encroaching on Africa's Present. The author is of the strong belief that the Past has enough venom to destroy itself as vividly shown in the hyper-obsession rooted in Mary's psyche. It is in the light of this that her perverse nostalgia finally induces her to suicide.

There are two distinct approaches to *Sacrifice* in regard to the levels of interpretation. On the one hand is the scape-goat motif, as earlier mentioned, in which Mary is the sacrificial lamb. On the other hand is Omotoso's attempt to redefine and, locate Africa's Past in relation to her Present. It is instructive to note that Lana does not hate Mary as a mother; he does not deny her existence either. What Lana abhors is his mother's profession – the ugliness in his mother's essence which is Lana's Past. Lana's efforts to make Mary change meet with no success hence the need to get rid of her and her ugliness. The author spares Lana of this effort as he warns through Florence, Lana's wife:

“You cannot destroy your past with your own hands. You must learn to accommodate it (*Sacrifice* p.30)

No doubt, Mary has enough fire and fury to burn herself out, and so is Africa – Past. This is proved in Mary's final exit through suicide.

The source of the multifidous predicament currently being encountered by Africa could be traced to the Euro-African romance in the past, just as Mary's with Akins (the popular photographer). The catastrophic aftermath of this romance include the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonization of Africa and the consequent socio-mental alienation or dislocation, which have led to the attendant problems of neo-colonialism. Thus we are, today, living witnesses and victims of the displayed African socio-cultural values and communalistic ethics, and the enthroned dislocated western values and, or capitalist system. The bane and the root of the woes that have befallen Africa.

Similarly, the romance between the innocent and undimmed Mary and the opportunistic Akins results in the former being put in the family way. This development puts the final nail to the coffin of Mary's life ambition as a seamstress, and marks the genesis of her many woes.

Mary's self-sacrifice (through prostitution) pays off. Lans Siwaju becomes qualified as a medical doctor. But no sooner this task is accomplished by Mary then catastrophe sets in. This is

usually the case with the intended missions or goals of traditional carriers. Mary faces rejection by the very symbol of her infinite sacrifice, Lana. This is reminiscent of the traditional carrier who, after accomplishing his carrier role, is either destroyed, or banished from the society he has sacrificed his life to save. Mary recognizes that her sacrifice is result-oriented, the making of a medical doctor out of what otherwise would have been “an abandoned bundle”. She has, nevertheless, been eaten up both mentally and physically – the price of her sacrifice. Little wonder therefore that Mary voluntarily seeks her exit, like the proverbial mother-snake, via suicide. This establishes Mary as a true carrier-hero in contemporary Africa.

### Conclusion

Like most traditional carriers, Baako and the five young friends – “The interpreters”, epitomise the spiritual sanctity, which their respective societies (the contemporary African society) lack but which the societies need to bring about a regeneration. That “innocent” individuals of Baako’s, the “interpreters”, and Mary’s messianic status, vision and mission are made to waste in the course of their “self-assigned” duties to save their respective societies (or Dr. Lana Siwaju in the case of Mary) from socio-political, moral and spiritual decay, is a signification of the traditional carrier role. I believe that carrier-hero concept formulation, which derives immediately from the indigenous tradition (traditional African oral source that is), is basically central to, and of immense influence on, the carrier-hero concept informing the carrier image in the contemporary African novel.

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