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A Tool of Success: A Critical Content Analysis of Naana's Character in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

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Abstract

African Writers gave little importance to the role of women in their literary works. The likes of Chinua Achebe and Ayi kwei Armah gave prominence to women characters. This is seen in Ayi Kwei Armah's text **Fragments**. This article therefore examines the important role given by the author of this novel to the woman character, Naana. A critical content analysis has been engaged in to ascertain her roles in the narrative and thematic developments of the story. That is, it studies how Naana is used as a tool to bring about the success of the novel. A study of this nature has to do with gender. Thus, the underlying theories of this paper are Marxist feminist criticism and feminist literary criticism.

1. Introduction

Sex and gender are very significant to the gender activist. Though the two terms can be used interchangeably, sex is said to be biologically driven. Gender however, marks the social and cultural roles of each of the sexes as indicated by given societies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed". It is therefore through the lenses of gender that societies ascribe certain specific roles to the various sexes.

Women are marginalized worldwide and are given circumscribed status and

roles. From Awumbila, women face different and more severe constraints than men because of their gender (Awumbila, 2001: p. 57). Similarly, Manona quotes M. F. Hirsch who says that "the position of women is backed by creation accounts, both biologically and biblically" (Manona, 1997). Manona further explains that man being physically stronger than woman was, right from the stone-age, the hunter, forager and the overall defender of the family, that is, the woman and the children. The woman having acquiesced in handling the less exacting chores therefore, naturally ceded leadership to the man. According to him, woman then settled down to taking instructions and directions from man. She also consulted him before embarking upon schemes and programmes for the family. From such early cession of initiative, he says, grew the practice and acceptance of the man as the patriarchal head.

According to Guerin et al., "Marxist feminist criticism focuses on the relation of reading to social realities, refusing to accept the separation of art from life" (Guerin et al., 1992: p. 194). In reality, women are globally relegated to the background, especially in Africa. Moreover, Kumah, as cited by Mibenge in her publication said, "As a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive—perpetuating popular myths of female subordination" (Mibenge, 2007).

From a study of research works on gender issues however, it was realized that, issues concerning women in their active years have been given much attention. This group includes wives, women-workers and mothers. Issues regarding the elderly folk, on the other hand, have not been sufficiently dealt with in both written and unwritten forms of media. To this effect, the psychologist, Matlin observes that, "elderly women constitute the major proportion of the elderly people, yet issues concerning them have been neglected in fiction, movies and on television" (Matlin, 1987: p. 481).

In Ghana, however, it happens that elderly women play very important roles as heads of the family, particularly in the traditional home setting. The headship roles of elderly women, even in the presence of elderly men, are very significant. Thus, when some Ghanaian literary writers employ elderly women as characters in their works, they seem to appreciate the valuable status of elderly women. For instance, according to Lyell, "Works of fiction have the added benefit of illustrating the various processes of aging with portraits of persons who are whole, and are thereby more complex than the limited pictures research studies offer" (Lyell, 1980: p. iii). The essence of the writers' use of such characters is emphasized by Kramer, who advises that the experiences of the elderly are "not something we leave behind but something we incorporate in our daily lives" (Kramer, 1987: p. 114).

In literary writings, the experiences of elderly women which Lyell says make them "less likely than those at other ages to do things that are out of character" (Lyell, 1980: p. 206) are made manifest by some Ghanaian writers' use of them as characters in their works. This is when their roles as advisors, as mediators between the living and the dead, and as custodians of traditions and cultures are

highlighted in the works. Moreover, it is common knowledge that the language of the elderly in Ghana is full of proverbs, wise sayings and myths. All these features together show the richness of their language.

Rao commends Armah for his capabilities and admirable literary works. He agrees with V. U. Ola, another literary critic who maintains that:

Among African writers, Armah and Ngugi are the two who have demonstrated the greatest insight and sensitivity as well as rare ability to artistically portray the problems and fears of the African woman and to delve imaginatively deep into the wells of her being. Armah, however, more than Ngugi towers above the rest in capturing the enigmatic combination of good and evil in her nature (Rao, 1993: p. 72).

Angmor has done very impressive studies on the works of some major Ghanaian poets, novelists and playwrights. After commending Armah for his ability to relate "life and art" in his work, Angmor observes the qualities of the novelist's *Fragments* and comments on his style. Angmor notes that one sees "the self-revelation of characters" (Angmor, 1996: p. 90) and the "naturalistic representation of life" (Angmor, 1996: p. 91) in the work. It is such characters as the elderly woman, Naana, whose character sketch is included in this study that adds to Amarh's "naturalistic representation of life".

Rao has also done a very comprehensive evaluation of the role of the elderly woman, Naana, in Armah's *Fragments*. He explains and sums his thoughts up in the following passage:

The narrative of *Fragments* is exposed through Naana's encompassing vision. In her blindness she is a visionary. The incantatory tone of Naana in the first chapter of the novel serves as a prologue…. Naana's thoughtful commentary on the life that has been lived and its future portents in the last chapter are like the epilogue which, in turn, is preceded by Joana's pragmatic vision. Both of them represent the significance of feminine principle, lending structural as well as thematic coherence to the novel (Rao, 1993: p. 57).

Rao, again observes the indispensable role of the old woman to the development of the story. He states that:

The old-world of Naana, the blind grandmother of the protagonist, underlines the opening and closing chapters of the novel providing a mythical experience. The significance of the title of the novel and its structural patterns are reflected in the thinking of Naana…in the last chapter (Rao, 1993: p. 55).

The above quotations illustrate how valuable the elderly woman character is in the mentioned Ghanaian text. They also point to the need for a further investigation into the presentation of elderly women in some other Ghanaian plays and novels.

From the critical responses on Armah's writings, Derek Wright gathers the

following revelations about Naana's contribution to the novel from Colmer (1980):

> The novel is framed by chapters in which Baako's grandmother, Naana, reflects on "the circular way" (p. 5), as she calls it…Naana's framing vision provides a sane view of the world against which we can measure Baako's vision as he moves toward insanity of believing that he is wrong and the people who surround him are right. Where Naana and Baako concur in dissenting from the common view we can be reasonably sure that their vision is more valid than that of Baako's demanding relatives…Naana is a vital figure in *Fragments*.

The comments from Rao and Calmer provide a concrete undertone to this study and it is along this line that the researchers chose to investigate the roles of old women characters in Ayi Kwei Armahs's *Fragments*.

An essay by Senanu, on Armah's second novel *Fragments*, discusses the high expectations of the family about Baako's conformity "to the image of the car-owning, consumer-oriented Ghanaian elite". Baako's inability to do so however ends in his insanity (Senanu, 1972: p. 21). Senanu's concern here is about the kind of character the writer develops in the protagonist. This, however, is not far-fetched from the concerns raised in this research since the research seeks to examine the roles of his grandmother, Naana, whose life has had so much influence on his life. Her life also aids in contrasting the decadence of the present generation with the genuineness of the older generation.

Other literary works on Armah's Naana gave their general impression about how the author presented her as a character and commented on her roles. The present study however delves much deeper into the specific roles Naana plays to bring about the success of the narrative—*Fragments*—through a critical study and discussion of events in the text. This is also done to study the genuineness of the against its setting and background—African, Ghanaian and the Akan tribe specifically.

The purpose of this study is to examine the roles of the elderly woman character (Naana) in Armah's *Fragments*. That is, it is to find out how she is used as a tool to bring about the success of the novel, as set in Ghana.

The choice of this topic stems from the researchers' interest in gender issues. From a study of research works on gender issues, however, the researchers realized that issues concerning elderly women have not been sufficiently dealt with in both written and unwritten forms of media. To this effect, the psychologist, Matlin observes that, "elderly women constitute the major proportion of the elderly people, yet issues concerning them have been neglected in fiction, movies and on television" (Matlin, 1987: p. 481).

This study will be expected to demonstrate how the use of the character of Naana enriches Armah's *Fragments*. It is therefore assumed that the study will encourage prospective writers to employ such characters in their literary works.

2. A Tool of Success

Richardson describes characterization as the process by which an author creates vivid, believable characters in a work of art (Richardson, 2006: p. 30). A character's dimension and purpose in a story are important and the author's purpose for the character determines whether the character will be complex, whether she or he will arouse the reader's sympathy or will repel the reader.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster (1927) identifies character to be either major or minor. The major character is often the protagonist. He or she may also be the most sympathetic, arousing the reader's sympathy and concern regardless of his or her personal response to this character. A minor character often provides support to and illuminates the protagonist. The degree of importance of such a character depends on his or her function. Naana in *Fragments* is an example of this type of character.

Armah's *Fragments* provides an example of the phase within the West African literary canon which is rooted in oral tradition. In *Fragments*, the traditional element goes beyond cultural documentation. It actually structures the narrative using the framework of the Akan folktale. Armah's representation of Naana in the novel leaves no doubt whatsoever in the minds of those familiar with the Ghanaian scene about the identity of the old woman the author has in mind.

Naana, the old grandmother of the protagonist, is very crucial in the development of the story in *Fragments*. She is the narrator of the beginning and ending of the story. It is also symbolic that the first and last chapters bear the same title, "Naana", which is an indication that both chapters are dedicated to her. In effect, she sandwiches and makes the story her own. She weaves herself through the plot and has so much influence on the protagonist. Rao (1993) for example appreciates the old woman's efforts in the development of the story and says:

> The narrative of *Fragments* is exposed through Naana's encompassing vision (Rao, 1993: p. 57).

The old-world wisdom of Naana, the blind grandmother of the protagonist, underlines the opening and closing chapters of the novel providing a mythical experience. The significance of the title of the novel and its structural patterns are reflected in the thinking of Naana in the last chapter (Rao, 1993: p. 55).

Rao's appreciation is a comprehensive report on Naana's contribution to the novel. Her presentations in both the prologue and the epilogue demonstrate the cyclical nature of events as well as life itself: "That is the way everything goes and turns round…. All that goes returns" (Armah, 1989: p. 1). Naana believes not only that those who go away return, but also that there is a continuity of life in death, and contact with the dead must be maintained. This ideology of hers emphasizes the circular "structural patterns" of the novel. It is this ideology she celebrates in the prologue, and also recounts events of the farewell ceremony the family have for the departing son to "the opposite lands, lands of the ghosts, alone in the white man's land" (Armah, 1989: p. 6). Thus, against everybody's

hopelessness, Naana is assured that "He will come back. He will be changed, but we shall welcome him as the same. That is the circle" (Armah, 1989: p. 3).

Armed with this ideology, Naana "attempt[s] to come to terms with values of a modern age which has not only overtaken her but has also destroyed her grandson, who should have been better equipped to deal with it" (Gikandi, 1987: p. 85). This is what the story centres on until the end when, like her grandson, she realizes her cherished values are not accepted by the current generation. That is, both her family and people of the larger society. With mission unaccomplished, Naana feels neglected and "useless" and so thinks she is "ready to go". According to her, "When there is no use, the spirit in us yearns for the world of the spirit". Hence, her readiness to go back to the spirit world would not have come "if this world has room and use for [her]" (Armah, 1989: p. 195).

In the prologue, Naana is made to skillfully introduce the other prominent characters from the family. These are Efua, "a human mother"; Baako, "a traveler"; Araba, "the eager sister and the eager mother"; and "His uncle, Foli, [who] has always been one to have a spirit flawed by the heaviness of flesh too often listened to" (Armah, 1989: pp. 2-3). The old woman introduces these characters in connection with their "dreams against the coming of "the traveler". She does it so expertly and thus enhances the beauty of the prologue as a whole.

This is a technique of the author. He uses her to introduce other characters to effect certain aspects of his writing. That is, she is made to use instances to introduce the characters. It illustrates a creative use of Naana's character. That is to say, in creating the work of fiction, the author of *Fragments* adapts this technique and her importance lies in the creation of certain devices such as suspense and satire.

Nana summarizes all issues raised in the story in her reflections in the epilogue. She also concludes the story by giving her final impression about events. For instance, she expresses the effect of social decadence exhibited by people around her and how it has heightened her wish for the "long crossing" to the other world:

> Things have passed which I have never seen whole, only broken and twisted against themselves. What remains of my days will be filled with more broken things. Had I not given up trying to understand, to gather all this confusion together in my spirit and to see which way it was going, my blindness would have been insufficient pain for me, and to it would have added my own madness (Armah, 1989: p. 196).

Structurally, the story of *Fragments* may be divided into three parts. These are the introduction, the body of the narrative and the conclusion. There is a distinct connection between the introduction and the conclusion. This is typical of Akan traditional folktale in which the end of the narrative is also contained in the introduction. An example is Naana's repeated insistence on Baako's return and her prediction that "He will be changed, but we shall welcome him as the same" (Armah, 1989: p. 3). Right in the prologue again, Naana hints the reader that though to the rest of the family, the hope of Baako's return is bleak yet for

their wishful thinking of gaining material things from it, they have high hopes and "wish" for his return: "Their wishes are the closest thing they have to the beauty of long peaceful dreams, and in their wishing they too want his return" (Armah, 1989: p. 2). For instance, Naana thinks Efua's "dreams" of acquiring material things from her son is outrageous for even cats have learnt to restrain themselves from devouring their young ones out of hunger:

> Two such dreams I have heard from the mouth of Efua herself. Oh great friend a human mother should not have such dreams against the coming of her own flesh and her loved one's soul. Even cats have learned to turn the hunger of the newly born against their own entrails (Armah, 1989: p. 2).… And Araba too. I have heard of the dreams she has had to welcome her returning brother." (Armah, 1989: p. 3).

On this note, Naana is afraid for her grandson because of "The things they want [his return] for…those are other things to load my soul with fear" (Armah, 1989: p. 2). And she indicates that these are the very things that will destroy the traveller in the end: "But these have been woven of such heavy earth that they will load his spirit down and after they have touched him it will never fly again" (Armah, 1989: p. 2).

The analysis above illustrates how the end of the story is contained in the beginning. That is, in the introduction, Naana is made to provide a summary of the conflict which is the family and societal expectations of the "traveller". And she also gives a gist of the resolution which is Baako's destruction.

Some of Naana's symbolic movements, actions and gestures enhance the traditional flavour of the story. Examples of these are her frequent sun baths "I had only come to take in this heat of the sun" (Armah, 1989: p. 1). Like Nana in Aidoo (1982)'s *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Naana dozes off even in the mist of the hullabaloo which accompanies Baako's departure: "And I slept because when I woke up there were many people and terrible hurry all around me and a mad blowing of many horns from people's cars outside" (Armah, 1989: p. 9).

Naana is disdainful about the kind of show off Araba and her mother put up at the outdooring ceremony. She spits her disgust "over the low wall" and asks: "What do they want with this wind machine?" What she is sure of is that they have turned on "the wind" on the child to boast of their wealth and prestige.

All these movements, actions and gestures are very characteristic of African elderly women. For Ba (1989)'s protagonist, Ramatoulaye's grandmother, for example, portrays such characteristics in *So Long a Letter*. Armah's introduction of such characteristics into the novel, like his colleague writers Aidoo and Ba, situates the story in its traditional setting.

The theme of *Fragments* is captured in the opening passage of the novel delivered by Naana:

> Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns round. That is how all living things come

back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return (Armah, 1989: p. 1).

This passage examines how the hero, Baako, is frustrated by his family and the larger Ghanaian society because of the values he stands for, which are abhorred by both family and society. Baako returns home after his education in New York for five years, to work as a scriptwriter for Ghanavission. However, he is disillusioned as "He finds the flashy tastes and expectations of his relations and friends unreasonable, and priorities at Ghanavision thwarting his initiative" (Angmor, 1996: p. 81). For example, as Naana predicts in the prologue, the family's high expectations of the "Osagyefo" the "saviour of the family's fortunes" (Rao, 1993: p. 57), coupled with Baako's disappointments at the workplace, "load his spirit down" (Armah, 1989: p. 2) and finally lands him in an asylum as a result of a psychological breakdown.

Hence, in the novel, Armah examines the alienation of Ghanaian individuals who returned from western countries to be disillusioned by the western-inspired materialism and moral decadence of the post-colonial era of the nation, Ghana. Though it is one unusual case and not common in recent times, Armah creates this story to illustrate the general norm of the time. Rao also thinks this story is about how "The impact of the shattering of 'the larger meaning' of the social order and moral vision is felt by individuals who wish to restore order and a sense of justice" (Rao, 1993: p. 56). This appropriately fits for the theme of Armah's *Fragments*.

In the prologue, Naana bemoans her own frustrations about the old cherished values which are neglected by the destructive modern society. She stresses the fact that, like the "sun", the long held values she and Baako share have not changed. It is only the people who live in "changing historical circumstances" (Gikandi, 1987: p. 86) that have changed. In the end, when there is a breakdown of her spiritual companions, Baako—psychologically, and the new child—physically, she wishes for her own death, in the epilogue:

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 glad welcome and my ghost will find the beginning that will be known here as my end (Armah, 1989: p. 196) …

The little one is gone; soon he will be the elder of his grandmother there. The return of the traveler also—in all that noise I thought he would surely die… (Armah, 1989: p. 199).

What is noteworthy from the above lines is that the old woman believes that the ultimate peace for her now is death.

Through the prologue, Naana provides a preview of the story to the reader. She also sets the tone of the story. That is, she comes in as a mediator to calm down the anxiety of both readers and family members about the sure return of the protagonist: "One thing I will continue to tell them over and over again: he will return" (Armah, 1989: p. 2).

Like Old Woman in Aidoo (1984)'s ***Anowa***, Naana admits she is "a mouth that continues to eat pepper and taste salt" (Armah, 1989: p. 2). This means she shares her views on everything that she sees which makes her a commentator. As a commentator, Naana is there to evaluate the deeds of the other characters, especially those of her relations. Knowing her members very well, and to the extent of introducing them to the reader, Naana takes the actions of each one of them into account and either commends or criticizes appropriately. For example, she assesses Uncle Foli's performance of the libation and says that "And the words took me away into a past that filled me with satisfaction because everything in it was full of understanding (Armah, 1989: p. 4).... Perfect words, with nothing missing and nothing added that should not have been added" (Armah, 1989: p. 5).

Naana however disapproves of Foli's way of pouring out the drink which he holds "in those hands of his which hate so much to let hot drinks escape" (Armah, 1989: p. 5). Naana appropriately describes this action in the following lines: "Slyly like a thief he was measuring the bottle in his soul. The less he poured out to end the thirst of the ghost the more the bottom would hold for his own dry mouth" (Armah, 1989: p. 5).

The numerous roles Naana plays in the thematic development of the story add credibility and reality to the story.

3. Conclusion

This paper sought to do a content analysis of the contributions of the elderly woman character in Armah's ***Fragments***. The aim was to investigate the roles Naana played towards the narrative and thematic developments of the novel. At the end of the investigation, Naana's invaluable narrative roles to the development of the story included her being used as the narrator of the beginning and ending of the story. Symbolically, the first and last chapters bear the same title, "Naana", which indicates that both chapters are dedicated to her. This point is typical of Akan traditional folktale in which the end of the narrative is also contained in the introduction. And this is also a style that enhances the aesthetic effect of the story. Naana is also made to introduce the other characters in the story. And because she knows them so well, she is able to provide the reader with a vivid description of both characters and events in the story and thereby gives the story that touch of verisimilitude.

Thematically, Naana is used to present the prologue and epilogue of the story. That is, her opening address captures the theme of the story. Acting as a social commentator in the story therefore, she presents and gives insight into the main theme and the associated ideas to the reader. These include: societal decadence, alienation of the individual from the society, modernism verses traditionalism and the cyclical nature of the universe. Also, as a confidant to Baako, she is a trusted friend in whom the suffering protagonist confides his innermost thoughts and feelings. As the custodian of her people's customs and traditions, she supervises traditional practices like the naming of the child and the performance of the libation to see Baako off.

It is recognized from the above discussion that, Armah's presentation of Naana's qualities in his *Fragments* is unique and for that matter, not overemphasized. The character contributes immensely to the success of the story as part of the didactic Akan folktales which teach many moral lessons on the one hand, and to the success of the writer's choice of an elderly woman who plays a major character role, almost equal to the protagonist in the story, on another hand.

Finally, the outcome of the study indicates that the overall portrayal of Naana, as an elderly woman character, is very significant as it authenticates the work and makes it more interesting and attractive to read. In effect, the topic and the methodology (qualitative) for this study, the significance of Naana's character in Armah's *Fragments* becomes important as it serves as a case study of the invaluable outcome of the presentation of elderly women in Ghanaian literary texts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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