

**DIASPORA WRITERS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM: A STUDY
OF ISIDORE OKPEWHO'S *CALL ME BY MY RIGHTFUL
NAME* AND AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *OSIRIS RISING***

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Abstract

Literature provides a platform for people to record their thoughts and experiences in creative works and subsequently make these literary texts to be accessible to others and this further projects the works as tools for social criticism and reconstruction. Using their literary works, writers are able to point out the fundamental problems that plague society such as those that hinge and militate against the peace and progress of the society. By engaging in these literary expositions, the writer attempts to articulate and proffer a workable framework for the society in his endeavor to institute socio-political stability. Some African writers have written on the experiences and social dilemma faced by immigrants in their strive to improve their circumstances through human mobility. In this case, the experiences in question include corruption, racism, and exploitation among others. This paper explores the traumatic experiences of African migrants using Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising* and Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. Psychoanalytic and Marxist Literary theories as frameworks for

critical analysis of the work. The paper concludes with the optimistic view that African writers are well positioned to initiate positive change.

Introduction

Literature as a mirror which reflects societal moral norms or customs derived from generally accepted practices rather than written laws, values, attitudes, interrelationships and peculiarities has become an integral part of any developing society. It has continued to fulfill its own unique function in national development. Literature helps to shape our attitudes to life which brings change in the society. This function obviously implies that a writer must express the needs and peculiarities of his society in his works. Kolawale Ogungbesan in 'Politics and the African Writer' rightly pointed out that the writer is a member of a society and his sensibility is conditioned by the social and political happenings around him. These issues would therefore be present in his work as 'African Literature has tended to reflect the political phases on the continent.'(43)

Writers are the soul of a society, the voice of conscience whose role is to champion the goal and the task of leading the people unto a glorious and prosperous future. Writers reflect the hard socio-political as well as religious and economic realities of the people. With this, they hope in one hand to redirect society unto its peace, unity, harmony and much desired future and on the other hand to save the past from a humanistic point of view, for the generations yet unborn. Literature in this regard will always remain relevant because the urge for writers to influence their societies through their writings keep their works alive. A very good example is

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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Nick Ostdick in his article titled "Literary Activism: The Influence of Politics on People" writes that Nadine Gordimer, a known South African Literary activist, characterized what drives her writing as 'seeking that thread of logic and order.' [1]

Alexandra Watson in an interview titled 'Activism, Literature, and Reclaiming the Margins', writes:

We do believe in the political and social power of Literature, especially when it arises from voices seldom heard. ...we believe that the written testimony of people of color, women writers, of LGBT writers, and other marginalized groups is a political act in itself. ... In order for art to truly flourish, the perspectives and experiences of silenced voices must be heard: the status quo must be challenged. ()

Literature becomes important if it can deal with the people's daily struggle and other activities for their right and security. It is clear that writers look at contemporary issues from different dimensions to better their society. In line with this position this study is designed to explore the traumatic experiences of African migrants using Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising* and Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name* in a bid to give exposition to the centrality of literature in critical literary discourse.

Psychoanalytical Theory

This theory deals with the work of the human mind, the id, the ego and superego. 'Id' is a socially destructive force because it achieves its desires without any concern for law or values. 'Ego' makes Id's energy non-destructive by diverting them into socially acceptable norms while 'Superego' provides additional balance to the 'Id'. Superego represses socially unacceptable desires back into the unconscious. Freud believes that the 'Id' is formed during childhood shaping the behavior of the would-be adult. Dreams are important tools for psychoanalyst in determining conflicts caused by physical ailments. Dreams in literature offer rich insight into characters that their outer personalities or spoken words might never suggest. Freud's Theory of personality attributes thoughts and actions to unconscious motives and conflicts. He was able to discover how some unfulfilled desires and repressed feelings in the past exert great control in the psychological nature of a person in adulthood. The researcher will interrogate the traumatic experiences of the characters in the texts under study using Freud's psychoanalytical theory as a frame work.

Marxist Literary Theory

Marxist theory stems from the fact that literature is an artistic construct with inherent socio-political and economic structures. Marx and his friend argued that the gap between 'the haves' and 'have not' has become extremely polarized and that this polarity is given impetus by the undue exploitation of the proletariat by the economic class or the bourgeoisie compradors that control the means of production and distribution. This deep rooted proletariat's marginalization can only be upturned by creating a revolutionary consciousness; an awareness that tilts towards the displacement of

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an oppressive structure and the erection of a new superstructure. In *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, Otis joins in a fight against the whites in his University when he comes back from Africa to revolt against the whites' racial attitude. He becomes a revolutionary fighter, fighting for the blacks and the coloreds. In *Osiris Rising*, Asar, a revolutionary fighter fought the government to his death because he believes that the government is corrupt and intimidates the poor masses.

Traumatic Experiences and Revolutionary Tendencies as Portrayed by Ayi Kwei Armah In *Osiris Rising*

Armah creates image of a country basking in deep corruption and other social vices. The country rollicks in bad governance, embezzlement, corruption, mismanagement of funds, bribery, killing, maiming of African culture, lack of social amenities and hypocrisy of African Americans as well as other social vices and disorder. This situation leaves many characters in the text helpless and unable to speak up against the wanton misrule by the government.

Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano [Sheldon Tubman] an African American tells his story and experience in America. He tells a story of how he was 'used' by a white lady. The white lady, Adele Morgan wanted to write on the topic 'The Brain of One Black Man' and decided to use Ras' brain for the study without Ras' consent, she made Ras believe that she was in love with him. On finding out, Ras burnt the lady's notebook. This singular act destroyed Ras' universe and so 'he lost energy '[114] and needed a hiding place. He tried committing

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suicide but was rescued; he disappeared and later became a Muslim and joined an Atlantic Yoruba Village founded on the principles of Negritude [p 114] out of frustration. The trauma Ras went through during this trial period is unpleasant because the environment over there is organized to frustrate him and other migrants especially blacks and in the process, he nearly lost his life. This act equally claims Sheldon Tubman's identity as he changed his name to Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano immediately after that. The encounter was what robbed him part of himself so much so that he never recovered again in his lifetime. The experience was devastating, showing that the American environment is hostile to blacks. The environment appears to be designed to frustrate blacks and those who cannot cope end up leaving the country and that is exactly what Ras did. The writer then presents Ras Cinque Jomo Equiano as a civil-rights activist in the United States of America who came down to Africa to 'liberate Africans from their cruel leaders, but was incidentally bought over by the Deputy Director for Security Services, Seth Soja (DD) with whom he (Ras) forms a cult intent on corruption and misrule. Ras inadvertently turns against the masses he came down to rescue and even becomes part of the intrigue and drama that lead to Asar's death. Another African American that comes down to give Africa succor is Earl Johnson [the fake Ethiopian]. Johnson lives in Ras' castle and works for him. He too is bought over by DD as he is the one that planted the briefcase that contained AK47 and other items in Asar's apartment. He is equally made rich by the DD to sabotage and frustrate the poor masses. The Deputy Director himself who came down from the US to help build his country is also caught in the web of corruption and embezzlement

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Ras fourth wife, Jacqueline Brown, is traumatized. She is a very young girl forced into marriage by circumstance. She had come down from the US in search of her root, incidentally she meets Ras and his group and a sham marriage was organized. Jacqueline could not bear it as the trauma that came with the marriage was too much for her. She said; "Then he got to hitting on me every time he saw me and the last twist it took, he wants me to be his wife fourth wife for Christ's sake. Hey, I can't wait till the plane lifts off and good-bye Ras" [177]. Ast and Don Bailey [a black American] helped Jacqueline to escape back to the US. They sneaked her out of Ras' castle that night and she entered the next available flight back to the US.

Ast, the heroine of the novel is almost trapped by the Deputy Director for Security Services, Seth Soja. The trauma Ast went through in the two rape attempts by Seth in Africa becomes a psychological problem to her.

She was unprepared for his reactions. Extricating his hands from her he grabbed her hair with his left, pushed back her head, twisting her neck and, with the edge of his right hand, gave her a hard chop on her windpipe, just under the chin...she was struggling to regain her breath when he hit her again, this time just above the neck. She summoned energy from the very last reach of her being, but the light in her head was dimming, her body slipping down a bottomless spiral [79].

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Ast travels from New York to Africa because she has psychological problem trying to locate her heritage and identify with her people [Africans]. She felt that Africa could offer such psychological cure, not knowing that Africa would multiply her psychological problems. She had come down from the US in search of love and identity and Ast while discussing with Netta confessed that she was not at peace with herself in the US because she did not find love in the US and wanted to know herself more. She runs away from injustice and man's inhumanity to man to avoid whites' hostility to migrants and find succor in Africa. Netta asked her why she must work and marry in Africa, she replies:

It would have to be in Africa, because of who we are, who I am. In America, I feel like a passenger walking homeward at five kilometers an hour, in a plane rushing away at a thousand kilometers an hour. It didn't make sense [87].

Ast later gets married to Asar and becomes pregnant for him. She goes through shock as she watches DD and his men claim that the half dozen of hand grenades, two AK47, magazines among others are seen in Asar's apartment. Ast knows that the items were planted in Asar's room by a stranger, the young Ethiopian Asar welcomed into his apartment. The Vice Chancellor is surprised and dumbfounded as well as Ast as she [Ast] is handcuffed, arrested and taken away to Bara.

Incidentally, the African society which they rush down to build is buried in corruption. Armah in the novel shows his stand and anger in the progressive attenuation of the pre-independence ideals of the ruling class. Seth Soja, the Deputy Director [DD] of the country's security force controls the ultimate power in the country. Though

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schooled in one of the Universities in the US, wields so much power and openly intimidates people. The Government had made him so rich that he buys people over with money, supports corruption and kills anybody that comes out to protect the masses. The battle in the work, appears to be between the haves and the have nots. Asar stands for the masses and fights for a corruption free country. He wants revolution because in this African unnamed country, corruption, embezzlement, bad governance and other vices are the order of the day. The country is so bad that nothing works - no good roads, no street lights, no traffic lights, telephones are not working [in Netta's hotel], the water is not running there is unemployment problem as only ministers' relations and /or concubines are employed in the government offices. These people are most of the time not qualified for the jobs. Netta said, 'Instead of solving real problems, the government specializes in hunting and jailing opponents' [69]. The DD's work is to arrest and kill those people that do not support the government of the day. Once you ask the government to improve on the living standard of its citizens, you are in DD's bad book. The masses are oppressed and suppressed. Ast, on arrival from the US is arrested by the security agents because an article is found in her possession. This article is believed to be one of the series of articles that aim to discredit and overthrow the present government. It is believed that Asar is behind the circulation of these articles. For this, Ast is followed secretly until she gets to Manda to meet Asar. Asar is a lecturer in Manda Teaching College where he [Asar] as a revolutionist tries to create a reformed society. Asar is a revolutionist who fought apartheid in

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South Africa and is now fighting corruption and dictatorship in Manda and its environ as he declares:

Now we've got to do it unless we resign ourselves to this new form of slavery, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund beating out of the rhythm for the dance of death. [139]

DD goes as far as bribing Prof. Woolley, a lecturer in Manda Teachers' College just to indict Asar. He has to report any development that could pose a threat to the government, suggest ways to neutralize the potential threats and locate the source of the 'articles'. The Professor is bribed by the DD to betray Asar. The same DD had tried bribing Ast when she first arrived Africa, and when she rejected, he tried raping her and later succeeded in killing Asar, Ast's husband. In the course of fighting for the poor masses whose resources are being siphoned by a hand full of corrupt officers, Asar is killed and the DD attempts to subdue his wife Ast. Though Asar is dead, the fight still continues as Ast's pregnancy signifies rebirth and hope.

Armah's *Osiris Rising* is deliberately crafted as a tool of resistance and liberation just like his other novels. They are meant to fight the injustices, prejudices and atrocities perpetrated over the years by foreigners (colonization) and also by Africans on Africans. Armah's liberation novels are designed to speak to revolutionary changes in social, economic and political structures in a straight forward language. Ogede believing that literature is a great tool for change sees Armah's works as 'a call for the total liberation of Africa.' According to Ogede in *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast: Pitting Imaginary Worlds Against the Actual*;

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In Africa in particular, where literature is a great weapon for change, Armah's work should have a special relevance, for, more than any other of our writers. Armah perfectly represents the notion of the ideal artist, one who does not merely copy but transfer reality.

Traumatic Experiences and Revolutionary Tendencies Portrayed In *Call Me By My Rightful Name*

The novel is an African-American novel that explores the ramification of the African presence in the western world. The aspect of life worthy of discourse as examined by Isidore Okpewho in this novel is the issue of race. Racism is a product of the complex interaction in a given society of a race-based world view with prejudice; stereotyping and discrimination. The hero of the book Otis is an African-American. Otis is traumatized by regular spasm he has whenever he hears Yoruba African music. He is taken to different hospitals for treatment but at last Dr Fishbon advised his parents to take him to Africa as it is the only solution. His case is so bad that he loses control of himself whenever it starts and he ends up feeling ashamed of himself. The trauma becomes too serious that he travels down to Africa with his father and doctor for solution.

The issue of race is felt by every African-American in the text. A white police officer stops Otis and his girlfriend, Norma on their way back from a party and treats them like animals that Norma said to the police officer, 'But you have gat no right to treat us like

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animals.' [9], to the police officer, he has 'less need to be extra-careful dealing with black youngsters.' [9]

Otis' grandfather, Abel Warfield was killed just because he was a black. Mr Warfield was burnt alive by a white family that he worked for as a house servant. Abel was falsely accused of lusting after their daughter. Melba's mother later died and Melba was left with her two siblings. Melba was only four years old when her mother died, her aunt, her mother's only sibling took her and cared for her, while her siblings were given to a black childless couple. She never saw her siblings again in life and her aunt died when she was 'in her first year of community college' [16]. She was left with nobody to call her own so she felt relieved when her boyfriend then, Mr. Hampton proposed to her,

Fate landed her a receptionist's job in a Boston construction firm where she met a handsome engineer who...surprised her on the second date with an engagement ring, and in all their life together had helped her outlive the trauma of the past. Deliverance, she remembered calling him once... [16]

The traumatic experience she went through made her marry the first man that proposed to her. Mr. Hampton, Otis father, grew up with his sister as choristers in their church. They sang so well that they were usually invited to appear at functions organized by their community. A white man once told them, 'you niggers sure have the singing thing in your blood... I think that he [Otis father] needs a few lessons in chord control. But of course that's something we whites do so much better than you niggers. If he could, maybe, scrub some of that black off his skin, he could conceivably get

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closer to being a white man and maybe do better in his chord control.' [18]. Otis was angry 'but his mother took control to prevent the impending awkwardness'. [18] Otis father felt the trauma of being a black as a child and grew up with racism ideology. The protagonist's grandfather was a known slave, he was stubborn and spoke so little that he was called the 'dumb African' [20] Africans are still seen as slaves in this text, they are all categorized by the whites as second class citizens and so discriminated against. There are riots and marches and 'black people have become increasingly unease.' [24] Police release their wild dogs on them. One can imagine the kind of stress and trauma black people go through at this point in time. There is chaos in the society - black people trying to be recognized by whites while white people fight to get blacks suppressed and intimidated. This equally goes on in the University where an election is held for the post of president and a white is declared winner. Blacks get angry as they believe it is rigged in favour of the white candidates. The writer presents the blacks as suppressed and oppressed and this is confirmed by Chip McAdoo when he said 'we'll never be who we want to be in America because the society won't let us, no matter what promises it makes to our leaders' [169]. Blacks are trampled upon, and the traumatic experiences left them with no other option than to revolt while some of them decide to trace their roots and return to their African 'homeland'.

In this novel, Okpewho looks at migration, identity, revolution and racism. The written testimony of people of colour and other marginalized group is political and is meant to motivate and move

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Africans to act. When Otis comes back from Nigeria he makes up his mind to fight for the rights of blacks. Otis travels all the way from America to Nigeria [Yoruba land - Ijoke-Oke] to look for his identity and solve the problem of periodic spasm once and for all. He finds his people and changes his name to Otis Akimbowale Hampton but travels back to the US to complete his education with the promise that he would be visiting his 'home' - Nigeria regularly. Apart from Otis Hampton, Chip McAdoo, Jim and Mr. Hampton [Otis father] other characters came down to Nigeria to look for their heritage. Chip McAdoo settles in Nigeria and refuses to go back, Jim Meredith and Giant also settle in Nigeria.

When Otis arrives at Ijoke-Oke initially, he is not welcomed by their baale [local chief] out of jealousy that he would take the throne from him. The baale later burnt Otis house and with this the community burnt the baale's house and chased him and his family out of the community. In fact, he is sent on exile. Isidore succeeds in bringing out the ill in the American society [race and class] and the one in the Nigerian society [jealousy and lack of focus] Otis' experiences in Nigeria and the United States of America are discussed in this paper to bring out the revolutionary tendencies and the trauma he faces in the text. The twins, Taiwo and Kehinde were also traumatized when they lost their brother, Akimbowale, to slavers. As old women, they are treated well by their community but once Otis comes into the picture, jealousy sets in, though it is nipped at the bud. Otis goes back to America with the mind to revolt and fight the unimaginable injustices meted out on blacks in America. In America, he joins other blacks to fight those who believe that blacks are inferior to them. During one of their protests he (Otis) and his girl friend, Norma are arrested and taken to jail

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for a night. Otis is beaten up in jail but this does not stop him as he 'promises himself not to refuse to answer the call of Ogun.' (256)

Conclusion

Both novels highlight various issues facing the African continent from different dimensions and seek to explore answers to these contemporary issues. These literary texts are perceived as an entity possessing intrinsic revolutionary structures. The novels are embodiments of sociology, economics and politics; a kind of social history containing class, ideology, exploitation, race issues, struggles and other indices of revolution.

Ayi Kwei Armah touched many faces of the African situation. He reflects the extravagant and bourgeois nature of the rich who enjoy creating wide gaps between them and the poor. So many are the anomalies that even African Americans who come down as messiahs to save their deteriorating homeland are caught in the web. The African society portrayed by Armah lack order, harmony and decorum. Okpewho mainly looks at the issue of race and class. His characters are in constant battle with the environment and the forces that try to rob them of their humanity. We see the influence of the American environment on the immigrants. The US environment is unfriendly to the immigrants [Otis, Chip, Jim] so much so that they decided to take the bull by the horn by running down to Africa to search for their roots.

This paper has critically examined the issues, experiences and viewpoints of these authors as literary writers viz aviz the writers' hopes to heal the psychological pains of their characters who are

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victims of race and corruption. By making Ast pregnant to continue the fight in Africa and Otis to settle down in the US and accepting his real history, and by attempting to fight racism in his domain, the writers have made clarion calls for positive change and at the same time, presented an invitation to African Americans to come down to Africa, identify with their people and build the Africa of every black man's dream. In all, the novels call for a corruption free and racial discrimination free society for better and more beneficial peaceful co-existence.

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