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### Irony and Vision in Selected Works of Ayi Kwei Armah

**Iboroma, Ibiene Evelyn**

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

E-mail: [iibiene@yahoo.com](mailto:iibiene@yahoo.com)

Mobile Phone: + (243)7067338032

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#### Abstract

Generally speaking, literature is used as an instrument for social change. A writer dialogues with his material world and puts in writing the outcome of this dialogue which usually serves as a mirror to the people and the society. The aim is to set standards that can engender meaningful changes in the society. The use of a medley of literary techniques such as irony unfolds the vision of life or society delineated by the writer in his work of art. Adopting the definitions of situational irony by Ephraim Chukwu, Xiang Li and Jay Braiman as the framework, this paper investigates Armah's manipulation of the ironic mode to convey his vision of African womanhood. This will be done through the study of the attitude of the female characters in their engagement with some patriarchal mores such as marriage in *Two Thousand Seasons*, *Fragments* and *The Healers*. The paper argues that Armah wears a mask in his delineation of African womanhood. He seems to delineate the phenomenon of social change from the standpoint of compromise. His inability to completely alienate himself from the patriarchal social order which accounts for the subordination of the African woman informs his vision. The paper therefore concludes that Armah's vision of African womanhood is ambivalent.

**Key Words:** irony, situational irony, vision, patriarchy, African womanhood and ambivalence

### Introduction

Generally speaking, a literary work of art expresses human experience in an imaginative way. Breyten Breytenbach posits that “a writer, any writer... is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society...he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people” (166). To Tony Afejuku and Tunde Adeleke:

A writer takes the material needed for his/her work from the society, moulds such materials into the shape he/she wants and gives the finished product back to the society. Thus, the society influences the writer by providing the materials and the writer also tries to influence the society by giving back to it the finished product from materials so supplied (169).

In other words, the writer dialogues with his environment and puts in writing the outcome of this dialogue which usually serves as a mirror to the people and the society. The writer’s dialogue with his material world and the strategies he employs largely reveal his vision of life/society. This vision argues Maduka “articulates values necessary for helping individuals or society operate rationally through the maximum exploitation of the principle of order regulating the mechanics of existence” (25). In doing this, the artist uses a medley of literary techniques one of which is irony. Maduka argues further that “a writer... can use irony in correcting undesirable habits in such areas of a people’s experience as politics, love, religion, beliefs or manners” (*The Intellectual* (142). So, what is irony?

### Irony

Many research findings show that the concept of irony is difficult to define. Xiang Li for instance submits that “the concept of irony is notoriously elusive and many attempts to box it into a catch-all definition inevitably begin with a disclaimer noting the irony of the difficulty in defining irony” (3). This corroborates Douglas Muecke’s observation that:

Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mists; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could. To attempt a taxonomy of a phenomenon so nebulous that it disappears as one approaches is an even more desperate adventure (qtd in Maduka 139).

Hana Vancova analyzing some encyclopedic entry on irony asserts that “there is no ultimate definition of irony’ (42). However, some scholars have made an attempt to define irony. Xiang Li for instance defines irony as “a contradiction between appearance or expectation/intention and reality” (4). Marta Dynel on her part defines irony as “the state of affairs or events which is the reverse of what has been expected” (537). There are many types of irony but “conventionally” argues Sahira M. Salman

“there are three main types: situational, dramatic and verbal irony” (446). Next is the definition of situational irony which is the focus of this paper.

### **Situational Irony**

Jay Braiman sees situational irony as “where an event occurs which is unexpected, in the sense that it is somehow in absurd or mocking opposition to what would be expected or appropriate” (n.p). Ephraim Chukwu avers that situational irony is an irony that occurs “when the expectation of supposed knowledge or related knowledge about something proves the contrary” (147). Li adds that situational irony can be considered “as an incongruity in a situation arising from tension between what is expected or intended and what actually happens” (6). To Joan Lucariello, “...ironic events “mock” the normal order of things...; and expose a theory of the world’s unpredictability, capturing our understanding that we cannot rely on ourselves, on others, or on events to run a standard course...” (qtd in Li 8). She further argues that in considering situational irony, a part of the unexpectedness arises from what she refers to as “script” and “script” according to Mark Ashcraft is a mental representation of “what is supposed to happen in a particular circumstance “which has to do with our sense of regularity or control in the world” (qtd in Li 8). Therefore, Li submits that “the acknowledgement of situational ironies emerges when a set of affairs deviates ironically from the scripts” (8). Toeing this line of argument, Cameron Shelly submits that when people say that

they find a situation ironic, they mean that their conception of it defies the normal way in which situations fit with their repertoire of concepts, that this misfit is noteworthy in some way, that it evokes a particular kind of emotional response, and perhaps, that it has a special, moral significance (775).

This paper attempts to define situational irony as an event or situation that occurs which is a deviation from what is expected; an event/situation that contradicts one’s sense of regularity. However, the working definition of situational irony for this study is a combination of the definitions of Ephraim, Li and Braiman which underlie the framework. Again, in analyzing situational irony from the texts under study, this paper will take a cue from Li’s observation that “both the perception and appreciation of situational irony are subject to one’s interpretation of the event, which is a function of one’s perspective, background, culture, etc” (7). It is also worthy of note that situational irony differs from other forms of irony in that what is being interpreted as situational is observed and not created as it is with the case of other forms of irony such as dramatic and verbal.

The thrust of this paper is to explore Armah’s manipulation of irony to convey his vision of African womanhood. It will also ascertain the clarity of his vision of African womanhood. The novels under consideration are *Two Thousand Seasons*, *Fragments* and *The Healers*. The study is divided into two foci: the first deals with the ironic

situations in the texts under study and the second with Armah's vision of African womanhood.

## 1

Armah's use of irony will be explored around the attitude of the female characters towards marriage, breadwinning/resourcefulness, leadership role and sexual objectification.

### Marriage

Mary Wentworth posits that "a key factor in the subordination of women is the marriage institution" (6). She asserts that "by providing each man with the services of at least one female, marriage rewarded men for their allegiance to and for their willingness to fight for, the patriarchy" (6). Characters that fall under this category are Ama and Araba Jesiwa in *The Healers*, Araba in *Fragments* and Idawa and Anoa in *Two Thousand Seasons*.

Ama marries Damfo, The Healer, and lives a boring life with him in the eastern forest. In the course of time, she finds dissatisfaction with her marriage and quits after their only child, Ajos, is six years old. She leaves her husband because "the life she found in the forest of healers left a large part of her soul unsatisfied... As the years passed the unsatisfied part of her soul grew bigger and bigger..." (62). She therefore leaves for Eusano in search of self-fulfilment. The 'script' is that Ama would have remained in the forest suffering in silence because in her milieu "silence was the virtue of women and passivity their garner" (Chukuma 1). Contrarily, she turns her back on convention and rejects marital conditions that want to squeeze life out of her. She eventually gets married to Esuman with whom she hopes to find fulfilment. It is also ironic to see Damfo, an African man, yielding to his wife's rebellion without imposing his patriarchal given weight on her: "He did not block her desire to return to Eusano" (62). Again, usually in real life and in fiction, it is wives that suffer abandonment in marriage. Examples include Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre* who is abandoned by her husband, Modu Fall; Efuru in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* who also suffers abandonment at the hand of her husband, Eneberi; Dora in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* who is also abandoned by Chris for a German lady etc. But here, it is Damfo, the man, which suffers abandonment. This is an unexpected outcome of this relationship because the patriarchal social system does not accommodate non-conformity.

Araba Jesiwa is subjected by tradition to marry Bedu Addo, a royal. She accepts it because she wants "to be right in the eyes of others..." (28). She forces herself to love Bedu but to no avail. The result is barrenness. With the passage of time, she regains consciousness and begins to re-evaluate her life: "I had been false to myself. I had to start being true to myself... in my blindness I had almost killed myself... I had to do

what was natural to me and leave others to do what was natural to them” (77-78). Here, Armah builds up tension between two levels of contradictory modes of behaviour, “woman-for-man/society and woman-for-herself” to use Marie Pauline Eboh’s words. The conflict is resolved in her rejecting the mores that thwart her identity and she “requested for a final separation...” (76) with her husband. This is ironic. What is seen here is an incompatibility between what is expected of Araba Jesiwa by patriarchy and the decision she takes. Her action no doubt signifies disorder in the patriarchal ideology when order is expected. Evidently, Araba Jesiwa reaction is a transition from “woman-for-man, *woman-for-society* to woman-for-herself” (Eboh 12 *addition mine*). Her marital experience seems to accord with Teresa Njoku’s thesis that “there can be no love and success in marriage where a free choice is ignored...” (29).

Araba in *Fragments* does not subscribe to the patriarchal definition of the female as a sex object. Rather, she uses sex as a platform for blackmail. Thus, she threatens to deny her husband, Kwesi, sex to make him approve her budget for an exorbitant outing ceremony. Hear her: “I’ll make him agree... I have my secret weapons... the midwife says Kwesi should leave me alone for two months, if he doesn’t agree to these things... I’ll add another month” (88-89). When her mother, Efua, tries to dissuade her from doing that, she insists saying “let him starve a bit. After all, we have to find some way of making men share some of our suffering...” (89). To Araba, sex is negotiable. This is rather ironic. In the patriarchal world, the woman is usually seen as a defenseless sex object but the reverse is the case here. Kwesi’s response is also ironic. He is seen as the weaker vessel. Hear him: “I find it so difficult to go against the wishes of a woman once I’m facing her... once we begin talking, nothing is clear anymore...” (92-93). His attitude corroborates Siendu Konate’s argument that “the female body, which is the “object” of contention, is indeed a source of power, for it unsettles man” (10). The reason Kwesi advances is also ironic. It is expected that he would exact his authority over his wife to succumb to his sexual demands. Again, Araba names her child after her brother without seeking her husband’s consent. This is a reversal of role. When Baako queries her action, she says. “Ah yes. And nothing prevents the mother from helping the father make a good decision. Men think they rule the world” (86-87). Araba is seen asserting her identity in marriage which is not congruent with patriarchy. Ironically, the traditional space is being restructured where the female becomes the subject and the man, the object.

Through Idawa, Armah debunks the myth that in patriarchy, proposal of marriage is male preserve. King Koranche has great affection for Idawa. “Everything a king could do to show himself to advantage before a woman he loved Koranche did in the hope of pleasing Idawa” (70). But Idawa “went on with her life as if she did not even see the king courting her attention” (70). What an irony! Traditionally, it is women who compete for a man’s love and attention but the reverse is the case here. Eventually, Koranche thinking he has worked hard enough to win Idawa’s love, fixed “a new dance

at the very next full moon, a dance at which the king would pick the woman of his heart” (70). Idawa knowing that she is going to be the choice, “the week before the full moon ...on her own initiative proclaimed her love for Ngubane...and asked to marry him...” (70). With great astonishment and joy, “Ngubane married Idawa” (70). The rejection king Koranche “had suffered at Idawa’s hands pushed his spirit into a comfortless hole...” (71). This is also ironic because traditionally it is women that suffer from heartbreak when disappointed by loved ones. He wonders: “how terrible things would be if she were not alone, if there were a hundred, a thousand, thirty-thousand of her kind” (72). Thus, Idawa does the unexpected to assert her self-identity in patriarchy. She refuses to be diminished by societal expectations.

Again, against the backdrop of the importance attached to marriage and motherhood in the African tradition, Anoa elects to remain single. At maturity, “it was thought she could be led into choosing mother chores, she foresaw the intended separation, spurned it and asked to be trained with her brothers in the hunt” (14). She refuses to function within the framework of her traditional roles and insists on her decision against all odds. “She lost all interest in sustaining life, refused food, would touch no water till she was admitted to the training of her age” (14). She eventually becomes “possessor of the art of hunting” (14) and brings innovation into it discomfiting her teachers. This is ironic. She does not only decline from fulfilling her expected roles of wife and mother but also excels in a trade that is male exclusive. Anoa is not alone in this fight against wifedom and motherhood. The men of Anoa admiring how the women are ‘thingified’ by the predators to use Udumukwu’s words, work towards “the suppression of women first, in the reduction of all females to things-things for pleasure, things for use, things in the hands of men” (59). In pursuit of this agenda, they decide that every female should be made “a childbearer as soon as her body showed it was ready, and for as long as her body continued to turn manseed to harvest” (60). While some accept this, others reject it even though they know that “the penalty is death” (61). They “... refused the childbearing, homekeeping destiny” (60) arguing that “they would not consent to the production of mere zombie bodies in a community doomed” (60). They defiantly stand their ground to the point of death. This is an unexpected reaction. They superimpose their identity over patriarchy’s highly valued wifedom and motherhood. Again, their undaunted posture contradicts patriarchal definition of the woman as weak and vulnerable always seeking shelter under the umbrella of man.

### Leadership Role

Characters to consider here are Noliwe and Ningowe in *Two Thousand Seasons*. In patriarchy, leadership is viewed as an exclusive male domain. However, Armah employs irony of situation to debunk this myth. He assigns leadership roles to two girls, Noliwe and Ningowe. Thirty pathfinders who were sent out to spy out a good land for the people of Anoa after the Arab predators dispossessed them of their land were killed. As a result of this, the men are afraid and are unwilling to continue with the leadership

role. Noliwe and Ningowe take over the mantle and reassure the people that “the land the pathfinders had seen, our destination was real” (55). They courageously lead the people to the promise land though they die soon after. “Ningowe was the first to die” (56). But why did these girls die? An answer shall be provided as the study progresses.

### **Breadwinning/Resourcefulness**

Ann McGinley avers that the patriarchal “society identifies the role of breadwinner as masculine” (802). It is ironic that men that populated *Two Thousand Seasons* are economically impotent. Instead of going to farm to provide for their families, “they had elected to go with the women every farming day to sit in shady places guarding against danger. Danger seldom came” (10). Bored, they decide to move the shade closer home “preferring to sit in the shade of large bodwe trees or beneath the cool grass of huts built by women drinking ahey ...in their heads congratulating the tribe of men for having found such easy means to spare itself the little inconveniences of work while yet enjoying so much of its fruit” (10). What an irony! The men enjoy the fruits of women’s labour with their bellies “like a pregnant woman’s, of a habit to consume more food and drink than *they* give out in work and energy” (11). Again, even “when such work as the men had named their work happened, there were no men in sight” (10). Therefore, “the women were maintainers; the women were their own protectresses, finders and growers both” (10). The women also engage in hunting: “every danger the women tamed, bringing tales and skins and meat to triumphant husbands” (11). This is alien to the patriarchal ideology.

Closely related to this is the role the women play when drought hits Anoa. While the men indolently “sat through moistureless afternoons season after season consuming stored supplies, staring up at the clear white skies, muttering mutual incoherencies about the beauty of such skies...” (11), the women on their part “looked at the same whiteness, saw famine where the men saw beauty, and grew frightened for our people” (11). What an irony! Consequently, Yaniba, a woman, “unwilling to tolerate the dryness outside... went past the farthest tributary to its source. She lifted a rock, one after many, and revealed to thirsty eyes a pool.... Other women came bringing help to her” (11). It is strange that it is a woman who takes the bull by the horn to save her community from drought performing a traditional masculine act while the men, sit under the shades built by women drinking ahey “grew eloquent describing to each other the terrors of a long dryness” (11). Ironically, Yaniba and other women engage in masculinity while the men engage in femininity.

### **Sexual Objectification**

Characters that fall under this category are Azania, Sekala and Nyewele, all in *Two Thousand Seasons*.

The predators from the desert turn the women “into playthings, for their decayed pleasure” (19). They subject the women to sex and assault eating and licking dawa from their genitals. The women disgusted, decide to fight against this inhumanity. Faisal, an Arab predator, invites Azania to make love to her. She accepts the invitation prepared to avenge on him for using women as ‘playthings’. Faisal, intent on having double satisfaction, still wants “his young askari in him from behind while Azania welcomed him inside herself, so that he would himself be firmly clasped between his lower and his higher joys” (22). In the heat of it, Faisal lays “insensate, hardly breathing” (23). Azania seizes this opportunity to release her pent-up indignation against the Arab predators. She seizes the sharp war spear of the askari and pushes “it hard through the askari’s right side, so hard it went through him into the Arab panting beneath, threading him in his right. The two, the predator and his askari, were thus fused together when the agony of death usurped their sweeter pain” (23). Sekala and Nyewele like Azania also take revenge on Mohammed who has a disgusting habit of licking women’s genitals. Sekala strikes “the expectant tongue with a thin, sharp knife” (23) while Nyewele, with a sharper knife, “slid deep into his neck and jerked sideways to the left, sideways to the right, Mohammed died with his forehead stuck to the floor” (23).

Azania, Sekala and Nyewele refuse to subscribe to what Linda Brannon describes as the Victorian ideal of womanhood: “...passive, dependent, pure, refined and delicate” (162). It is ironic that these women display rather the ideals of manhood: “active, independent, coarse, and strong” (162). Of course, their revolt does not go unpunished. The askaris begin to avenge on the women by killing them. About “fifteen women died that night, murdered by stupefied askaris” (25). The oldest woman, Nandi, unable to bear the brutal killing of the women confronts the askaris: “but for whom are you fighting still?” (25). This confrontation costs her life. But why this old woman? Where are the husbands and brothers of these women who are expected to fight against the askaris? This is rather absurd.

## 11

Maduka argues that the delineation of “character is central to the representation of the vision of life/society in the texts” (26). Accordingly, the overall representation of the female characters in the novels under study throws some light on Armah’s vision of African womanhood. It appears from the foregoing discourse that Armah seems to condone patriarchy even though he appears to condemn its practices. His inability to completely alienate himself from the patriarchal mores that foster the oppression and subjugation of the female informs his vision of African womanhood.

Armah sentences the African woman to economic confinement which critics argue is the hallmark of female subjugation. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, he delineates female characters like Yaniba who participate in economic activities such as hunting. They bring “tales and skins and meat home to triumphant husbands” (11). The image of this



resourceful woman hardly features in his later novels especially in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* and *Fragments*. He reduces the woman to an appendage of man and a blackmailer. Araba (*Fragments*) having no economic existence uses boycott of sex as blackmail to extort money from her husband. Again, her unabashed search for material wealth through the sweat of men is not only catalytic to Baako, her brother's insanity but also to the death of her baby. Naana, her grandmother avers that "... the baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god..." (199). Araba is portrayed as the destroyer of man in furtherance of the myth of the daughters of Eve.

Again, female assertiveness is not sustained in Armah's fiction. Noliwe and Ningowe die no sooner than they take the people of Anoa to the promise land. They die for taking up a leadership role which is a male preserve. Araba Jesiwa suffers loss for revolting against arranged marriage by losing the husband of her choice prematurely. Idawa's choice of husband also meets with calamity as her husband, Ngubane dies soon after the marriage: "the season after that Ngubane the farmer died" (71). Her next choice of lover, Isanusi, still in defiance of forced marriage also ends in disaster. She invites Isanusi to her home and 'Isanusi knew her' (103). "Isanusi loved Idawa as she loved him" ... but his spirit found no rest in that single love. From one new moon to the next for two seasons Isanusi wandered alone without hope" (103). So Idawa does not have successful union with any man for kicking against patriarchal sanctioned forced marriage. Not only that, those liberating female characters that kill the predators and their askaris for using the women as "playthings" are killed. This paper identifies with the narrative voice which asks: "How, why did these liberating women die?" (25). Again, after making Anoa to stride over the walls of the patriarchal sanctioned obligatory roles of wifhood and motherhood successfully, the other women who reject these same roles of motherhood and wifhood are killed. This is punitive and "punitive literature" argues Laretta Ngcobo, "perpetuates the oppression of women; it denies them justice. All these crimes against women stem from one fundamental principle – the social and sexual subordination of women" (540). This calls to question Felix Odonakor and Richard Bampoh-Addo's argument that Armah is one of the male novelists that "have learned to use their writings to correct this social imbalance" (123)

Gabriel Okonkwo asserts that the "writer escapes from his world of reality where rigid dogmas deter his dreams into a world of phantasm where he becomes the ultimate king, judge and lawmaker ... He creates his ideal society, makes the laws that guide the people, reigns supreme over them and then condemns the dissidents (199). So Armah in a bid to defend patriarchy creates an ideal society where he makes the law that women who challenge the power of patriarchy will meet with frustration or death. This

calls to question Ezeigbo's assertion that Armah's representation of the female is "creative, incandescence and dynamic" (55).

### Conclusion

All in all, in delineating his vision of African womanhood, Armah wears the mask of an ironist viewing his female characters from the patriarchal standpoint. He highlights the problems facing the African woman as closely as possible and gives one hope that her condition can change for the better. However, it is observed that the direction of this change is hazy. He sees the patriarchal subordination of the African woman as something that needs be interrogated but he is not able to divorce himself completely from the status quo. He is not able to cross the gender lines. His attitude fits into what Charles Nnolim describes as "chasing with the hounds and at the same time running with the deer" (70). The operation of double standard in his delineation of female characters is evident. One side of his persona asserts female emancipation while the other negates. This accounts for his ambivalent vision of African womanhood. He seems to delineate the phenomenon of social change from the standpoint of compromise. If Armah has to play the role of a writer which Nnolim argues "demands some measure of commitment, some degree of courage to challenge the status quo, ...He must, in his works, confront the problem of good and evil in his society, differentiate them and take sides; and in taking sides, he must tell us the masses... where he stands" (69). In this light, it is obvious that Armah does not clearly declare to the masses where he stands with regard to African womanhood. His commitment to the cause of the African woman lacks firm foundation. Ngcobo argues that "there is an age-old fear that the independence of the female spirit will destroy the pillars of society" (540). This is corroborated by Cheryl Lange who intones that "it is also possible that male authors feel that they would be chastised for being too "feminine" and not fitting into the masculine gender role" (Lange 5). Could this explain Armah's ambivalent vision of African womanhood? It takes the reader with a keen sense of irony to encode Armah's vision of African womanhood. This is because the forces that shape this vision do not operate coherently. In all, the "finished product" to use Afejuku and Adeleke's words, Armah is giving back to the society from the materials so supplied by the society does not set standards that can engender meaningful changes concerning the disparaged and oppressed status of the African woman.

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