



Reading the rhetor in postcolonial African fiction: Armah's *Two thousand seasons* as an illustration

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For some time now, rhetors have steadily gained a firm hold on postcolonial African fiction in various versions of what narratologists designate as extradiegetic narrators. One such guise is the communal voice because of the rhetorical advantages these rhetors enjoy as the centre of social, historical, and political consciousness. Yet, in spite of the rhetors' pervasiveness in postcolonial African prose, little has been said in African critical practice about these fascinating narrative agents since most of the emphasis has been on canonical African texts – what Lindfors designates as the 'long drums and canons'. Happily, the end of the twentieth century saw a shift in the concerns of African criticism, bringing narratological criteria to bear on postcolonial African fiction. This article theorises the deployment of the rhetor in *Two thousand seasons*, arguing that the rhetor is privileged because of the ideological force he assumes and his authoritative point of view. It is intended as a contribution to the study of narratology in the African novel, revealing the significance of the rhetorical strategies that guarantee the future of the rhetor as an agency in postcolonial African fiction. For these reasons, this discussion supports a critical discourse of African texts that is, in Culler's words, 'a poetics, a study of the conditions of meaning' in postcolonial African fiction.

Om die retor in postkoloniale Afrika-fiksie te lees: Armah se *Two thousand seasons* ter illustrasie. Retors word binne postkoloniale Afrika-fiksie toenemend as 'n variant van die ekstra-diëgetiese verteller in die narratologie erken. Een voorbeeld hiervan is die gemeenskaplike stem. As middelpunt van die sosiale, geskiedkundige en politieke bewussyn, hou retors verskillende voordele in vir die skrywer. Ten spyte van retors se sterk aanwesigheid in postkoloniale Afrika-prosa, het kritici tot dusver min oor hierdie fassinerende narratiewe agent geskryf, oënskynlik omdat die 'kanon' van die Afrika-letterkunde, wat Lindfors beskryf het as die 'long drums and canons', die meeste aandag gekry het. Dit is wel bemoedigend dat 'n ommeswaai aan die einde van die twintigste eeu plaasgevind het en dat kritici nou wel narratologiese kriteria op postkoloniale Afrika-fiksie begin toepas. Hierdie artikel teoretiseer die aanwending van die retor in *Two thousand seasons* deur aan te voer dat die retor 'n bevoorregte posisie inneem danksy die ideologiese invloed wat hy uitoefen en die gesag van sy gesigspunt. Die artikel wil 'n bydrae lewer tot die bestudering van die narratologie in die Afrika-roman deur die aandag te vestig op die belangrikheid van die retoriese strategieë van die retor as agent in postkoloniale Afrika-fiksie. Hierdie artikel onderskryf dus 'n kritiese diskoers oor Afrika-tekste wat – in die woorde van Culler – 'n poëtika, die studie van die voorwaardes vir betekenis in postkoloniale Afrika-fiksie, uitmaak.

The unique style of the *new* African novel – a search for a new theory of reading

The main objective of this article is to provide a *reading model* of how, through the deployment of certain linguistic units in a text, the African novel constructs particular *narrators* for equally particular *readerships*. The justification for such an undertaking is, as Forslund (2010:5) suggests, that 'students and pedagogues both benefit from exploring reading. Understanding the act of reading could enable teachers to understand how to help their students to become better readers' and students, in turn, 'could benefit from instructors who anticipate which texts they would consider engaging and identify the source of their difficulties with reading.' Adding 'theory' to reading, says Forslund (2010), is critical because it helps to clarify 'some of the aspects of reading that are not yet fully understood.' As an illustration of its objectives, the discussion focuses primarily on the technical aspects of Ayi Kwei Armah's fourth novel, *Two thousand seasons* (Armah 1979). As will be seen, such aspects are specifically at the level of syntax, and could be considered as *style markers* in the manner that Leech and Short (1981:69) designate them, that is as those 'salient' and 'particular features' of a text 'which call for more careful investigation'. The ending of *Two thousand seasons* provides one cue on how the novel ought to be read, for it contains a good

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example of a style marker. It is an *exclamatory* sentence, and reads as follows: 'what an *utterance* of the coming together of all the people of our way' (Armah 1979:206; emphasis added). In the speech act theory of pragmatics, Huang (2007:11; emphasis added) explains that an 'utterance is the use of a *particular* piece of language – be it a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a sequence of sentences – by a particular speaker on a particular occasion.' Thus 'utterance-meaning, or speaker-meaning, is defined by what a speaker *intends* to convey'. Specific *intentions* and *particularities* then are central to the total structure of *Two thousand seasons*.

In the sentence above quoted from Armah's novel quoted above, the use of the intensifier *what* draws attention to the *intensity* of the *feelings* that are associated with the action of the text. Significantly, several exclamatory statements also precede this last one, and they suggest the *tone* of the novel as they end with exclamation marks. One of them is this: 'What a scene of carnage the white destroyers have brought here: ... what a death of souls!' Notably, whilst the adverb 'here' suggests the *temporal* nature of the novel's action – as being in proximity to the speaker (and possibly to the audience too) – it is instructive to note that the exclamation mark adds force to the emotions that are expressed in many of the utterances in the novel. Any reading of *Two thousand seasons* must acknowledge Booker's (2009:155–156) assertion that Armah's text 'draws upon African oral traditions in its consistent use of a *griot*-like narrative voice that helps to move the text beyond the conventions of European realism'. This discussion firstly acknowledges that position, for it will be seen that Armah's novel draws some of its technical aspects from African orature, especially *performance* as Okpewho (1983) defines it:

the total act as well as the context or the role of the audience ... but also the narrator's use of the movement of the face, hands and other parts of the body in giving life to the narration. (p. 16)

Secondly, the discussion recognises that Armah often foregrounds striking instances of syntax. In this way, it will be seen that the discursive procedures as well as interpretative and descriptive nomenclature of this discussion are largely derived both from the insights of pragmatics and narratology. Huang (2007:2) states that pragmatics is 'the systematic study of meaning by virtue of, or dependent on, the use of language'. Prince (1982:4) defines narratology as 'the study of the form and functioning of narrative.' In pragmatics, what is relevant to this discussion is what Cummings (2005:1–37) discusses as 'the multidisciplinary nature of pragmatics', starting from Austin and Searle, and developed by Habermas in the way McCarthy (1978:283) formulates it; that 'from the point of view of a theory of communicative action, the keystone of theory of speech acts is an explanation of the illocutionary force proper to performative utterances, that is, of their power to generate the interpersonal relations intended by the speaker.' The totality of these 'acts' in *Two thousand seasons*, as will be seen, are *perlocutionary acts*, which Huang (2007:103) explains, concern 'the effect an utterance

may have on the addressee'. Put differently, 'a perlocution is the act by which the illocution produces a certain effect in or exerts a certain influence on the addressee' so that, furthermore, a 'perlocutionary act represents a consequence or by-product of speaking, whether intentional or not. It is therefore an act performed by speaking.'

The *realism* of the Western novel that Booker refers to above in relation to *Two thousand seasons* needs comment; it specifically implicates the various *narrative modes* of the novel genre since the eighteenth century that have prompted Booth (1983:70–71) to come up with a critical method that stresses the primacy of two questions: 'Who is speaking to whom?' and 'For what purpose?' To answer these two questions, Booth rejects the empirical writer, and comes up with the *implied author*, which takes care of what for some time has been discussed as 'point of view' and in contemporary literary theory as 'perspective', 'mood', and 'voice'. To explain his concept, Booth (1983) writes that:

[an author] creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's work. (p. 71)

In a text, 'the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form' (Booth 1983:73–74; emphasis in text). It is instructive to note that Booth acknowledges in the Preface to *The rhetoric of fiction* that his method looks back to Aristotle, to 'oratory'.

Abrams (1988:158–159; emphasis added) discusses 'oratory' as it has developed since Aristotle, pointing out that Aristotle 'focused his discussion on the means and devices that an *orator* uses in order to achieve ... *intellectual* and *emotional effects* on an *audience*', and that Aristotle understood 'oratory' or 'rhetorical discourse' as the art of 'discovering all the available *means of persuasion* in any given *case*'. Other commentators have also noted the significance Aristotle attached to the audience. Lucaites, Condit and Caudill (1999:36) point out that Aristotle saw rhetoric as 'the ability ... to see the available means of persuasion'. Eagleton (1983:206; emphasis already in text) states that *rhetoric* 'looked at such devices in terms of *concrete performance*' and as a 'means of *pleading, persuading, inciting* ... *people's responses* to discourse in terms of linguistic structures and the material situations in which they functioned' and 'saw speaking and writing ... as forms of *activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences*'. He then endeavours to show that the intentions of rhetoric are often pointed, and should be explained and understood in *collective* terms, since rhetoric directly implicates both 'performers' and 'audiences'. Borchers (2006:8; emphasis added) says that to Aristotle, 'persuasion' implicated semiotics, meaning 'the symbols used by people to communicate.' Moreover, Borchers continues, the person who had 'the ability' to deploy such symbols, the figure who 'does the communicating is [the] *rhetor*'. The rhetor is thus an orator, a professional one and, according to Borchers, a 'powerful speaker [...] who uses rhetoric for specific goals'



(Borchers 2006:7). In this discussion, it is necessary to stress that there is a convergence between rhetoric and narratology; that both of them rely on perlocutionary acts and, as such, implicate intended results.

Du Plooy (2010:2) rehearses narratology, and identifies what she describes as 'new narratologies' and divides them into three dominant paradigms namely, 'contextual', 'cognitive', and 'transgeneric and transmedial approaches in narratology'. In the context of this discussion, 'contextual narratology' is apposite, for, as Du Plooy (2010:2) explains, it is 'directed at cultural, historical and ideological issues and concerns itself, apart from structural aspects, with the thematic and ideological content of narrative texts.' When Du Plooy (2010:2) says that one of the major concerns of contextual narratology is the 'ideological content of narratives', *ideology* must then be understood in the way Althusser (1971:152) constitutes it as a 'representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. Hawthorne (1994:92) rehearses various readings of ideology, and from that defines ideology as 'a system of ideas: ... a way of looking and interpreting – of living – the world' and that 'ideologies are collectively held'. From this, it is possible to argue that the implied author of *Two thousand seasons* should be read as constituting what Lanser (1981:246) describes as the totality of 'particular ways of reflecting and communicating ideology'.

It is necessary to understand *how* Armah's novel apprehends the *meaning* from its readers as *its total effect* on them. It is tempting to look for the way forward to Booth's implied author, to Receptionists such as Iser (1974) for his term the 'implied reader', which is evidently a counterpart to Booth's implied author. Iser (1974:xii) says that his paradigm 'incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text and the reader's actualisation of this potential through the reading process'. Literature, which Iser (1974:53) identifies with fiction, is not to be seen as an opposition to reality; rather, it is a means of telling us about reality. It does this, according to him, by placing the reader in a *communicative situation* that is linked, as has already been explained, to the illocutionary act described in speech act theory. As already noted, this linguistic utterance is defined in terms of performance rather than meaning; that the illocutionary act may involve any one of a number of common activities such as informing, warning, ordering, and threatening. What is essential, though, is that it has the potential effect or an 'illocutionary force' and invites an appropriate response on the part of the recipient. Assuming sincerity on the part of the speaker and provided that the speaker and the recipient share the same conventions and procedures, the latter comprehends the *force* of the speech act, and hence its 'meaning' from the situational context. For Iser (1974:60), there are obvious parallels with literary language: 'the language of literature resembles the mode of the illocutionary act, but has a different function'; 'the success of a linguistic action depends on the resolution of indeterminacies by means of conventions, procedures, and guarantees of sincerity'; 'literary texts also require a

resolution of indeterminacies' and lastly 'the reader must first discover for himself the code underlying the text, and this is tantamount to bringing out its meaning'.

It appears that Iser is concerned with the reader who is *competent* to interact successfully with a specific text. His reader is thus always performing and is inconceivable apart from what Iser (1978:35) discusses as the 'act of reading'; that 'the role of the reader is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern'. One is reminded of Eco's (1981) 'model reader', and in both paradigms, Crosman (1980:402) argues, such readings really explain 'how the audience is inscribed in the work' as well as 'the reading strategies laid out for the reader who has entered the text'. For instance, Eco (1981:11), as Iser does, borrows insights from pragmatics, and states that the 'model reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions ... to be met in order to have a macro-speech act (such as a text is) fully actualised'. Significantly, 'felicity conditions', explains Hawthorne (1994:196), are 'the conventions underlying successful conversation'; they constitute 'the co-operative principle: that governs conversations in an ideal situation' between speaker and listener.

McCallum (1992:221) provides a persuasive criticism of Iser, which could be applied to Eco too. He says that given Iser's commitment to the notion of a 'determinate' text and a 'prestructured activity', it is difficult to escape the suspicion that Iser's concern for the reader is a form of lip-service, and that his real interests are straightforwardly formalist. If, as Hawthorne (1994:196) says, the inscribed reader is 'the reader whose characteristics are actually there to be discovered in the text itself, waiting for the actual reader to slip on like a suit of clothes', and required to *perform* particular *roles* in order to construct the meaning of the totality of the text, then in *Two thousand seasons* the paradigm that is apposite is Wolff's (1971) 'intended reader'. Holub (1984:152) defines this reader as the one 'the author has in mind for ... [the] work ... and can be determined not only by textual clues in the work being read, but also by adjacent works and even by the author's (and presumably other authors') remarks'. Hawthorne (1994) says that with the intended reader:

the evidence may be either intra- or extra-textual: an author's comment in a letter that a work of literature was written to be read by a particular person or group of people can be used as evidence substantiating a case for a particular intended reader, but clearly not for a particular inscribed reader. (p. 166)

What interests Wolff (1971), therefore, is the idea of the reader in its historical unfolding, that the intended reader is a concept that interprets and identifies the historical audience the author was aiming for when the work was written.

It is instructive to note that Iser (1974) explains how Wolff's (1971):

intended reader, as a sort of fictional inhabitant of the text, can embody not only the concepts and conventions of the



contemporary reading public but also the desire of the author both to link up with these concepts and to work on them – sometimes just portraying them, sometimes acting upon them. (p. 33)

With this reader's role set in motion, it is possible to interpret the actual audience that the author intended to reach. It appears then that Wolff's (1971) construct overlaps with Iser's, but it is not completely identical – Wolff's (1971) reader is more a creature of literary history than Iser's who is of pure reading. Holub (1984:152) notes that 'such a distinction can never be drawn with exactitude'. From the foregoing, it will be possible to argue, as this discussion suggests, that the intended reader in *Two thousand seasons* carries most of the *functions* both of the implied and model reader, but predominantly those of the *intended reader*. The narrator is also disguised as both *implied author* and *rhetor*. Indeed, there is a thin line between the implied author and rhetor in Armah's novel precisely because the narrator is deployed as a *strategy* to *persuade* an *intended audience*, and persuasion already implies a *bias* in the *narrative mode* in a text. It is as though in Armah's novel, the rhetor and the implied author are two sides of the coin because they both function as the same ploy for a *particular purpose* the novel *intends*. The objective is thus to influence the reader to take a position against colonialism – the same position that the rhetor favours. Similarly, there is also in Armah's novel an interface between the intended reader and a 'listener' precisely because the form of the text borrows both from *writing* and *orature*. Armah suggests that the intended readership of *Two thousand seasons* is *contemporary Africans*. In this essay, Armah (1977) explains that before he published the novel with the East African Publishing House, he had initially attempted:

to make it available to a large *African* audience by getting it serialized in newspapers. This was part of an experiment – unsuccessful so far to see if I [Armah] could effectively *break out* of the colonialist *stranglehold* of Western publishers such as the Heinemann African Writers' Series'. As can be seen, the intended reader is particularized as *Africans* in this extra-information. (p. 41)

What is instructive in the way Armah frames the intended reader in *Two thousand seasons* is that he also alludes to the ideology in the novel. The imagery in 'breaking out' and 'strangulation' suggest *liberation* and *death*, respectively. The point is that it is as though for a very long time Armah had been increasingly becoming weary of colonialism and its symbols such as Heinemann, especially with the problems he had with Heinemann concerning royalties. Armah is angry with the exploitative impulse of colonialism. Consider the reasons Armah (1985) has provided for transferring from English to Social Studies in America:

... that the shift had been accelerated by the events in the Congo crisis culminating in the murder of Patrice Lumumba; that in in my [Armah's] general reading I had come to be suitably impressed by the consistency with which ... the West promoted parasitic ... regimes outside their own home grounds, supporting Chiang against Mao ... Dieng against Ho ... Somoza against Sandiano ... Batista against Castro I kept relating this pattern of Western political preferences to developments at home in Africa, and, against the background of abundant historical evidence, the conclusion that presented itself to my mind was inexorable: if we Africans were to rise from the abyss of exploitation and

contempt, we would be obliged to do so against murderous opposition from the West. (pp. 17–52)

About Heinemann in particular, Armah (2006) is scathing:

... [i]t might be tempting to describe Heinemann ... as a colonial structure The merchandise they targeted was African: the literary resources of the continent. The owners would be European; the producers, like the resource base, African. Across the racist divide separating owners and producers there was room for a few front figures, Africans chosen not to be offered full-fledged membership in the proprietary caste, but to give an otherwise Europeans-only enterprise the cover of an African face at the reception desk. Such a business model existed long before the European onslaught on African humanity and African resources It was the basis of the slave-raiding industry that destroyed African societies throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-centuries; and 'someday, the many victims of Heinemann fraud may decide to tell their stories'. (pp. 307–308)

Two thousand seasons must then be read as an *angry* novel that was written at a particular moment to address a specific issue in the history of a particular people. In postcolonial African fiction another example is Ngugi's (1989) *Matigari* – a text in which one finds, as Gititi (1995:214) says, 'an anti-imperialist attitude ... [a] ... search for modes of writing that reflect the dialectic of social change'. Armah's novel, like Ngugi's, is characterised by a splenetic tone. It is a text in which the rhetor *expresses* intense *negative* feelings towards colonialism. In expressing this ire, the novel often employs *speech acts* that generate specific information to implore its intended *African* readers to perform certain actions, and, ultimately, to see specific ideological results both for themselves and against the West. It is, therefore, not surprising that three chapters in Armah's novel are devoted to colonialist exploitation of Africa – 'the ostentatious cripples', 'predators' and 'destroyers where colonialism and neo-colonialism are unpacked negatively', as in the following passage in which the Arab Faisal's sexual activities on 'the night of nights' are explored is telling against colonialism using phallic imagery:

He [Faisal] strode forward at the urgent call and in a moment was naked upon his master's back *ploughing* the predator's open *arsehole* while the master tried to keep his forgetful penis in Azania And Azania herself, she slowly, lovingly helped him to slide off her, so gently she did not disturb him or the askari *pumping manseed* into his Arab master. (Armah 1979:23; emphasis added)

'Ploughing' suggests *cutting* and *breaking up*, whilst 'pumping' heightens the excessive use of *force* and *pressure*. Used in relation to the human body, they heighten pain. Adding to these words the billingsgate vocabulary of 'arsehole' and 'manseed', the result is no longer erotic sex. Strikingly, the technique of the passage, like that of many others in the novel, involves what Rimmon-Kenan (1983:60) describes as a 'direct definition' that has the 'capacity to guide the reader's response' to the characters. In such passages in Armah's novel, Ngara (1982:127) suggests, there is 'affective



and evocative language' and this language 'can arouse [*in the intended reader*] emotions and feelings'.

The rhetor as narrative strategy

Gikandi (1987:22) recognises the 'rhetor' in Armah's *Two thousand seasons* as 'an agent of historical understanding', stating that 'as rhetor, the narrator is actually engaged in the art of invention, seeking out evidence to set the case he wants to defend in the novel'. This rhetor, Gikandi (1987) continues:

is interested in setting up a body of feelings and *values* which are common to him and to his implied audience,' while 'at the same time, the ... [rhetor] acts as the custodian of his people's communal values, and their mythical ethos'. (p. 22; emphasis added)

Being a 'custodian' requires the confidence and trust of others. In fact, a custodian is a trustee, and to be a trustee of 'people's communal values' necessitates familiarity with and knowledge of those values. Such a task is a noble one and explains why this narrator should certainly belong to the realm of rhetoric, as has already been explained. It is in the first chapter of *Two thousand seasons* – 'The Way' – that the rhetor establishes his own point of view and justifies his *authority* either by falling back on his knowledge of a past already lost, or by drawing on his learned understanding of Anoa's prophecy and its implications. At this early stage in the novel, it is also evident that the rhetor adopts a *retrospective* point of view, highlighting events that will be dramatised in the subsequent chapters. Here, it is as though the rhetor is aware that in writing, as in speech, it is normal to introduce the *theme* of a message at the beginning and to impart the *new* information later. Thus early in the novel, the rhetor is strategic, and, as Gikandi (1987:21; emphasis added) observes, 'is interested, not neutral'. The rhetor is, in fact, from the outset engaged in the art of invention, seeking out evidence to set up the case he wants to defend later.

Ngara (1985:51) posits that '[no] study of ideology in the African novel would be complete without a reference to Armah'; that Armah has a 'radical authorial ideology' that is 'matched by an equally revolutionary aesthetic ideology which manifests itself in various forms ... in [*Two thousand seasons*] where there is a definite *appeal* for a return to African traditions' (Ngara 1985:115–116; emphasis added). From the rhetor's perspective, such a definite appeal anticipates both *action* and *impact* on the part of the intended reader. Bishop (1982:523) says that the novel's 'impact ... will be immense, once its form is fully appreciated'. Okpewho (1983:3; emphasis in text) argues that '[perhaps] no [*African*] ... work better demonstrates ... [*the*] urge to review the old mythic tradition and furnish *new* hopes than ... *two Thousand seasons*'; that in Armah's novel, there is:

an energy directed at creating a *new* mythology that would offer for the projected or emergent [*African*] society a firmer road to self-realization than could be found in the older traditions. (Okpewho 1983:3)

To Mudimbe (1988:36), a postcolonial text such as *Two thousand seasons* is an oppositional text, a *counter-story* to the initial *coloniser's* dominant one; it is a product of 'a new generation' of writers keen on advancing the 'notion of epistemological vigilance'. Herein lies the core of Armah's ('revisionist') project in *Two thousand seasons*: to search in African 'myths' for fresh ways of constituting a *new* African society in an equally *new* novel, as this discussion shows.

If Armah's novel attempts a *new* way of presenting reality, then it may be apposite to suggest that a theory of narrative that underwrites an approach to *Two thousand seasons* must take into account Armah's (1985:2006) insistence that there is an inextricable relationship between postcolonial African literature and African orature, for in *Two thousand seasons* he deploys orature for aesthetic as well as political purposes. Whilst Armah values the use to which orature may be put, in *Two thousand seasons* he also implicitly seems to suggest that the value attached to orature is not entirely dependent on either the narrator or the writer, as the latter is also engaged in the process of negotiating meaning with the audience. The second point such a theory must take into account in interrogating Armah's novel is related to the first: it ought to take cognisance of the fact that orature to Armah can only influence but not determine the final interpretation of his text. In this respect, Armah would probably agree with Young (1988) on the nature of narrative and interpretation – that events and their representation may be so closely linked that they are virtually inseparable. In his study of Holocaust narratives, Young (1988) writes that like all attempts at canonization, the events in the narrative reflect a particular vision of the past as well as a desire to re-imagine that past to shape the future in a particular direction. He regards Holocaust narratives as acts of advocacy, for they begin from a particular version of a collective memory of the Holocaust and, through the work which results, attempt to shape the area thus delineated. Following Young's argument, the question of meaning in *Two thousand seasons* depends not only on the events in the lives of 'the people of the way' and the manner in which the rhetor narrates them, but also on the position of the rhetor and his intended reader, as this positioning influences the interpretation of the novel. 'The people of the way', in this respect, have to interpret both the events in their lives at the hands of 'the destroyers' and 'the predators' from the position of victims.

The point really is that if the construction or reconstruction of a narrative is a selective process, then so is an act of interpretation. In fact, interpretation involves a reorganisation of a given narrative, as it involves an act of linking or associating that narrative with other narratives and, or, events. It is this linking or association that makes the narrative comprehensible. That is why in narratives, Mink (1974:114) writes, comprehension is a 'characteristic kind of understanding which consists in linking together in a single act, or in a cumulative series of acts, the complicated relationships of parts which can only be experienced *seriatim*'. The theory of narrative that informs Armah's (1979) text must



also be able to explain the *quality* of the language the rhetor deploys in Armah's novel. The point about language could be the most important of all in such a theory, but, for now, let it suffice to say that such a theory must account for the manner in which the rhetor in *Two thousand seasons* deploys what Richards (1926) once described as 'pseudo-statements' meaning that, as Jayne (1970) amplifies the former's literary theory, 'all ideas are meaningless in the sense that they can be neither proved nor disproved'; that:

fiction ... and most human communication depends more than we want to admit on pseudo-statements as expressions that express feelings and attitudes important to us quite aside of their lack of verifiable truths. (pp. 13)

It is as though, to achieve his intentions, the rhetor frequently resorts to what Jameson (1981:115) describes as 'ideologemes' – 'the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses' – to build up a particular value system that is antagonistic to another.

'Performance' as narration in prose fiction

Any discussion of how form reinforces the functioning of narrative in *Two thousand seasons* (Armah 1979), should consider how commentators since Henry James have viewed both the canvass and language of the novel as genre. Benjamin (1973:86) notes the 'usefulness' of the novel; that the novel's value 'may in one case consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim'. Zeraffa (1976:vii) describes the novel's traditional function as an oracle; that the genre 'confronts us openly with the issue of the meaning and value of our ineluctable historical and social condition'. Visser (1978:103) seems to accept the concept of usefulness, saying that the significance of the novel can be fruitfully discussed not by defining it, but by examining the causes which will in turn illuminate the *uses* to which the novel is put. Ngugi (1986:69) explains that the critical question regarding the novel 'is not that of ... [its] racial, national and class origins ... but that of its development and the uses to which it is continually put'. Brink (1998:18) notes the metaphoric as well as symbolic language of the novel, and is particularly fascinated with 'the compass [of the novel's] involvement with language', in the way in which 'the novel has to *sustain* this engagement' so that '[as] a result, what ... [the reader] comes up with after immersing ... in a novel, may perhaps more compellingly display the possible gains ... of the enterprise' (emphasis in text). Wilson-Tagoe (2009) says that:

[as] a genre that encourages interiority and accommodates other genres, forms, and voices, the novel opens individual locations of struggle and desire and provides a flexible and discursive space for relating to the collective in *new* ways. (p. 177; emphasis added)

Recognising these facilities that the novel enjoys, Armah reworks the form and functioning of the narrative in *Two thousand seasons* (Armah 1979) to situate his novel into African orature so that the impression one gets is that form in his novel is at the mercy of the rhetor, that the *telling* takes precedence over the story precisely because Armah's

chief interest in the novel is to advance a new postcolonial consciousness – a radical one that gives an emphatic *voice* to the pan-African impulse.

Gikandi (1987:22) discusses what he designates as the 'fixed truths' and 'absolute assertions', and questions '[*what*] gives the ... [rhetor] the authority to make such absolute assertions' in the following passage in the Prologue of *Two thousand seasons*:

Say it is the nature of the spring to give; it is the nature of the desert sand to take. Say it is the nature of your given water to flow; it is the nature of the desert to absorb. (Armah 1979:xii; emphasis added)

Note that this passage has transformations, which implicate both the rhetor and the intended reader, as follows:

[We] say [*to you that*] it is the nature of the spring to give; [We] say [*to you that*] it is the nature of the desert sand to take. [We] say [*to you that*] it is the nature of your given water to flow; [We] say [*to you that*] it is the nature of the desert to absorb.

'Pronouns', says Alexander (1982:222), 'are significant in that they signify the participants of the discourse'. Fowler (1991:35) explains that 'pronoun systems are a representation of social systems'; that in the context of literary discourse, this would imply that 'the ideological systems underlying choices of ... pronouns are of great interest'. The first-person plural 'we' and its variants 'our' and 'us' in the above passage functions on two levels: first, it suggests a specific group to which the rhetor certainly belongs: the 'hearers, seers, imaginers, thinkers' (Fowler 1979:xi) in the world of Armah's novel. Secondly, 'we' implicates a wider social group to which, significantly, both the rhetor and the intended reader belong: '*we* are not a people of stagnant waters. *We* are of the moving stream' (Fowler 1991:192; emphasis added). 'We' is; therefore, central to the consensus-forming strategy of the novel, and logically designates the conjunction of the source and the addressee of the discourse. The 'you' in the passage also requires comment. It is the intended reader of *Two thousand seasons* (1979). Ordinarily, the first-person singular 'I' and the second-person 'you' are crucial in constituting author, text, and reader relations in literary discourse. Yet, in the above passage, both the pronouns 'we' and 'you' imply contemporaneity both for the rhetor ('we') and the intended reader ('you'). The rhetor is therefore striving for the illusion of fostering *shared knowledge* between himself and the intended reader in the *same African space* and at the *same time*; it is as though the rhetor is addressing an intended reader that is *there* and *now* about issues that he assumes to be *common* and *familiar* both to himself and to the intended reader. This common knowledge, this shared experience in *Two thousand seasons* is at times heightened in the use of 'questions', as in the following passage:

You do not understand how the destroyers turned earth to desert? Look around *you*. *You* are ignorant of death, but sleep *you* know. Have *you* not seen the fat ones, the hollow ones now placed above *us*?

Of the two thousand seasons of destruction what was it the first voice of Anoa said? (Armah 1979:7,16; emphasis added)



Both the pronouns and the rhetorical questions need comment. Firstly, note that the questions are not 'rhetorical'. These questions do not necessarily imply consensus between speaker and listener; rather, they belong to a technique applied both in rhetoric and orature. In rhetoric, the technique is *rogation* – used by the speaker to bring the audience to his way of thinking. In orature, Jablon (1997:150) describes this technique as the 'co-conspiratorial address'; that such a technique is often a 'variation of the call-and-response and ... antiphonal interaction.' This is a technique which in Armah's novel at once implicates both the rhetor and the intended reader in the same situation. In this way, this 'question-and-answer' technique is used to bring the intended reader to accept the rhetor's thinking, and assumes broad agreement between the rhetor and intended reader about the rhetor's 'fixed truths' in *Two thousand seasons*.

Pronouns in Armah's novel go beyond the use of 'we' and 'you' as a rhetorical strategy; there is also the construction of 'they', which is the opposing unit in the rhetor's discourse, as in the following passage:

Destroyers will travel long distances in *their* minds and out to deny *you* this truth. *We* do not argue with *them*, the fools. Let *them* presume to instruct *us* about *ourselves*. That too is in *their* nature. That too is in the flow of *their* two thousand seasons against *us*. (Armah 1979:3; emphasis added)

Here 'we' and 'them' are antagonistic; 'we' narrows and solidifies into a population, which includes 'you' and sees its interests as culturally valid – 'community and wholeness', as Ker (1997:163) says; whilst the 'we' is consensual, referring to the community of values that the rhetor claims to express, 'them', is a totally different group comprising different populations, which the rhetor designates as 'destroyers' and 'predators', as also already suggested; it is a group that threatens the 'we'.

It is instructive to note the significance of *listening* in *Two thousand seasons*, for to *hear* is crucial if the intended reader has to perform what the rhetor requires of him. Elsewhere in *Two thousand seasons* the rhetor beseeches the intended reader to listen to the story, to '*hear this for the sound of it*' (Armah 1979:34; emphasis added). Now, to be implored to *hear* anything merely for its *sound* may imply an invitation to oratory and rhetorical strategies – to some interesting *quality* in how what is to be *heard* or is being *said*. In many passages in Armah's novel, it is the *rhythm* of what is to be 'heard' of the *said* that is interesting, for oratory can be notable for the effectiveness of its rhythm. Of course, rhetors need not come close to being poets, but their words will attract more attention if they know the power of a balanced sentence, and the rhetor in *Two thousand seasons* is aware of this power. For this reason, the rhetor very often deploys *lexical repetition* of particular syntactic patterns such as subject-object inversions, certain personal pronouns, adjectives, verbal nouns, and parallelisms, all of which at once result in *incessant resonance* and suggest the *themes* of the novel, as in the following:

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected hearing, the fractured vision that sees only the immediate present *The disease of death, the white road*, is also unconnected hearing, shattered hearing that listens only to today's brazen cacophony *The disease of death, the white road*, is also unconnected thinking, the broken reason that thinks only of the immediate paths to the moment's release ... (Armah 1979:8; emphasis added)

This passage deploys parallelism and repetition. 'Parallel phrasing, aimed at reinforcing a central emphasis', says Armah (2006:246), 'is a form of selective repetition that depends on the placing of identical words in identical positions in successive phrases.' The need for this rhetorical device, he explains, is 'to avoid monotony.' Indeed, the use of the comma – a *brief* pause – between the two noun phrases heightens the rhythm and quality of the music, creating *resonance*. The repetition here is of the inversion, which results in *music* through the repetitive conjoining of a complex noun phrase 'the disease of death' and a simple one 'the white road'. Significantly, repetition in the passage serves to heighten the rhetor's interest, which is *death* – the deracination of Africa on various levels, which colonialism ('the white road') brought, and continues to bring to the continent. If the passage is spoken, the stress should then be on the items that are fronted.

Here is another example of the use of repetition, but a variation on the one in the passage above:

Our way is reciprocity. *The way* is wholeness. *Our way* knows no oppression. *The way* destroys oppression. *Our way* is hospitable to guests. *The way* repels destroyers. *Our way* produces before it consumes ... (Armah 1979:39; emphasis added)

This is the repetitive *alternation* of one simple noun phrase that begins with a possessive pronoun 'our' and another, which has a determiner 'the' at the beginning. The reason for this, as Armah (2006:245) explains, is that if *spoken*, 'a succession of short, declarative statements can create a calm, sometimes soothing, even slightly hypnotic rhythm in the text'. The achievement of these passages is oratory at its best, with the rhetor as a master of syntax in *speaking*; he brings to the fore the oral impulse, and by playing with the sense of sound in his novel, Armah moves beyond the realm of the written text and approaches the domain of gesture and act. Almost thirty years after the publication of *Two thousand seasons* (Armah 1979), and as if to celebrate the achievement of the rhetor in his novel, Armah explains the balanced mingling of rhetorical strategies as 'the best of sounds, phrases, pauses, sentences, images, figures – the best, in sum, of every tool available to verbal art' (Armah 2006:243). 'Taking the book [*Two thousand seasons*] as a whole', Ngara (1982:141) says that 'we can correctly say that what most sustains the reader's interest is the language: its haunting rhythms, its enchanting quality, its evocative power'.

From the foregoing, it can then be seen that Gikandi (1987) is interested in the essence of the substance and its veracity, in what authorises the rhetor to make seemingly incontestable



statements. The rhetor goes further: he is also keenly interested in the *form* of what he says, in how he *crafts* what he says – in the deployment of particular *syntactic patterns*. In short, the rhetor is conscious of *rhetoric*, of the twin aspects of *oracy* – telling and listening – so that, overall, the Prologue offers a meaningful starting point in the study of the rhetor in *Two thousand seasons*. If one were then to visualise the scene in the Prologue, one is likely to *see* and *hear* the rhetor in full flight exhibiting command of ‘oracy, which, to Bukonya (2001:33), ‘does not mean just words’, but ‘holistic communication’ that exudes ‘attitude ... posture ... voice ... expression ... gesture, movement’. It is as though the rhetor here is keen on using all the oral communicative resources at his disposal in order to be *heard*. That is why the Prologue – altogether six and a half pages long – is deliberately wholly *italicised*, for as Lucas (1955:42) explains, ‘a legitimate stress of the voice should ... be marked by an equally legitimate convention in print’.

Two thousand seasons is an oppositional text to colonialist fiction. It is constructed within the imperatives of what Mudimbe has already noted, as *epistemological vigilance*. It is thus instructive to note that the vigilance the rhetor wants to ensure on the part of the intended reader ought to be explained through the existential imagined relationship of Africans to their real conditions, as stated in passages such as the following in Armah’s (1979) novel:

Woe the race, too generous in the giving of itself, that finds a road not of regeneration but a highway to its extinction. Woe the race, woe the spring. Woe the headwaters, woe the seers, the hearers, woe the utterers. Woe the flowing water, people hustling to our death (pp. xii–xiii; emphasis added)

In this passage, the repetition of the phrase ‘woe the’, forms an invariant part of each relevant unit and results, again, in parallelism, in a powerful rhythm, a potent and persuasive *warning to all Africans* – ‘the race ... too generous.’ Significantly, ‘[w]oe’ heightens the rhetor’s anger towards his people for perpetually ‘giving’, but never ‘receiving’, for such generosity only means death, the rhetor seems to say. Yet, to the rhetor, there is nothing entirely wrong with generosity, for ‘our way is reciprocity’. In fact, this point is poignantly made in the Prologue:

Receiving, giving, giving, receiving, all that lives is twin. Who would cast the spell of death, let him separate the two. Whatever cannot give, whatever is ignorant even of receiving, knowing only taking, that thing is past its own mere death. (Armah 1979:xii)

The cumulative style of these sentences with their short pauses between the gerunds, heightens the idea of *building on*, of *quid pro quo*. Yet, the essence of the problem the rhetor wishes his intended reader to know is this: ‘[r]eciprocity, that is the way you have forgotten, the giving, the receiving, the living alternation of the way’ (Armah 1979:17). In Armah’s novel, the notions of *reciprocity*, *connectedness* and *creation* are emphasised as the *ideals* of ‘the way’, as the ideology of *Two thousand seasons*.

Throughout the novel the rhetor has been *telling* his intended reader what he recalls, but he concludes the story with a rousing call for expectations for the future – ‘*the coming together of all the people of our way*’ (Armah 1979:206). Thus the *system of ideas* Armah’s novel attempts to rewrite about Africa under the aegis of a provocative critique of the established colonialist textuality is the supposed possibility of another ‘two thousand seasons’ of ‘the coming together of all the people of the way.’

The strategy of the rhetor that *Two thousand seasons* initiates does not end with itself. Owusu (1989:19–30) offers examples of texts that continue and revise narration in African fiction. Bolstering his arguments with insights from African orature, he designates such texts as ‘textspeak’ because, according to him, in these novels the narrators attempt to ‘speak’ to their implied readers. Significantly, the range Owusu discusses includes *Two thousand seasons* and Armah’s other novel, *The Healers*. One could broaden Owusu’s corpus to include South African texts such as Mpe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow: A novel of postapartheid South Africa* ([2001] 2011) and Mda’s *Ways of dying* ([1995] 2000), *Heart of redness* ([2000] 2002) and *The Madonna of Excelsior* ([2002] 2004). In these texts, commentators read narratives that revise the traditional omniscient narration. Barris (2009:38–47) rehearses an extant critical opinion on the narrative techniques in the work of the two authors, and thinks that ‘writing out of ... unstable postcolonial conditions, both authors split off some of the narrative burden, sharing it with a fictionalised communal voice’; that ‘they use orature to position themselves as African speakers, as aware of indigenous tradition as they are of cosmopolitan literary practice’ (Barris 2009:38–39). In short, in these novels, Barris (2009:44) says, ‘the collective knows, and the collective speaks.’ Yet, whilst South African readers note the ‘speakerly’ qualities of these novels, the discussions do not go beyond ‘localising’ their discussions; they do not insert the texts in a tradition of African texts that includes Okara’s *The voice* (1964). Ngugi initiates it in *Petals of blood* ([1978] 1991), and it is intensified in *Matigari* (1989). Furthermore, the discussions on Mpe and Mda do not locate their texts in a veritable tradition of African eloquence, as illustrated in *Two thousand seasons*, but dates back not just to the South African *imbongi*, but also to the sub-Saharan African *griot* – masters of eloquence, venerable story-tellers. Yet, in Armah’s novel, the use of the rhetor as a strategy is unmatched, and it may be necessary to view *Two thousand seasons* as the rhetor’s *performance* on behalf of the community to which the rhetor, in fact, belongs.

Conclusion: The future of the rhetor in African fiction

This discussion has focused specifically on how *Two thousand seasons* deploys particular linguistic rhetorical strategies to construct a particular narrator – the rhetor – for a particular reader – the intended reader. To do this, the discussion has drawn from the insights of both pragmatics and narratology, showing that theory brings to the study of literary texts interesting insights indeed. In the case of Armah’s novel, it has been shown that the insights from pragmatics and



narratology help to explain that the rhetor's primary interest is in *Two thousand seasons* especially in constructing a particular system of beliefs in the intended reader that will ultimately lead him to *action*. In this way, the novel as genre in the manner Armah crafts it in *Two thousand seasons* is not just an imagined project; rather, it is a means to plead, persuade and incite, through ingenious linguistic structures. The result is the rhetor because he is an eloquent speaker, a powerful orator, and a sure-footed debater who is likely to win arguments. Indeed, the rhetor speaks for, and on behalf of, communities for whom he is a custodian of values and knowledge. An important area for further research then may be to explore *how* the intended reader designates this discussion as the 'listener' in postcolonial African fiction and how texts are constructed where this form of reader may be pervasive.

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