



Medecine and Literature: A Reading of Disease in Ayi Kwei Armah's the Healers

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ABSTRACT

Illness is no new subject in the history of african literature. It has fecunded the narratives of many generations. As a true metaphor of the state of the culture and society presented in the narrative, illness has become the symptom of a society that is sick of the corruption of its own cultural norms and values. In such a context, illness is metaphorized as an outlet for the patients to express their rejection of the prevailing social norms. Healing will consist in becoming aware of such a state of affairs and finding by oneself the ressources of one's healing process with the help of the eponymous healers. Frantz fanon's psychological findings of the link between society's malfunctionning and its consequences on the individual's mental state will be used to conduct that study. These theories will reveal the underlying social determinants of health condition.

Keywords: Patholect; cultural determinism; psychoanalysis; pathography; pathogenic c'sntext.

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of illness is no oddity in literature. Evidence of bridges between literature and medicine abounds with physicians who have become famous writers (John Keats, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, etc) or famous novels which have been about illness. Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) and G. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) are exemplary cases in the literary world. Books by many African writers or theoreticians of literature in postcolonial era have been published that show the concern of theoreticians for the topic of illness and disease that is largely addressed by writers of fiction. Jane Plastow [1], Rebekah Lee [2], Mari Kathryn Webel [3] and Susan Sontag [4] are examples of that interest of theory for disease and sickness in literature.

For fiction writers, mental diseases abound in books by writers such as Ayi Kwei Armah [5], Cheikh A. Kane [6], Yambo Ouloguem [7], Sony Labou Tansi [8], Lesego Rampolokeng [9], Tade Thompson's *The Wormwood Trilogy* [10], Akwaeke Enezi's *Freshwater* [11], Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone* [12] or Songeziwe Mahlangu's *Penumbra* [13]. This relation of literary expression and the issue of disease is justified by D. Marechera who argues that « if one is living in an abnormal society, then only abnormal expression can express that society » [1]. The ailing body and mind provide physical and metaphorical resources for conveying the dissatisfaction with the society in which authors live.

Art, as understood by mimetic theories which entrust literature with conveying cultural or universal truths, places a primary importance on how well fiction imitates life. As part of life, illness is the common lot of human beings. As such, it is the concern of literature as well. Because illness and disease are about pain and unease, they are experiences of an intimate order. To speak about illness is to say what is otherwise difficult to say. That is the traditional role of literature as no one is better qualified than artists to describe what is intimately felt, to describe the undecipherable. For literary critics, the artist is the sensitive needle of the society, the one whose practice reveals the state of the society. For Thomas Mann, he is « the instrument of signalisation, seismometer and medium of sensitivity » [1]

Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Healers* illustrates this link between different systems of signs and

discourses: that of art and the material or scientific discourse that accounts for and takes care of people's health condition. This novel is no intimate narrative of some sick narrator on his own disease. Sickness is yet illustrated extensively to the point of serving as the central metaphor to the plot. Some of the characters suffer from physical and psychic troubles that the eponymous healers undertake to cure.

It is our aim in this study to show the close link between illness and the state of the society, to reveal disease and illness as being socially constructed and the products of history and culture. To prove this, we shall focus on the recurrence of the topic of illness in the history of African literature. In this history, we will analyze briefly the presence of that topic in colonial literature about Africa as some of these representations are among the conditions of birth of modern African literature. In fact, many post-colonial writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi and Armah decided to « write back » to colonial writers' negative clichés about the indigenous peoples.

We shall analyze the signs and symbols of illness and the subsequent interpretations made of these signs through the representation of the pathological statuses, the significance and meaning of the healing processes as narrated. Borrowing from Frantz Fanon's psychiatric conceptual tools [14] as exposed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Toward African Revolution* which link the colonized's pathological status to the contradictions of colonial and post-colonial societies, we will establish the relationship between the individual's health condition and the oppressive social structure of the society he lives in. M. Foucault's theories of madness [15] as a social construct will be equally useful. As a consequence, we will suggest the healing process as not only a psychological process of education on the causes of the sickness but also as a political action to change the structures of the society. This cure will be effected by a group of experts called the healers.

This study will be conducted with the following steps: after establishing the link between literature and medicine in the history of African literature, we will analyze the semiotics of the disease, that is, how illness is literary represented. We will end the study by focusing on the healing process as initiated by the eponymous healers through their specific

indigenous medical tools which are an alternative healing process at variance with euromodernist healing protocol.

2. ILLNESS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE : A BRIEF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF A FAVORITE TOPIC

The topic of physical and mental illness has always been present in African literature whether this literature is written by foreigners on Africa or by African writers themselves.[2] We will see how colonial literature represented the mental condition of the colonized. We will then show how the colonized represented these health statuses over generations of their writers.

2.1 Illness in colonial literature

This part will be concerned with showing the general patterns of that literary trend which takes specific forms according to whether we are concerned with scientific, artistic or specifically literary discourses. The picture colonial anthropology and western medias drew of Africa was that of a continent of disease and poverty. Apart from epidemics, malaria, nauseating quagmires, specific to the tropical areas which are described with a rhetoric suggesting a descent in hell, Africa is equated with a whole series of mental troubles [16, 17, 18]. This image is used recurrently to the point of becoming an identifying cliché of any narrative about Africa. As the continent of beings who have no rationality, Africa is the land of madness and other psychological troubles. This picture of Africa represents its irreducible otherness with the western world. It is the continent of « absolute barbarism » [19] the favorite terrain of states of trances, depression, convulsions, stupor and other irrational forms of atavistic violence. Not individuals in Africa are the victims of mental troubles. It is the African as a general category which is afflicted by these mental illnesses. Anthropology, ethnology, colonial psychiatry all tended to agree on these accepted theories [20] A.Porot & JM Sutter ;]

These colonial sciences in their effort to explain the cultural or racial madness of the primitive man came to the conclusion that the latter's collective psyché is unable to face the new civilization brought by the change initiated by the contact with the western world. The psychological violence of the encounter is the root cause of that collective failing psyche. The mental trouble is the symptom of a cultural

unease. Many writers in their fictions take up the topic of physical and mental illness of the African setting. The illness does not afflict only Africans but also Europeans who set foot on the African soil. This topic is a prevailing motif of the narratives of writers as varied as Pierre Loti [21], Karen Blixen [22], Joseph Conrad [23], James Joyce [24]. Many writers of the colonized and post-colonized societies wrote back to that picture of a so-called collective and inherited sickness of the dominated African societies.

2.2 Illness in African Literatures

Under the early literary movements called tutelary literature, « littérature de tutelle » [19], many African writers, repeating the clichés of some colonial masters in the field of literature, will present the shared figure of indolent and sick Africans. B. Mouralis analyzes this paradoxical attitude of some African writers assuming with complacency this colonial picture in chapter II entitled « La tentation de la maladie » [16]. The topic of epilepsy is dominating in *Compère Général Soleil* [25]. The « soul disease » is the favorite feature of characters in many poems of the Negritude movement or novels like *Karim* by Ousmane Socé or C.H.Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* [26] The Negritude movement later assumed some of these clichés of the African ruled by his senses and emotions. Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* introduces Clarence's slumber as a key feature of the narrative from the beginning to the end. As a general rule, the main ideas of the movement are in agreement with the assumptions of colonial anthropology and psychiatry. Their diegesis display a whole range of characters affected by a series of soul diseases and melancholy as a consequence of their inability to adapt to the social changes brought by the « civilizing mission » of the western world. These diseases first presented by the colonizers are accepted by some African writers of earlier generations as an integral dimension of the humanity of the African.

But contrary to colonial literature which linked this malingering and pathological indolence to an inherited health status of the African, the Negritude movement linked this state to the nostalgia of the lost Eden that Africans lived in before the advent of the colonial master. This implied a cultural underpinning of the general pathogenic atmosphere of the African setting. The sense of the metaphoric use of the pathological status is present in the narratives and seems to take precedence over the disease

understood as a biological or individual unease. In a word, the pathogenic characteristic of the colonial situation drives most Africans insane.

Against that trend, we also have, in the same period, and within the same literary movement, a contradictory current which presents literary heroic figures with no sickness. The diegeses of these narratives are in precolonial Africa. The stories deny the picture of an Africa reduced to a lot of sick bodies dying of fever, miasma, malaria, guinea worms, etc. This affirmative current of literature chooses the epic genre in plays, poems and prose. It represents healthy, robust and virile heroes. From the blind following of the picture of the colonial writer, we have moved to a denial of the disease. The narratives of Thomas Mofolo, Mazizi Kunene [27, 28], Tamsir Niane (Sunjata), Senghor and his Chaka, have no option for the topic of physical or mental illness for their heroes. Of course in these narratives, people do fall sick and even die but in the most natural way. But it is no tribune for general agonies, epidemics and an atmosphere of descent in hell. Sunjata's father dies not long after the birth of the child who has a handicap that he must prevail over to fulfil his destiny. The hero Sunjata, like Chaka or many other heroic figures, will assert his personality in a context where he had little opportunity of assertion. In historical narratives which use the precolonial setting for their stories, the physical and psychic integrity of the characters is the norm. In C.Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is no case for any clinical evacuation. Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* is no sick character until toward the end of the story when the loss of his son ends up shattering his life thus causing his psychological break. To sum up, we can say that against the picture of a sick Africa, some writers will choose to present the counter-image of an idyllic picture with no disease.

With a new generation of writers using the postcolonial setting, the topic of disease is used again in an original approach as a way of addressing the new political situations of independent Africa. Illness becomes a favorite topic of that literature not by itself but as the symbol and metaphor of a given social reality. What etiology of disease can be established? What does the disease mean? What aesthetic of disease can be developed in literary language?

The sickness of the body and the psychological unrests are used to depict the failure of the management of the new leadership. The

pathogenic context of the post-colonial world is presented as the cause of the psychological unrests of the sick characters. Madness becomes one of the favorite topics and motifs of literature produced by writers as varied as A.K.Armah, A.Kourouma, Wole Soyinka or Chinua Achebe. The disappointment subsequent to the betrayal of the hopes raised by the nationalist fight, the mismanagement of the independences, the violence of the political elite against the people are the main causes of the decrepitude of the sanitary status of citizens. Disease is represented as the metaphor of the disfunctioning of the society.[29] All these disillusionments end up affecting the bodies and minds of characters whose social commitment and rather sensitive nature are assaulted in a way that leaves no other option but developing psychological unrests.

In these new narratives, we have two types of characters: we have those who see the social mess in which their countries are but decide to find some fulfilment in the social failure. They even work to thrive in it even against their earlier commitments. On the other hand, we have other characters who are regarded as social outcasts, the mad characters. They go against the new values, the visionless management of the new leaders and develop psychological mechanisms of resistance. There is an ironic twist of these narratives as concern the medical status of their characters. In this universe of paradoxes, the most conscientious and socially committed are regarded as insane and are kept into asylums or forced to exile. The others, who should be regarded as the real insane characters, are celebrated. The corrupt, thieves and other characters with a mentality of servitude are celebrated as heroes. In these galleries of representation of disease, where does Ayi Kwei Armah's representation of sickness fit?

3. WRITING THE DISEASE

This part of the study is concerned with studying the language used to present the physical and mental assaults that characters go through and their reactions to this heterotopic life of theirs. It also focuses on the conflict between the values in which characters believe and those prevailing in the social context. It will also address the question of the meaning of the disease as it shows out in signs, symbols and literary metaphors.

3.1 Writing the Disease: A Semiotics of the Sick Body and Mind

The relation between literature and illness as mentioned earlier is not an obvious one. Illness or sickness is the condition of the individual human being who feels some discomfort or pain in his body. Such a pain is therefore an intimate experience that is not always easy to convey. When literature undertakes to address the issue of illness, it is a matter of representation. The role of literature is to successfully make the readers feel the pain or discomfort of the characters when reading. The writer uses a system of linguistic signs that have some effects on the reader [30] who is able to feel and understand the meaning of that linguistic system.

In *The Healers*, the writer is able to convey the pain the sick characters feel through the choice of an appropriate lexicon. The obsessive use of a specific set of words takes the readers into the lives of the sick persons of the fictive universe. Readers are led to share the experiences of pain and discomfort of the sick characters. These fictive patients are assimilated to real human beings by the dialectical relationship that exists between fiction and the real world. Such a recurrent use of a specific lexical item leads us to coin the concept of patholect, borrowing from the linguists who speak of an idiolect or sociolect. The narrative is no medical sociolect of physicians. There is no medical jargon in the narrative which is, strictly speaking, no illness narrative. The main narrator is neither a healer nor a sick patient. The patients' narratives of their illnesses and the healers' diagnoses are aspects and moments of the whole narrative. Sections of the narrative consist in therapeutic dialogues between a healer and his patients. The ordinary language that is used may be seen as part of the healing process as the patients are made to feel free and confident in their relations with the healer. They would feel excluded by a medical jargon. This often happens in modern medicine where the patient feels that he is a mere object of a therapeutic discourse which he does not understand. Here the physician is not only a healer. He is rather more a pedagogue than a medical expert. That is why he uses a language that his patients can understand.

The medical motif is present right on the cover page with the title of the novel, *The Healers*. The world of the diegesis need healers because its society is sick by the cultural norms it has adopted and its rulers. This pathological context

is shown in the text through the narratives of the patients about their pains and discomforts, the diagnoses of the healer and the narrator's own accounts.

It is useful for later developments to distinguish illness from sickness and disease. Illness, as we understand it, is what the patient feels or identifies him/herself with. It is usually based on self-reported mental or physical symptoms. Sickness will be understood as related to the social role a person with sickness or illness takes or is given in society. It is therefore understood from the society's perspective. As for disease, it is the abnormal functioning of the organs of the body as diagnosed by the physician or any specialist. This diagnosis is made according to expert, standardized and systematic codes.

There are specific sequences in the narrative when the storyline is slowed down as in a digression to allow for the pathography of some characters. In the early chapters when Densu is introduced into the narrative, we are presented with a troubled character. The hero is confused about the meaning of the ritual games that are taking place in Esuano. As an illustration of that confusion about the meaning of the games is a set of question marks whose rhythmic function stands out clearly in chapter 4 of part One:

Densu had examined the disturbing urge. Could there not be festivals with meaning instead of the current rituals ...? Should it not be possible for people ...? Why would one not find, at ESuano, ...? Why could he not ...? For what reason should he not...? Why should he not search ...? [31]

These questions remain unanswered until the hero meets Damfo who provides answers to his preoccupation. After his regular encounters with the healers, he gains insight into the meanings of the games and the corruption they have developed into. He better understands his first unease before he is trained to lead a meaningful life.

In addition to describing Densu's soul as "a battlefield", the readers' first contact with the young hero after his performances at the ritual games, is established through a lexicon of a perturbed character both physically and mentally. He feels "restless", can hardly sleep at night although he is tired. [32] Although he is under no medical treatment, Densu is subject to several pains and psychological distress.

A feeling of loneliness, intense and hurtful, came over him and threatened to overwhelm him. He tried again to find escape from it in sleep, but he failed. He turned his mind upon the feeling, determined to understand it. He knew inner pain was often a sign he had not understood something happening within himself. He knew also such pain would persist until he achieved understanding. Then it would vanish as pain, becoming just a calm awareness, the feeling of reality finally understood. [33]

The murder of prince Appia is rendered in a forensic lexics to convey the violence and brutal murder of the prince : "cut up veins", "mutilated arms", wounds on head and neck, gaping eye sockets, clotted blood and other butchered throat. The subsequent chapters describe the somatic and mental condition of characters who have experienced some form of physical or psychological violence. A rhetorics of pathology used by the narrator is efficient to make readers share the pain and discomfort of the characters whose pathographies are drawn. The use ad nauseam of some words or expressions familiarize readers with the experience of the suffering characters. Both mind, soul and body are subject to a detailed description of their disfunctioning. In Damfo's words, Asamoa Nkwanta's illness is diagnosed as being caused by the following: "That murder [of his nephew] sickened his soul" The healer mentions "poisons of disease", "sick body" as the general condition of the army leader.

The death of his best friend Anan leaves Densu in an equally poor health condition. "Densu soul was a battlefield", "the pain of resentment still burned him." [34] He keeps on "vomiting" the food he is given. Damfo explains that this is an unconscious way of rejecting life [35] "His body [is] cold" and his mind "tortured" [36] There are several scenes where he feels pains and numbness, paralyzing chills and cold, [37]. The scene of ritual human sacrifices to the Pra brings back the same symptoms of illness: he feels some nausea, fever [38], pain [39].

The description the narrator makes of Asamoa Nkwanta is even more moving as it is juxtaposed to that of a man who used to be strong and powerful, the venerated commander of the Asante army:

The great fighter, the warrior of the crossways, winner of a hundred victories, terror of the enemies of Asante, looked a

wasted wreck. On his body the flesh was wasted. The skin hung loose on his limbs. His face looked as if he had inherited the skin covering it from one several times bigger, and the difference showed in log, deep lines. It was plain the man had suffered – the kind of suffering that comes from within. Strong men may resist pain inflicted from outside themselves. But against the pain that has its source inwards they are more helpless than the weak, because the pain borrows their own tremendous strength and pits it against them. Asamoa Nkwanta's body showed the results of a terrifying struggle. His eyes showed Worse- that the struggle was far from over. [...] Asamoa Nkwanta's eyes had lost their natural colour. There was no white separate from the black of the pupil. Black and white, both had been overwhelmed by an angry, virulent red ... [40]

Through this description readers are led to share the sufferings of Asamoa Nkwanta. The character's mental, psychological distresses and physical sufferings are reflected in/on his body. What is seen outside on parts of the body is the manifestation of an internal disfunctioning at the psychological level. Asamoa Nkwanta's eyes reflect the body's disfunctioning resulting from the killing of his nephew, the most important person in the akan matriarcal society. In this system, the nephew is one's heir and blood relative. The Army commander has therefore lost more than a son : his only nephew of whom he was so proud. The physical description of the symptoms of diseases affecting individual characters has other goals : establishing the etiology of that physical disfunctioning through is not the illness is not to be understood as a mere physical suffering and becomes the image of a malfunctioning of the society.

3.2 Illness as a Social Metaphor

If illness in colonial literatures and the one under its tutelage were taken literally as reflecting the « primitives »' inability to adapt to changes brought by modernism, in *The Healers*, illness stands for a metaphor of cultural and social "disease". The sick bodies and minds of individual subjects represent the painful social realities and the state of cultural values. The dialectics of the individual and the society is the homology of the individual's sickness and the society's disease. For the healers, there is a disease when the different parts of the body do not function properly and harmoniously:

If body and soul are working together the mind thinks: I should do this; the will decides: I will do it; the muscle tenses itself to help the will; and the hand does what the mind has thought. Everything works together. But say there is a bone broken in the body. The mind may think something; the will may desire it; but when the muscle tries to move the hand, there are two pieces of the broken bone pushing against each other, fighting each other, instead of working together. That is disease. [41]

The healer proceeds with his definition and explains that their work as healers consists in restoring its unity to the body. He is unequivocal about the ultimate aim of this work. Curing the sick bodies of individual patients is only a small part of their job. "That cure of that kind of disease [disharmony between the different parts of the body] is one of the first steps in healing." [41] When his interlocutor thinks that that second step is the highest of their work, the healer is quick to correct him: "Not the highest, tough, ... There are worse diseases needing healing. When one person in a community body and soul-clashes with another individual in the same community, that too is disease?" [42]

The link between biological medicine, psychology and politics is clear here as their goal is to work towards the unity of the different groups composing a community and even the unity of all human beings. When groups within a natural community fight against one another, this is considered as a disease. Thus the conflicts between the different Akan clans and tribes are a clear symptom of the disease affecting the society. The division of Africa into petty nations is a symptom of a "terrible disease" [43]. The division of the Asante society between slaves, free men and noble rulers is a symptom of a whole diseased social body. The conflicts between the Asante, the Fantse, the Denkyra, the Wasso, the Assen, etc. are symptoms that what should be one and working for a single purpose is now divided into warring factions. The meaning of the games have been lost. The narrator uses extensively the word "division" and other semantically related words or expressions. The reader feels that the repetitive use of this lexical item has some extra-literary function: exorcising its evil effects. "Division", "fragmented", "fragmentation", "scattered", etc are some of these words. The narrator lists a litany of historical events and keeps on teaching readers that these are signs of division and

therefore the disease. Recording the common origin of these Akan people, he explains how they came to be divided. From the spirit of the first rituals meant to celebrate the collaborative effort against common enemies and adversities, the spirit of these games has been lost:

That was the spirit of the first rituals. But the hard realities of our scattering and our incessant wandering had long disturbed the oneness these festivals were meant to invoke, to remember, and to celebrate. [...]

[A]mong the wandering people some had chosen homes deeper in the heart of the land, ... This was division. Some had published their way eastward... This was division. Some after coming south had gone westward.. This was division. Some had just moved south and south. This, too, was division. [44]

The highest work for the healers is to bring together all of the Akan people, then all the African people: Ebibirman, that is, the community of all black people.[45] The breaking up of that community is therefore the most serious disease against which the healers must work. Although a healing of that sort seems almost impossible to carry out within a single generation, each generation of healers should do its part and leave future generations do their own. It is considered another disease to lose faith and be unable to see beyond the present state of affairs. The disease is so deep because it has run unchecked for centuries. It inevitably creates confusion over the appropriate medicine to use for such a treatment. This is not a sickness that can be cured with the usual herbs as the igbo saying goes : « a disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with every day herbs » [46]. The easy ways suggested by impatience may end up causing more harm than the disease it was supposed to cure. That is why the healers are more pedagogues than political activists. They take time to explain the symptoms of the disease, its internal and external causes before suggesting its cure. That is the ideal condition of healing. Once the patient understand all these aspects, he/she is on the way to be cured. To jump into action as bloody revolutions do in the political field to bring about political change is similar to applying coercive therapeutic excesses that the sick patient does neither understand nor share. The Akan peoples cannot be united without this historical and political consciousness of belonging to the same family.

People have lost remembrance of their former unity. It is mere utopia for many analysts to fight and hope of uniting all the blacks of the world. But the healers dream such an impossible dream of an ultimate cure that will heal the black world.

The medical practice of the healers is a holistic one as it has been shown. It does not separate medicine from psychology nor psychology from sociology or politics. They are able to transcend the apories of modern science with its partitioning of intellectual and scientific practices. Medicine of the body has nothing to do with psychology. We thus have a bodiless psychology and mindless or soulless medicine. They all have nothing to do with the social realities which are addressed by other specialist outside the hospital centers. It is as if we could cure a body with no reference to the mind of the patient or the cultural context which may have caused or served as a catalyst to the disease. That is why Asamoah Nkwanta is an opportunity for healers to go beyond the apories of their own science. How could they bring people together when they are even reluctant to live in the society and do not want to play any political role in the present state of their communities?

3.3 The Causes of the Disease

Having dealt with the symptoms of diseases in the narrative, the next step is to analyze the causes of these diseases as they are presented in the novel. This is a necessary step toward understanding the disease and curing it.

The specific way the diseases affecting different characters are presented implies that no character is responsible for his lot. Illnesses do not strike only those who deserve it. On the contrary, there is an obvious relation between illnesses and society and its cultural norms. The root causes of these diseases are to be found in culture and society. It is true that only a few characters are suffering from diagnosed diseases. These are Densu, Araba Jesiwa and Asamoah Nkwanta.

The first indicator of the link between illness and culture can be implied in the ambivalent understanding of the notion of illness. While it seems that for a large portion of the society of the fiction, the healers and their friends are a group of "mad" persons, a sect of sorcerers, for the healers themselves, the rest of the population which find some fulfillment in the new arrangements is regarded as being affected by

diseases they are not aware of. Many of them are confused by the new society in which they live, others are mere "idiots" who can hardly make sense of the ideal of unity of the black people. When in the closing lines Ama Nkroma is caught laughing for no apparent reason, Damfo asks her a question whose ironic tone shows that the healers are aware of what the rest of the community thinks about them: "What do you find to amuse you, you strange healer - woman?... Or, is it just the well-known madness of all healers that's come upon you now?" [47] Anan has another definition of madness: "[Madness] is when you insist on talking to people who can't understand you" [38]. For Ababio, who is an archenemy of the healers, Densu suffers from the "disease of pride" [39] As for him, he has made it a life principle never to allow generosity to affect his life and stand on his way to power and privileges. "Don't think I'm telling you out of generosity. I've never suffered from that disease." [40] Araba Jesiwa loves and has a deep respect for Damfo. All through the narrative, the chief healer is described as a positive character who deserves the respect and love of his patients. But the manifestation of that veneration for the healer by princess Jesiwa is regarded as sheer madness by Ababio who can hardly understand these strange forms of "foolishness" [41] inflicting some human minds:

That prince worships his mother. His mother worships that mad healer, that homeless, wifeless wretch who lives in the eastern forest. The woman Araba Jesiwa is forever taking the prince to visit that lunatic healer, that Damfo. And that Damfo has filled the mother's head with that foolish talk of his against the whites. Would you believe it? The madman calls those who work with whites dogs. [42]

Madness has an ambivalent meaning. It is always a negative label that affects others who think differently and believe in a set of different values. The quotation sounds like an oxymoron with the healer assimilated to a madman, a lunatic. The opposition of the healer to foreign domination is also regarded as foolishness. It is rather the opposite option that would be madness or foolishness in a normal context. In any case, sickness is an ideological and cultural phenomenon. Each component of the society has its own comprehension of what madness refers to.

Another illustration of the relation between illness and culture is the fact that sick characters are at

variance with the prevailing norms of their societies. It seems that only the most perceptive and sensitive members of the society are developing some forms of unease with the social norms. There is an autobiographical note in their description. These characters seem to embody some of the sequences of the writer's life. Armah's social commitment and consciousness once led him to a nervous breakdown, an episode which is recounted in *Fragments* through the trials and tribulations of Onipa Baako, that alter ego of the writer.

Araba Jesiwa is at variance with the cultural values that impose on her a marriage of convenience with the noble Bedu Addo. As a consequence, she unconsciously « rejected », i.e. lost, all the babies that were conceived in that unnatural wedlock. When she marries Kofi Entsua, the craftsman she has loved since childhood but who has no title of nobility, the union is blest with a child who will stay with her until he is murdered by those who fear he will be a bump on the road to power in Esuano for them. Densu finds it hard to stay in Esuano because even the air has become unbreathable to him once he has some insight into the nefarious political intrigues of the town. As for Asamoa Nkwanta, he is also evacuated into the healers' clinic in Praso when his life becomes unbearable to him in Kumasi after the murder of his nephew. The murder of his nephew « sickened his soul » [43]. The characters who are sick in one place are regarded as sound in mind and body in another. They feel better in their new sites even before starting the cure process. This new environment is good health conducive.

The narrator shows that even geography is closely related to sickness. Esuano whose air is described as being corrupted by local politics is responsible for Densu's illness. Not only geography but also the prevailing cultural norms are the root causes of some characters' poor health condition. After a few days far from the pathogenic sites of Esuano and Kumasi, the main characters seem to have found in the healers' villages some therapeutic setting.

A further manifestation of the association of illness and culture is the amazing collective amnesia that seems to affect most of the characters peopling the diegesis. The majority of the Africans have lost the meanings of their basic values, rituals, festivals and social practices. This guilty oblivion leaves Densu helpless and hopeless. He senses a vague feeling that there is some corruption and perversion in the games

that repel him naturally. Like a madman, he keeps asking questions for which most people have no answer. Or they simply hardly understand the meaning of those questions. "What were these games for? [44] "What was the purpose of these games?", Why did they [games] seem so purposeless in him?" [45] Densu's first unease with Esuano's practices and cultural values show out with the numerous questions he raises.

The collective amnesia is a consequence of the painful remembrance of all the traumatic encounters, historical events the blacks have been through. The healer shows that illness is sometimes a device to protect the mind against unbearable painful remembrance:

The events that have shattered our people were not simply painful events. They were disasters ... Those who survived them could only survive in part because they found ways to forget the catastrophes. When you're still close to past dangers that threatened to wipe you out, even remembrance pains you. Our people forgot a lot of things in order to survive. [53]

Forgetfulness becomes a way out, a psychological device to help protect the minds of the diseased persons. The disease is the solution, a psychological outlet protecting against the fragile mind of the patient who finds it hard to accept an unbearable trauma. When the period of rest for the mind is "prolonged unnaturally" (84), it works toward collective death, not regeneration. The healers' role is to reconcile people with their history, to face and learn from it. Past, present and future are temporal categories that build the personality. That is why healers see it as part of their job to reconnect these categories into any human being. They make it a principle of the work: "A healer needs to see beyond the present and tomorrow. He needs to see years and decades ahead." [46] The narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* is more explicit about this holistic conception of temporality. "A people losing sight of its origins is a lost people." [47] Damfo reminds Asamoa Nkwanta that there will be no social healing unless people accept to recreate their original oneness: "- the past ... also tells you there is nothing eternal about our present divisions" he argues before concluding: "We were one in the past. We may come together again in the future." [48].

The last cultural factor that is responsible for the social malaise and psychological illnesses of some characters with a too high psychic and psychological sensibility is the institution of royalty. For the healers and those sharing their ideals, "royalty is part of the disease" (269) affecting the African people. Division is the worst disease affecting this community. Royalty thrives on division and therefore works for that purpose [49]. That is the ironic situation of the African people that their leadership is the source of their problems: "Among our people, royalty is part of the disease. Whoever serves royalty serves the disease, not the cure. He works to divide our people not to unite us" [50].

The deep unease Asamoah Nkwanta feels after his stay in the healers' village comes from the realization that, as the commander of the Asante army, he is serving the disease. In the last interviews with Damfo before leaving the healers' village, the general's words would be assimilated to a mutiny in a normal context:

[The desire to protect my people] cannot die in me. But there's a feeling in me that paralyzes my will. When I think that the result of all my work... is simply to give power to people who know only how to waste power and waste life, my arm grows weak and I feel all the forces of life and will deserting me. [...] The royals these days serve only themselves... [and the army is a] plaything the royals indulge themselves with." [51]

Healers do not loath power per se. In the present state of affairs, to be in the circles of power is to be part of the disease. They are against its use by most African rulers for their own petty privileges. It could be used to strengthen unity among African peoples. Unfortunately, most "royals ... do not wish the unity of black people" as this would mean the end of royalty. Nkwanta has to refer to history to find examples of royals who used power to serve the people: Ossei Tutu and Obiri Yeboa.

The same Asamoah Nkwanta had been affected by the ritual killing of his nephew. This incident is used by Damfo to open his consciousness to the shortcomings of their culture. A society which nurtures a culture based on ritual human sacrifices, an unfair stratification of the society between nobles, free men and slaves cannot but be psychologically pathogenic.

As a pedagogue, Damfo teaches Asamoah Nkwanta the roots of royalty. He also opens his mind on the ethical failures of the Asante society with its division into classes with conflicting interests. These are signs of a corruption of the ideals of the social contract signed by their common ancestors to ensure the well-beings of its members and the development of the whole society. This idea of a later corruption of some erstwhile positive values is reflected in the words of the wise Isanusi to the young initiates of Anoa in the preceding novel by Armah: "You have to learn we are not a people to nurture kings and courtiers. You have to understand these are recent excrescences among us." [52].

The disease that affects most royals is sexual impotence. Damfo is confident that any healer with an aphrodisiac medicine, the *bediwona*, will be welcomed at royal courts. [53]. This impotence is the metaphor of some political impotence. Instead of embodying vision for the future, creativity and a positive use of the authority that is vested with them, the royals rather personify fruitlessness, barrenness and lack of vision. They are the very opposite of power as understood by the healers. It is no surprise that their eagerness to have the medicine for themselves is presented at a meeting with Sir Garnet Wolseley at Cape Coast. The translator keeps on repeating to the assembly of kings who represent the enemies of the Asante how powerful their white interlocutor, his queen, his country are as if to better drive home to these African leaders their emasculated condition. The local translator precedes every translation with a remembrance of the power of the man in whose name he is speaking. "The renowned Sir Garnet Wolseley", "the powerful Sir Garnet Wolseley", "the great white man", "the queen ... has sent us this powerful white man", "the white queen is all powerful" etc.[54] As a proof of their powerlessness is their wish to see the white army fight the Asante alone without their involvement. The sexual impotence of the African rulers has an ironic twist: the very representatives of African power are in fact powerless. This is shown during the meeting with Garnet Wolseley where they are reminded that they are mere puppets.

Disease is therefore caused by the state of the society and is therefore related to culture and society. By linking the ailing body and mind to the state of culture and society, the narrative shows that the healing process will have to take into account the functioning of the society. The

individual's health condition can be improved by improving the sociopolitical condition of the society in which he/she lives. The healing process will have to be concerned with healing the social structures. The analysis of the causes of the disease is therefore the necessary step toward the healing process.

4. THE HEALING PROCESS

We have seen in the study that the disease is socially constructed. As a consequence, the cure will have to be found at the levels of culture and social practices. Literature is the site of social and cultural ideas that can be used to suggest alternative cures to the sickness of the body and mind of characters. Like the sickness which is cultural, the cure will be cultural and political before being scientific. It will be achieved through education, cultural and political awareness that prepare minds to be reconciled with the sociocultural contexts in which the characters live.

4.1 The Therapeutic Journey

The narrative is structured in seven parts each made up of six chapters that relate the events of the story. The adventures of the different sick characters take them through different steps. These steps are the manifestations of the sickness, their medical evacuation into the healers' villages and their subsequent healing. The plot development is therefore built on the healing process of its main characters who are Densu, Araba Jesiwa and Asamoa Nkwanta. These adventures are different experiences of their healing process.

During their stay with the healers, these three characters are led to become aware of the causes of their illnesses, and by so doing, to find the cure to their illnesses. By learning to know themselves and their bodies better, they are transformed into new beings with different values and perspectives. Densu's trials and tribulations from Esuano to the Eastern Forest, then to Praso, Cape Coast and then back into Esuano at the end of the novel perfect his knowledge about himself, his society and the nature of its cultural values. Asamoa Nkwanta's stay in Praso, the "healing conversations" [55] he has with Damfo transform the army's commander into a different personality to the despair and disappointment of former friends who think that the healers have "bewitched" the army's Osagyefo [56]. The Araba Jesiwa we meet at the end of the novel, who

could have stayed psychologically broken by the misfortunes that beset her, is a character who has made hers the life principles of the healers as symbolized by her refusal to allow the sacrifice of the lamb for the ritual of purification.

The exile from a pathogenic context to a site more conducive to good health is essential in order to reconcile these patients not only with themselves but also with a more humane ethics. The narrative closes with new optimistic perspectives as the healers have added new important figures to their numbers in their fight against the "disease", the other name of the corruption of moral values.

4.2 The Therapeutic Methods

Like the illness described in details as the direct effect of a cultural determinism, the healing process is cultural as well. As evidence of this dialectical relationship between healing process and sociocultural values is the fact that each society has its specific medical therapeutic protocol. The specific way the topic of disease is addressed in this novel is a criterion of its label as a traditional novel. The different steps that patients must go through to be effectively cured are the focus of the analysis now.

The healing is sociocultural because the characters that the healers have cured are regarded by other members of that society as being "insane" or "bewitched" [57]. Araba, Densu and Nkwanta are looked at with suspicion as they do not share the new corrupt values prevailing in Esuano. The cured patients of the healers are not welcome in the town of Esuano as they do not share the values the other inhabitants have made theirs. The royals fear the healers and their supporters as the ideas and values they preach are a threat to the system of selfish privileges on which royalty thrives. The traditional rulers have adopted a policy of collaboration with the enemy to keep some of their privileges. This betrayal of the ruling elite is part of the disease affecting the society.

Another aspect of the healing process in this narrative is its specific therapeutic protocol. In fact, the treatment that the healers have adopted is quite different from what modern medicine proposes. That is why we can say that the healing process is also a cultural one. Each society has its own understanding of disease. It also has its own way of curing the diseases affecting its people. The healers' modes of

therapy as at variance with the medical practice in other societies.

Damfo and his team of healers always start by helping their patients have an insight into the deep causes of their illnesses. For the specific case of Araba Jesiwa, she was led to be false to herself, to be blind to her true self [58]. The violence she inflicted on herself, the "false selves" that she embraced and allowed to dominate her real self were the source of her troubles. When she gets rid of these false selves, she is cured. In the second healing process, although she is physically cured, she has no will to be whole again because of the pain of the loss of her only son. The prince Appia was indeed murdered before her very eyes with no option for her of providing any help to him. [59] The trauma of such an experience leaves her with no will to continue to live.

For some time Densu goes through the same process. Although the medicine is good and effective, the young man remains ill because he also has no psychological desire to live. When Damfo tells him that he had "spent a long time struggling against life" [(59), he answers that life is worthless: "there is nothing in it." [60] If pains and disappointment are natural, according to Damfo, it is not natural to find escape and refuge in illness and even death. "What's not natural is the wish to die." [61] The healer therefore insists that medicine serves only as a help to nature. Healing comes from within, from will and wish to get cured:

[Damfo] said the healer was only a helper. He would be impotent to help unless he, [the patient i.e Asamoia Nkwanta], was himself ready to search for the way to recovery...he asked Asamoia Nkwanta to remember that medicine could do nothing if a human being was making war on his own natural self. [62]

The healers' practice is based on the principle of humility. If there is any power in healing, Damfo reminds us, it is not a personal one. The power of healers is no selfish power for self-glorification. It is no power of the individual craving for self-importance. This power, he argues, "has nothing to do with our small, selfish dreams. It's the power to help life create itself" [63].

This healing methodology sets the patients as the center of the healing process. S/He is the main agent of the healing and s/he has to find in him/herself the resources of their cure. This

method is at variance with what is sometimes experienced with modern medicine which seems to see in the sick a mere body to work on without any regard for his/her person. S/He sometimes goes through the process against her/his will. The physician hardly listens to her/him and seldom takes into account their patients' worries and wishes.

Listening to their patients, taking time to understand their worries, is the main strategy adopted by Damfo. This consists in listening to the patient narrating her/his illness. This implies patience, care and showing concern for the sick and her/his preoccupations. Araba narrates her healing to Densu describing Damfo's healing method. To a certain extent, Densu, who is a mere boy, has that basic quality of listening. He is another healer to Jesiwa as he "never tired of listening to her." [64] By some repetitive devices, the narrator shows this need of the patient to talk. Over 12 paragraphs of two pages, we can record twenty one times the expression "she talked of..."

Araba Jesiwa talked freely, ... – She talked to him of anxiety... – she talked of the pain ... She talked to him of waste ... – she talked of huge inner energies... – She talked to him of despair ... – Araba Jesiwa loved to talk to him of hope ... – she talked to him of change ... – she talked of remarriage ... – Araba Jesiwa talked to Densu of conception ... – she talked of the joyful nausea ... – She talked then to him of fear ... – And she talked to him of that indescribable ... [65]

Talking is therefore part of the healing process. The patients need to talk freely about their problems and hopes. « He [Damfo] never pushed me » [66]. This is the most important step in the healing process according to Damfo. Medicinal herbs and other infusions and decoctions are used to help the body's natural defenses. That is the easiest part of the healers's work. But the most difficult part in the healing process is to be done by the patient himself. This consists in realizing the internal causes of the illness and taking the decision to get cured by rejecting some of its causes.

Watergazing is another technique that the healers develop to help patients engage in a self-analysis. If an important part of the healing is to be effected by the patient himself, She/he needs to find within himself the resources of his healing. This can be achieved by preparing the patient to

listen to himself, analyze within himself the causes of his illness. It consists for a person to look into a wide clay bowl containing water over a long period of time. If he has been prepared for that ritual, he will see an image of himself reflected into the water of the bowl. What he sees will be interpreted. With time and patience, patients are able to interpret their own unconscious materials such as dreams, memories, fleeting thoughts, intense emotions and other parapraxes. The holistic approach of the healers therefore combines what is close to Freudian psychoanalysis and biological medicine. This is different from what is done in modern medicine that generally dissociates the various components of their healing sciences. Although medicinal herbs are important to restore the body to its natural functions, what is referred to in the narrative as "healing conversations" and "watergazing" play a decisive role in the healing process. The healers's job is to cure bodies, heal sickened souls and minds by working for a society of sane cultural values.

5. CONCLUSION

Medicine and literature are no antithetical couple in African literature. According to the category of the writers, the topic of disease has been given a variety of figures and motifs. These figures have always been used not for their own sake but as metaphors for some socio-cultural concerns. Sickness and particularly mental disorders have served such goals. As the very manifestation of the failure of the "primitive" Africans to face the unknown Other in colonial literature, madness and other epidemics were narrated as intimately related to the African subject. Some literary trends by African writers of the first generation tended to assume that image and even claim it as part of their humanity.

Armah's *The Healers* is about disease and healing. We have tried to analyze the language the narrator uses to convey the image of the disease relating the writer to a patient and a healer in the same narrating process. His narrator has been able to speak about his sick characters' medical status with minute details. He has created healers who had the expertise to take their patients from their narratives of the symptoms to the cure of their diseases.

This narrative presents the disease as being culturally and socially determined. It has also shown that the healing process is also related to the society and its values. The medical science

of the eponymous healers not only reconciles the body with the mind of the patients but it also works towards reconciling people who were supposed to be united but are not. The disease is a general and metaphorical topic referring to such disharmonies and divisions. The narrative also suggests some proposals about the rapports between physicians and their patients which could inspire modern medicine to the benefits of their patients.

The narrative suggests that the healing process of individual members of a society requires working for a sane society at social and cultural levels. It implies that Medical practice work in collaboration with other fields and sciences for better medical conditions in a healthier society. *The Healers* is a major contribution to a thorough discussion on the medical system in a postcolonial society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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