An Interview with writer Ayesha Harruna Attah

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, writer Ayesha Harruna Attah discusses her last publication, *Zainab Takes New York*, and how it intersects with other works of fiction related to both African and specifically New Yorkian literature. The figure of the grandmothers – a central narrative device in the novel – resonates with an interest in the history the writer developed in her previous works, *The Deep Blue Between* and *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* – two historical novels of slavery set in the 19th century Ghana and South Atlantic.

Keywords

The Hundred Wells of Salaga, *The Deep Blue Between*, *Zainab Takes New York*, migration, slavery

Ayesha Harruna Attah (1983) is a writer of Ghanaian descent who now works and lives in Senegal. She writes and publishes in English. Her most recent books are *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* (2018) and *The Deep Blue Between* (2020). Her new book, *Zainab Takes New York*, was published in 2021 and is now about to become a TV series/film. The novel is set in the present and has as its main protagonist Zainab, a young woman from Ghana who has moved to the United States to study.

Elisa Bordin: The plot of *Zainab Takes New York* shares some similarities with books by other writers of African origins who are working in the US. I think of Taiye Selasi, and her *Ghana Must Go*, where we read about a family of Ghanaian-Nigerian immigrants in the Eastern US, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* with Ifemelu who, like Zainab, leaves her native African country to go to the States to study. Do you think your work is part of a trend, such as the literary output of the so-called new African diaspora in the US, even if you don't live in the US now?

Ayesha Harruna Attah: I wrote *Zainab Takes New York* as a book in conversation with other books about New York and less as a book about the immigrant experience. Yes, Zainab is from another place and grapples with life as an outsider, but if this novel were to look for literary cousins, it would pair well with Teju Cole's *Open City*, E. B. White's *This is New York*, and Ann Petry's *The Street*. In other words, it's a book about New York City first, and New York City has always been a city of outsiders, so I don't know if I would classify this book as trendy.

EB: Although *Zainab Takes New York* takes place in the present, the past is a constant dimension in the book through the characters of Zainab's female ancestors and their talking ghosts. Why so?

AHA: As a writer, I gravitate towards the past as a way of understanding how we've arrived where we are as a people. Even in writing a light romance novel, I wondered how the ghosts of who we are would guide or misguide the protagonist's steps. I also thought it would be comedic to allegorize the work I do: dredging up the past and telling its stories. What if I heard my ancestor's voices, not just in figurative terms, but in a real way, and backed with actual personalities? What would that look like?

EB: Some elements of *Zainab Takes New York*, such as the presence of these 'ghosts' and a haunting past, made me think of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the importance of passing on (or not) a "story." Which happens in the form of a graphic novel in the case of Zainab. Is that a form of healing for the protagonist?

AHA: I love that my romance novel still has echoes of Toni Morrison's Beloved for you. I think Zainab's graphic novel is healing not only for herself but for her entire line of forebears and the women who will come after her. Healing doesn't just come from hearing her ancestors, (because that can actually flair up the trauma), but it comes from her engagement with the stories they tell her and her understanding of why some stories are told in a certain way, for instance, why some topics might have been couched in silence. Like one of Zainab's ancestors tells her, sometimes, healing comes from understanding that there are things we carry that weigh us down that started even before we were born.

EB: The three grandmothers' voices provide a lot of context and content, but they are also a powerful narrative device because, through them, you manage to stage Zainab's life in New York. They provide an off-frame voice and commentary on the action that is taking place. Therefore, readers can easily identify with them, even because the three women always have different interpretations of Zainab's actions. How did you come up with the idea of this narrative device?

AHA: There's a famous divide among writers – there are those who plan and those who don't. I planned my first four novels but decided to try the other approach for this fifth one. The late E. L. Doctorow, a former professor of mine, described it as driving in the dark with just the headlights guiding you. All I knew was I was writing a romance novel set in New York, and the grandmother characters appeared as I was about two or three chapters in, like wild animals popping into one's night vision. They were a lovely surprise and became the book's heart.

EB: The past as a historical dimension is also part of your previous books. *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, for example, can be considered a historical novel in which you tell the lives of two female protagonists during the end of the 19th century in Ghana. What is surprising for the reader is the discovery of slavery in Ghana at the end of the 19th century, when we know that, at least officially, the Atlantic slave trade was over in 1808. If the trade of slaves across the ocean was not possible, why was slavery still practiced in Ghana?

AHA: By the time the book is set, slavery had been banned by the British, who had begun colonizing most of Ghana by this point. Just because the colonial government declared that a system they had once profited from was illegal, it didn't mean their laws would immediately be accepted by the local population. Some of it was an act of resistance to the British, and some of it was just resistance to change. A lot of it was because of how profitable it was. Even in places like England, when slavery was abolished in 1835, many slave holders asked their governments for compensation.

EB: What historical sources did you use to write *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*?

AHA: I talked to my family; I read many accounts about Salaga: chronicles, travel accounts about visitors to the region, poems, and origin stories about Salaga's various ethnic groups, and I visited Salaga itself and saw its hundred wells for myself.

EB: What is more important, history or the memory of it?

AHA: I think how we remember history is more important. The traces of what happened and how they affect our present and future is what is interesting to me. Things happen. How we handle those things is where we form our nature, where we develop ideas (or not), and how we transform our new realities.

EB: Slavery also appears in *The Deep Blue Between*, the book you published immediately after *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*. Can it be considered a literary spin-off of that earlier work?

AHA: Yes, it is. The two girls in *The Deep Blue Between* started their journeys in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*. I couldn't stop wondering about their lives and had to give them a chance to get their full stories told.

EB: Differently from *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, *The Deep Blue Between* has a more transnational setting. It starts in Ghana but then moves to Brazil and Nigeria…

AHA: I lived in Brazil for a few months and was fascinated to find so many parallels with life in Ghana. And to find certain beliefs almost frozen in time. Some of these belief systems also began in Nigeria. I'm a big fan of expansive stories, so I stretched and scared myself a bit and decided to set a tale in these two other countries.

EB: While *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* contains, in the title, a geographical reference (Salaga), *The Deep Blue Between* contains a color reference: blue, which of course we connect to the sea. How important is water in this novel?

AHA: Water is both a joiner and a separator. For one of the twins, water is almost her antagonist. For a lot of West Africans, we have a complicated relationship with water, specifically the sea. A city like Accra is right on the ocean, but most times I'm there, I forget that the sea is within reach. I like to say it's like we've turned our backs on the sea because it took so many of our siblings away. This book examines some of the ways in which water can be both friend and foe.

EB: Would you define *The Deep Blue Between* as a coming-of-age story?

AHA: Yes. Both girls start off at age nine and are in their late teens at the book's end, so there's a lot of growing they both do.

EB: Why is that part of history, namely slavery in Africa, so important to you?

AHA: History is the way we understand ourselves. It's how we understand why our world functions the way it does today. In West Africa, slavery was a big part of how our countries work today, even though not many people like to engage with that past – some of us were enslaved, and some enslaved others. I want us to keep talking about these topics because it's the only way we can heal. We have to look at each other and acknowledge how we've treated each other, and from there, we can move on with our lives.

EB: Talking of history, what surprised me was finding a reference to homosexual love in the life of one of the three Zainab's grandmothers. Is that a historically sound element you found in your research, or is it a "contemporary" touch you wanted to add to their stories?

AHA: In my research and in some interviews, I've found a fluidity and acceptance of many ways of being in precolonial West Africa. I highly recommend *She Called Me Woman* and *The Sex Lives of African Women,* books which debunk the idea of homosexuality in Africa being "contemporary."

EB: All your books have female protagonists – Zainab, Wurche, Aminah, etc. All your protagonists are women who get empowered by their relationships with other women. Do you think this has to do with the fact that you are a woman writer, or is it an explicit desire to involve a female readership?

AHA: I write mostly women characters because so much of our story has been left out of history. One of my favorite examples is when an English commander visited Nigeria in the 19th century. Among the household, there was the prolific translator and poet Nana Asma'u. The

Englishman talked only about her husband and brother and briefly noted that the women in the house seemed to enjoy certain freedoms. For me, the total lack of interest in Asma'u was telling.

EB: What are your literary references? The writers who inspire you? Slavery, for example, is an important theme in US literature, as visible not only in the already mentioned Morrison but in general in the so-called neo-slave narratives and the works of prominent contemporary writers such as Colson Whitehead (*The Underground Railroad*) and the Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi (*Homegoing*).

AHA: To be honest, slavery is just one of the many topics that interest me. I love history and women's stories, and myth creation. I love Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jennifer Makumbi, Akwaeke Emezi. I love writers who can create or recreate worlds and write the heck out of a sentence. I love stories that remind us that we're all trying our best.

EB: What are you working on right now?

AHA: I just got selected as the protégée in literature for the Rolex Mentor & Protégé Initiative, and I'll be mentored by Bernardine Evaristo. I'll be working on a novel set about four thousand years ago.

Elisa Bordin is Associate Professor of American Literature at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy. Her research deals with the western, the literatures of minorities and of migration, and critical race studies. Among her latest publications, the edited volume *Transatlantic Memories of Slavery: Remembering the Past, Changing the Future* (published by Cambria Press in 2015); *Un'etnicità complessa. Negoziazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante* (2019); and a volume on the "global Igbo" writer Chris Abani (with Annalisa Oboe, published by Manchester University Press in 2022).