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Ayi Kwei Armah's Criticism of Post-Colonial Ghana in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Abstract

In 1957 newly independent Ghana under the leadership of Kwane Nkrumah — acknowledged as, „Osagyefo" — „the Redeemer" —, adopts a socialistic system with limited success. Ultimately, Ghana descends into a dictatorial state. Later, debutant novelist Ayi Kwei Armah publishes *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), a politically-engaged novel in which corruption and moral decay are ubiquitously depicted. This paper presents the kinds and styles of criticism Armah uses to present doubt and scepticism about life in a newly independent post-colonial Ghana.

post-colonial literature, criticism, corruption, scatological, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ghana

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Introduction

After Ghana's transition from British colonial rule to an independent post-colonial society which culminates in the regime of Kwame Nkrumah in 1957, comes a rendering of this state of affairs in a debut novel by Ayi Kwei Armah (b. 1939). The novel entitled *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) is Armah's depiction of life in Ghana. This portrayal is often regarded as a controversial one which receives ample criticism particularly by fellow Africans. One of the most scathing of criticisms is by the Nigerian writer, poet and playwright Chinua Achebe who describes the novel as, „(…) a sick book. Sick, not with the sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of the human condition" (Achebe 1973: 19). At the same time Armah is described as one of the greatest African prose writers leading Idang Alibi, a newspaper columnist to state, 'Armah has shown in all his novels that he is a great prose stylist, a brutally frank socially committed African writer, a philosopher and artist *par excellence* (Alibi 1985: 5). Either side of the critical divide appear to agree on the powerful affect Armah's works continue to have on the African literary world and of which *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) as a debut novel made such an impact. In this paper the horrid kinds and styles of criticism which Armah uses as representations of post-colonial Ghanaian life are focused on along with the criticism leveled at Armah's chosen approach to the subject matter.

Criticisms of Armah

Achebe believes *Beautyful Ones* to be too existentialist, modernistic and over the top with scatological imagery and that it was unfair to have the hero unnamed in the story. Charles Nolim is another critic who in the same vein as Achebe is disturbed by the sordidness of the scatological imagery and notably the prevalent pessimism (Bodunde 1987: 22). Nolim refers to Armah as „the pejorist" who thrives on the scatological scenes and emphasizes that Armah's description of the banister is Armah at his, „pejoristic best" (Nolim 1992: 111).

> The wood underneath would win and win till the end of time. Of that there was no doubt possible, only the pain of hope perennially doomed to disappointment… Of course, it was in the nature of the wood to rot with age. The polish, it was supposed, would catch the rot. But of course in the end it was the rot which imprisoned everything in its effortless embrace… In the natural course of things it would always take the newness of the different kinds of polish and the vaunted cleansing power of the chemicals in them, and it would convert all to victorious filth… (Armah 1968: 14-15)

Achebe goes further in his criticism of this so-called „sick book" by observing that the story is not even about Ghana in particular because it could be set in any of the post--independent African nations or anywhere for that matter. There is no identifiable location in Africa, he suggests that there is „…nothing particularly Ghanaian about it, no specifically Ghanaian mannerisms or special brand of politics, no language in the local idiom of the people and the major events in the novel never take place in any well-known geographical or political centre in Ghana" (Nolim 1992: 113). It is not surprising that pre--*Beautyful Ones* Armah wrote an essay entitled *African Socialism*: *Utopian or Scientific*? (1967) in which Africa is depicted as without a constructive and imaginative ideology which could facilitate the process of decolonization and in which Africa's leaders are attacked by Armah. In this essay he states that they have become greedy and opportunistic and subscribe to „an ethic which has everything to do with consumption and notoriously little to do with production of any sort" (Armah 1967: 15). This notion is expanded on fictitiously in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) set in Ghana, however it could be anywhere. Furthermore, Armah recently emphasized (Armah 2009) the social situation which gave him his theme which is the charismatic political leader Kwame Nkrumah's admission of the politically demobilizing potential of African leadership's option to model their rule on European colonial practices:

> I was not blind to the possibility of bribery and corruption in the country among both Europeans and Africans. Things had moved fast, the feeling of power was a new thing; the desire to possess cars, houses and other commodities that were regarded as necessities by the European population in the country, was not unnatural in people who were suddenly made to feel that they were being prepared to be taken over from those Europeans; and money, the wherewithal to obtain these luxuries, was tempting (Nkrumah 1979: 213).

The story *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is about a railway clerk who is simply referred to as „the man" and is set during the regime of Kwame Nkrumah. The Man is representative of the common man Nkrumah has promised to represent. The novel dramatizes the conflict between hope for change and the betrayal of that hope by the nation's leaders and serves as a stinging indictment of the Nkrumah regime. Primarily the disgusting and powerful scatological imagery which Armah employs to criticize his country causes the most distress, still his diatribe was not received negatively in all quarters. Critics such as the Zimbabwean writer, Nyamfukudza commented on Armah's artistry leading him to call his work, „intricate in form and distinguished by a highly wrought prose style using violent imagery" (CLC Vol 136). But Armah's commonly held label as a pessimist is persistent amongst critics and offers little hope for the future hence the title of the novel; *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which begs the question if not *now? When?* When will the so-called „Beautyful" ones be born? Armah appears to suggest never. Within this deep pessimism he offers a glimmer of hope, *yet* means one day but we do not know when, and we fear it will not be soon.

The scatological imagery of filth, dirt and excrement achieves such an end. The imagery embodies the circumstances that post-colonial Ghana is in through the eyes of „the Man". His experiences are representations of the disgrace he feels toward the state of his own country. The Man establishes that, „There is something so terrible in watching

a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, […]" (95) especially after a youth spent fighting the white man. He now questions if the black man's, „[…] real [emphasis added] desire has been to be like the white governor himself, to live above all blackness in the big old slave castle?" (108). After all the shouting against white men „the Man" concludes that in the end it was not hate, „It was love. Twisted, but love all the same" (109). In this new post-colonial state the Man is full of disgrace for a Ghana which is in love with the acquisition of material goods and wealth which is referred to as, "the gleam" and is tempting to follow.

The Story

The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born tells the story of „the man," a railway clerk, and his relations with his wife and family, his fellow workers and his friends. The novel reveals through his actions, his inner thoughts, and his encounters with various people, his quest for understanding and for determining his place in a corrupt society.

There are three parts to the novel. The first, describes a day in the life of the man and his encounters with various people — a bus driver, his fellow railway workers, and a timber merchant who attempts to bribe him, and his wife, Oyo. Armah describes these encounters at length and in great detail. Everywhere he goes he encounters physical, moral and spiritual corruption: the bus driver steals from the company, his fellow workers seek illicit rewards in a society that implicitly condones bribery; timber-merchant offers a substantial bribe in order to move his timber; the man refuses and his wife condemns his decision not to share in the rewards of corrupt practices.

The atmosphere and tone of the novel is set at the beginning when we are informed that there is a government campaign to clean the country which is initiated in a series of radio programs featuring, a doctor, a Presbyterian priest, and a senior lecturer from the University of Legon. The people of Ghana are „impressed" and the three experts are „[…] in agreement about the evil effects of uncleanliness" (9). The Minister of Health labels it „[…] the most magnificent campaign yet" (9). All the same, „the man" pays witness to moral and social corruption throughout the story which is sustained by images of decay and filth — rotting refuse, excrement, nose droppings — all of which contribute to sustaining Armah's narrative. The persistent images of filth are strengthened in references to the Chichidodo, „a bird [that] hates excrement with all its soul. But [that] feeds on maggots and as you know maggots grow best inside the lavatory" (52). The Chichidodo is an image of the corrupt members of Ghanaian society and their practices.

Through his experiences of this one day the man muses on his own actions as these relate to the people he encounters. He questions the legitimacy of his determination to retain his personal integrity. He is scorned by his wife for refusing to accept bribes. He expresses his moral position by his unwillingness to put his name on the deed to the fraudulent purchase of a fishing boat by his relation, Koomson, an alleged socialist reformer. Koomson is in fact, a corrupt member of government who now lives in one of the residential estates that previously accommodated the envied colonizer. Koomson's wife, Estelle, is dressed out in imported finery and her sister in-law studies in England (albeit

in sewing). Koomson is chauffeured around in a Mercedes Benz which leads the Man's wife to believe her husband is a living reproach and interprets their situation as a lack of initiative on her husband's behalf (Fraser 1980: 17).

In the second part of the novel, Armah traces the history of Nkrumah's progress from idealistic national leader to corrupt and disassociated megalomaniac and the man's connection with various characters who share in one way or another his disillusionment with the present situation. Teacher, Manaan, and Kofi Billy all have shared in the optimism about the bright future implied in Nkrumah's ascendancy. All have been destroyed by his apostasy. Through their reflections, Ghana's post-colonial history is revealed, as well as the birth, growth, and death of the initial idealism of Nkrumah's regime. The Nkrumah years are symbolized in the novel by the contracted life span of the „man--child" who goes through a full cycle of birth, growth and death in nine years, the period of Nkrumah's regime.

The third part of the novel describes events leading up to the military coup that over throw the government and the reactions of the public to this event. a lengthy part of this section describes the escape of the corrupt minister, Koomson (aided by the man), by crawling through the excrement in the pit latrine at the man's home.

Beautyful Ones expresses the frustration many citizens of the newly-independent states in Africa felt after attaining political independence. Many African states like Ghana followed similar paths in which corruption and the greed of African elites became rampant. Corruption in turn filtered down to the rest of society and the „rot" that characterized post-independent Ghana in the last years of Nkrumah is a dominant theme in the book. The novel provides a description of the existential angst of the book's hero who struggles to remain clean when everyone else around him has surrendered to the „rot".

Armah's Criticisms

Armah presents Ghana in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) as a corrupt state. Throughout the novel Armah substantiates on the ugliness of life in post-colonial Ghana. One of the first experiences of ugliness is at the beginning of the story when the bus driver produces „[…] a generous gob of mucus […]" which he spits out against the tyre (1). By the end of the story the Man and Koomson, make an escape from the ensuing coup by climbing through a latrine, and the box seat which is, „as usual, encrusted with old caked excrement…" (196). Armah uses a plethora of unpleasant images, such as these, to tickle the sensory perceptions of both „the man" and the reader.

Regardless of attempts by the government to clean up the country with a campaign labeled by the Principal Secretary to the Ministry of Health as, „[…] the most magnificent campaign yet" (9), the man and everything else constantly struggle with filth finding it difficult to remain clean. The so-called „magnificent" campaign consisted of little white boxes being placed at strategic points all over the city for the collection of waste matter and to serve as shining examples of cleanliness. Printed on the boxes in bright blue letters were the words:

K.C.C. RECEPTACLE FOR DISPOSAL OF WASTE (8).

And underneath in plain but striking red bold capitals the message:

> KEEP YOUR COUNTRY CLEAN
> BY KEEPING YOUR CITY CLEAN (8).

Unfortunately, the shining examples of cleanliness did not take long to be, „[…] covered over thickly with the juice of every imaginable kind of waste matter" (8). Ghana cannot escape from the filth and dirt which covers it despite the strategically positioned little boxes all over the city which are supposed to serve as, „[…] not just containers for waste matter, but as shining examples of cleanliness" (9).

Throughout *Beautyful Ones* Armah uses latrines, toilets, shower-rooms, banisters, teeth, the smell of breath and the white receptacle boxes previously mentioned to convey a filthy, dirty and corrupt Ghana often described by the man as, „rotten". At the railway administration building, the Man's workplace, there is a long staircase with a banister which he must climb sometimes several times a day, and if he and his co-workers needs to visit the bathroom. The man finds the texture of the wooden banister uncomfortable and unclean, when he reaches for the support of the banister he recoils his hand immediately after contact in an instinctive gesture of withdrawal. The man believes the banister absorbs every kind of possible waste matter from the hands of those who use the banister every day. He claims it used to be wooden and it is still possible to see wood between the swellings of other matter although it is, „[…] a dubious piece of deeply aged brown wood" (14).

> Apart from the wood itself there were, of course, people themselves, just so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course toward putrefaction. Left-hand fingers in their carless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip from the lavatory downstairs to the offices above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The callused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. Afternoon hands not entirely licked clean of palm soup and remnants of *kenkey*. The wood would always win (15).

The people aid the rot just as they — the corrupt ones — aid the rot of their country, Ghana. In this „rot" the man struggles to stay clean. Even when he washes himself he cannot seem to escape the filth and the rot which is apparent when he showers after work. In the shower-room, the man cannot keep his eyes off the bottom of the door because, „[…] it was rotten at the bottom, and the smell of dead wood filled his nostrils and caressed the cavity of his mouth. […] and there was no more point in trying to keep the rot out of himself" (119). The rot and rotten ways translate as corruption in *The Beautyful Ones* an issue which the man grapples with and ponders over:

> …everybody knew the chances of finding a way that was not rotten from the beginning were ridiculously small. Many have found it worthwhile to try the rotten ways, and in truth there was no one living who had the strength to open his mouth to utter blame against them. Many had tried the rotten ways and found them filled with the sweetness of life (170).

The man's relative Koomson — the politician and socialist reformer also referred to as „the party man" — and his wife Estelle certainly live a life filled with sweetness. Estelle's surrender to the man's interpretation of the „rot" is visible when the two dine with the man and Oyo, his wife. Estelle protests against drinking locally manufactured spirits: „Really, the only good drinks are European drinks. These make you ill" (155). Such preferences appear to affect other aspects of the nation's lifestyle. The residential estates of the Senior Service comprise of names outside properties seeking resemblance to double-barreled European equivalents. The outcome is expectantly grotesque:

> In the forest of the white man's names, there were the signs that said almost aloud: here lives a black imitator. MILLS-HAYFORD… PLANGE-BANNERMAN… ATTOH-WHITE… KUNTU-BLANKSON. Others that must have been keeping the white neighbours laughing even harder in their homes. ACROMOND… what Ghanaian name could that have been in the beginning, before its Civil Servant owner rushed to civilize it, giving it something like the sound of a master name (147).

The allure to all things foreign and exotic is referred to as, „the gleam" and plays lovingly on the imported objects of the Koomson's living-room where the light, „[…] glinted off every object in the room" (172). Koomson and his wife certainly enjoy „the gleam" and the man's wife is also attracted to it: „It's nice. It is clean, the life Estella is getting". But the man retorts mockingly, „Some of that kind of cleanliness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump" (52). The man's contempt for corruption and his insight are brought into his own home the evening of the unfolding coup when Koomson hides at the man's coiled up in a small ball in a darkened bedroom fearing his arrest. Naturally, Koomson is frightened and his nervousness is punctuated by „[…] half-audible rumblings from his belly and full, loud farts from below […]" (190). The man tries to coax Koomson out of the room but finds the experience totally repulsive. Koomsoon proclaims, „They will kill me" (191). At this point the man smells his breath describing it as, „[…] the rich stench of rotten menstrual blood" (191). The man holds his breath until the smell subsides, „[…] in the mixture with the liquid atmosphere of the Party man's farts filling the room" (191-192). And the rumblings continue:

> At the same time Koomson's insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal corrupt thunder which in its fullness sounded as if it had rolled down all the way from the eating throat thundering through the belly and the guts, to end in further silent pollution of the air already thick with flatulent fear (192).

Throughout this time the man's wife, Oyo stands outside close to the door curious to know what is happening but she retreats with a choking sound. The man, also in a state of resignation declares, „his only one thought now: to get out of this room" (192). The man feels like vomiting and wants to get away from the stench so he moves to open a window, „hoping to steal a breath of uncorrupted air" (192). Koomson appeals with a whining noise not to open the window and claims he is hungry so the man exits the room to get Oyo, his wife to prepare some food. Oyo comes close to her husband and whispers in his ear, „How he smells!" and when the food is ready his wife has a realization and looks into

her husband's eyes with gratitude and whispers chokingly, „I am glad you never became like him" (194). For the first time in his married life the man believes that his wife is glad to have him the way he is.

After his food, the noise of soldiers boots „marching to a disciplined rhythm" (194) prompts Koomson to exit the room. Unfortunately, his only means of escape appears to be through a latrine hole. Passing through the shithole by Koomson and the Man provides a symbolic moment in *Beautyful Ones*: the morally corrupt Koomson also wallowing in shit and covering his body with corrupt matter, while the man symbolically corrupts his body, because he had earlier, through his wife, shared Koomson's corrupt wealth when he failed to renounce the boat deal.

> He [the Man] could hear Koomson strain like a man excreting, then there was a long sound as if he were vomiting down there. But the man pushed some more, and in a moment a rush of foul air coming up told him the Party man's head was out […] (198).

As the Man crawls down the latrine his hands encounter small, rolled up balls of earth that feel like bits of soil thrown up by worms. The droppings of cockroaches stick to the Man's elbows and he feels an icy wetness which causes his right hand to slip and then he recalls the vomiting sound Koomson made on his way down.

The overall effect of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is to fix a sense of a whole nation labouring under a corrosive malaise. This sickness afflicts all levels of society from the humblest office cleaner to the most pampered government minister (Fraser 1980: 20). Armah uses images of decay and corruption exaggeratedly on nearly every page and, never fails to focus on the wetness that accompanies corruption and decay (to everyone's disgust). Hence the preponderant images of ooze, clamminess, slime, lubricity, mucus, urine, are accompanied with their accompanying offensive smells, often made more grotesque with images of retching, farting, vomiting, and bad breathe (Nolim 1992: 110).

Armah's story tells us that the birth of the real „beautiful ones" is somewhere in the future. At the end, regardless of all the ugliness „the man" experiences a distant but potentially beautiful future is presented. The image presenting this future is a painted flower which the man sees on the back of a bus which disappears out of sight as the bus leaves the town:

> The man watched the bus go all the way up the road and then turn and disappear around the town boundary curve. Behind it, the green paint was brightened with an inscription carefully lettered to form an oval shape:
>
> THE BEAUTFUL ONES
> ARE NOT YET BORN
>
> In the center of the oval was a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful (214).

At the same time the man hears a melodiously happy tune as a bird dives low and settles on the roof of a nearby latrine. Before the man can recall the type of bird (probably the chichidodo — the bird which feeds on excrement) his thoughts shift to his family, his work and everyday life and then slowly heads back home.

Conclusion

Armah's *Beautyful Ones* presents Nkrumah's socialist experiment as rotten and leaves the reader with a lingering stench, akin to the smell on the man after crawling through the latrine, after the novel ends. The Man waits for a fresh wind to blow away that stench, the misery and the corruption and for beauty to one day be born and grow. Armah ends The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born on a slight note of optimism. One day there *will* be a better future for post-colonial Ghana, but when and how, we are not sure. Armah's post-colonial Ghana is metaphorical for an Africa which lacks any coherent ideological future, one lost in corruption, consumption and corrosion. The criticism leveled at Armah for not setting the novel overtly in Ghana and for choosing sordid scatological imagery is a decent and correct one mainly because Armah's own criticism of post-colonial Ghana — as depicted in *The Beautyful Ones* — is one which actually deals with Africa's wider malaise, a pan-Africanism which Armah is part and parcel of since he holds a deep concern for the human condition and future of his fellow Africans. The deep human compassion which Armah holds for the African continent is often treated as naive and too idealistic to inspire any real change as Adewale Maja-Pearce states, „Armah is a visionary writer in the strict sense. This much at least must be conceded even if the details of what is effectively promoted as a blue print for a social and political arrangement are far too vague and simplistic to be convincing at any but the most hopeful level" (Adewale 1993: 13).

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born ends on a tentative optimistic note of hope that one day there will be so-called „Beautiful Ones" who have the capability to direct Ghana and a wider Africa towards a more innovative egalitarian society but before that happens there comes sowing, planting and preparation. In Armah's post-colonial Ghana that society is adjourned, at least for now until the „Beautiful Ones" are born.

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