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Identity and Alienation: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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Abstract:

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is a post-independent Ghanaian novel by Ayi Kwei Armah. Its mood is one of disappointment and lament over the socio-political realities of post-independent Ghana and by inference of most African countries. The novel is about a period of excessive despair and disillusionment for people like the unnamed protagonist, Man who have full faith in traditional rituals and customs but fail to acclimatize themselves in the changing westernized, money-minded society. But the work has got a ray of hope, a ray of optimism. The words written at the back of a Mammy-Wagon, “*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*” though appears to be pessimistic, but the pessimistic suggestion bears the possibility of its own hopeful contradiction, an accurate summation of society; at present there is utter despair and disillusionment prevailing in the society but the day will definitely come when the real beautiful ones, ones without evil traits will be born, who will demolish the remnants of the colonial administration. Thus, the novel is an optimistic one, full of hope for a golden period to be ushered in near future.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born marks the advent of a major talent on the African literary scene. For the critics who held that African novel must develop its uniqueness by reflecting its traditional norms and concerns, the novel came as a shock. Partly for this reason and partly for the controversial issues involved in the novel, it received considerable critical attention. Armah’s concern for the survival of the social norms and moral values coupled with his extensive use of symbols and images initiated a long term debate. The earlier critics and reviewers were hostile to the novel and condemned it as an expression of despair and disillusionment. For them the picture that the novel presents are that of a “dark haven, an unbearably pessimistic, and unabashedly pejorative, or worse in the context of Ghana, and uncalled for existentialist world” (Rao, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* 33).

Since the publication of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah has attracted critical attention by sheer excellence of his art. Initially, there were bitter voices that complained of his outsiderist posture that characterized him as a startling novelist, an “unpredictable enfant terrible at drastic odds with the literary establishment” (Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* IX). Sustained and concerted efforts to capture and present the contribution of Armah to the growth of the African fiction in English have been few and far between. In fact, Armah is a pioneer and a pathfinder who evolved a genuine poetics of the African people.

A closer look at the novel reveals the care and concern with which Armah has expressed his sense of commitment and pained concern for his people. The novel has a carefully woven symbolic structure. Chinua Achebe calls this work a “sick book” in which “the hero, pale and passive and nameless – a creation in the best manner of existentialist writing, wanders through the story in an anguished sleep, neck-deep in despair and human excrement of which we see a rather lot in the book” (“Africa and Her Writers” 25).

Eldred Jones in his review of the novel considers the dominant mood of the novel as one of the “hopeless despair” with the author’s “almost Swiftian preoccupation with the bodily secretions” (Rev. of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 55). He aptly concludes; “Armah has taken the predicament of Africa in general, Ghana in particular, and distilled its despair and its hopelessness in a very powerful, harsh, deliberately unbeautiful novel” (Rev. of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 56). Charles Nnolim throws light on the symbolic overtones in the work.

- Symbolically, Armah’s Ghana is Dante’s Inferno, and much of the events take place in the circles of the avaricious, the gluttonous and the lustful, which contains sinners who are aptly appeased with dirt and filth and who stink in the mire of their own corruption. (“Dialectic as Form” 210)

The novel’s mood is one of the disappointment and lament over the socio-political realities of post independent Ghana. The protagonists are two unnamed individuals, referred to as Man and Teacher, who refuses to be sucked into the general corrupt trend of the society. Man is a clerk in the control room of the Railway Administration and Takoradi, a job which is a source of livelihood and a means of escape through the thought of his failure as a man. Though married with a wife and three children, he remains a lonely and solitary figure, a living symbol of the hopelessness and powerlessness of the honest human being who is not willing to acquire wealth by devious means. As he clutches tenaciously to his integrity and fights to maintain it, he becomes the laughing stock of a society which no longer considers how money is made as long as it is made.

Man and his friend, the naked Teacher, who has stripped himself of all social ties, exist inside and at the same time outside society. His nakedness symbolizes his absolute purity. His is a vegetative life of lying naked in his room, reading books and listening to music.

He is an upright man who has resisted temptations. But Man struggles on in the face of scorn and ridicule even from people he loves. Unlike Teacher he would not let society crush his spirit. The price he pays for his choice is a daily life of shame.

Man and his family are living in abject poverty. He has to constantly endure the accusations of his family and of his mother-in-law. He is portrayed as passive, impotent and weak person. The pull on man is double and on one knows this better than him. The awareness makes his suffering worse. Teacher's life-style drags him towards despair, while Oyo, his wife drags him towards corruption. However, Man is set apart from others by his redeeming qualities. In the first place, he is sharp and is perceptive and is invested with "a mind and body which together form the nerve-centre of a radioactive kind of searchlight" (Aidoo, "No Saviors" 14). He is often amazed by the squat massiveness of his office building as he observes the "great deal of care" that went into the "making of even the bricks" (10-11).

This sensitive perception enables him to closely observe men and manners, helps him in his judgement of the beautiful and the ugly, and the moral choice between good and bad. Secondly, Man is alive to the social realities, particularly the problem of corruption, which is not only rampant but beyond control in the given context. He prefers to keep himself aloof from the mad crowds who are on the look-out for personal gain and comforts at any cost. He is unwilling to participate in the "national game" (129) of corruption and self-promotion.

Man is the inheritor of the traditional ideals and values. But it is Man who is forced to be a stranger in spite of himself. His family nags him for his lack of punch and the society dismisses him with contemptuous indifference. In one of his confessional moments, the Man informs Teacher:

I am the one who feels strange. (54)

His movements both physical and moral – is natural, but is always faced with the peculiar situation of being labeled unnatural by the society. It views his attempts at preserving his own integrity with a perverse logic, since it considers, "there was too much of the unnatural in any man who imagines he could escape the inevitable decay of life and not accept the decline into final disintegration" (47-48).

Man is not an activist but he is no outsider either. Although, he is not tainted by corruption, he manages to survive within a corrupt society. Man is good and his goodness is emphasized throughout. He is unlike Teacher who is an outsider, who reads, listens to radio and admits he is not free. Teacher has left his family and his ancestors but with the realization that he is nothing without them. At least Man has his family and is able survive in an era of crass materialism.

The predicament of Man is contrasted with the rapid fortunes of his childhood friend, Joseph Koomson – the Minister. He has secured a high place in the social and political hierarchy. He reads the pulse of the people and exploits the prevailing situation to the fullest advantage. His success story from that of a dock-worker to the position of a minister through manipulative skills testifies his belief in the easy gains. Koomson is a total violation of everything his party stands for. His money making schemes prompt him to declare socialism as a "nuisance" (136). The hypocrisy of the regime is brought out when he confesses that "the old man [Nkumah] himself does not believe in it" (136). In fact, his moral depravity symbolizes the ethos of a whole nation.

Man, on the other hand, follows norms and principles scrupulously. He is alone in the pursuit of a life that open up possibilities for all, amidst people who are driven by selfish motives. He frequently visits one of his friends, Teacher, from whom he seeks advice and guidance. Teacher's role in the novel is central. The social oblivion that Teacher has imposed upon himself has much to do with the disaffection in the post independent situation. The degradation in all walks of life as a result of the "easy slide" (31) towards "the blinding gleam" (56) forces him to adopt a lonely posture. He realizes he cannot redeem society so he redeems himself in his own way by not participating in the normal social activities of life. In spite of his isolation and idealism, Teacher sees with great clarity what is going on in society. He sees that in Ghanaian society anyone who wants to be happy and give his loved ones the things they desire is forced to make a compromise. He realizes that the land wants a man, not honest and living but completely like its dead self. The only way to rise above it and still maintain one's dignity is to run away from the situation. Teacher's story and conduct unwittingly vindicates the belief that being happy within the Ghanaian situation inevitably presupposes being drawn into the web of corruption. Teacher has obtained freedom but only at a terrible price of condemning himself to a half-line of loneliness. Even then he is not really free, for he still long to meet the loved ones, to touch them, and to be touched by them. The memory of the dear ones and the consciousness of the way in which he has abandoned them, constantly prey on his mind and they visit him in his dreams:

- There is my mother. Now at last she leaves me alone, but two nights past she was with me in a dream full of guilt and fear and loneliness. (60)

Teacher thus, is far from being a happy man. In spite of his outer calm and nakedness, he is man in pain. The tragedy of his situation and that of Ghana is summed up in his discovery that there is no salvation anywhere. Finally, he withdraws himself into the shell of isolation in which his freedom is indistinguishable from his non-existence. He asserts:

- It [Freedom] makes no difference. If we can't consume ourselves for something we believe in, freedom makes no difference at all.... I am free to do what I want, but there is nothing happening now that I want to join. (61)

The onus lies entirely on Man to show a positive framework of mind to carry on his lonely struggle. Even Man cannot be a party to the driving ambitions exhibited by Koomson and his wife Estella Koomson. Man's position is finally vindicated and his paradox is resolved by the ultimate downfall of Koomson and his regime in a coup that forces him to take the help of man. Thus, the false façade of the gleam gets exposed, but still there is hope in the new dispensation. And so, the question continues whether the beautiful ones will ever be born. Man prepares to resume his routine, hopefully waiting for the arrival of the beautiful ones. Despite all the pressures and adverse conditions, Man keeps his integrity intact and comes out of the ordeal unscathed.

The sad paradox of Man's life is that home which is normally a place of love, security and assurance has become the darkest place for him. This unnamed protagonist, leading a dull and drab life, gets trampled down in his fight against society and its rottenness. The

thought of his family, his loved ones, to whom he must go back after work does not fill him with happiness, for their sufferings are the sharpest reminders of his inadequacy and failure. The occasional encouragement he gets from Teacher, whose life of total isolation sometimes tempts Man, although he always manages to rise above it.

- You know it is impossible for me to watch the things that go on and say nothing. I have my family. I am in the middle. (93)

Oyo's part in the novel emphasizes the degree of Teacher's ethical victory. Oyo is a type Eve, the Biblical temptress. "Her tactics are obvious. The commonest one is that of appealing to the man's natural desire for material wealth in the form of a long car and a big house or a romantic effect of a sweet smelling perfume," (Ola, "Ayi Kwei Armah: The Essence of African Womanhood" 1-15) like the one, Man, Oyo's husband felt on Estella Koomson's hand when he shook it. There is another method of posing as the unlucky and injured wife; when these two tactics fail, she applies another method of direct taunting to make Man feel less than a man. In a fit of anger, she calls him chichidodo and proceeds to explain her reason for doing so.

- Ah, you know, the chichidodo is a bird. The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul. But...only feeds on maggots, and...the maggots grow best inside the lavatory. This is the chichidodo. (45)

The increasing desire for materialistic wealth and passive acceptance for corruption is expressed in Robert Fraser's observation that the characters in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* "give the impression of being in the grip of a covetous mania, an engrossing hunger for material possessions which prevents them from attending to deeper spiritual needs" (*The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* 12).

Man experiences insults and humiliation both from the family as well as from others. The bus conductor insults him for soiling his bus, the merchant for not accepting bribe, and his mother-in-law for poverty but he does not retaliate. Actually he himself is very well acquainted of his impotence and lack of strong will:

- I have been walking along paths chosen for me before I had really decided. (60)

Despite such attacks, he retains his love and consideration for his family and struggles to follow the righteous path. Again, it is the Teacher, the man belonging to the post independent Ghana, the educator and the maker of the society, representing the *Guru* in Indian sense, who assures Man of the superiority of his own stand over that of his wife, Oyo who wants him to jump into the path of corruption. Teacher admits that a troubled but committed life like Man's is much richer than an empty one like his and urges Man to fight on.

Armah portrays Man's wife as the living embodiment of the society and its values, which Man stands against. The pressure from Oyo is worse than that exerted by the rest of the society, since she is a loved one and the suffering stares Man in the face. Man is anxious to alleviate his suffering but only by honest means. The bullying matriarch, Oyo's mother, does not make things easier for Man. She is the main engineer of the boat deal with the Koomsons. Her method of attack is that of moaning and groaning about the deprivation of her grandchildren and the sufferings of her daughter. She adds another and a very serious dimension to Man's trials.

Man is vindicated and rewarded after the military coup when once influential politician Koomson had to flee the country with his help. Like Shakespeare's *Shrew*, Oyo undergoes a process of education and comes to appreciate her husband's integrity. After taking care of the refugee, Joseph Koomson, Man meets his wife:

- He [Man] went back into the hall and stood quietly beside Oyo. She held his hand in a tight grasp. Then, in a voice that sounded as if she were stifling, she whispered, 'I am glad you never became like him.' (165)

In Oyo's eyes there was now real gratitude. Perhaps for the first time in her married life she was glad to have him the way he was. Ultimately Man's love, understanding and patience is reciprocated by Oyo, his loved one, and his integrity gets appreciation. Armah's vision is therefore, not entirely pessimistic, as may seem to be the case if events are just seen from Teacher's point of view or from Man's personal experiences. In reality, Man is deeply attached to the society and he is frustrated to see the prevailing corruption and disorder in the society and his incapability to reform it increases his distress.

The present Ghanaian society is a symbol of decay, rot, filth, putrefaction and corruption. Armah's vision of the world is better than 'what exists.' He sees infinite possibilities of Man rising higher than that of the present moment. What prompts him to portray decay and degeneration with all its allusory motifs is a reflection of the deep rooted pain and hurt. As a result, he projects that the African history is a continuous story of exploitation and betrayal, first by the master and then by another. The pungent satire in this novel is directed particularly against the latter category whom Frantz Fanon describes in a title of his treatise as "Black Skin, White Masks" (*Black Skin, White Masks*) and whom Armah himself terms as "Black Masters, White Shadows" (Rao, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* 36). Fanon's theory of Neo-colonialism has far-reaching implications and his perspective comments help to put this novel in its proper perspective. He opines:

- The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vacation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket. The psychology of the national bourgeoisie is that of the businessman, not that of a captain of industry. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 120)

The society of Ghana represented by Man is the society overloaded with the weight of evil practices of corruption and depravity of moral values. The decay and rot are so blatant in contemporary Ghana and corruption so rampant that one is constantly drawn to Fanon's portents even before many African nations gained independence. Armah realizes that the prophecy comes to be true with devastating effects and this work of Armah is a manifestation of this realization of the "obscene haste" (88) to reach at the top. It is with the businessman-like psychology of the national bourgeoisie and their activities of the intermediary type that Armah deals within this piece of art with the clinical precision of a surgeon. The novelist also decries the national leaders for their greed and acquisitiveness.

The power of this work is the consistency with which Armah exploits the central symbol of filth to articulate the revulsion against corruption. This alleviates the didactic quality of the novel's preoccupation with political and social corruption. On the way to work, Man passes a waste box white the caption in bold, shiny, red capitals:

KEEP YOUR COUNTRY CLEAN
BY KEEPING YOUR CITY CLEAN. (7)

Immediately the association between filth and moral squalor, cleanliness and moral purity, is registered. Ironically, however, the box which is supposed to symbolize the people's determination to preserve certain strands of decency and purity attracts the worst kinds of filth, and within a very short time the shiny red capitals reflecting the optimism of a few idealists can no longer be seen. Like the all-powerful night, corruption and filth draw everything to themselves, and smother even the very best of intentions.

The Railway Administration Block, where Man works is a mass of decay, putrefaction and filth, reeking of putrid turpentine. The banister is like a long piece of diseased skin and the character of the wood itself has been changed by the accretion of excreta over the years. Armah insists on the realistic details of urine, faeces and snot to suggest the repulsiveness of corruption. In his view, the whole of Ghana, buildings as well as the people, stinks of corruption. He also focuses on the bubbles of yellow filmy saliva playing around the wolfish timber merchant's mouth. Armah forces us to feel disgust as the woman sucks her child's nostril, not to arouse our indignation against her but against the authorities who allow her to languish in poverty, squalor and ignorance, while they fatten themselves on the country's riches: "His mother calmly puts her mouth to the wet congested nostrils and sucks them free" (35).

Armah is completely frank in describing the bodily functions. The latrine becomes another symbol for the Ghanaian body politic—decayed, uncared-for and stinking with corruption, just as the latrine reeks of excrement, and just as each user leaves his own dark smear on the walls, so each minister or official befouls his already ill-used country with his own corrupt acts. Armah also insists on the juxtaposition and association of excrement and sex, as there are sexual drawings on the walls of the lavatory, in the country, on the whole the most corrupt men are also notable for their sexual activities.

The novel powerfully reveals the contemporary Ghanaian conditions and parallels it with many independent African countries, where independence has propelled new set of masters, black this time, into the seats that the colonial bosses used to occupy. These new masters have acquired the same status symbols and behave with the same arrogance and condescension like the old bosses. Armah's satire is especially vitriolic when directed against the grotesque attempt of this new class to behave like Englishmen. Over the entire country broods, a mood of hopeless gloom. The prospects for most of the people are bleak. Their life is marked by spiritual sterility, boredom and loneliness. Moreover, corruption is accepted as inevitable and even those adversely affected by it are prepared to bear patiently in the hope that their own turn to eat will come. Ministers and other authorities carry on their fraudulent practices without interference, largely because corruption is virtually accepted as the legitimate means of enhancing one's prosperity. For instance, Oyo, the wife of Man, struggling under the weight of poverty is convinced that Man should accept bribes to supplement his meager salary. She uses this striking analogy:

- Those who wanted to get far had to learn to drive fast...Accidents would happen...but the fear of accidents would never keep men from driving, and Joe Koomson had learned to drive. (58-59)

The claim of the loved ones and the silent accusation in the eyes of relatives help to wear down the resistance of men of honesty and integrity. However, the men who are responsible for the inextricable confusion of good and evil are represented by Koomson. His career shows how originally well-intentioned politician can be seduced by the fruits of office. Koomson is not really a bad man. During his visit to Man's house, one can see the marked contrast between his behaviour and that of his repulsive wife, Estella. While she is condescending, ill-mannered and snobbish, he is jovial and expansive and does his best to put his host and hostess at their ease. At another time, he buys some bread from a pleading old woman, though he already has more than enough.

He is an example of a will perverted by the prevailing temper of the times. However, he is not thoroughly corrupt and his spiritual rottenness is indicated by the foul smell emanating from the body as he cowers in Man's bedroom in his attempt to escape from the police.

- He [Man] waited for Koomson to say something now, but only the subdued breathing of the frightened man, punctuated with increasing rapidity [by half audible rumblings from his belly]. His [Koomson's] mouth had the rich stench of rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the new smell had gone down in the mixture with the liquid atmosphere of the Party man's fart filling the room...from the eating throat thundering the belly and the guts. (161-163)

Thus, the darkness inside the Man's room is made more suffocating by the presence of Koomson – his fear and his stench. He cringes like a frightened animal and finally squeezes his enormous bulk through the lavatory hole used by the Man's family. The grueling struggle through the putrid lavatory has two functions. In the first place it enables Koomson to experience the conditions of life of Ghanaians, whose trust he has betrayed; secondly the lavatory is a place where Koomson belongs in the end, its putrefaction mirrors his spiritual rottenness: "He [Man] could hear Koomson strain like a man excreting, then there was a long sound as if he were vomiting...the man [Man] pushed some more, and in a moment a rush of foul air coming up told him the Party man's head was out. The body dragged itself painfully down, and the man [Man] got ready to follow into the hole" (168).

By following Koomson into the hole, Man finally vindicates the view that everyone, innocent as well as guilty, is involved in the effects of corruption. Man and Koomson take the help of a boatman to cross the shore. There was still fear on the face of the boatman but it was "unmistakably the fear of one weak man in the presence of another just as weak" (173). Having accompanied Koomson near the other shore, Man jumps into the black water to come out afresh; this symbolizes his personal cleansing. On his way back home, he observes an inscription in an oval shape on the back of a Mammy Wagon:

THE BEAUTYFUL ONES
ARE NOT YET BORN. (183)

The novel's title - *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* – is endorsed by its bleak conclusion. The coup occurs but corruption continues and although Man undergoes a symbolic cleansing in the sea before turning in the direction of home, it is only a personal cleansing unrelated to what goes in the larger world around.

Ama Ata Aidoo thinks that the novel's tone is a positive one portending optimism. No doubt, the society is facing a difficult time before the birth of beautiful ones but a positive hope is sustaining people because the beautiful ones will definitely be born in future.

- Perhaps the beautiful ones, when they are born and let's pray it will be soon, will take care of everything and everybody once and for all time. The least we can do is wait. ("No Saviors" 18)

Man realizes that the change of regime may not bring any real change in the structure of the society. One cannot miss the foresight of Man when he opines that the change of regime is nothing more than "a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted" (162).

Even future does not perceive all that bleakness either. Man is prepared to wait for when the future unfolds, it will not take the present models as its beautiful ones. Moreover, apart from the personal hope in Oyo's confession to Man, Armah offers us a little cause for optimism; on the way home, Man sees the soldiers of the new regime demanding and accepting bribe. But the optimism, the positivism in the eyes of Man as well as that of Armah, is still maintained with a hope for the birth of the beautiful ones in near future. Thus, to conclude, Achebe's words about the novel are quite apt, he avers that Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is "a striking parable of corruption in Ghana society and one man who refuses to be contaminated by this filth"; but it is "a sick book, sick not with the sickness of Ghana, but with the sickness of the human condition" ("Africa and Her Writers" 25) and this sickness is diligently portrayed in this seminal text.

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