

The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born: A True Picture of African Society

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Abstract: *The Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah, has proved himself to be a tireless experimenter who has a genius for finding new mediums for old messages. His obsessive vision of an Africa whose only hope for the future lies in breaking the paralysing grip of western influence is embodied in five entirely different and independent fictional modes: a classical-cum- allegorical first novel, a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman, a polemical roman a thesis, an epic, and a historical novel. A critique which highlights ongoing thematic concerns at the expense of palpable innovations and discontinuities run the risk of reading Armah's Oeuvre as if it were a single novel. His The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is one of the famous novels of post-colonial African literature. During that period the novelists were less lost in thought with cultural and sociological matters than with the exposure of corruption and incompetence widespread in the African political system. With its uniqueness and by a reflection of the traditional African forms and concerns, The Beautiful Ones marks the advent of a major talent on the African literary scene. In fact, in a sense, the novel marks the realization of the fuller potential of the African artist to write about African reality. It registers Armah's revulsion against corruption in his native Ghana. Dominated by a mood of total disillusionment, the novel uses the imagery of sickness to characterize the Ghanaian situation. The narrative has the merciless quality of the description of the African reality. Its darkness as also its labyrinthine world of dark dingy surroundings acts both as a symbol and real-life pictures. The Beautiful Ones is at once a bitter satire against the political reality of Ghana in particular, and the bizarre political reality of the Third World in general. This paper is an attempt to convey the social and political corruption of contemporary Ghana. Pointing towards the Ghanaian reality, this paper shows how the narrative raises certain fundamental questions about the development in the recently liberated Afro-American countries with a boldness of commitment.*

Key Words: *post-colonialism, Hopeless despair, Corruption, Neo-colonialism.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

This is a clever and uncomfortable moral fable, handling human- values without withholding sympathy from the clumsy ones and those whom weakness implies to a pursuit of power (Guardian)

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born tells the story of a simple railway clerk during the regime of Kwame Nkrumah at the time when Ghana gained independence from Britain. But the story could take place in almost any new nation of Africa since it deals with that handmaiden of fledgeling African sovereignty: corruption in people's governments. The social, economic and political absurdities in the post-colonial situation quite tragically reinforce the very values of exploitation and elitism. What prompts Armah to portray decay and degeneration is a deep-rooted feeling of pain and hurt. As a result, we are compelled to see that African history is a continuous story of exploitation and betrayal, first by the colonial masters and later on by their post-colonial followers. The pungent satire in this novel is directed particularly against the latter category whom Fanon describes as "black skins, white masks" and whom Armah himself treats as "Black Masters, White Shadows." Fanon's theory of neocolonialism has far-reaching effects and his sensitive remarks aid us to put the novel in its proper outlook:

The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not involved in the manufacture, nor in creation, nor structure, nor labour; is it completely canalized into activities of the intermediate type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket. The psychology of the rational bourgeoisie is that of the businessman, not that of a captain of industry. (Fanon)

Ayi Kwei Armah has written short stories, poetry and some astringent political criticism. In the field of novel writing, he established himself as an exceptionally innovative artist. In his novels, Armah has made the most emphatic and bracing departures. Since his first emergence in 1968 as the author of the justly acclaimed The Beautiful Ones Are Yet Born, Ayi Kwei Armah has been seen as a starling writer, a fearless and unpredictable enfant terrible at drastic odds with the literary establishment. Thus, Eldred Jones evaluates it "the dominating mood of the novel is one of hopeless despair" (Jones, African Literature Today, vol. 3). While E.N. Obeichina talks of its rigid moral positions (Obenchain, 49), Molly Mahood concludes that the dominating mood of the novel is one of the almost total disillusionment.

Armah comes to be saddled with structures which are essentially political rather than artistic in nature. His misfortune in this regard is similar to another writer from the Third world: The Trinidadian novelist, V.S. Naipaul. In both, a determination to see, things straight has been taken as a kind of obsessive and twisted acidity. Obiechina in his critical framework argues:

on the level of the parable, it might pass but on the particularized level of fact, it raises numerous weighty questions which, given the limitations of the fictional medium, cannot be adequately dealt with. Maybe Armah has not heard of the world's 'neocolonialism' or how it operates on the African men and on the African political destiny. Maybe he underrated what has been called the colonialism of the mind.(Obiechina,49)

The protagonist of *The Beautiful Ones*, known as 'the man' throughout, is a down-at-heel Morse operator in the employ of the Ghana Railway Corporation at Takoradi. The term by which he is designated suggests both his social obscurity and partially, his representative quality. His work is dull and unrewarding. His family, frustrated by poverty and deferred expectations, are pinched and resentful. Chinua Achebe very critically analyzes this fact and suggests:

"There is a brilliant Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah. Who seems to me to be in grave danger of squandering his enormous talents and energy in pursuit of the human condition? In an impressive first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* he gives us the striking parable of the corruption of Ghanaian society and of one man who refuses to be contaminated by this filth." (Achebe 25)

The man has two redeeming qualities. The first is his acute and sensitive intelligence. Man did not opt this mode of existence by his choice rather he is forced to forgo his early ambitions because of an amorous misadventure. He is continually tortured by thoughts of the future he might have had, the gap that has widened between him and those of his less able contemporaries who have achieved eminence. His intelligence, however, is less a matter of sheer ability than of the moral focus which he brings to bear both on his own life and on those of his countrymen. His suffering is heightened by an awareness of lost opportunities, political betrayal and cultural dislocation. Of all the characters in the novel, he is virtually alone in his decision to put into practice the official party ideals of 'hard work and honesty and integrity'. Claude Wauthier rightly expresses his view:

"It is not only the Nigerian writers who have no illusions about the political life of their country. The entire novel of the Ghanaian, Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, is a sombre, disillusioned account of the corruption of Nkrumah's regime. The hero, a runaway employee, refuses to take part in the rampant corruption, in spite of the reproaches of his wife and his mother-in-law, who consider him to be over-scrupulous"(Gauthier,320).

His difficulties are only increased by the fact that his job confronts him with numerous opportunities to improve his lot by accepting bribes. In the third chapter, an Ashanti timber contractor visits the office while the man is doing overtime and attempts to bribe him but the man blatantly refuses. When his wife learnt of his refusal to comply she tells us that this is not the first time that he has refused the fruits of graft and greed.

His abstinence is made all the harder by the prospect of Koomson, an old school friend, successfully scaling the upward path towards the giddy height of power. Koomson's success is the result of moral laxity and an ability to spot the main chance. He now lives in one of the brasher residential estates that previously accommodated the envied colonizer. His wife bedecked with imported finery, his sister-in-law studying in England for the higher course. His life is irradiated by that dazzling gleam the man's own so conspicuously lacks. It is Koomson rather than the man who is seen to epitomize the moral outlook of the nation, for, despite his wealth and prestige, Koomson's ideals correspond to the triumphant average. His mind perennially occupied with money-making schemes. Materially opulent, he is morally bankrupt, a complete contradiction of everything for which the party officially stands. However, it is Koomson whom the people envy, not the man, a preference which tells us much about the state of the national consciousness.

There is an important character—Teacher known for part- mystic, part- writer, part- preacher. If the man is Everyman, beset with temporal concerns, then Teacher is an artist with an artist's special plea to be heard. Teacher's social isolation is mirrored by his personal circumstances. Unmarried, he remains uncluttered by the demands of 'the loved ones'. In effect, however, Teacher has only solved his moral problems simplifying them. He has deliberately contrived his situation so that his honesty hurts no one but himself. In the last resort, there is too little parity between his position and the man's for him to be able to offer viable advice.

Ultimately the man is subdued by the realisation, that he faces his dilemma alone. He is stuck with an ethical fastidiousness which in his position is completely inappropriate. Koomson elicited from the man a complex attitude which in some ways distils his predicament. At bottom, he knows his friend's kind of success to be detestable. He is under no illusions as to his friend's ability or his morality. He is forever haunted by the possibility that his scruples are nothing but a cover for a weakness. The man contemplates Koomson's strength from a position of weakness. In this respect, Chinua Achebe's critical view attracts our attention when he observes:

It is well-written book. Armah's command of language and imagery is of a very high order indeed. But it is a sick book. Sick, not with the sickness of Ghana, but with the sickness of the human condition. The hero, pale and passive and nameless---a creation is the best manner of existentialist writing, wanders through the story in an anguished half-sleep, neck-deep in despair and human excrement of which we see rather a lot in the book. He reminded me very strongly of that man and woman in a Jean-Paul Sartre novel who sit in anguished gloom in a restaurant and then in a sudden access of nihilistic energy seize table knives and stab their hands right through to the wood to prove some very obscure point to each other" (Achebe,25).

The overall effect of the novel is to fix a sense of a whole nation labouring under a corrosive malaise. The sickness afflicts all levels of society from the humblest office cleaner to the most pampered government minister. Robert Fraser's approach is upright when he says, "Armah analysis to certainly palpably corrupt practices such as bribery is to confine his point and hence to anaesthetize it. His method digs way beneath his superficial satire; it becomes a means of exposing the eddies of disturbance below the manifestly rotten surface"(Fraser,20)

Thus, throughout the book, primary moral impulses are seen to be hedged about with endless qualifications arising from the actual conditions of life inside which they must operate. The man's elemental sense of integrity may not be socially determined. The man is not like Sartre's characters. A free agent he has to be seen in common with all the other characters, as an expression of his society. His insight may be exceptional, but his sense of shame is absolutely not. Like the young sweeper Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's novel of Indian life *Untouchables*, he is the product of a long process that has left him and his kind stranded far from hope.

To put it another way, the man is a victim of history. The historical dimension in the book is a very important aspect of Armah's general vision. It is observable from two angles: the short perspective of recent Ghanaian politics and the longer perspective of century's old cultural betrayal. The paradox as much on the cultural level as on the level of material success, lies certainly in the fact that the writers of this literature for the masses are socially much closer to the African proletariat than the intellectuals who belong, willy-nilly to the new African middle class. When the intellectual writers are it, Armah, Aluko, Achebe or Soyinka---attack corruption, they are concerned with the political situation. Therefore, Emmanuel Obiechina rightly examines the technique and approach of Armah:

"Armah also occurs a gallery of flat, parabolic characters some of whom, like the Man and the Naked Man, also do not have proper names. Among these, we can identify the good man clinging precariously to his moral integrity in a corrupting world, the disillusioned and bitterly cynical outsider, the corrupt politician, the disappointed and contemptuous wife, the hate-filled mother-in-law. These are among numerous cardboard characters used by Armah to explore social corruption in post-independence Ghana" (Obiechina, culture,346)

2. CONCLUSION:

To sum up, the social and political corruption of contemporary Ghana is seen to be the legacy of years of moral compromise, a history of duplicity which precedes independence, and even colonialism itself. The Man's isolation is caused by the fact that together with Teacher, he retains a glimmering, indistinct sense of virtues long since lost to the rest of his society. The Man's vision is nothing if not social. This way, it can be summed up in the opinion of Obiechina:

"The central theme of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is social corruption; Armah approaches it through the tradition of parabolic narrative, and through well-chosen illustrative images. Like Soyinka, Armah employs a cinematographic technique, following his spotlight over well-chosen areas, dwelling on them long enough to build up impression through which the moral state is expressed "(culture11).

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