DESPAIR AND DISINTEGRATION IN NOVELS BY ARMAH

DESPAIR AND DISINTEGRATION IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN AND FRAGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the dominant themes of Armah's novels -- the despair and social fragmentation that plague post-Independence Africa. These themes are treated in varying degrees in all of Armah's five novels: The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Fragments, Why Are We So Blest?, Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers. In each of them, however, the time, setting and focus are different. However, his conviction that Africa's vision has been impaired because she traded her traditional values for unsuitable alien ones, with the resultant tension in family and social relationships, is consistent. Because of length restriction, this thesis focuses on The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Fragments, Armah's first two novels. However, an attempt is made to generalize the Ghanaian experience in these two novels to embrace the whole of Africa, by making comparisons with and drawing parallels to the rest of his novels as well as novels by other African writers, notably Achebe and Ngugi. The first two chapters deal almost exclusively with Armah's literary treatment of the botched-up political experiment of Independence. The concluding chapter examines the likely political future of Ghana (and Africa) vis-a-vis current political events and the dominant themes of Armah's novels, for which the Appendix provides political and historical background.

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Chapter 1

The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born

... and everywhere the ceremony
Of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction,
While the worst are full of passionate intensity.

- W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

I

The bleakest African novel ever written about the disenchantment following Africa's Independence, Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born[1] defies a strait-jacket interpretation. Critics have variously described it as a moral fable[2], an allegory[3], "a dialectical work"[4]. Others regard it as an extremely "sick book"[5], very "uncomfortable" and full of "mythic undercurrent[s]".[6] Indeed, there is no end to the debate on what Armah is about in this explosive first novel.[7] That the novel is a tour de force is attested to by its ability to evoke such diverse emotions from different readers. Certainly, its controversiality has gained for it a certain notoriety, which has helped to place it among the foremost of African novels.

Part of the attraction of The Beautyful Ones is the sheer volume of criticism it has drawn from admirers and detractors alike. Western critics have been more appreciative of Armah than have African critics, and where their criticism is both severe and adverse, some try to explain away Armah's "peculiar" writing by referring to such European influences as Sartre, Beckett and Kafka. In Africa and even Ghana, Armah is not so "fortunate". Derek Wright tabulates some criticisms by fellow African writers,

showing that the novel has been castigated for displaying

> a private and westernized sensibility's rejection of the extended family's "familial warmth"; an abject failure to differentiate between different kinds of Ghanaian speech and to realize Ghanaian settings; an impaired vision, depicting a falsified, unrecognizable Ghana, and betraying a long-expatriated author's failing insight into the drama of Nkrumah's political experiment; a general lapse into oversimplified opinions which account for African political failure entirely in terms of the personal selfishness of leaders, when "explanations must lie deeper in the complex process of history."[8]

Though the above criticisms include Achebe's evaluation of The Beautyful Ones, it is pertinent here to pay closer attention to Achebe's objections to the novel. This is mainly because Achebe occupies such a prominent place in the corpus of African literature that his words carry authority. In his book Morning Yet On Creation Day, Achebe makes some observations on The Beautyful Ones which offer a useful starting point for discussing the novel. Achebe's major accusations against Armah are that : 1) Armah is not sufficiently local. He argues that Armah writes a universal story instead of exposing and illuminating a peculiar Ghanaian problem. 2) Armah is too influenced by the mannerisms of existentialist thought and writing, and this element tends to clash with the "pretence" that the novel is set in Ghana. In fact, says Achebe, Armah is an alienated writer, and no longer African. 3) Armah's central excremental metaphor is foreign. In other words, Achebe is implying that Africans should not write like this. 4) Armah's subconscious would not allow him to squander his enormous talents on the useless task of writing a modern existentialist tale, hence he unconsciously introduces a

few details which seek to convert his novel into a moral fable.[9]

Some of these charges cannot be taken seriously. The claim, for instance, that the excremental metaphor is foreign is untenable. It is true that we tend to associate scatological images with non-African writers such as Swift and Rabelais, but there certainly is no limit to the store of images available to any writer -- African and non-African alike. The excrement in Armah's writing is a metaphor which above all implies disgust, and it would be petty for Achebe to argue that an African cannot feel disgust for his own country, or that to feel disgust is somehow reprehensible. Nor is it true that Armah is not sufficiently local or African. In fact, Armah can be local to a fault. His description of Takoradi harbour area is documentarily accurate. As Wright points out, most of the major events take place at the Esikafo Estates, the harbour and in the Kansawora Railway Office. Wright's comment that, "In fact, we are explicitly in Ghana from the messenger's lottery win onwards: 'But you known our Ghana.'"[10] could not have been truer. As for Armah's not being "African", this is simply ridiculous. Armah himself strongly repudiates the charge in an article in West Africa magazine: "I had long had a sense of myself not simply as an Akan, an Ewe, a Ghanaian and a West African, but most strongly and significantly as an African."[11]

But perhaps this is not Achebe's point. Perhaps Achebe means that the quality of life depicted in the novel -- the aimlessness, cheerlessness, hopelessness and squalor -- is not an

accurate representation of Ghanaian life. The novel, however, is primarily symbolic. It is exceptional in the sense that, while "the African Novel," with the outstanding exception of Camara Laye's The Radiance of the King and, perhaps, Soyinka's The Interpreters, has tended to be realistic, Armah on the other hand aims to reveal truths about Ghana and Africa by a different approach. He seeks, through symbolism, to reveal the deep significance of Ghana's corruption and social disintegration. His novel is therefore certainly about Ghana even if many of his details are not typically Ghanaian.

What of Armah's alleged alienation? Alienation is a loaded word and Achebe uses it rather loosely. Technically, it is linked with existentialism. In the existentialist view, man is essentially alienated; in other words, he has no basic purpose or essence. The phrase which sums up this notion is Sartre's "Existence precedes essence". This philosophy questions the very existence of man, who can be one of two things: he can be an aimless bored wanderer or an active dynamic creator of his own reasons for living.[12] The concept, however, of alienation is capable of other interpretations. For Christians, alienation is the result of "original sin", that pristine act of disobedience which caused us to be separated from God. There is also a Marxist view of alienation. It occurs when men are moved by capitalism from the fruits of their labour: when that labour is produced for the benefit of other people. In such a situation, men feel a loss of self-essence; ultimately, they do not feel that they themselves

are worth anything. Such a view is what Dickens portrays in Hard Times.

However, in so far as alienation is a theme in Armah's novel, in so far as the hero is seen to be suffering from a bewildering sense of his own unworthiness, this has a social and not an existentialist cause. Armah shows that it is the conduct of the powerful in society which brings about this problem. It is the Koomsons of Ghana (or Africa) who, by their corruption, engender all the moral bewilderment. But Achebe's use of the word is not even so technical, when he says that Armah is an alienated writer. All he really seems to mean is that Armah no longer belongs to Africa, or perhaps does not really care about the people of Africa.

Is this, however, true? Is it, in fact, the case that Armah is any more westernized than any African writer who has a western education? On the contrary, a more careful reading of the novel shows that one object of Armah's most virulent satire is the cheap westernization which afflicts contemporary African society, and which he exposes at several levels. The famous passage in which Armah discusses the names of Africa's nouveau riche is one high point of this satire (pp. 125-6).

Armah ridicules the vulgar materialism which has beset Ghana as a result of its contact with Europe. Koomson's radio booms like thunder, while his sister-in-law, Regina, is specializing as a dressmaker in London. She has, in fact, fallen in love with a Jaguar and threatens to commit suicide if she is

not able to buy one. Supposedly, Koomson will have to divert public funds to meet this new craving just as he did in the case of the scholarship for Regina's course. Armah's argument is that this kind of misplaced priority in the use of public funds adds to the sufferings and disenchantment of the people. This theme, the erosion of values, the erosion of African identity, is in fact central to Armah's thought. It is at the heart of Fragments, his next novel, in which the protagonist returns home from many years of studying in America to find that Africa has become nothing more than a vulgar imitation of the West, with no values except materialism and the addiction to imported goods.

The situation in Fragments is the reverse of what happens in Achebe's No Longer At Ease, where the hero's westernization makes him unfit for Africa. In Armah, it is Africa itself which has become too westernized for his visionary protagonists. In Fragments, the voice of traditional Africa is Naana, but no one pays her any attention. She is, in fact, treated by her family, as an eccentric windbag who has lost contact with modern Africa. Thus the core of family life -- respect for the aged and a belief in traditional values -- has been shattered and the individual, family and nation are left adrift, wandering aimlessly. Yet, it is to Naana that Armah gives some of the most beautiful prose to be found in contemporary African writing. There is no doubt whatever that Armah attaches great value to the past and to the traditions of Africa. The charge, therefore, that he is alienated is very strange. What Armah is asking for is that Africa should

return to itself.[13]

Achebe is, however, helpful in one observation. He makes a distinction between The Beautyful Ones and what he calls the "Moral Fable" of Africa. It is this latter kind of novel that Achebe describes as a European modern story, and he argues that there is a profound sense in which Armah's novel represents a different kind of consciousness, perhaps a later stage in the evolution of the African novel. Hitherto, African novels had tended to express or assume a shared outlook as to what is right or wrong. The individual might reject the social code but he does so with the awareness of his own guilt, or of himself as an outlaw. More precisely, the African novel assumed that traditional social values, social relations, survive even into the post-colonial period, providing a more or less acceptable value system. Armah's The Beautyful Ones is among the first, perhaps accompanied by Soyinka's The Interpreters, to see African society as irrevocably fragmented and to face up to some of the implications of this vision.

To proceed to the other objections stated earlier, it is indeed true that in The Beautyful Ones the extended family system is at the periphery of social and family life, and not the core of it. With the exception of the Man, his wife, children and mother-in-law (and the Koomsons), every character is a lone wolf adrift in a world without meaning and purpose. This, however, is precisely Armah's point. Western culture has eaten into traditional family values and individualism has supplanted the

cohesiveness of the extended family structure.

The question of "Africanism" is also swiftly dealt with. There is enough pidgin and local idiom of proverb in the novel to counter the charge that Armah's work lacks "Africanism". The conversations between the clerks in the Railway Office, as well as the numerous latrine graffiti, are mainly in pidgin. So is the use of local proverbs. The boatman, for example, falls back on "the ancient dignity of formal speech" (p. 174), when Koomson goes to him for help at the collapse of the Nkrumah regime. (It is significant that in Ghana, as in most of Africa, weighty issues are often discussed in formal speech, mainly through the use of proverbs.)

These critical objections, then, are in the main frivolous[14]. The crux of the matter in The Beautyful Ones is that Africa's prospects for a better life, for a better future, are very bleak on account of her leaders' inordinate greed and concupiscence. Moral uncertainties -- the absence of any clear social goals and the near total disengagement of the individual -- form the basic concern of the novel. Armah's world is one of moral ambiguities and doubt. It is intensely pessimistic in that he presents no ultimate solution to the predicament he poses, whereas the moral fable always resolves its problems.

II

The first of five successful novels within the space of

ten years (1968-78), The Beautyful Ones centres on the despair and nightmare that is Independence for Africa. This is a subject that has been treated over and over again by African writers, including Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, Duodu, Amu Djoleto, Sembene Ousmane, Tchicaya U Tamsi, Okot p'Bitek; poets, play-wrights and novelists alike. The almost obsessive attraction that African writers seem to have for this subject underscores their concern and disgust about the betrayal of the continent's hopes in post-colonial Africa. However, it is Armah's The Beautyful Ones that gives the subject a detailed treatment which hangs on the memory long after the novel has been read and laid aside. In this novel, as in Fragments, there is a kind of debilitating paralysis that seizes everybody in the country, making it almost impossible for them to act or resist the system. Despair is distilled and handed to the reader in large doses of scatological imagery. On almost every page the senses are assailed by what Peter Nazareth aptly describes as

> powerful images and visions of corruption, rottenness, disease, castration, vomit, and excrement, as though the rottenness of society is no longer merely a spiritual thing but a physical reality that engulfs everybody.[15]

It is Armah's way of showing his repugnance for a system that exudes such moral filth.

Achebe and critics in his school of thought find this aspect of the novel objectionable and, hence, label it "sick" and "uncomfortable". To read the novel in this way, however, is to miss the essence of Armah's art. The Beautyful Ones is not a "sick" book, though it is certainly meant to be "uncomfortable" in

a distinctive way. Because many people accept the gradual but certain decay and fragmentation of African society with a customarily complacent nod of the head, Armah decides to shock his readers to the reality of Africa's situation by piling up the images of filth, decay and rust.

Africa's history -- a history of exploitation, poverty, corruption, betrayal, decay[16] and, above all, the almost total loss of hope in her ability to reverse this tide -- is given a graphic presentation in The Beautyful Ones. Imagery and metaphor are central to our understanding of the theme of despair and disintegration in this novel. Therefore, though scenes of realism abound in The Beautyful Ones, it is through symbolism that this theme is given its most forceful treatment. The sixth chapter is pivotal to the structure and meaning of the novel, but the first chapter sets the scene for the symbolic exploration of its overall meaning. It is therefore relevant to treat this chapter in detail.

The picture that is painted by this first chapter is neither pleasant nor optimistic. It is a picture of a nation and its people at the brink of total collapse. The bus seems to represent Ghanaian institutions, rusted and decaying. Life is cheap, as the "crumpled packet of Tuskers" (the cheapest Ghanaian brand) testifies, while Ghanaian industries are too inefficient to make good products; witness the difficulty in lighting an ordinary cigarette. Armah presents the passengers as sleep-walkers, while the bus conductor attempts to escape from the reality of a harsh

world through the symbolic gesture of closing his eyes. The hopelessness of the national situation is re-enforced by the darkness surrounding the bus. Not only are the people walking corpses, but there is a lack of vision about the national direction as the people have no sense of where they are going: "The passengers shuffled up the centre aisle and began to lower themselves gently down, one after the other, into the darkness of the dawn" (p. 1)

To add insult to injury, materialism is also busy at work, eating away the very fabric of a society that had at the centre of its code "I am my brother's keeper". The material importance of money to the people is stressed, and it is a common Ghanaian practice to offer money in denominations far above the price of what is being paid for. The possession of money in larger denominations gives people the illusion of wealth and power. This accounts for the exultant look on the face of the giver of the cedi: "The eyes had in them the restless happiness of power in search of admiration" (p. 2). The conductor, who is aware of this feeling, takes advantage of it to cheat his passengers. Wealth is universally courted, and rich men are not only important in society, but are almost venerated. Later, in Chapter 4, a bread-seller refers to Koomson in sweetened tones as "My own lord, my master, oh, my white man, come. Come and take my bread. It is all yours, my white man, all yours" (p. 37). Grotesque as this may seem, it nevertheless paints a very graphic picture of how people worship the rich in society, and themselves desire to be

rich.

The description of the cedi and its smell gives us another aspect of Ghanaian society. It is a society thoroughly decayed. Armah suggests that this decay had begun even before the colonial era, and hence it is appropriately regarded as an "ancient rottenness". Strangely, the conductor actually enjoys the smell. Why, one may ask? The answer seems to be that there is something in the people which compels them to court corruption, a kind of natural appetite for decay. Interestingly, however, though he enjoys the smell, subconsciously the conductor is aware that something is intrinsically wrong; hence his sense of shame.

The novel is to repeat this kind of moral ambiguity time and again, in the lives of several characters. The clearest sign of the hopelessness of Ghana's search for true Independence and meaning in life is found in the symbol of the man as sleep-watcher. His eyes are open, giving the impression of vigilance, but they are in reality empty: they lack moral focus. This is the case for Ghana, that even her watchers are asleep. It is interesting to notice how Armah develops his imagery of filth and decay. Out of the sleeper's open mouth, saliva quietly oozes as if his very being is so full of corruption that some is forced out of his mouth. It is the same with the bus conductor, who clears his throat and eats the phlegm. In both cases, we are shown the moral consequences of compromising one's principles.

Beyond this, however, decay is also pervasive, affecting every aspect of Ghanaian life, including her language. The short

but telling description of the authorities' effort to keep the city clean shows the hopelessness of the task confronting the national leadership. The hitherto gleaming dust-bin is itself now covered with filth. The irony is that the dust-bin is supposed to cover filth and not the other way round. Armah seems to be suggesting that brightness has a short-lived existence in Ghana. Where he mocks official jargon, Armah's prose is inflated. The very fact that the writing on the receptacle is no longer decipherable, again indicates the loss of purpose of the leadership. The sleeper is no longer conscious of his surroundings or even his destination. Also, in the taxi driver's explosive invective, "Your mother's rotten cunt!", (p. 9) the baseness of the society has finally affected its language too. The chapter is very symbolic and the images portray clearly a dramatization of the virtues and vices in the country.

III

My objective in this chapter is primarily to examine the intense pessimism of the novel as depicted in the loss of hope, by the broad masses of the people, in their leaders, as well as in the disintegration of the individual, of family bonds and of society as a whole. It is also pertinent to note that the happenings in the world of the novel reflect the totality of the African experience, and not just a peculiar Ghanaian problem. That Armah is concerned with the bad leadership that has plagued

Africa since Independence is obvious. There is desperation, for instance, in the lament, "How long will Africa be cursed with its leaders? There were men dying from the loss of hope, and others were finding gaudy ways to enjoy power they did not have." (pp. 80-1). Political leadership has come to be associated with hypocrisy, graft, inordinate materialistic orientation and general corruption. As a result of this bad example set and perpetrated by the political leadership, corruption has become a way of life for the people. It is no longer limited to the Koomsons of Africa, but policemen, railway clerks, timber contractors and bus conductors are now all part of this national game. It is this active and general participation in corruption that is responsible for the continent's endemic poverty, hunger and disease. The neglect of vital sections of the economy, the lack of clear social goals and the pursuit of individual selfish interests contribute to this problem.

At the heart of The Beautyful Ones is the impotence of the hero, resulting from the moral ambiguity in which he lives. The man is caught in an impossible position, what Wright describes as being "caught in the crossfire between family and gleam [the glamour of wealth] and unable to go forward or back ..."[17] Wright is, of course, right, but what he has failed to add is that the Man knows that his moral position is right, but the overwhelming condemnation of family and society makes him feel guilty all the same. It is significant that he remains anonymous throughout the novel. McEwan suggests that his "anonymity might

better suggest the manner of parables"[18]. I think not. Rather, I think it stands for all the nameless and faceless people throughout Africa whose lives have been both demeaned and dehumanized by corrupt regimes. Charles Larson may be more accurate when he says that, in the first chapter of the novel, the emphasis is not at first on the protagonist but "on the bus itself, the driver, the conductor and the other passengers" (all nameless). He argues that this is so because the novel is not so much "about a person as it is about a society: post-independent Ghana in the days prior to Nkrumah's fall."[19]

The Man, then, is a representative figure. It is worthy of note that Teacher, who is a kind of mentor to the Man and has some moral authority in the novel, is also nameless. McEwan is right when he suggests that the Man is untypical,[20] but untypical in the sense that Armah denies him heroic stature. His is a passive resistance, one which he neither boasts about nor glories in. He even knows that this stand is not appreciated; in fact that it is somewhat ridiculous; but is the right thing to do.

The novel is a dramatization of the agony, the futility and the threat of insanity, which are the consequences of holding on to moral ideas in a situation where morality is rendered irrelevant, and where considerations of gain have become the sole motive of society. The theme, then, of the protagonist's isolation from his countrymen is sounded quite early in the novel. Priebe's observation that "The Man actually carries a tragic potential" is right, "for we are made to feel the dignity of his

struggle with the forces that overwhelmingly contrive against human dignity."[21] Against these odds, "he is the only person ... who is struggling to maintain his humanity."[22]

Yet the Man appears naive. In his conversation with the messenger who has won some money in the lotteries, we get the impression that the Man does not know his Ghana well, when he advises the messenger to seek police help. The conversation between the two is very interesting, insightful and pathetic:

> "You look happy," the man said to him.
> The messenger continued to smile, in the embarrassed way of a young girl confessing love. "I won something in the lottery," he said.
> "Lucky you," the man said. "How much?"
> The messenger hesitated before replying. "One hundred cedis."
> "That's not very much," the man laughed.
> "I know," said the messenger. "But so many people would jump on me to help me eat it."
> "They'll come, anyway."
> "No. Nobody will know."
> "You used a nickname?"
> "Help me oh God." He smiled.
> "I hope you have a nice time," the man said.
> The messenger frowned. "I am happy, but I'm afraid," he said.
> "Juju?" the man smiled.
> "No, not that," said the messenger. "But you know our Ghana."
> "Ah yes."
> "And everybody says the Ghana lottery is more Ghanaian than Ghana."
> "You're afraid you won't get your money?"
> "I know people who won more than five hundred cedis last year. They still haven't got their money."
> "Have they been to the police?"
> "For what?"
> "To help them get their money."
> "You're joking," said the messenger with some bitterness.
> "It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all."
> "What will you do?" the man asked.
> "I hope some official at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as bribe and allow me to have

> the rest." The messenger's smile was dead.
> "You will be corrupting a public officer." The man smiled.
> "This is Ghana," the messenger said, turning to go. (pp. 18-19).

It looks as if the Man is very naive in his idealism. The truth is, however, that he does not himself believe in the advice he is giving, and yet he is not ready to capitulate to corruption. Herein lies his predicament. The distance between him and his fellow countrymen is further increased by the general cynicism which is rampant everywhere. The messenger here may be ready to capitulate to corruption but he, at least, sees it as a lapse into the realm of impurity which is Ghana. For the majority of Ghanaians in The Beautyful Ones, corruption in whatever form -- whether it is influencing with money, the allocation of railway trucks, the ownership of fishing vehicles contrary to what is permitted by the constitution, or whether it takes the form of seducing school girls from Achimota or Holy Child -- is a norm. The person who insists on morality is seen as eccentric, even insane.

It is interesting to note that after Amankwa has tried unsuccessfully to bribe the Man, it is he, rather than the latter, who feels outraged and aggrieved. There is genuine bewilderment in his cry "Why are you making everything so difficult for me?" (p. 28) But, even beyond this, Amankwa's outburst of impotent anger, "But why? ... why do you treat me so? What have I done against you? Tell me, what have I done?" (p. 31), gives a terrifying picture of a nation disintegrating. After all, it is

exports like timber which earn for the country its foreign exchange -- foreign exchange that in turn is used to import whiskey for people like Koomson, while important sectors of the economy, like the railroads, education, and mining are neglected. In his second encounter with the timber contractor later in the novel, the irony is that Amankwa is right. The Man will never prosper since he refuses bribes: "You. You are a very wicked man. You will never prosper. Da." (p.107). The use of the Akan word "da" is very interesting. It means "till infinity" or "never", and it is often used in expressing only the most banal of truths.

The question arises, what kind of person would willingly remain poor? But the Man is not even allowed to withdraw into himself. The highest kind of isolation he suffers is that of having to live with his wife's contempt and scorn. She hates him for refusing to avail himself of opportunities which could improve their lives materially. Estella lives a comfortable life because she has had the good fortune to be married to the shrewd politician Koomson -- the very antithesis of the Man. Ayo calls the Man the "chichidodo," a bird that hates filth but lives on maggots (p. 44). The chichidodo symbolizes the Man's ambiguous position: living on maggots while scorning filth, and therefore condemning his whole family to a life of abject poverty.

This brings us to the heaviest penalty which the Man endures for his moral position: the reproach of the loved ones. The sight of his children wearing threadbare singlets, condemned

to eat only a tiny piece of sardine with their kenkey for supper, is painful for him. Even more so is his wife's quick moral degeneration. The most disturbing episode in the novel is when he tries to make love to his wife but finds his feelings checked by his inadequacy to provide for the family. There is the further reproach, a more direct one from his mother-in-law, who, in the presence of their father, speaks to her grandchildren: "Have you all eaten this morning?" (p. 122). An effect, then, of the protagonist's resistance to corruption is his estrangement even in his own home.

Family disintegration apart, there is also the breakdown in the individual's will. Brought to his knees at last, Amankwa recognizes the need to grease the palms of the allocation clerk in order to have his timber carted from the forest. The allocations clerk makes no bones of the fact that his little game with the Timber Merchant is both very deliberate and profitable:

> "Will you bring his timber?" [the man asks]
> "Yes. He has learned his lesson."
> "What lesson?" asked the man.
> The clerk answered with a chuckle, nothing else.
> (p. 108).

This is what makes the situation so painfully hopeless. Corruption has become part and parcel of national life. It is in fact viewed as normal. As Priebe notices only too well, "To refuse a bribe is not to foil corruption; there is always another waiting eager to take it."[23]

There is also the larger social breakdown in sterile relationships and unproductivity. There is a sense in which the

physical decay of the Man's world parallels the moral decay in society itself. In the offices of the Railway corporation, there are no serious personal attachments, and language itself is reduced to meaningless jargon. No meaningful work is done in the offices and nothing seems to work. The communication system with the other stations breaks down with a frequency that is alarming; especially as its efficient functioning regulates the movements of trains and reduces the risk of accidents. It is surprising that accidents do not happen more frequently. Pencil sharpeners do not work and the office is almost suffocating with hot, stale air. Clerks devise elaborate ways of passing the time, while the senior officers not only come to work as and when they like, but also fail to supervise their subordinates. The Man observes all this with quiet despair:

> ... if some woman comes from the village wanting to know such things and asked them straight what exactly it was they spent their time doing, they would never be able to give a real answer. A job is a job. It did not matter at all that nothing was done on most jobs. (p. 156)

The important thing is no longer productivity, but consumption. We consume where we have not produced, and Armah's point is made when the observation is made not by a minister of state or a senior civil servant, but by a taxi driver (in Ghana most taxi drivers are barely literate): "The way things are going, it seems everybody is making things now except us. We Africans only buy expensive things." (p. 140) Armah shows that the rat-race, this "chasing after the gleam", led by African politicians, helps in the break-up of ties and society. The rat-

race produces what Lazarus refers to as "sublimated social aggression."[24] In their anger and frustration, the people turn on themselves and on each other, attempting to find a vent for their pent-up impotent anger:

> We blamed them, as we blamed ourselves and every other thing that was there to be blamed. What can people do when there remains only so much meaning in their lives and that little meaning is running so irretrievably away with every day that goes? What can people do? We were defending ourselves against our friends as if they were animals. (p. 76)

The cohesiveness which was the strength of African societies is thus undermined as a result of frustration and what Armah calls "victim anger" (p. 69).

All of this confuses the Man. In his bewilderment, he begins to see moral degeneration as a natural process, a version of nature's inevitable march towards decay. Corruption begins to appear to him like a path of the natural order of things. His own refusal to participate in corruption appears not only futile but disgustingly hypocritical: a cover-up of the natural process, which, because it is concealed, develops into something grotesque. All this is tearing him apart.

IV

Next to the theme of disintegration, one of the most outstanding qualities of The Beautyful Ones is its bleak vision of Ghana's future. The extensive scatological imagery in the novel not only reflects the widespread corruption and fragmentation of

society but, even more significantly, it portrays the helplessness of those caught in this decay. In both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments, the protagonists are not only fighting a losing battle, but they are also keenly aware of the hopelessness of the struggle. The futility of their moral position is underscored by the fact that Armah does not completely equip them with the tools necessary to win the fight against materialism and corruption. The heroes seem weak, passive, spineless and almost resigned, concerned only to preserve their own individual integrity and moral purity. They do have heroic potential and resilience, but these remain largely undeveloped.

For the majority of people in the novel, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. There is no hope either in the present or in the future. The picture is not just bleak, it is hopeless. Even for Teacher, the hopelessness of the situation is galling. Asked whether he can discern any hope in the present state of affairs, his answer is a categorical:

> "No. Not any more, Not hope, anyway. I don't feel any hope in me anymore. I can see things, but I don't feel much. When you can see the end of things in their beginnings, there's no more hope, unless you want to pretend, or forget, or get drunk or something. No. I also am one of the dead people, the walking dead. A ghost. I died long ago. So long that not even the old libations of living blood will make me alive again." (p. 61) [Emphasis mine].

This, coming from Teacher, one who is both wise and intelligent, besides being close to those in power (p. 33), sounds indeed like the death-knell for Africa. Even the traditional spirits of Ghana have abandoned her and do not any longer respond to the rites of

libation and sacrifice. Ghana seems adrift, with no clear vision of where she is going, but certainly bent on a course of self-destruction:

> "I see a long, long way," he said, "and it is full of people, so many people going so far in the distance that I see them all like little bubbles joined together. They are going, just going, and I am going with them. I know I would like to be able to come out and see where we are going, but in the very long lines of people I am only one. It is not at all possible to come out and see where we are going. I am just going." (p. 74)

This is the real tragedy of modern Africa, this inability to see where we are going, or to resist the current, or even to chart a proper course of where we want to go. Faced with this prospect, it is little wonder that people like Kofi Billy, who are weak-willed, take the easy option out in suicide.

The shock of betrayal by Africa's most trusted leaders is also, in part, accountable for this strong sense of despair. Writers like Ngugi and Achebe are also concerned about this situation and have tried to deal with it in their works. Ngugi's treatment of this theme in his ambitious novel Petals of Blood is very illuminating. Admittedly, his novel is not as bleak as Armah's, but the despair, the betrayal, the frustration, the injustice and the social disintegration are all present. In a way, Ngugi's politicians are even worse than Armah's. They are villainous, hypocritical, vicious and murderous. His Ilmorog is the very symbol of despair. The wry humour of the novel partly disguises the pain, suffering, bitterness and frustration, best illustrated in this hell-hole and in his main characters. Munira, Wanja, Abdulla and Karega are all lonely, frustrated individuals

vainly trying to hide from a hostile world. As in The Beautyful Ones, the politicians in Petals of Blood are not interested in serious issues that affect the people, like the prolonged drought and famine in Ilmorog, the lack of roads, hospitals or good schools.[25] The shameless exploitation of the poor, the corruption in high places and the breakdown in human relationships are all too pervasive. Petals of Blood also has its fair share of black whitemen: the Rev. Jerrod Browns, the Raymonds Chuis (pp. 146-153), are parodies like Armah's Mills-Hayfords, Plange-Bannermans and Attoh-Whites (p. 126).

Whether it is The Beautyful Ones, Fragments, Petals of Blood, Achebe's A Man of the People or the many other African novels dealing with the same theme, the rule is the same: "Get rich on the misery of the people", as Ngugi puts in Petals of Blood.[26] This is true of the general situation in post-Independence Africa. The political catch-words - "freedom", "independence", "developments" and "revolution" - are a fraud practised on the people. Their despair and consequent lack of action are in part due to the fact that nothing really changes, according to The Beautyful Ones, even with the change of leaders (pp. 89 & 162). This, of course, is enough reason for despair; after all, "the sons of the nation were now in charge" (p. 10). This is what makes it difficult for the people to act. As Achebe sees it, the people can even afford to laugh at themselves. Their anger is diffused in laughter, but, as he is also quick to point out,

> it was the laughter of resignation to misfortune. No one among them swore vengeance; no one shook with rage or showed any sign of fight. They understood what was being said, they had seen it with their own eyes. But what did anyone expect them to do?[27]

The situation is the same everywhere. In Ngugi, the despair is also mixed with genuine bewilderment at this sudden turn of affairs:

> "... And mark you, and this is where it pains, it's their sweat and that feeds the catechist, the wardens, the deacons, the ministers, the bishops, the angels ... the whole hierarchy. Still they are condemned ... damned.
>
> "I am a priest, or father-confessor, and looking through the tiny window, I am really looking at the soul of a nation ... the scars, the wounds, the clotting blood ... it is all on their faces and in their eyes, so bewildered. Tell us, tell us before we confess our sins: who makes these laws? For whom? To help whom? I cannot answer the questions ...
>
> "I ask myself: what happened? When happened?"[28]

What happened is what one critic describes somewhere in this way: "No more the foreign hawk on alien chicken prey, but we on us."

V

The basic difference between Armah's vision of Africa and that of Ngugi and Achebe is one of degree. At least this is the case in regard to Armah's first two novels. All three writers do share the view that, for the African politician, politics is used for profit. They are thus disgusted with the kind of lust for materialism that is creeping into African society and the resultant breakup of family ties and social relationships. They are also concerned about the future of Africa, and are painfully aware that Africa took the wrong turn at Independence and that,

unless the tide is stopped and reversed, destruction is both inevitable and imminent.

In The Beautyful Ones, the situation seems hopeless. Hope, if there is any, seems to be in the very dim future, a prospect that is far from encouraging. Ngugi's Petals of Blood is, however, different from The Beautyful Ones in one significant respect. It has hope. Galvanizing the people into a potent force to take over power from corrupt and insensitive politicians is no longer a probability, but a near certainty. At least, this is the impression one gathers from the novel's end, and Karega is the symbol of that hope:

> Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system of all its preying bloodthirsty gods and gnomic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joying and loving in creative labour ...[29]

The Socialist vision of Petals of Blood is clear. But if Armah's The Beautyful Ones is disturbing, Achebe's A Man of the People is perplexing. In both novels, corruption is a national game and the only reason anyone will enter politics is gain. The esteemed village elder in A Man of the People is speaking for his village when he asserts that

> "The village of Anata has already eaten [the Minister, Chief Nanga comes from Anata], now they must make way for us to reach the plate. No man in Urua will give his paper [vote] to a stranger when his own son needs it; if the very herb we go to seek in the forest now grows at our very backyard are we not saved the journey?"[30]

The problem with A Man of the People is its neutrality. The satire is useful in its mockery of people, institutions and

politicians, but the general cynicism and resignation offers no useful pointer for Africa's future; not even in the coup that marks the end of the corrupt regime. At least, in The Beautyful Ones, there is resistance, even if it is passive. In A Man of the People, there is only the cynical acceptance of the inevitable.

However, both The Beautyful Ones and A Man of the People clearly show that Africa indeed lacks the men of probity and conscience who can steer the continent away from greedy self-acquisition toward selflessness and national reconstruction. Just as the Common People's Convention (C.P.C.) is no better than the Progressive Alliance Party (P.A.P.) or the People's Organization Party (P.O.P.),[31] the military in The Beautyful Ones is no better than Nkrumah's Convention People's Party, which it ousts (pp.182-3). The popular notion that politics offers opportunities for people to get their fair share of the national cake, even if it is at the expense of some other people, constituencies or villages, is repeated again and again. True, the satirical thrust is not as devastating or bleak in Achebe as in Armah, but the general atmosphere of paralysis and despair is keenly felt, especially in the light-hearted way Achebe treats political corruption.

The bleakest picture painted by the African novel of Africa's political future is, however, not just in showing how corrupt her politicians are. Rather, it is in the disease imagery that the writers use to convey the futility of the struggle. The image of newly-independent African states destroyed at birth is at

the heart of both Petals of Blood and The Beautyful Ones. Indeed Petals of Blood derives its very title from this image. In Munira's Nature Study class, we make the startling discovery that Africa "is a worm-eaten flower ... It cannot bear fruit."[32] This image of a diseased Africa suffering from stunted growth, or, more appropriately, from arrested development is given a full-blown treatment in The Beautyful Ones. Armah amplifies this picture in many ways. Birth, for instance, is no longer an occasion for joy, but for regret and despair, since the newly-born comes already exhausted and decayed. In the vision of Armah, Africa's new birth lacks vigour and freshness. It is a vision of

> ... helpless messes of soft flesh and unformed bone squeezing through bursting mother holes, trailing dung and exhausted blood. (p. 62)

This image of old age and decay in infancy is given a grotesque twist in the character of Rama Krishna and the Man-child. In the incredibly short period of seven years, the Man-child

> ... had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity and old age, and in its seventh year, it had died a natural death. The picture Aboliga the Frog showed us was of the man child in its grey old age, completely old in everything save the smallness of its size, a thing that deepened the element of the grotesque. The man child looked more irretrievably old, far more thoroughly decayed than any ordinary man could ever have looked. (p. 63)

This kind of diseased aging process is all the more terrible because it is unnatural. Ghana seems to have completed her natural cycle of development even before she has properly begun it, or so says Armah.

In the case of Rama Krishna, his attempts to escape old age and its effect (by resorting to yoga) prove equally futile. Meditative exercises, diets of honey, abstention from meat and sex, rather than giving him the immortality he craves, result in an early death and an internal decay worse than any physical one, because "where his heart ought to have been there was only a living lot of worms gathered tightly in the shape of a heart." (p. 49) What then is the future of the country if the end is seen from the beginning? How can there ever be any hope, when, as in the stories of the bird chichidodo and Rama Krishna, any attempt at moral purity only results in a worse entanglement in corruption and decay?

Armah does not leave room for any doubt about Ghana's plight and moral dilemma. There can be no salvation anywhere and the doubting Thomases are effectively silenced by his central excremental metaphor of filth and putrefaction:

> The wood underneath would win and win till the end of time. Of that there was no possible doubt, only the pain of hope perennially doomed to disappointment. It was so clear. 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. It did not really have to fight. Being was enough. 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, awaiting yet more polish again and again and again. And the wood was not alone.
>
> 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-handed fingers in their careless 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-handed fingers still dripping with

> the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The calloused 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 remnant of kenkey. The wood would always win. (pp. 12-13)

Armah seems to be suggesting that decay and corruption in Ghana have come to stay. Any changes in government, or any political innovations aimed at restoring equilibrium, have the strange effect of only perpetuating this decay.

It is this inability to ever reverse the trend that causes so much despair in the people. Things seem to be consistently getting worse. In the Attorney General's presentation of the stages of booze, we get a very frightening picture of Ghana. In what Armah ironically refers to as "special knowledge", Ghana has progressed from "The Mood Jocose" to "The Mood Comatose", (p. 133) the final stage where she is insensible. While the politicians make a field day out of this situation, the net effect for Ghana is the loss of her skilled man-power. Ghana is left at the mercy of bumbling politicians like Koomson whose main interests are women and drink. Armah seems to share this general despair with his characters. The frequency with which the word "despair" itself appears in the novel is certainly not accidental. In chapter six alone, "despair" appears nine times, and this excludes words or phrases that express a similar meaning. The parable of Plato's cave may be enlightening in showing the extent of resignation by the people of Ghana. The people in the cave are so accustomed to the dark that the bringer of light is considered mad. They cannot imagine how there can be anything but darkness

in their cave, so they do not even bother to check out the claim that there exists light somewhere else. This is the position of Ghana, and even curiosity now seems to be dead. Yet the ultimate in despair is expressed by another nameless character: "'Aaah, contrey broke oo, countrey no broke oo, we dey inside'". (p. 82) It is the final despair, the end of the struggle, and the acceptance of fate.

There is a clear recognition of the futility that goes with the Man's isolation -- his refusal to join the stream. This is best symbolised in Teacher. Teacher is a wise man but he is also a drop-out. We first meet him sitting naked at his open window, reading or listening to music, sensitive but eccentric. His understanding and appreciation of hi-life music is very deep, but he shares this understanding with no one, except, occasionally, the Man. For all his intelligence, Teacher is barely alive. He represents the final stage of what is ahead of the Man himself if he persists in his stand. The emptiness of Teacher's position is underlined in his own admission of loneliness, sorrow, unfulfillment, puzzlement and resignation (pp. 59-60)

The bewilderment, however, exists only for the protagonist. The author himself is not bewildered and stands firmly against corruption. It is in his symbolism, especially in the metaphors of ugliness, foulness of smell and excrement, that he makes clear his attitude towards corruption. Amankwa, for example, is given a wolfish and selfish aspect. Koomson, with all

his perfumed and well-tailored exterior, is finally compelled to lower himself into a latrine hole. In addition, he is vulgar and uncouth, and all his wealth fails to disguise this aspect. He is very characteristic of that general misconception which assumes that one's culturedness is measured in terms of one's material position. Finally, the fact that Ghana is enveloped in excrement intensifies Armah's condemnation of the moral decay which envelops his country.

The end of the novel, though it confirms its title, is both ambiguous and disturbing. The flower may be beautiful, but it is also ambiguous, especially with the accompanying inscription THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN. The question that remains is whether the beautiful ones will ever be born.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. This reference and subsequent references to the novel which are given in parenthesis in the text, are taken from the 1975 reset Heinemann edition.

2. Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (London, Ibadan, Nairobi and Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1977), p. 92.

3. Shatto A. Gakwandi, The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa (London, Lusaka, Ibadan and Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1977), p. 92.

4. Neil Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Mind: A Reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born". Research in African Literature, Vol 18, No. 2 (Summer 1987), p. 137.

5. Achebe, Morning Yet, p. 25.

6. John Coates, "The Mythic Undercurrent in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born", World Literature Written in English, Vol 28, No. 2 (Autumn 1988), p. 155.

7. See Derek Wright's article, "Armah's Ghana Revisited; History and Fiction", International Fiction Review, Vol 12, No. 1 (Winter 1985), pp. 23-27.

8. Wright, "Armah's Ghana Revisited", p. 23.

9. Achebe, Morning Yet, pp. 25-27.

10. Wright, "Armah's Ghana Revisited". p. 24.

11. Ayi Kwei Armah, "One Writer's Education", West Africa, 25 August 1986: p. 1752.

12. Jean-Paul Sarte, Existentialism (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), pp. 15-20.

13. See Armah's Fragments and especially, Two Thousand Seasons. In the latter novel, for instance, Armah shows that all alien values are the way of death while "our way, the way" is the way of life. "The way" may be regarded as the guidance that a society provides for itself. It is our understanding of the conflicts, events and a way to rid society of its dissident elements. The old prophets represented this integrity which arises from understanding one's social environment and the choices before it. "The way", then, is the coherence of a society for its own good.

14. For Armah's own response to these charges, see his article, "Larsony, or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction." Asemka, Vol 4. (1976), pp. 1-14.

15. Peter Nazareth, An African View of Literature (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1974), p. 39.

16. This theme is treated extensively in Armah's Two Thousand Seasons, where he takes a backward sweep of Africa's history even before colonialism. He juxtaposes the twin onslaught of European and Arabic attack on the African value system and the collaborative hand of and betrayal by African leaders, and tries to chart an escape route for Africa.

17. Derek Wright, "Saviours and Survivors: The Disappearing Community in the Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah," Ufahamu, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1985), p. 142.

18. Neil McEwan, Africa and the Novel (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 99.

19. Charles R. Larson, The Emergence of African Fiction (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1971), p. 259.

20. McEwan, p. 99.

21. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect," p. 167.

22. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect," p. 167.

23. Richard Priebe, Ghanaian Literatures (New York , West Port, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 235.

24. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect," p. 156.

25. Ngugi Wa Thiang'o, Petals of Blood (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1977), pp. 93-4.

26. Ngugi, Petals, p. 76.

27. Chinua Achebe, A Man of the People (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1966), pp. 123-24.

28. Ngugi, Petals, p. 164.

29. Ngugi, Petals, p. 344.

30. Achebe, A Man of the People, p. 125.

31. Achebe, A Man of the People, pp. 124-25.

32. Achebe, A Man of the People, pp. 124-25.

Chapter 2

FRAGMENTS

... have thine eyes not seen
how in vain, unavailing dreamlike impotence, the purblind peoples of the earth are imprisoned eternally?

- Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound

I

Fragments,[1] Armah's second novel, has not evoked the same critical acclaim as The Beautyful Ones. Critics seem not to have recognized the sheer imaginative feat that Armah has performed in this sequel. Over two decades after its publication, Fragments is still overshadowed by its more "successful", if somewhat controversial, predecessor. Yet that Fragments is a major literary achievement cannot be denied. Its range and depth in dealing with the nominal freedom that Ghana has mistaken for political Independence give it a verisimilitude that is more pronounced than that in The Beautyful Ones. His vision in this sequel is far more extensive and bleak than even that in The Beautyful Ones. So is his language, which is more poetic, tender and often sad. In fact his lyrical language, imagery and form all reflect what Ogede aptly describes as "his fear of the reality of chaos captured in the novel's disordered narrative sequence."[2]

To the extent that Fragments continues and expands on the themes of The Beautyful Ones, it is not difficult to find marked resemblances between the two novels. Again the central situation is that of the sensitive individual caught up in the oppressive embrace of a greedy materialistic society. The Ghana here is no

different from the one encountered in The Beautyful Ones. Images of rot and sterility portray a society that is corrupt at almost every level. The vulgar imitation of western values, the sense of oppression, defeat and despair all press on the reader with an anguish that is only paralleled by that experienced by the protagonist himself. Ghana is a disoriented society, completely lacking that unifying ideal which gives each individual person or object a role or function. In this sense Ghana, as the novel's title suggests, is a fragmented society. In both novels, Armah does make the point that it is the post-Independence Ghana's obsession with materialism "that is out of step and not his protagonists."[3]

Fragments, however, is fundamentally different from the earlier novel in many significant respects. Where The Beautyful Ones focusses on a humble railway clerk as hero, Fragments is concerned with an artist hero. The portrait presented is that of an artist as a young Ghanaian. In fact, one of the central concerns of the second novel is the proper role of the artist in society. The hero's isolation and subsequent mental break-down stem from the impossible situation in which he is caught. Like the Promethean figure whom he resembles so much, Baako is caught between two worlds, neither of which is ready to accept him. Ogede's summation of this predicament in which Baako finds himself, is quite apt. His vain attempt to give up the social privilege which his education automatically gives him does not go down well with his own class. Yet he is isolated from the mass of

the people by virtue of that special education. He thus becomes a kind of Judas to his class and yet remains a stranger to the oppressed on whose side he is fighting.[4] Caught between these two mutually exclusive worlds, he becomes isolated, and, quite naturally, he is viewed by both with suspicion.

Fragments is also concerned with religion in a way that The Beautyful Ones is not. One question that is implicitly asked in the novel is the extent to which the vulgarization of Ghana coincides with its secularization. Though the novel's title has a much broader interpretation, it is in the religious context that "Fragments" is best understood. The word refers not so much to the structure of the novel as to its vision of Ghanaian society. Ghana is presented as a society without purpose, quite literally; as a society adrift. The basic reason for this is not hard to find: Ghana is spiritually dead as a result of sacrificing her traditional respect for life to materialism, her new god.

II

Armah examines

> society's spiritual life because he believes that of all aspects of man's life, religion exercises the most powerful controlling force determining the patterns of individual human conduct, morality and conscience.[5]

In Ghana's case, this is still largely true. The tragedy, however, is not that the old ways and customs have been completely abandoned for the new. If this were the case, it would perhaps be understandable. What has happened is that traditional practices

have been marginalized and have become only gestural. This hypocrisy allows people like Foli and Korankye to contravene the ethics of traditional religion and get away with it. In the ceremony marking Baako's departure for the United States, for example, Foli's greed leads him to endanger the life of his nephew. As Lazarus explains,

> By pouring as little of the offertory schnapps as possible in sacrifice, thereby saving as much of the bottle as he can for his own personal consumption, Foli contravenes the spirit of the ceremony while remaining within its letter.[6]

Ironically, this voiding of traditional practices has the effect of protecting the offender while endangering the innocent. Two reasons may account for this. One of them is what Lazarus describes above. The superficial observance of the ceremony puts the offender outside the power of the vengeful spirits because all the rituals are apparently observed, and the spirits have no excuse for retribution. The other reason is that, since the spirits have not been properly appeased, vengeance of a sort is still expected. More often, the spirits exact this vengeance on either the one for whom the ceremony is performed, or on the most promising person in the family. Often this victim is one who is very closely related to the offender, and whose death will adversely affect the offender. The character who most clearly sees this is the blind old woman, Naana. She recognizes that Foli's words are externally beautiful, but devoid of meaning without the accompanying action. She remonstrates with him:

> "You learned so well the words you spoke to the dead ones this night. Did no one also teach you the power of the

> anger of the departed? How did you forget then? Or was the present growling of your belly a greater thing than Baako's going and the whole stream of his life after that? The spirits would have been angry, and they would have turned their anger against him. He would have been destroyed." (p. 12)

In Ghana, as in most parts of Africa, the belief that the living, the dead and the unborn share symbiotic life in a circular continuum is very strong. A violation at any end is bound to interfere with the process, and produce grave consequences at the other end. To avert any catastrophe, Naana takes the bottle from Foli and pours out the drink in generous doses to the spirits, as she believes is their due: "'Nananom drink to your thirst, and go with the young one. Protect him well, and bring him back, to us, to you.'"(p. 11) In this way, disaster is turned into blessing.

Armah's point is that if religion, which is both so sacred and so intimately bound with the individual's life in Ghana, can be so easily set aside for material gain, then it should come as no surprise at all if people stop at nothing, including the exchanging of human souls, to arrive at that gain. If the erosion of human values and the social disintegration that this entails is given a frightening aspect in The Beautyful Ones, in Fragments it assumes a harsh reality. This is mainly due to the fact that the events recorded in Fragments are common everyday occurrences, to which the reader with a Ghanaian or African background and experience can easily relate at a personal level. The love of festivities as occasions for the ostentatious display of wealth, or as opportunities for material acquisition, is against the tenets of traditional Ghanaian life. Yet this has become a

prevailing characteristic of most parts of post-colonial Africa. The fantastic airport reception of Brempong which assails the beholders with a "confusion heightening the eye-filling impression of an unending swirl of colored cloth and jewelry" (p. 81) is a case in point. Brempong's reception, with its display of rich kente cloth and the wasting of expensive imported drink, is a parody of a religious ceremony, and, hence, a travesty of all that is sacred.

In the same way, the celebration of the birth of Baako's young nephew profanes the concept of the outdooring ceremony. The orginal purpose of the ceremony is to welcome the newcomer, who is in fact still a spirit, to the world of the living. The spirit-child is, by tradition, expected to stay the mandatory eight days before the outdooring. It is only after the eighth day that the spirits of the nether world will formally relinquish their hold on the child to the land of the living and to human care. Any contravention of this code will have fatal consequences for the child. Naana recognizes this fact very well. The spirits must first be satisfied by the strict observance of all the rules by the living. Otherwise, as Naana predicts, the child "'will run screaming back, fleeing the horrors prepared for him up here.'" (p. 139) Foli's attempt to cheat "those who have gone before and even those coming after us" (p. 9) only parallels Efua's and Araba's more serious omission of "not look[ing] to those gone before, and ... not see[ing] the child." (p. 263)

However, the lust for materialism has supplanted man's

3better judgement and human life means little to a society where wealth and position are rated above the human soul itself. So, rather than hold the outdooring ceremony on the customary eighth day, Efua and her daughter Araba decide to have it on the weekend following pay day. Their reason is logical enough: "'An outdooring ceremony held more than a few days after pay day is useless'" (p. 125). We are sharply reminded of Passion Week in The Beautyful Ones, where the workers are the living dead because they can hardly make ends meet. This contrasts with "the days after pay day" when "the fullness of the month touches each old sufferer with a feeling of power."[7] The choice of the fifth day for the outdooring, then, is entirely dictated by expediency: in Efua's world everything is understood, and expressed, only in terms of material gain.

The consumerist ethic in the novel helps to account for the social and spiritual disintegration of Ghana. Korankye's misappropriation of the drink meant for the gods, and his subsequent desecration of the family's mango tree with his blood-stained knife, are consistent with the drunken sacrifice of the ram as food for eating and not as an offering. So is the array of guests at the ceremony, with their "long, twinkling earrings, gold necklaces, quick-shining wrist-watches, a great rich splendor stifling all these people in the warmth of a beautiful day" (p. 259). It is shocking the extent to which people will go, even at their own personal discomfort, to satisfy the new god of materialism. In the midst of this obscene festivity, Efua guite

literally bilks her guests. Meanwhile, in a grotesque display of wealth, the main celebrant is placed directly in front of a new electric fan, ostensibly to give him some fresh air, but in reality to show off. Naturally, the child dies of pneumonia. However, in the general scheme of the novel, the child's death "is attributable to abuse of tradition" which "provokes the anger of the ancestors, [and] they withdraw their protection" from the child.[8]

Again it is Naana who recognizes the fact that the ceremony is a breach of decorum and tantamount to a death warrant for the child. She blames Baako, who, as uncle to the child, has more authority than any one else, for allowing the ceremony to take place on the fifth day. It is not surprising that Naana should be the one to preceive this shattering of Ghanaian society. She is a relic from the past who still possesses an ancestral and unified view of the old world:

> Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns around. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return. (p. 1)

The view expressed here is familiar enough. There is a providence behind the turning of the earth which retains everything in an eternal benevolent cycle. It is also animistic in the sense that it holds that all things have souls and, therefore, are alive. In this context, the dead are not really dead but live all around us and do in fact return either through rebirth or when summoned

through libations. (pp. 5-6)

As one of my professors used to remark, part of the greatness of this novel is the fact that it almost succeeds in making one take traditional religion seriously. One reason for this is its language. Naana's interior monologue is rendered in very moving prose; prose which, in its repetitions, its cyclic rhythms and cosmic imagery reminds one of the Authorised Version of the Bible. But Naana's beautiful prose and her religious view of the world are not shared by the other characters in the novel. She has lived too long and now inhabits a world in which the pact between the living and the dead is broken. The unnaturalness of this situation is seen in the reversal of the natural cycle of life itself. The child, a newcomer to the land of the living, returns to the nether world well ahead of his great-grandmother, who finds no cause to be alive herself. (pp. 284-285) Naana is right when she concludes that "the baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god" (p. 284). She is genuinely baffled by the kind of power that can make parents "forget that a child too soon exposed is bound to die" (p. 284). The answer is not far-fetched. That power is money, Ghana's new god.

III

One has to agree with Wright that Armah's vision in Fragments has darkened. Wright argues that

> The more aggressive and intolerant conformism of modern Ghana in this book demands offerings for the altar of its

> materialism and, since its sins against humanity are deadlier than the corruption of the first book, a heavier price than the Man's passive endurance must be paid for their purgation.[9]

The dog, the small boy at the sea shore and Skido are all sacrificial victims, the purpose of which is to show that "only the traumas of madness and death can truly shock Ghanaians into a real sense of human worth and dignity."[10] Baako himself is the central scapegoat in the novel. What Wright fails to add, however, is that the tragedy of the situation is even more unbearable because, in Fragments, Armah is dealing with what may properly be regarded as the intelligentsia of the society. Unlike the situation in The Beautyful Ones, Armah is not concerned with uninformed politicians like Koomson, or humble clerks like the Man, but with members of the educated elite like Brempong, Asante Smith, Ocran, Boateng and Baako. Armah's examination of the Ghanaian elite is very incisive. Placed in positions of power in the forefront of the struggle for the country's emancipation from neo-colonialsim, the elite have become part of the problem rather than the solution. Their main interest is self-aggrandizement at the expense of their country.

It is in Baako, the main sacrificial victim, that the two central motifs of despair and disintegration are unified. The novel opens as Baako is about to return home after studying in America for five years. He has a pretty good idea of what his contribution toward the post-Independence development of his country ought to be. As an artist, he sees in Television the realization of his dream. The use of images, rather than words,

for mass communication has the power to touch the hidden recesses of the minds of his prospective audience. His reasons for electing Television over writing are thus simple. It is a collaborative art, bringing together the best talents and resources for the best production. Besides, in a country where about 70% of the population is illiterate, television's power to communicate is not dependent upon the ability to read and write. Yet Baako is very apprehensive about returning home because he is not sure if he will be able to contribute anything meaningful to his country (p. 145). He arranges to slip in unannounced because he wants to avoid his family. He knows what his family expects of him as a "been to" and he also knows he will not play that role: as a material provider. (p. 147) It is an interesting case of a clash of interests: What Baako has (his great talent as an artist) neither his family nor his country is interested in. What his family wants, Baako will not give. It is a classic case of the misfit, and his consequent isolation and fragmentation are well on course.

Baako's situation in Fragments is the opposite of what Obi Okonkwo experiences in Achebe's No Longer At Ease. He is not the conventional "been to" in the sense that his Western education ill-equips him to cope with life in traditional African Society. Neither, as Wright rightly observes, is he "caught between Africa and the West." It is worse than that, for he is trapped "between the West and a vulgarly Westernized Africa".[11] The breakdown of the community and the failed hopes of Ghana are both graphically

expressed in Baako's inability to complete the mansion whose foundations his mother has painstakingly laid. But the pressure is mounting, both from his expectant family and from his colleagues in Ghanavision.

The extended family system, the main bulwark against personal and social crisis in African society, is given an ironic twist in Fragments. Instead of providing the protective shelter for Baako in his fight against materialism and what Lazarus terms intellectual irresponsibility, so that social cohesion and political consciousness may be restored, it literally hounds him into madness. This situation puts Achebe's criticism of The Beautyful Ones in a new and rather interesting perspective. In his essay on "Africa and her Writers", Achebe attacks Armah on the grounds that his

> suggestion ... of the hero's personal justification without faith nor works is grossly inadequate in a society where even a lunatic walking stark naked through the highways of Accra has an extended family somewhere suffering vicarious shame.[12]

Fragments seems to have been conceived with this criticism in mind. The two key issues of the hero's "faith" and "works" and the suffering extended family have been effectively answered here. Achebe's Biblical allusions apart, here is a hero who possesses faith and works as well as personal justification, and yet is as isolated as the Man in The Beautyful Ones. What is even more interesting, the protagonist's madness is the direct result of his family's action.

Baako's education is seen in the light of an investment by

his family. His return, therefore, is a sign that their premiums are ripe for the harvest. Baako is less than 24 hours in Ghana when his family's expectations begin. On his being introduced to his mother's head of department the Principal's words are very illuminating: "'It's a blessed day for you, Mrs. Onipa. Take the afternoon off to give him a fitting welcome.'" (p. 101) In anticipation of this blessedness, Baako's mother's first query is when Baako's car is expected, "'so that [her] old bones can rest.'" (p. 101) In the same way, when Baako rushes his sister to the hospital for delivery, she expects the V.I.P. treatment that goes to relatives of senior officers. When she is not accorded this "right", her disappointment can be read plainly in her unsmiling face (p. 107)

IV

If Baako still posesses any idealism in the face of the shameless greed and acquisitiveness of his family, he soon abandons it in his frustrating hunt for a job. Despite his obvious qualifications, and in a country where skilled personnel are hard to find, Baako fails to gain employment. He is given the now-familiar Ghanaian invitation to bribery, "Come tomorrow," a clear sign that he has failed to grease the palms of the Senior Assistant Secretary of the Ministry. It is humiliating for Baako, who has to fall back on Ocran, his former teacher, for help. Baako is beginning to learn the importance of having a well-placed

god-father. When Brempong had earlier catechized him on the importance of having such a god-father, who will have a job ready waiting for him, Baako naively insisted that his certificates were enough to secure him a job. (p. 68)

Brempong, for all his vulgarity, knows his Ghana very well. He is a satirical portrait of the typical "been to" and, to give him credit, he plays his role only too well. The practice of gaining positions in government or the Civil Service by recourse to people in powerful positions is one of the curses of post-Independence Africa. One of its serious defects is the fact that it often succeeds in putting square pegs in round holes, and leads to brain drain as a result of frustration. Odili in Achebe's A Man of the People decries the practice and insists that he will not "stoop to lick any Big Man's boots"[13] because he values his independence. But Odili himself admits that "A common saying in the country after Independence was that it didn't matter what you knew but who you knew."[14] He is even glad when he is offered the opportunity to do a post-graduate course abroad, through the good offices of Chief Nanga. In Petals of Blood, the prospect is even bleaker. There can be no employment without the help of "a big brother". The eternal question that is asked is often "Who sent you?" If the answer is no one, the response is "No vacancy".[15]

The situation is even worse when a foreigner is rated above a citizen only on the grounds of the colour of his skin. This certainly does not augur well for the nation's manpower

development, least of all when the foreigner in question may be less qualified than the citizen. Brempong's cool assertion, "If you were an expatriate, a white man, it wouldn't matter. You'd have things easy, even without real qualifications" (p. 68) is quite chilling. This is the system Baako is forced to work with, and its sterility and incompetence are made explicit in the novel.

Baako's "education" through the Ghanaian experience is not yet complete. His futile attempts to put his learning to fruitful use will be discussed later in this chapter. For the moment, I am concerned with the disastrous Ghanaian political experiment. Ghanavision presents Baako with his first big demonstration of the mess Ghana has made of her Independence. He has been previously warned by both Ocran and the Principal Secretary not to expect anything worthwhile at Ghanavision. In fact, he has been told that the place is a mess, that nothing works, that he can do nothing to change the prevailing situation and that the top brass know "things don't work, but they're happy to sit on top of the mess all the same" (pp.118-19). Still, nothing prepares Baako fully for his shock at the state of affairs in Ghanavision. The place is a quagmire of indolence, inaction and intellectual stagnation. There is no creativity, little innovation and plenty of ignorance. Engineers turn out in white-white suits, with no idea of how to fix broken-down machines, while producers prefer leisure and travel to work. Their chief activity is to make endless trips to embassies to beg for films and tapes. However, nothing is a more shattering blow for Baako than to be told that a

nation is built, not through "socio-cultural and economic self-reliance",[16] but rather "through glorifying its big shots." (p. 190)

The picture at Ghanavision is meant to reflect the bigger picture of the nation at large. In effect, the country is run by time-serving sycophants like Asante-Smith, whose main aim is to make money at the expense of the nation. Again, this picture is a familiar one in post-Independence Africa. In The Beautyful Ones, Armah explains that the nation's wealth is being exploited by "the sons of the nation". Here, in Fragments, the situation is even worse, for "the external enemy isn't the one at whose expense the hero gets his victory; he's supposed to get rich, mainly at the expense of the community" (p. 147). The tragedy of Africa is that these thieves are glorified for their crimes. They are heroes. Both Petals of Blood and A Man of the People clearly present this disturbing view of African politics. In Petals the politicians and senior civil servants "get rich on the misery of the people".[17] In A Man of the People, theft by politicians is actually seen as a reward commensurate with their bravery in driving the white man away from the land.[18] Clearly Africa is on a course of self-destruction. All these problems weigh on Baako's mind, relentlessly driving him towards insanity.

Madness is a felt presence in Fragments. However, it is not so much the madness of Baako or the poor helpless dog, as the general madness of society itself. In a way Larson's contention that "Baako is an island of sanity in an ocean of madness"[19] is

right. The action of the novel points towards an attempt at self-destruction. In Two Thousand Seasons, there seems to be good cause for the people's blind pursuit of self-destruction. At least there Armah presents the world of Africa in opposition to a Euro-Arabic fragmentary one. Such words and phrases as "destroyers", "predators", "zombies" and "ostentatious cripples" are used to describe the fragmentary worlds of Arabs and Europeans. Their way of life is one of death:

> Springwater flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration. The desert takes. The desert knows no giving. To the giving water of your flowing it is not in the nature of the desert to return anything but destruction. Springwater flowing to the desert, your future is extinction.[20]

The Arabs and Europeans also have "shattered hearing", "broken reasons", and "unconnected sight". On the contrary, the African world is one of "the way, our way", "creators", and "reciprocity". It is springwater: lifesaving and regenerating. The clash of these two different worlds brings death to the people.

In Fragments this is not the case. If again and again we find a throwback to a westernized world or its cheap imitation, it is against the background of a wholly African Society. The European world is felt but not really seen. Yet the vision of Fragments is far bleaker than the picture painted in Two Thousand Seasons. In the latter novel, there is a determined resistance to the incursions of the foreigners. There is even a determined effort to revert to the traditions of the people. What we have in Fragments is the exact opposite. It is an equally determined effort to discard the traditions of Africa and to adopt those of

Europe in their totality. As if this in not bad in itself, this dance of death is led by Africa's leaders.

It is this strange, larger, social madness that accounts for the great suffering of the mass of the people in Fragments. Their suffering is very real and "their oppressors are a living presence" throughout the novel.[21] In fact one of the themes of Fragments is the divided world of the elite above and the masses below. Baako's abortive screen play, "The Brand", captures in graphic visual images the real meaning of Independence for Ghana and Africa. For the broad mass of the people in Ghana, Independence means suffering, pain, hunger, disease, oppression, indignity and defeat. It is also significant that the oppressors were, not too long ago, among the oppressed. Baako's screenplay shows a

> SINGLE DARK CIRCLE FILLING SCREEN, REPRESENTING THE WEAK PERIPHERY, LARGE ENVIRONMENT, HABITAT OF THE OPPRESSED. ON WHICH A SQUARE IS SUPERIMPOSED, WHITE, THE TOUGH CONCRETIZED FORTIFICATION ...
> LS: LADDER LEADING FROM WEAK CIRCLE TO STRONG SQUARE.
> CU: THE LADDER IS MADE UP OF THE SHOULDERS OF INHABITANTS OF THE LOWER LEVEL, THE OPPRESSED ... (pp.210-11)

The oppressed are both powerless and disenfranchised. They are numerically superior to their oppressors, yet they have been marginalized and their subjugation is complete. In Baako's own words, "THE INHABITANTS OF THE CIRCLE, [ARE] A CHORUS OF QUIET, DENSE DEFEAT." (p. 210). What is disgusting about Ghana's leaders is their hypocrisy and neo-colonial mentality. Baako pictures them as "exhibitionist" in "WHITE-WHITE LIKE PERENNIAL COLONIAL SCHOOL BOYS, HARD WITH AN EXTERIOR SHINE" (p. 210-11).

Their hollow promises that the climb is only to find a means of liberating the oppressed, while at the same time they handpick prosepective climbers and bask in self-praise, emphasize their hypocrisy (p. 211).

In A Man of the People, Achebe examines the whys and wherefores of this problem. He attributes the African politician's lust for power to the fear of returning to the circle of the oppressed. The suffering and pain of his recent past is still too fresh in his mind to risk a return to the same humiliating circumstances. According to Achebe,

> We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us -- the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best -- had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loudspeakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that the next phase -- the extension of our house -- was even more important and called for new tacics...[22]

Here, there is not even the pretence of liberating those barricaded outside. Africa's political leaders are only concerned with entrenching their power and increasing their comfort at the expense of the rest of the people.

The anguish and frustration resulting from the indifferent treatment meted out to the masses helps to account for the vanishing of the community in Fragments. Outbursts of violent destruction fill the city, and a sense of frustration is felt everywhere. The glee with which the syphilitic man butchers the helpless whimpering dog, while his poisonous, repressed desires slowly ooze out, is an indication of his entrapment and

frustration. People are imprisoned in their own small groups: expatriates and citizens alike. Juana's desire to allow a "sense of inner worth come between herself and those she walked among, so that there could be the human touching the hunger for which continued in her in spite of everything" (p. 19) shows the extent of the damage done to the human psyche. Society itself has become brutalized and the Psychiatry Ward, full of inmates with broken souls, tells the story. Even Juana sometimes questions the wisdom of mending such brokenness only to have the cycle repeated again and again.

The need for human contact and fellow-feeling is still strong, yet so many sterile and artificial structures make this impossible. Juana wants a more personal relationship with the nurses she works with, for instance, but the externals of rank and status form forbidden barriers. Human relationships are both sterile and meaningless. In the midst of this brokenness, this desire for human contact and frustration, any possibility of salvation is welcome. It is such desperation that drives people into the exploitative arms of the chauffeur-driven false beach prophet. The distance between him and his congregation is measured by his gleaming Mercedes.

In the city, this brokenness and lack of fulfilment are also reflected in the several unfinished government projects. Schools and roads are quickly abandoned, distilleries are shut down and industrial rail trucks are defunct. Everywhere, the signs of general impotence are reflected in the under development

that has become the mark of Independence. Efua's own "architectural miscarriage"[23] is the central symbol of this pattern of unfinished hopes and frustrated dreams.

However, if the city presents a gory picture of poverty and pain, the countryside presents an even more chilling one of neglect, disease and hopelessness. The general neglect of the countryside has led to an increase in urban migration, accelerating the process of societal breakdown that has been started by the greed and concupiscence of Ghana's leaders. Juana has been to the countryside and her impression of it is horrifying. What she has seen is a "kind of destruction that made people look to the grinding town as if some salvation could be found there. In the countryside things were worse". (p. 22) For the people in this area, urbanization has become a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea -- a necessary evil. Baako's own description of the countryside only serves to re-enforce Juana's earlier impression of a people in a living hell:

> The brown roadbeds up north with their dangerous gravelly sides and laterite dust had remained beautiful in his mind, and the villages on the way down from Tumu to Wa were now sounds, though there was no forgetting them as places where maimed people and sickness walked down every half-hidden path ... (pp. 190-1)

No one with a first-hand experience of the North will contradict Baako's description of what he has seen.

Skido's death by drowning at the Bamboi River is the central metaphor of this neglect. Though hardly mentioned by critics, the ferry at Bamboi, with its bureaucratic indifference, is the most telling indictment of Ghana's new educated elite. The

road from Bamboi to Wa and Tumu is one of two major roads linking the whole of the North with the South. There are a number of interesting things to consider here: 1) The North is approximately one half of the total land mass of the country; 2) the North is rich in livestock, rice and groundnut production; 3) the South is rich in forest products (timber, plantain, citrus, maize and other agricultural crops); 4) there is one central market (at Techiman) in the whole country serving both the North and the South on a weekly basis. Needless to say, trade in foodstuffs between the North and the South is not only essential, but, for the majority of people, their very survival depends upon it. Seen in this context, Skido's frustration and anxiety at the unnecessary delay at Bamboi is very understandable. While his lorry-full of foodstuffs is rotting, people up North are starving and no one seems to care about it. He is one of many sacrificial victims at the altar of the materialism, graft and political indifference that is ruining the country. The question that has often been asked by many concerned ciitizens is: What prevents the government from both bridging the river and asphalting the road, considering its economic and socio-political importance in the country?[24]

V

Properly speaking, the world of Fragments is one inhabited by the wretched of the earth. The people are "completely seized

with danger and so many different kinds of loss" (p. 34). There is the conviction, ingrained into their collective consciousness, that, in the struggle against their oppressors, hope of any kind is only a dream. This implicit acceptance of hopelessness is reflected in the many messages written on trucks and buses. In Ghana as well as in many other African countries, the practice of writing cryptic messages on the bodies of vehicles is very widespread. It is an attempt to express inner feelings and truths too deep to suppress. It is also cathartic in the sense that it cleanses the soul of the individual in an emotional relief.

The message that this unorthodox kind of public sloganeering conveys is self-evident: "Life is arduous and unrewarding."[25] It is a "grim and debilitating struggle against reality,"[26] evidenced in such dicta as "obra ye ko" (life is war). The implicit acceptance of this dictum of life as war with all its concomitant agents of uncertainty, pain, sorrow, frustration and death gives cause for concern in a nation that has just attained self-determination. The vision of life as a battlefield is, however, not an isolated case. The reality of life as it is lived is accurately depicted on the T-shirts worn by two men "with cartoons of sweating wrestlers on them under the printed caption, 'STRUGGLERS!'" (pp. 34-5) In Independence Ghana, self-expression, however, has its dangers. Consistent with the oppression of the already helpless citizens, the two men are arrested as provocateurs. The event is "serious" enough to warrant an editorial in the government newspaper, The National

Times, the next day. The official charge is that the message on the T-shirts is "Too bold". "What purpose, demanded the editor, could such images and words have, save to trouble the peaceful minds of hardworking citizens with a view to subverting the nation as a whole?" (p. 35)

In Ghana, "Truth", they say, "is painful" and no one likes it, least of all her leaders. The arrest of the two "strugglers" reflects the general suppression of truth in Ghana. A Man of the People deals with a more serious analogous situation involving senior cabinet ministers. The government has a severe financial crisis to deal with, resulting from an unexpected slump in the coffee market. The Minister of Finance, we are told, is "a first-rate economist with a Ph.D. in public finance".[27] His plan to deal with the situation receives a "No" from the Prime Minister. With a general election around the corner, the Prime Minister is not ready to risk his position by cutting down the price of coffee to the farmers. His solution is to instruct the National Bank to print more currency notes. As a man of integrity, the Finance Minister offers to resign, and he is joined by two-thirds of the cabinet. The Prime Minister does not give them the chance and dismisses them, calling them "conspirators and traitors who had teamed up with foreign saboteurs to destroy the new nation."[28]

In an atmosphere of such overwhelming oppression, the wretched of the earth in Armah's Fragments are left with only one alternative -- to appeal to God. The despair in such acronyms as "S.M.O.G.", meaning "Save Me Oh God", is very telling. For the

perpetual "broke man" whose hopes of even one square meal a day are often not realised, there is the hope in God. As the driver of one such bus with just such a sign explains: "'Poor man never get bank account. But he look far in de sky and he tink in him head he get some last chance. In heaven'" (pp.35-36). This, of course, helps to explain the unusual success of the phony beach messiah, who is not even ashamed to display the symbol of his ill-gotten wealth in the face of the general poverty of his converts. For the defeated inhabitants of the circle of oppression -- rural and urban alike -- there is only grinding hardship, toil and the bleakness of life. In The Beautyful Ones, despair is expressed in the ability to see the end of things in their beginnings. In Fragments, it is worse, because both the beginnings and the ends are unknown. Life is

> a long stretch of danger with both ends unknown, the only certain things being the constant threat and the presence of loss on a way lined with infrequent, brief, unlikely hopes and once in a long while ... unexpected miracle escapes from the edge of the unknown. (pp. 33-4)

VI

One of the most powerful portrayals of instances of sterility in Fragments is society's attitude to art. Again Baako serves as the perfect example of the embodiment of private grief and public despair. He has been trained as a writer and he wants to use his skill to help develop his country. Baako's commitment and idealism are disturbing to Ocran, the more experienced artist, who advises him to forget his idealism because the people of Ghana do not want artists. (pp. 112-115) Ocran's fear is that Baako's

commitment in the face of the general malaise in the country may end up frustrating him and driving him crazy. In the ensuing discussion between the two on the role of the artist in society, two things are clear: Ocran believes that the only way to be a real artist in Ghana is to work alone. That, for Ocran, is the only way to express himself freely. Ocran finds it expedient to sacrifice his artistic ambitions concerning mass communication in attempting to maintain his artistic integrity. Baako counters this line of reasoning by arguing that the artist must serve society. It is the duty of the artist, he argues, to offer society an interpretation of itself, and extend people's understanding of their situation. Baako stands for the social utility of art, and any withdrawal on the artist's part may lead to his being cut off from the society he ought to be serving.

Ocran, of course, is experienced and mature. Having worked in Ghana for several years, he knows the constraints that militate against intellectualism in the country. However, his withdrawal does not prove as satisfying as he imagines. Like the enigmatic Teacher in The Beautyful Ones, Ocran is marginalized, and frustrated. His private grief and internal anguish are given vent in his works. As Baako discovers in Ocran's studio, "the walls were lined with rows of black heads in dozens of different attitudes from sweet repose to extreme agony". (p. 111) From beginning to end, the tension captured in these sculptures grows progressively intense until the "inward torture actually broke the outer form of the human face, and the result [is] ... old

anonymous sculpture of Africa." (p. 111) Ocran's work is a brief summary of Ghana's history -- from sweet hopes to bitter anguish and despair. Ocran's marginality concedes too much, and more is the pity because, as an artist, he does have a story to tell.

But neither is Baako's vision of the role of the artist in society practical. "His ambitions of politicizing and re-educating 'the masses' are naively idealistic"[29] and immediately begin to backfire in his face almost before he can even implement them. He has failed to reckon with the crassness of officialdom, and the lessons he is learning at Ghanavision are very painful ones indeed. He looks on with disbelief while Senior Officers scramble for television sets that were initially meant for distribution in the hinterland. His dream of communication with the masses is effectively aborted once the sets have been withheld from the people. As if this is not enough, Baako is told that his type of drama is not essential in the nation's development. What is important, Asante-Smith asserts, is to glorify the nation's leaders, no matter how inane or counter-productive their speeches or actions.

Baako is soon to find out that the only artists who make it in Ghana are the fake ones. Indeed, one of the most powerful instances of satire in Fragments is reseved for Akosua Russel, the fake artist. Akosua Russel is totally untalented but succeeds very well in masquerading as a great artist in all literary soirees. She is especially good at attracting American patronage. Like Asante-Smith, she has special ability in catering to the

tastes of the rich and powerful. Her type of art is not only vulgar, as Armah reveals, it is prostitution of art. It is a version of the same prostitution which makes Brempong's sister lavish on her brother praise in language reserved for Kings (pp. 81-2). It is also at this soiree that Baako is introduced to another talented yet frustrated artist - Lawrence Boateng. Like Ocran, Boateng is marginalized, but he thinks that in Akosua Russel, he may yet get his opportunity to assert himself. Boateng is an editor for a magazine who is not taken seriously by his superiors, yet be has written a rather powerful first novel and, for five years, he has been unable to publish it.

Unable to bear this situation, Boateng has begun to take to drink as a way of burying his frustrations and half-hearted hopes. Society has elected to go with the Akosua Russels of Ghana rather than the Boatengs, Ocrans or Baakos. It is another version of its self-destructive syndrome. The experiences of Ocran and Boateng are pointers to what lies ahead of Baako should he persist in his missionary dreams. Artists, like any other intellectuals in Ghana, can only function properly, if they are willing to prostitute themselves. Otherwise, they can either withdraw from society like Ocran, or leave the country like the Professor in The Beautyful Ones. Which ever choice they make, Ghana is the loser.

Society's treatment of the artist is best exemplified by the experiences of the gong-gong boy at the beach. Buffeted, kicked and sidelined, this weak-looking boy is nevertheless able to rise above his circumstances to give strength and purpose to an

otherwise mindless and frustrated group of fishermen. That his vocation is productive is attested to by the fact that the combination of his singing and the music from his gong have a dramatic effect on the fishermen. From their initial uncoordinated strength and sullenness, the boy's music soon galvanizes them into one purposeful action, and succeeds in helping them to bring the nets full of fish on shore, where the fish-mongers are impatiently waiting with their baskets.

Although initially disturbed by the fishermen's ill-treatment of the boy, Baako draws inspriation from his success. He sees in the boy's role his own larger role to society in general. The boy's achievement is remarkable, and Baako not only sympathizes and identifies with him, but, even more importantly, hopes to be able to contribute in a significant way to the post-colonial development of his country in analogous fashion. However, Baako has over-interpreted events at the beach. He has all too soon forgotten that the group the boy is dealing with is potentially dangerous, probably because their inner strength and frustrations are not properly channeled. Besides, he has also forgotten the fact that as soon as the labour is completed the boy is once again ignored. For all his part in bringing in the fish, all he has left are his bruised body and fond memories of his "success", a grim reminder of his unimportance to the community he has so well served.

Lazarus points to the fact that the boy's encounter with the fishermen is purely accidental, and this contrasts with

Baako's own painstaking preparations for his vocation. Besides, he continues, Baako has failed to reckon with the impunity with which the fishermen maltreat the boy. This situation, Lazarus argues, certainly gives room for speculation about the careless way society may treat its own artists and other intellectuals. Lazarus concludes that the beach scene, looked at from this perspective, seems to support Ocran's standpoint of constructive withdrawal rather than active participation. After all, apart from the fact that the boy gains nothing personally from his contribution to the day's work, his action has also failed to influence the community in any lasting significant manner.

This is a very bleak prospect for African intellectuals who wish to put their talents at the disposal of their country. Yet, this is the view Fragments seems to endorse. What is even worse is the difference between the boy's contribution and that of Baako. Again Lazarus' assessment of the situation is quite right. The boy's artistic contribution is already within the framework of productive labour in general. In Baako's case, he is caught within an overweening bureaucracy in which nothing works. Talent, initiative, and imagination are sacrificed for expediency and pragmatism. What we find at Ghanavision is a strangling atmosphere of stupefaction, draining the energy of even the most well-meaning and talented artists. In this atmosphere, Baako's ambition to function as "drummer", "educator and therapist"[30] to society is doomed to fail.

Fragments, like The Beautyful Ones, presents Ghanaian

society as slowly disintegrating because the preoccupation with material pursuits has led to indolence, mental torpor and the death of forward-looking policies. Even human relationships have become sterile and gestural only. In fact, the only worthwhile example of a life-giving relationship in Fragments is the love affair between Baako and Juana. As Edward Lobb observes,

> the sexual aspect of this affair is described graphically, but never very sensually; one has the impression that sex is really a metaphor for what Juana thinks of as "the human touching, the hunger for which continued in her inspite of everything". (p. 19)[31]

Yet it is interesting to note that Baako's affair with Juana, for all its depth, does not save him from madness. It is equally significant that Juana chooses to go home for her annual leave at the time that Baako most needs her help and support. Perhaps, this again reflects the very bleak prospects of stemming the tide of self-destruction in Ghana.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. Fragments, London: Heinemann, 1974. Further references are incorporated in the text.

2. Ode S. Ogede, "Pattern of Decadence. Visions of Regeneration in Armah's Fragments," Modern Fiction Studies, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Autumn 1991), p. 530.

3. Ojong Ayuk, "The Lust for Material Well Being in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Fragments." Presence Africaine, vol. 132 (1984), p. 38.

4. Ogede, "Patterns," p. 499.

5. Ogede, "Patterns," p. 532.

6. Lazarus, Resistance in Post-Colonial fiction, p. 112.

7. Armah, The Beautyful Ones, p. 2.

8. Ogede, "Patterns," p. 533.

9. Derek Wright, "Ayi Kwei Armah and the Significance of His Novels and Histories". International Fiction Review, Vol 7, No. 1 (Winter 1990), p. 33.

10. Wright, "The Significance of His Novels", p. 33.

11. Wright, "The significance of His Novels", p. 31.

12. Achebe, Morning Yet, p. 26.

13. Achebe, A Man, p. 17.

14. Achebe, A Man, p. 17.

15. Ngugi, Petals, p. 104.

16. Ogede, "Patterns," p. 542.

17. Ngugi, Petals, p. 76.

18. Achebe, A Man, pp. 2 and 138.

19. Larson, Emergency of African Fiction, p. 274.

20. Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons (London and Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973), p. xi.

21. Ogede, "Patterns," p. 543.

22. Achebe, A Man, p. 37.

23. Wright, "The Significance of His Novels", p. 33.

24. After several years of complaint, official memoranda and political compromises, the Bamboi River was finally bridged in 1980. The road, however, is still in its deplorable state. Promises by the Rawlings administration to asphalt it are still to be fulfilled. It must, however, be mentioned here that in terms of development, his government has done a lot more for Ghana than most past governments, especially with regard to electricity, communication, roads, agriculture and rural development.

25. Lazarus, Resistance, p. 107.

26. Lazarus, Resistance, p. 107.

27. Achebe, A Man, p. 3.

28. Achebe, A Man, p. 3.

29. Lazarus, Resistance, p. 101.

30. Lazarus, Resistance, p. 101.

31. Edward Lobb, "Armah's Fragments and the vision of the whole in Ghanaian Literatures, ed. Richard K. Priebe. (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 255.

Chapter 3

CONCLUSION

> ... you carry in your hands, like an egg, the hopes of all Ghanains ... [many things] will determine whether this egg will be broken, or if it hatches, whether it will bring forth a vulture or a proud eagle.
>
> - J.J. Rawlings, on his time-table for return to civilian rule in Ghana[1]

I

Over two decades have passed since the publication of both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments. Much has happened within this period. Africa has had its share of coups, wars and a host of abuses of human rights, which all tend to make life even more unpleasant for the broad masses of the people. Despite the crucial role that economics plays in the overall development of any nation, most of Africa's problems seem attributable to bad leadership and intransigent politics. In the past few years, Africa has been going through a whirlwind of political activities, aimed at redressing her political problems. The winds of democracy currently blowing across the continent bring us to another cross-roads in our political development. We are nostalgically reminded of the years immediately preceding Independence from colonial rule over thirty years ago. The question that seems to be gaining universal currency amidst the present euphoria is whether Africa is at the dawn of a new era, or whether the cycle is to be repeated all over again. In the natural order of things, one hopes that it is the former. However, in the general scheme of Armah's two novels, this hope

seems likely to be disappointed.

In all of Armah's novels, there is the explicit recognition of Africa's futile struggle in the existing situation of her consumerist ethic, her dependence on the West for this satisfaction, and the intransigence and lack of foresight of her leaders. This element of despair is central to Armah's art and his vision is to explore all the alternatives available to Africa, for an avenue of escape. In both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments, but especially in the former book, almost every page is full of negatives. The natural and social worlds of these novels are both full of decay and corruption, and the despair of his protagonists speaks for itself.

One can make the claim, with some justification, for Armah that the almost overwhelming negativity in his works is in itself not a negation of life, or of any positive thinking, for that matter. The despair and social disintegration in the worlds of his novels do not mean the absolute impossibility of stemming the tide of decay, and beginning a new process of regeneration. However, the novels do present a rather difficult, almost insoluble, problem that needs serious re-thinking by Ghanaian and all African leaders. Until the root of the problem is tackled and solved, all other attempts will be mere window-dressing, much like the ability of the wood in The Beautyful Ones to absorb any new polish without any marked change. In his book Myth, Realism, and the West African Writer, Richard Priebe suggests, as one of two alternatives, that we

> look at these negations as symbolic action directed against an existing order, as essentially revolutionary, and hence inducing us to accept an apocalyptic orientation.[2]

This view, however, is too narrow and needs some qualification.

II

There certainly is a revolutionary potential in Armah's works and it would be foolish to deny it. What is more, Priebe's suggestion that the several negations in them are an indictment of the existing order also makes much sense. However, to argue that the negations in themselves are "essentially revolutionary" and, therefore, "apocalyptic" is going too far. There are several signs of hope in both novels, and I shall be discussing these later in this chapter; however, the overwhelming pervasiveness of defeat and hopelessness make any revolutionary ideal only a potential one. In the context of the two novels, mass action is still premature. As Lazarus rightly observes, to advocate revolution in circumstances of the total improbability of one occurring, is both naive and irresponsible.[3] It will be recalled that, at the end of The Beautyful Ones, even the coup fails to evoke any feeling of elation in the masses. The new power brokers are no saviours or heroes, because they come from the same social stratum as those in the ousted government. The feeling of disillusionment with the political process is reflected in the people's reception of the news of the coup. Contrary to the earlier popular reception of coups in Africa,

> the streets were very quiet. Only here and there, a small group of men would be talking, and it did not seem necessarily true that they were talking of the things that had taken place that day ... there was nothing really unusual. (p.159)

This apathetic response to the change of government is a good barometer of the people's loss of faith in the political leadership any political leadership. Besides, in The Beautyful Ones, Armah himself makes the point that mass action is still premature:

> Someday in the long future a new life would maybe flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as its instruments the same people who had made a habit of killing new flowers. The future goodness may come eventually, but before then, where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it? (pp.159-60)

The prospect, indeed, is bleak and this seems to conform with Armah's vision of Ghana. The problem, as Amuta rightly defines it, is the fact that Armah himself "fails to provide a social vision that could galvanize the mental freedom which his works permit."[4] In Two Thousand Seasons, Isanusi and his small band of initiates can only offer timid and very feeble attempts at revolution. Theirs is a nucleus of a revolution aimed at pointing the way for future generations to take. Even in Why Are We So Blest?, where the revolutionary imperative is recognized as the way to social salvation, there seems to be a lack of sufficient confidence in this alternative to make it workable:

> In this wreckage there is no creative art outside the destruction of the destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art and revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction.[5]

However, no action proceeds from this recognition, presumably

because the time is not ripe for revolution.

This situation contrasts sharply with events in Ngugi's Petals of Blood. Here the revolutionary alternative is recognized by both the elite and the masses. In their epic march from Ilmorog to the capital, it is significant that the only person among the elite who is willing to help this bedraggled delegation from the hinterland is a socialist lawyer. But even beyond this is the fact that the workers of Kenya, led by Karega, are willing to rise up in arms to overthrow the existing decadent government of Kenyan capitalism. In Armah's works, action is left in the hands of individuals who prove to be no match for the forces in their societies. The weight of the social forces proves too much for these lonely, isolated individuals to bear, and they simply crumble.

The collapse of socialism in world politics today even makes the revolutionary alternative suspect. Revolution in international politics is fast becoming anathema. In the light of recent political events in Africa, for example, the coup in Sierra Leone comes as a shock to many people in the world. The coup has succeeded in undercutting the idea of democracy as a panacea to Africa's problems. The coup seems to imply that, in Africa's case, it is not so much the question of ideological leanings as a change in the attitude of people towards politics that is important. In The Beautyful Ones, the coup merely offers a respite for the people, nothing more. Only a few hours into the new regime, the old order of bribery and corruption is already

revived. In the end nothing really changes; there is a "change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted," nothing more. "The change would bring nothing new. In the life of the nation itself, maybe nothing really new would happen." (p. 162) And so it is that Armah raises hopes only to dash them to pieces again.

Even more than the Man, Teacher stands as the symbol of hopelessness for Ghana. Teacher does not deny the fact that certain situations are capable of inspiring hope in people. But, for him, the defeat of such hopes is in their very transitory nature, and therefore they must not be trusted. For the majority of people in The Beautyful Ones, "hope" is a word they would rather not hear. "All too often, hope gives way inevitably to disillusion, and disillusion is made all the harder to bear by the lingering memory of the hope in whose ashes it has arisen".[6] As a result of this attitude, Teacher repudiates life itself in favour of hopelessness. For him, "It is not a choice between life and death, but what kind of death we can bear, in the end. Have you not seen there is no salvation anywhere?" (p.56) There is no more fight left in Teacher: his despair and disillusionment are complete, hence his withdrawal from society itself to await the end of things.

Yet there are several signs of hope in both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments. Armah imbues his protagonists with seeds of regeneration, a clear indication that sometime in the future, these seeds may find the right soil to take root and perhaps

flourish. One of the greatest signs of hope in these novels is the sheer amount of resilience in the protagonists. In the face of public scorn, mental and psychological conflicts, and, even worse, family abuse and disregard, both the Man and Baako find inner strengths to stand by their convictions. They are able to fashion for themselves some constructive purpose for living amidst the shattered reality of their society. Their resistance to the decay and disintegration of their society is heroic, though it is not enough to effect a moral change in their society.

In The Beautyful Ones, even more than in Fragments, Armah gives many glimpse of hope and regeneration amid the general gloomy outlook of the novel. One of the most painful sources of unhappiness for the Man has been his wife's ready capitulation to "the gleam" as an end in itself. Oyo's scorn of her husband and her insulting reference to him as a "chichidodo" prove a greater burden for the Man than society's disregard of him. We noticed earlier that desire flees from both of them, bringing an end to the one area in married life most capable of strengthening emotional attachment between spouses. At the end of the novel, however, desire is not only re-kindled between Oyo and her husband, but a reconciliation is also effected between them, with the promise of future understanding between the two. This augurs well for the future, as the fight against materialism and social fragmentation is anything but finished.

The Beautyful Ones also abounds in symbolic cleansings and regenerations. The sea, which has often been recognized as one of

the most potent of symbols in literature, plays a dominant role. It is the one place that offers sanctuary to the disillusioned in society. The Man, Teacher, Kofi Billy and Maanan all retire to the sea shore when society becomes too suffocatingly distressing for them. With the loss of hope in the political leadership, it is the one place that these young people go to, to escape from the harsh reality of life as well as bury their problems in the magic of marijuana. After having helped Koomson to escape from the country, the Man leaves the stench and dried bits of faeces still clinging to him in the depths of the sea. He emerges cleansed, a sort of purification rite that renews him, giving him the strength and purity he still needs to continue with his resistance against a corrupt society. Armah provides several words and phrases of regenerative significance associated with the sea. The breeze from the sea itself is "fresh in a special organic way that has traces in it of living things from their beginnings to the endings." The breath of air the Man takes also "fascinated him with its freedom from decay." The man also finds the sea "beautiful" (p. 171). The sea, moreover, is also "quiet" with a "general sense of stillness". (p. 112) It gives a sense of peace and well-being. The journey to the sea is also one of self-discovery, for the Man is able to see "into parts of himself not often visited" (p. 113). All these various nuances of the sea imagery are positive and reflect the possiblility of a final cleansing of the filth from society.

III

These hopes, however, remain largely unfulfilled. Nor do they offer indications of fulfulment in the near future. The nearest possibility we have of the realization of these hopes is in the very long and uncertain future. It is part of Armah's art to use these various signs of hope to defeat hope itself, an indication of the near-impossibility of the task at hand. The protagonists in the two novels may have succeeded in holding on to their convictions, for instance, but they are by-passed by society, which has not been very much influenced by their moral position. For the kind of ailment Ghana is suffering from, only with the realization by the masses that something is inherently wrong with the body politic will healing be possible. Until this happens, visionaries like the Man or Baako will continue to be misfits, eccentric or even mad.

In The Beautyful Ones, the sea itself is finally self-defeating. The sea, with all its positive symbolic ramifications, is not enough to effect a social purification, and regeneration. The Man's dive into the sea may be a penultimate act, aimed at ritually purifying him, but society itself is still buried in rot. The purification rite is largely marginalized by the fact that the streams which feed the sea are all clogged with debris, and the fresh wind from the sea is rather "brief". The complicity of the Man, the boatman and the Watchman in ferrying the minister away from "justice" is reflective of the wider complicity in society's

upholding of wrong doing. The enigmatic "we shall meet again" (p. 178) uttered by Koomson and repeated by the Man is disturbing. Does it imply, like the "debris heaped by the returning tide"[7], that the rot is not washed far away and that its return is inevitable? The novel seems to suggest this. However, if there is still any doubt, the presence of Maanan at the beach banishes it.

The presence of Maanan at the beach at this significant moment is a grim reminder that all is not well with the body politic. Her new-found faith in Nkrumah has received a shattering blow and has left her completely insane. There is a sense of the despair and the lack of significance in human action, or hope in another human being, in her words: "And how can I find it when they have mixed it all with so many things?"(p.180) If the "it" Maanan is referring to is synonymous with hope or the salvation Ghana is looking for, then the search is hopeless indeed. In the fine grain of the sand on the sea shore, the search is almost doomed to failure right from the beginning.

The closing paragraphs of the novel seem to put the lid on an already hopeless situation. The final promise of the "beautiful flower" and the "single melodious note" (p.183) of the "strangely happy" song of the bird may point to a future healing of the land, as Coates suggests,[8] but the title of the novel is uncertain about this. It still remains, for all this, for the Beautiful Ones, yet to be born, to restore health to the nation. Even the Man's symbolic rebirth in the sea will not change

anything, as he slowly makes his way into the same old corrupt world:

> ... his mind was consumed with thoughts of everything he was going back to - Oyo, the eyes of the children after six o'clock, the office and every day, and above all the neverending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him. (p.183)

Not a very pleasing prospect, one must admit.

IV

Like The Beautyful Ones, Fragments is not destitute of faith in Ghana's future. Its world is paralysed by irresponsible social action. Secularization has blinded Africa's vision of the real essence of life, and this is made worse by the mad rush for material possession. In spite of this gloomy picture, there are glimmers of light twinkling like faint stars, showing the way home. The problem is whether, in the general helplessness and hopelessness, people will recognize these signs as the way for a general cure of Ghana's severe malady. And if they do, whether they will have the courage to embark on the course of regeneration. On these signs of hope, the novel's ending is ominously silent.

One of the greatest signs of hope for Ghana in Fragments is the love affair between Baako and Juana. Armah seems to suggest that the beginning of the cure for Ghana's problems must start with human relationships; relationships that are completely altruistic, and based on human worth, love and trust. Fragments'

vision in addressing communal problems is based on this kind of relationship. As Ogede points out, "Baako's regeneration into the novel's community of visionaries is presented as the best promise for Africa, and not merely personal salvation for him."[8] This regeneration, of course, involves a collective struggle against the negative forces of society. Juana's effort in this struggle serves as the rallying point for all the other visionaries in the novel -- Ocran, Naana and Boateng. Juana helps Baako to mend by showing confidence in him, talking to him and "renew[ing] the interest he had lost in holding on" (p. 269). It is Juana who points out to Baako that he is not a criminal and that his action is worth something (p. 271). Her love breaks through to him with a "fullness of affection she had been unable to let out in words ... and took complete possession of her". (p. 272) The greatest sign of hope Juana envisions for the future is her faith in Baako and her resolution to "begin preparing the unused room" (p. 277) for Baako to occupy on his discharge from the hospital.

There is even more hope in the other visionaries' attitude towards Baako. Instead of feeling disappointed and frustrated, their commitment to their ideal is re-enforced. Ocran joins Juana in giving back to Baako his lost self-esteem. Ocran advises Baako to disregard people's judgment of him once he is satisfied in his own mind of the correctness of his actions. Above all, Ocran himself seems to discard his earlier detachment from the mainstream of events by asking Baako to make good use of his talents and brains: "Don't stop thinking Onipa. You have a good

mind; don't be afraid to use it." (p.274) The combined action of Juana and Ocran not only gives Baako the support and self-confidence he needs, but it also shows that the struggle is no longer an isolated one.

Of even more significance is the spiritual help Naana promises Baako when she joins her ancestors. In the traditional African setting, this is very important. The action of betrayal in Naana's age group can only lead to class suicide, but with the will to fight by the younger generation, and with the spiritual support of the ancestors, victory is in sight. Naana's words, "When I go I will protect him if I can, and if my strength is not enough I will seek out stronger spirits and speak to their souls of his need of them," (p.283) are reassuring. There is confidence in her words, the surety of one who knows, without the shadow of doubt, what the outcome will be. This is not accidental on Armah's part. It is significant that Naana's monologues both begin and end the novel. At the beginning of the novel, her faith in Baako's return (p.1) contrasts sharply with Efua's doubts and her recourse to the beach messiah for help. The novel begins and ends on a positive note of hope for the future.

However, as so often is the case with Armah, this hope is muted and rendered both ambiguous and uncertain. In the words of Ocran, life is "twisted" (p.119), and the fact that things are likely to remain that way for a very long time is underscored by his advice to Baako: "Heaven help you if you go into that Civil Service thinking you're going to work".(p.119) As if to justify

this rather outrageous claim, Baako's working experience with Ghanavision is short-lived. His resignation amounts to a capitulation in the ongoing battle, and if he could not fight it within the ranks of Ghanavision, it is doubtful if he can fight it without -- the more so in a society which looks at madness with suspicion.

It is also doubtful how successful Baako's re-integration into society will be. It is true that he has the love and support of Juana and Ocran on his side, but it is most likely that his will be a lone voice crying in the wilderness, asking for the path to be prepared. How long it will take the messiah to come is, however, uncertain. Baako's own loss of hope in the struggle is seen, not only in his resignation from Ghanavision, but even more significantly in his writings. His screen plays represent the sum total of his convictions and are a pointer to society's slow path towards recovery. In burning them, Baako seems to admit defeat and the painful truth that "nothing works" in Ghana. Despite the presence of hope, therefore, the action of the novel itself does not seem to support imminent victory over Ghana's decadence.

Besides, as Wright observes, Fragments does not fatuously advocate a return to values rooted in a vanished world. Naana's world, he argues, is lost forever, and her "spiritual meditations" only parallel "Baako's artistic self communings" as part of the general madness of an inherently materialistic world.[10] "Certainly," Wright notes in another article,

> there is in the novel a reluctance to believe in total loss and waste, given its most positive expression in

> Naana's faith in an energy-conserving cycle of being. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether any painful redemptive knowledge has accrued either to family or community from the spectacle of Baako's disintegration.[11]

And it must be admitted that any healing process has to start with the family's or community's lessons learnt from Baako's mental and psychological fragmentation. Until this occurs, Baako will merely be repeating the cycle of broken and patched up souls of people in Juana's ward at the hospital.

In an interview in West Africa magazine with Robert Moss, Achebe is quoted as saying that "the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect." According to Achebe, the writer's duty is to help them recover from this loss.[12] In both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments this has been Armah's task. His method is to shake the people out of their complacency by presenting a world that appears so irredeemably lost that there seems to be no hope for its salvation. The idea is to give society an awareness of what is wrong with it, and to challenge it into tackling the problems in a meaningful way. In other words, Armah is saying that the idea of defeat is mainly in the mind and once this is recognized and accepted, liberation is both possible and attainable.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Ben Ephson, "PNDC Sets Timetable for Return to Civilian rule: Elections Next Year?", West Africa, 2-8 Sept. 1991, p. 1418.

2. Richard K. Priebe, Myth, Realism, and the West African Writer (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1988), p. 30.

3. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect," p. 161.

4. Chidi Amuta, "Ayi Kwei Armah and the Mythopoesis of Mental Decolonization." Ufahamu, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1984), p. 53.

5. Ayi Kwei Armah, Why Are We So Blest? (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 231.

6. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect", p. 165.

7. Derek Wright, "Motivation and Motif: The Carrier rite in Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, English Studies in Africa, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1985), p. 131.

8. Coates, "Mythic Undercurrent," p. 170.

9. Ogede, "Patterns," p. 544.

10. Derek Wright, "Fragments: The Akan Background," Research in Africian Literature, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1984), pp. 190.

11. Wright, "The Significance of His Novels," p. 34.

12. Chinua Achebe, "Writing and Politics," West Africa, 11 Aug. 1986: p. 1676.

Appendix

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

> At long last the battle has ended! And thus Ghana, your beloved country is free for ever.
>
> - Dr. Kwame Nkrumah[1]

I

The theme of despair and social fragmentation seems to pervade all of Armah's works. The reason for this is not hard to find. The years immediately following the Second World War were years of hope and promise for Africa. Africa had fought on the side of the Allies and victory was won against Nazi Germany. This victory intensified Africa's struggle against colonial domination. African soldiers had watched their white counterparts die in the war, and they had also shown as much courage and bravery as white soldiers. The war thus served to demystify the notion of white supremacy, and, on their return to the continent, many of these soldiers became active in the numerous protest movements and political parties in their countries. They saw this new struggle as an opportunity to regain their dignity and assert their freedom.

There were other, even more forceful, reasons that gave cause for hope and promise. One of these was the great economic potential of the continent. In the 1950's, for instance, "the Gold Coast [now Ghana] enjoyed consistent balance of payment surpluses and was a net exporter of capital in the British Colonial Empire."[2] The potential for development was enormous. Africa looked to the era when her own sons and daughters would tap

her vast resources and transform the continent into a great economic power. These were days of great expectations in which people looked forward to the end of famine and disease in Africa and the beginning of a great social transformation. Indeed, Kwame Nkrumah's catch phrase "Seek ye first the political kingdom" became a cliche as people expected many forms of prosperity with the attainment of Independence. These expectations were not far-fetched, for "At independence Ghana, one of the richest tropical countries in the world, had reserves of about 200 million."[3] For many people in Ghana at the time, the period heralded Ghana's golden age.

In The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,[4] Armah supports this claim by insisting that the decolonizing years offered real potential for radical transformation. Teacher expresses the feeling of the people when he observes that they "were ready here for big and beautiful things" (p. 81). This general expectancy could be felt and even Teacher was thrilled. "The promise was so beautiful", he says. "Even those who were too young to understand it all knew that at last something good was being born. It was there. We were not deceived about that" (p. 85). As Neil Lazarus rightly observes, this is how The Beautyful Ones gains its "distinctive moral flavour".[5] The novel does not simply present Ghana's new rulers as corrupt and opportunistic. It derives its moral intensity from the inability of the leaders to avail themselves of the opportunities presented at Independence.

The hectic days of decolonization also had one very

distinctive feature: the importance of leadership. A new breed of African leaders emerged to lead the Independence struggle. Everywhere in Africa, these leaders quickly became the embodiment of the promise, hope and expectations of Independence. Again the reason for this is not hard to find. The people had become disenchanted with the "nationalist agitators", who were members of the bourgeoisie. In The Beautyful Ones, Armah presents a picture of the nationalists as collaborators with the colonial administration (pp. 80-1). Their ambition in the struggle was to take over from where their colonial masters would leave off, and to preserve all the mystery and glory of power politics that they saw in colonialism. Armah variously refers to them as "Black Englishmen" and "yes men" "trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European" (pp. 81-2). They were men eager to do the bidding of their white masters in return for recognition. They were motivated by a greed for power and the people quickly recognized it.

Armah's analysis of the decolonizing period is incisive. The nationalists came to the people as saviours, but spoke to them

> in the legal English they had spent their lives struggling to imitate ... and they asked us to be faithful and to trust them. They spoke to us in the knowledge that they were our magicians, people with some secret power behind them (p. 81)

The contrast between them and the broad masses of the people was obvious. The people recognized this gap only too well and were not prepared to put their destiny in the hands of what may be regarded as second-rate "colonizers" (p. 83). A leadership crisis

had been created.

It was in these circumstances that Nkrumah rose to power in Ghana. He broke away from the nationalist party, the United Gold Coast Convention (U.G.C.C.), to form his revolutionary party, the Convention People's Party (C.P.P.) with its slogan "Self-Government Now". Nkrumah was a unique figure and quite literally appealed to the people. He came to them without any pretensions whatsoever. He was poor and hungry-looking like the people he offered to lead, and he made no bones about it. Through Teacher, we get to know the real Nkrumah as the latter speaks to the people:

> "I have come to you. And you see that I have nothing in my hands. A few here know where I live. Not much is there ... I did what we all do, and I slept on other people's verandas. It is the truth, so why should I feel ashamed when proud men look down and say 'veranda boy'? I am not ashamed of poverty. There is nothing shameful in it. But slavery ... How long ... Alone, I am nothing. I have nothing. We have power. But we will never know it; we will never see it work. Unless we choose to come together to make it work." (p. 87).

This vision was the source of Nkrumah's popular appeal. He was the symbol of all that the people looked for in a leader. He could touch the deepest core of their emotions in a way others could not. He was the promise of Independence. He offered them the opportunity to take their destiny into their own hands, and fashion something meaningful out of Independence. He also taught them the power of united action and "rose to power on the basis of massive popular support."[6]

II

Armah's novels are not merely a lament over Africa's missed opportunities. Rather, the almost total loss of hope and the break-up of society presented, especially, in The Beautyful Ones and Fragments, serve as a warning of a future social and political armageddon in Africa, if efforts are not made to reverse the present trend. It is against this background that both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments should be understood. Both of them derive their power from the contrast between the expectations and the waste; between what might have been and what actually is now. At the electric moment of Nkrumah's historic speech, "At long last the battle has ended! And ... Ghana ... is free for ever", the scene was set for the rest of Black Africa to follow suit. Nkrumah's Independence speech was both the culmination of the Independence struggle itself, and the beginning of a hoped for bright future:

> "Today, from now on, there is a new African in the world and that new African is ready to fight his own battle and show that after all the black man is capable of managing his own affairs. We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation."[7]

These were courageous words. They were also words of pride in achievement and words of promise. They were to be repeated in varying degrees over the next couple of years, throughout Africa: "Guinea in 1958, Nigeria in 1960, Uganda in 1962, and Kenya in 1963 ..."[8]

In The Beautyful Ones, Armah also shows another aspect of

Nkrumah's rise to power. It is what Lazarus describes as "the existence of a rare and precious level of political awareness on the part of the masses."[9] This political awareness is manifested in their repudiation of the bourgeoisie as their future leaders (pp. 81-3). It is in this light that Nkrumah's political betrayal is presented in the novel as obscene. The loss of hope depicted in the two novels stems not so much from the corruption itself, as from the loss of faith in any leader's promises or any politician's actions. Nkrumah had been their own man. He was one of them, and he articulated their feelings, hopes and aspirations very well. They had faith in him, so his act of betrayal was not only unpardonable, it was also a source of despair. If Nkrumah failed, who else could ever succeed? Nkrumah's "Judas kiss" of Africa is all the more painful because of the promise it embodied. The people, like Moses, are taken to the Mountain and shown the Promised Land spread out before them, and, in the same breath, they are denied entry into it. Again, through Teacher's consciousness, we share in the people's suffering:

> The beauty was in the waking of the powerless. Is it always to be true that it is impossible to have things strong and at the same time beautiful? The famished men need not stay famished. But to gorge themselves in this heartbreaking way, consuming, utterly destroying the common promise in their greed, was that ever necessary? (p. 85)

Nkrumah and his Party men have proved to be no different from the educated elite the people rejected in their favour. This helps to account for the gloomy mood of the two novels. Armah has succeeded very well in capturing the shock of betrayal by Nkrumah,

the people's most trusted leader.

Nkrumah's betrayal was to be repeated across the continent by virtually all the men who led their countries to Independence. In Ngugi's Petals of Blood, the shock of betrayal takes two forms. The first is in the discovery immediately after Independence that the betrayers of the Mau Mau cause are those now enjoying political power, while the fighters, some of whom, like Abdulla, lost their limbs in the struggle, are destitute. The second closely resembles the Ghanaian situation -- the most trusted leaders turn out to be as bad as, or even worse than, their political rivals.

Freedom, it is said, has never been won on a silver platter. The Kenyan struggle, in which the Mau Mau played a significant role, is only one of several examples. The fight in the forests, the hunger, disease, hardship, betrayal and death, are all faithfully recorded in Petals of Blood. The promise of a free nation in which human dignity and the potential for development -- from one's own sweat -- were what kept the Freedom Fighters going, when all seemed lost.[10] The betrayal of Dedan Kimathi was shocking and a set-back in the struggle, but nothing prepared Mau Mau veterans, like Abdulla, for the surprises of Independence. Nding'uri, a Mau Mau hero, is betrayed and hanged, while Abdulla barely escapes with his life during the struggle for Independence. After Independence, it turns out that people like Kimiera, who actively collaborated with the colonialists, and who betrayed Nding'uri, are now in positions of power - he is a

leading industrialist and one of three "directors of the internationally famous Thang'etta Breweries and Enterprises Ltd."[11] Abdulla, in post-Independence Kenya, is reduced to selling oranges for a living.

Kimiera's betrayal and his subsequent elevation in Kenyan politics are discouraging, to say the least, to any well-meaning African who wants to contribute effectively to Africa's development. But so are Chui's who, like Nkrumah, is the embodiment of promise for Africa. The drama enacted at Siriana is a microcosm of Africa's tragedy. Chui, the hero at Siriana, is expelled because of his leadership in a strike that calls for change, meaningful development and sound educational policy for the country. Several years later, he returns from successful studies abroad to a tumultuous welcome from the students of Siriana who have embarked upon yet another strike and are calling for a black headmaster. Their choice of Chui is both logical and understandable. Chui had been militant in his days at Siriana. He had also advocated changes in the school's curriculum to suit the African context. Chui would understand the students. He is one of them.

However, Chui's subsequent repudiation of all that he earlier stood for comes as a shock to the students. He turns out to be a black-whiteman in "Khaki shorts and shirt and a sun helmet: a black replica of Fraudsham",[12] the man he has come to replace. As the students slowly recover from this apparition, Chui delivers the coup de grace:

> He spoke and announced a set of rules. He thanked the teachers for their high standards and world-wide reputation of the school. It was his desire, nay his fervent prayer, that all the teachers should stay, knowing that he had not come to wreck but to build on what was already there ... Far from destroying the prefect system, he would inject it with new blood.[13]

Chui's action strongly reminds one of Rehoboam, the man who succeeds Solomon as King of Israel. Asked by his people to lighten the burden and tyranny they suffered under his father, his words are anything but encouraging:

> "My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions."[14]

This precisely mirrors the problem of Africa. Struggle of any kind is doomed to failure, as the new leaders turn out to be worse than the old ones. The struggles, pain, disease and betrayals only form a pattern of repetition, with no light at the end of the tunnel. In fact, the people are now even worse off than before. The debilitating paralysis engulfing the worlds of The Beautyful Ones and Fragments, has occurred precisely because there is no longer any motivation for fighting. There can never be victory in any struggle again, only loss and despair. Again, Ngugi captures this helplessness very succinctly in Petals of Blood. He tabulates the expectations of Independence and ends on a note of sorrow and despair:

> ... memories of the search for a decent job or trade: the years of toil at the shoe factory; the years of awakening, with more dreams of black David with only a sling, a spear and a stolen gun triumphing over white Goliath with his fat cheques and machine-guns; dreams of total liberation so that a black man could lift high his head secure in his land, secure in his school, secure in

> his culture - all this and more ... and below it all ... the loss ... the unavenged loss.[15]

Independence for Africa, in the worlds of these novels, is nothing more than a dream.

III

The notion of Independence in Africa is very much cherished and even the gloominess of Armah's novels does not diminish its aura. While Armah's visionaries, such as the Man or Baako, attempt to restore the glory and promise of Independence, the vast majority of the people are discouraged because of the lightning speed of deterioration that has come to be the mark of Independence. The headiness of the expectations of black freedom which Independence promised was short lived. In the extremely brief period between Independence in 1957 and Nkrumah's ousting in 1966, Ghana had accumulated a foreign debt of 360 million.[16] (This is all the more alarming as she started with such large reserves at Independence.) While this fact is well documented in both novels, the speed of its occurrence has an ethical significance that is bewildering. There is something very unnatural about it. In The Beautyful Ones, Armah regards the dizzying speed of "such quick decay" as sickening, and invested with "an irresistible horror." (p. 62)

The main point I am trying to make is that there is little cause for Africa's Independence to have gone sour. Quite literally, and strange as this may seem, Africa's Independence has been betrayed by the very people who led its struggle: her leaders. In both The Beautyful Ones and Fragments, for example,

Ghana's betrayal has been perpetrated by the politicians and senior civil servants in government. What could be the reason for this? Quite possibly, it was the sudden glory and lime-light that their positions have placed them in. It may also be due to the corrupting influence of wealth. We should remember that Koomson, for instance, has been just a poor dockworker with calloused palms. The sudden elevation to ministerial position may have gone to his head. Whatever the reason, Ghanaian politicians (and African politicians in general) have had their consciences seared by the hot rod of power and privilege, to the extent that social injustice, the correction of which was one of the reasons for which they fought to gain power, now means nothing to them. As a matter of fact, these leaders have seemed to derive some obscene satisfaction in seeing the misery of their people. How else can one explain Koomson's encounter with the bread-seller or Brempong's grotesque reception at the airport? Politics is seen as the shortest route to success, power and wealth.

The great expectations entertained by the people have come nowhere near fulfilment since Independence. Development has been illusive and the quality of life has not been much improved. Rather than the dignity and prosperity that Independence is supposed to herald, all the people have as reward for their struggle is social fragmentation, violence, underdevelopment, economic stagnation and elitism.

The almost total lack of hope in the two novels is largely due to the domino effect of the leaders' betrayal of the ideals of

Independence. Corruption, for instance, becomes a national game as the people take the cue from their leaders. Consequently, traditional values and family life are traded for materialism. This in turn has led to a loss of vision for Ghana, and the continent as a whole, leaving the people marooned on islands of individual self-interest. As the nation flounders and teeters on the verge of collapse, the leaders shore up their own images by hypocritically urging the people to tighten their belts and act in unity, for the end of the struggle is in sight. Part of the despair, as Armah shows in the two novels, is that no one believes the leaders any more. The people are living in the present, content merely to eke a living for now as the future seems to hold nothing in store for them.

I have tried to put the thesis as a whole in a historical perspective so that the main issues of despair and disintegration can better be understood. One reason for this method is that neither The Beautyful Ones nor Fragments gives extensive background information about the period of decolonization. In The Beautyful Ones, Armah does give some information on Nkrumah's meteoric rise to power and his subsequent betrayal of his supporters. But this information is sketchy, as the Independence struggle itself is not detailed. Moreover, aside from Nkrumah's own humble beginnings and his promise to gain Independence through mass action, nothing much is said about the expected economic and social transformations after Independence. In the same way, Fragments is located somewhere in the middle of Nkrumah's rule.

So all we get is the greed, corruption and graft of the politicians and their unholy cohorts. Of course we do get a lot of stagnation, class domination, violence and all the other social ills associated with Nkrumah's rule. But the extent of the people's disillusionment with politics can better be gauged against the promise of the Independence struggle itself.

Another reason is that, with the disappointment of the people in the pioneer governments, bad leadership seems to have become a legacy for most African countries, including Ghana. This is one cause of the novels' gloomy atmosphere. The people have lost all hope because one government merely takes off from where its predecessor left off. This explains why coup after coup in Ghana (and Africa, generally) does not really solve the problem. Worse, it also explains why the people fail to rejoice when a government falls to a coup.

A third reason is that this is Armah's own method in nearly all his novels. Armah attaches great significance to the lessons of the past because he believes that the future of any society depends on its ability to learn from past mistakes. So, while dealing with contemporary issues in some novels, in others he reconstructs the history of Africa to serve as a guide to both his readers and to African leaders present and future alike. In Two Thousand Seasons, for instance, Armah tackles the whole of the African past and seeks to show how African values and traditions have been debased and destroyed by Euro-Arabian imperialists and their African allies. He uses history to expose

the root causes of Africa's problems, so that lasting solutions may be found. For instance, The Healers, his fifth novel, takes its theme in part from Two Thousand Seasons. After examining the causes of Africa's disunity, in detail, he is now ready to provide a curative vision to help attain its unity. The "healers" of the novel are Armah's answer to Africa's long history of strife and internal dissension. Like all his other novels, The Healers is a story of the past, providing lessons to the present and the future.

Given the almost total lack of hope in the political process, what do the events in Africa today portend for its future? More than twenty years after its publication, the title of the first novel still seems appropriate: THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN.

NOTES TO APPENDIX

1. These were the opening words of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, first President of Independent Ghana. On the 6th of March 1957, when he spoke these words to a capacity crowd of over 100,000 people, The Union Jack had been replaced by the Ghana flag, marking the end of colonial rule and ushering in a new golden era for Ghana. See Neil Lazarus' Resistance in Post-Colonial Fiction (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), pp. 1-26

2. T.E. Anin, "In Search of the Magic Cure." West Africa, 20-26 Jan. 1992: p. 101.

3. Derek Wright, "Armah's Ghana Resisted: History and Fiction," International Fiction Review, Vol 12, No. 1 (Winter 1985), p. 27.

4. This reference and subsequent references to the novel, which are given in parenthesis in the text, are taken from the 1975 reset Heinemann edition.

5. Neil Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: A Reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born." Research in African Literature, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1987), p. 141.

6. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect", p. 141.

7. Quoted from Neil Lazarus' Resistance in Post-Colonial Fiction, p. 1.

8. Lazarus, Resistance, p. 1.

9. Lazarus, "Pessimism of the Intellect," p. 143.

10. Ngugi Wa Thiang'o, Petals of Blood (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1977), p. 136.

11. Ngugi, Petals, pp. 4-5.

12. Ngugi, Petals, p. 171.

13. Ngugi, petals, p. 171.

14. I Kings 12:10-11, New International Version of the Bible, (East Brunswick: International Bible Society, 1973), p. 258.

15. Ngugi, Petals, p. 220.

16. Wright, "Ghana Revisited," p. 27.

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