

CHAPTER II

***THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN:* Man, Society, and the Communal Vision**

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is one of the most successful novels of post-colonial African literature. During this period the novelists were less preoccupied with cultural and sociological matters than with the exposure of corruption and incompetence widespread in the African political system. With its uniqueness and by a reflection of the traditional African forms and concerns, *The Beautiful Ones* marks the advent of a major talent on the African literary scene. In fact, in a sense the novel marks the realization of the fuller potential of the African artist to write about African reality. It registers Armah's revulsion against corruption in his native Ghana. Dominated by a mood of total disillusionment, the novel uses the imagery of sickness to characterize the Ghanaian situation.

Like Soyinka in *The Interpreters*, Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*¹ presents a work of fiction about the undermining effects of corruption. His satire is interspersed with symbolic passages which explore the situation deeply. As Eldred Jones

quite rightly points out, "the narrative has the remorseless quality of rendering the African reality. Its darkness as also its labyrinthine world of dark dingy surroundings act both as symbol and real life pictures."² **The Beautiful Ones** is at once a bitter satire against the political reality of Ghana in particular, and the bizarre political reality of the Third World in general. Pointing towards the Ghanaian reality, the narrative raises certain fundamental questions about the development in the recently liberated Afro-American countries with a boldness of commitment. Eldred Jones, in his review of the novel, considers the dominant mood of the novel as one of "hopeless despair" with the author's "almost Swiftian preoccupation with the bodily secretions." He concludes by saying, "Armah has taken the predicament of Africa in general, Ghana in particular, and distilled its despair and its hopelessness in a very powerful, harsh, deliberately unbeautiful novel."³

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born tells the story of a simple railway clerk during the regime of Kwame Nkrumah at the time when Ghana gained independence from Britain. But the story could take place in almost any new nation of Africa, since it deals with that handmaiden of fledgeling African sovereignty: corruption in people's governments.⁴ The social, economic and political absurdities in the post-colonial situation quite tragically reinforce the very values of exploitation and elitism. What prompts Armah to portray decay and

degeneration is a deep-rooted feeling of pain and hurt. As a result, we are compelled to see that African history is a continuous story of exploitation and betrayal, first by the colonial masters and later on by their post-colonial followers. The pungent satire in this novel is directed particularly against the latter category whom Fanon describes as "black skins, white masks" and whom Armah himself treats as "Black Masters, White Shadows." Fanon's theory of neo-colonialism has far reaching implications and his perceptive comments help us put the novel in its proper perspective:

The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket. The psychology of the rational bourgeoisie is that of the businessman, not that of a captain of industry.⁵

Decay and rot are so blatant in contemporary Ghana and its corruption is so rampant that one is consistently drawn to Fanon's portents. Armah realizes that Fanon's prophecy true with a devastating effect. Armah also decries the rationalist leaders for their greed and acquisitiveness. He says:

African politicians love flashy scenes and high-flauntin' words. That is only a partial exploration. More important is the historical fact that in a very

radical sense the nationalist leaders of Africa have found themselves sucked into the role of hypocrites, actions involved in a make-believe situation.⁶

Armah's view is that, in a way, post-colonial life is only different in form, but not in its content. Only the alien rulers of exploitation are replaced by the native rulers who are systematically chosen by their own people. It would have been very easy to protect people from the colonial rulers, but it is very difficult to decolonize the corrupt minds and corrupt practices of these "native rulers." The new leaders are the direct heirs of the chiefs of the past, concerned chiefly with privilege and consolidation of their power and not with progressive leadership and accountability. The Nkrumah regime in Ghana which started off on a note of promise slid into a mire of corruption and degeneration. **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born** is not so much a novel about an individual as it is a novel about a society. It is in fact, a merciless attack on political corruption. Armah presents in this novel the leading politicians of the corrupt African nation – a modern wasteland transformed into contemporary Africa, post-Independent Ghana prior to Nkrumah's fall.

The protagonist in the novel is unnamed and Armah simply calls him as "the man" – whose anonymity represents everyman, the ordinary Ghanaian citizen. Throughout the novel the man is identified

as "the watcher," "the giver," and the "silent one." The term by which he is designated suggests both his social obscurity and, partially, his representative nature. Eustace Palmer views the novel as a symbolic moral fable and writes thus:

Indeed, the temptation to compare this work with **Everyman** or Bunyan's **Pilgrim's Progress** is very strong. The characters are important not for what they are in themselves, but for what they represent. Most of them are vaguely particularized and indicated by generalized terms... Ghana is itself symbolically presented, one of the consequences being that Accra is much less vividly described than Lagos of Achebe or Ekwensi. But this deliberate vagueness makes it similar to Everyman's 'Field Full of Folk' or Tutuola's 'Land of the dead.' Most of the inhabitants of the country walk like dead men in a land which is morally and spiritually dead.⁷

The man is an ordinary railway clerk in the Ghana Railway Corporation at Takoradi. His work is dull and unrewarding. He leads his life as a railway clerk because he carries the terrible burden of principle in a climate that permits advancement only under the table. He struggles against odds to keep his soul clean. He has his moments of frustration, loneliness, defeat, and despair but remains firm to the end in his resolve. He suffers public disgrace and family ridicule. His wife is indifferent to him and his mother-in-law is openly hostile. But

he is a man of unquestioned integrity. Although he and his family live in utter poverty and he constantly has to endure the silent accusation of his wife and children, he resolutely refuses to accept bribes. His family, frustrated by poverty and deferred expectations, grow resentful. He drags himself mournfully through each working day with little to anticipate in the evening but the accusing eyes of his wife and children and their nagging envy of those whose financial position is sound.

The man is, however, is set apart from others by his two redeeming qualities. In the first place, he is sharp and perceptive and invested with "a mind and body which together form the nerve-centre of a radio-active kind of search light."⁸ This sensitive perception enables him to closely observe men and manners helps him in his judgement of the beautiful and the ugly and the moral choice between good and bad. Secondly, the man is aware of social realities, particularly the problem of corruption which is not only rampant but seems ineradicable in the given context. He prefers to keep aloof from the mad crowds who are on the look-out for personal gains and comforts at any cost. He is unwilling to take part in the "national game" (129) of corruption and self-promotion.

The society with its decaying moral values appears like a hell to the man who is humble, honest, and sincere. He is a wrong person

in a society in which nothing but corruption exists. He is caught between accepting bribery as a common method of Ghanaian upward mobility and retaining his personal values and communal allegiance with his neighbours. Larson, while discussing the novel in **The Emergence of African Fiction**, compares the man with Ellison's unnamed protagonist in his **Invisible Man**: "Like Ellison's Invisible Man, Armah's goes on a journey through hell, though unlike Ellison's protagonist, who only slowly comes to know that it is his society that is out of joint, Armah's man knows all along that his society has lost its values and that he is the lone center of value in a society which has long since traded its soul to the devil. It is this awareness from the very beginning makes the man's voyage excruciatingly painful." ⁹

The man's journey begins and ends with a bus ride. In the opening sequences, the man is a mere object, not even the centre of attraction at first. He is a tragic spectator as also a narrator of the declining moral and ethical standards. He is never allowed to emerge completely from the impersonality which is his representative quality. We meet him through the eyes of the bus-conductor for the first time.

There is a subtle reference in the description to the indigenously produced goods which are not on par with their imported counterparts. The bus itself doesn't look like a vehicle but appears as a bundle of rust. The money that the conductor handles is old and rotten, rather

emitting bad smell. Armah satirically points out that, just like the rotten money, the society is also rotten and its foul smell is associated with corruption. The most striking feature of the novel is the strength of the author's moral earnestness. On almost every page, Armah expresses his aversion towards unhealthy atmosphere he sees everywhere in unusually vigorous and realistic language. It is this language that captures the attention of every reader. As Lemuel Johnson points out, "**The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born** is rather more concentratedly bitter and plain-speaking. The novel representatively establishes a vision which eschews irony, casualness and the oracular when it parallels the thrust of the selections from Hayden and Montejo. The contemporary political and moral understanding of the issues involved is as a result unequivocally presented in the novel's unhappy sense of historical symmetry."¹⁰

Armah expresses his disgust by exploiting the potential of a central symbol – that of filth, putrefaction, and excreta. Throughout the novel, the odours of excreta, effluvia, and vomit assault our sense of smell. All these aspects of the novel are presented in the first powerful scene in the bus. The conductor knows pretty well that it is highly impossible for him to make money in usual corrupt practices because it is "passion week" – the last week of the month. The passengers in the bus seem like walking corpses or sleep walkers for

him. The man gives him a cedi, and the conductor gives short change as usual:

The cedi lay on the seat. Among the coins it looked strange ...Then a vague but persistent odour forced itself on him and he rolled the cedi up and deliberately, deeply smelled it... Fascinated, he breathed it slowly into his lungs. It was a most unexpected smell for something so new to have: it was a very old smell, very strong, and so very rotten that the stench itself of it came with a curious, satisfying pleasure.(3)

When the conductor notices that the man is actually sleeping rather than watching and that his spittle is soiling the bus seat, a wave of indignation fills him:

Then a savage indignation filled the conductor... he saw, running down from the left corner of the watcher's mouth, a stream of the man's spittle. Oozing freely, the oil like liquid ... descended with quiet inevitability down the dirty, aged leather of the seat itself, ... The watcher was no watcher at all, only a sleeper. (5)

As the conductor quickly discovers that the watcher is really a "sleeper," in an instant he was moved from abject submission to violent attack:

“You bloody fucking son of a bitch! Article of no commercial value! You think the bus belongs to your grandfather?”

...

“Are you a child? You vomit your smelly spit all over the place. Why? You don’t have a bedroom?”

....

“So countryman, you don’t have a hand-kerchief too.”

The man did not answer...

As he got to the bottom step, the conductor sitting down on a seat next to one of the windows, looked out of the bus and shouted his farewell to him, “Or were you waiting to shit in the bus?” (6)

What happens in the bus is a parable of what happens in the country as a whole. The bus, like the state, is in a state of decay, its pieces only held together by rust. The passengers represent the ordinary citizens and the driver and conductor are the authority attempting to defraud the citizens, and if caught, to bribe them into silence. The “brotherhood” can exist only in the cosy and secure relationship of briber and the bribed.

The man in the novel is presented as an anti-hero. Armah, far from idealizing the hero, demonstrates his passive impotence and weakness. The man possesses high ideals but he could not champion an anti-corruption movement. He could not even explain convincingly why he refuses to take bribes. He drifts aimlessly through a colourless life of poverty. Each day he makes the dreary journey from his loveless

home through filth, slime, and insults to his tedious job in the decaying Railway Administration Block. Far from being heroic, the man is a pathetic figure weakened by his consciousness of failure. He lacks the guts to reply or to defend himself even against the worst insults. Many people – the bus conductor, the wolfish-teeth timber merchant, and his mother-in-law, insult the man. Furthermore, the man himself is conscious of his impotence and lack of will: “I have been walking along paths chosen for me before I had really decided, and it makes me feel the way I think impotent men feel” (60). At the office, the merchant with the wolfish teeth tries to bribe the man so that he can get his timber loaded on a train. But the man refuses to accept the bribe to play the national game. He feels like a criminal, the guilty one, for refusing the bribe:

The man was left alone with thoughts of easy slide and how everything said there was something miserable, something unspeakably dishonest about a man who refused to take and give what everyone around was taking and giving: something unnatural, something very cruel, something that was criminal for who but a criminal could ever be left with such a feeling of loneliness? (31-32)

But the man is unable to say with enough courage why he must refuse the bribe. His reply to the merchant’s “but what is wrong?” in accepting bribe, is a weak “I don’t know.” He becomes increasingly

conscious that the world regards him as a fool. He is caught in dilemma whether to accept bribe or remain firm. Although the man overcomes the dilemma when the corrupt Nkrumah is overthrown, little actual change occurs. This conflict between the hope for change and the betrayal of that hope by his nation's leaders is central to Armah's fiction. Neil Lazarus, in his aptly titled essay, "Pessimism of the Intellect and Optimism of the Will," quite rightly points out that the novel is a voyage of discovery and a predominantly dialectical work and states that "its reciprocity is first heralded in the resonant cadences of its style and is most clearly demonstrated in the complex relationship between the affirmative vision that is implicit in the man's search for authentic values and the blasted landscape within which the novel's action is staged."¹¹

The portrayal of three more contrasting characters other than the man holds the vital fictional interest. They are Oyo the man's wife, the Teacher, the man's friend, and Mr.Koomson, the man's classmate, now a leading politician. If Mr.Koomson and Oyo appear mutual accomplices in the glorification of wealth, the Teacher is something like a debating conscience of the man. He singularly dramatizes the troubled conscience and cynical helplessness of the man in full measure. The Teacher is also an alienated individual like the man, but he has withdrawn from life, from family and work, and advocates passivity and negation – "the mystic path," – as an alternative to the

inevitable corruption. The anonymous man could not accept this as a solution, or rather he has no alternative to reject it, since as he tells the Teacher, "... you know it is impossible for me to watch the things that go on and say nothing. I have my family. I am in the middle." (93)

The predicament of the man is strikingly contrasted with the rapid fortunes of his childhood friend, Koomson. Koomson reads the pulse of the people and exploits the prevailing situation to his fullest advantage. His success story, from that of a dock-worker to the position of a minister through manipulative skills, testifies to his belief in easy gain. Koomson represents a total violation of ethical standards and everything his party stands for. His money-making schemes prompt him to declare that socialism is a "nuisance" (136). The hypocrisy of the regime is brought out when he confesses that "the old man (Nkrumah) himself does not believe in it" (136). With all his moral depravity, Koomson comes to symbolize the ethos of a whole nation in the given context.

The man encounters Koomson on his way back home in the night. Armah introduces Koomson as the black-white man. He is the white man because he possesses white suit gleaming through a darkness into which his body merges. Armah writes, "he is literally the gleaming clothes he stands up in." Gareth Griffiths says about Koomson: "The black-white man is invisible because he is merely a

caricature. He has no social or economic reality, no personal identity. His reality is defined solely by the objects with which he surrounds himself, and from which he builds his personality.”¹²

The man is amazed at the “flabby softness” of the hand of Koomson when he shakes hands with him and wonders whether such “ideological hands” of revolutionaries “leading others into bold sacrifices” should not have become “even tougher than they were when their owner was hauling loads along the wharf?” (131). It reminds him of the age-old betrayal by the native cripples. He comments:

And yet these were the socialists of Africa, fat, perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who had sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade. (131).

The man’s encounter with Koomson is brief. When he reaches home and mentions this to his wife and the bribe he has refused, his wife attacks him for his inability to succeed in the same way as Koomson. She calls him an “Onward Christian Soldier” for not accepting the bribe. Oyo belongs to the world of acquisitive tendency. For her, corruption and other practices are legitimate and she tells the man that refusing the bribe is absurd when everyone is practising it. Oyo, struggling under poverty, is convinced that the man should accept bribes to supplement his meagre salary. She explains this striking analogy:

Life was like a lot of roads: long roads, short roads. Wide and narrow, steep and level, all sorts of roads and the human beings were like so many people driving their cars on all the roads. Those who wanted to get far had to learn to drive fast ... Accidents would happen but the fear of accidents that never keep men from driving, and Joe Koomson had learned to drive. (58-59)

Koomson is Oyo's ideal person and she points out her husband's inability to earn money like Koomson. She bluntly tells him: "Maybe you like this crawling that we do, but I am tired of it. I would like to have someone drive me where I want to go" (44). She asks the man what name he can give to people who were afraid to drive fast or to drive at all. The man gets so much irritated at the attitude of his wife that he says, "I am asking myself what is wrong with me. Do I have some part missing? Teacher, this Koomson was my own classmate. My classmate, Teacher, my classmate. So tell me, what is wrong with me?" (57).

Oyo wants to lead a better life and she is very much dissatisfied with her husband because the man does not want to earn money in "other" ways. The result is that the man is an alienated one, from the family and the society. Regarding Estella, Koomson's wife and the luxurious life that she leads, Oyo says, "It is nice. It is clean., the life Estella is getting" (44). She fails to understand him when the man

tells her that he cannot do the same thing, because, "one of that kind of cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump"(44). She responds to him by telling him that he is like chichidido that eats worms but hates excrement: "... the chichidido is a bird. The chichidido hates his excrement with all its soul. But the chichidido only feeds on maggots, and you know the maggots grow best inside the lavatory" (44). The man leaves home to escape the nagging pressure of his wife and begins to walk to his only friend, the Teacher.

On his way, he begins to muse on a figure he had once known called Ramakrishna, a Ghanaian, who "had taken that far off name in the re-incarnation of his soul after long and tortured flight from everything close and everything known, since all around him showed the horrible threat of decay" (48) is closely related to the actual Teacher whom the man proceeds to visit.

Ramakrishna's flight has been a failure. He attempts to live outside the corrupt cycle of eat and be eaten. His attempts to supplant the killing of living things for food by a diet of honey and vinegar. This has resulted not in serenity but in decay. His ultimate solution, "the one way" to salvation that he discovers near the end is a "rejection of life." In an attempt to avoid corruption and decay, he rejects women, and through yoga he attempts to rejuvenate his brain by standing on

his head. In spite of his efforts, corruption and decay overtake him. He is rotting inside and when he dies his heart is seen to be "only a living lot of worms gathered together tightly in the shape of a heart," and the man reflects. "And what would such unnatural flight be worth at all in the end? And what kind of sound the cry of the chichidido could be, the bird longing for its maggots but fleeing the feces which gave them birth?" (49). The man's lack of conviction about the wisdom and rightness of his stand is powerfully communicated here. He thinks, in striving so earnestly to avoid corruption and decay, he may also inevitably end up more corrupt and decayed like his friend. This uncertainty makes him such a weak, unheroic opponent of corruption. It is only towards the end, when the terrible conditions are demonstrated in Koomson's ruin, that the man feels his position finally vindicated. Commenting on the man's confusion, Robert Fraser points out, "Like the young sweeper Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's novel of Indian life **Untouchable**, he is the product of long process that has left him and his kind stranded far from hope, from the simple human fulfilment their common sense of dignity teaches them to demand. The man's confusion is but another result of this process."¹³

When the Teacher is finally introduced, he is naked. The Teacher and Koomson are a contrast to each other, for if Koomson's life has reduced him to a mere suit of clothes, the Teacher's life has had a reductive effect. They both represent two extremes which fail to

meet the requirements of reality that the ideal and sordid should be seen to exist in the same universe and in the same compass of experience. The Teacher's nakedness is a pure symbol of innocence. The Africa to which the Teacher is attuned is an idealised Africa, the Africa of self-conscious purity. The music he plays is "at once very far away and very African."

Those who are blessed with the power
And the soaring swiftness of eagle
And have frown before.
Let them go.
I will travel slowly
And I too will arrive. (51)

The Teacher, is both a figure from the past and the character existing in the novel's present. He is Ramakrishna, the lost friend, and the Teacher, the present comforter. The man analyzes his depression, his inability to play the national game in spite of his familial pressures. He explains his feelings to the Teacher:

"I feel like a criminal. Often these days I find myself thinking of something sudden I could do to redeem myself in their eyes. Then I sit down and ask myself what I have done wrong, and there is really nothing."
"You have not done what everybody is doing," said the naked man, "and in this world that is one of the crimes. You have always known that." (54)

But the comfort and understanding he has always found in the Teacher is no longer what it was. The Teacher's withdrawal has ultimately no answer to challenge the decay and corruption. Because of this he has become a figure without hope. The man realizes that the Teacher too is slowly being destroyed by the society around him. All that is left of him now is depression and an irretrievable loss of faith in everything. He can only see all around death, the living death. He informs the man: "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?" (56). He says that he died long ago. He explains his social withdrawal as a reaction to misunderstanding: 'No one wants what I happen to have. Its only words after all' (79). The Teacher's statement serves to identify him as a failed writer, unable to communicate his message. Here is a conversation between him and the man:

'If we can't consume ourselves for something we believe in, freedom makes no difference at all. You see, I am free to do what I want, but there is nothing happening now that I want to join. There used to be something, and you know what I mean.'

'I know,' the man paused ...he said, 'You're still hoping, aren't you, Teacher?'

'Hoping for what?'

'Anything, an end to this ... a beginning to something else. Anything?'

'No, not anymore. Not hope, any how, I don't feel much. When you can see the end of things even in

their beginnings, there's no hope, unless you want to pretend, or forget, or get drunk or something. No, I also one of the dead people, the walking dead. A ghost. I died long ago. So long ago not even the old libations of living blood will make me live again." (61)

Now the Teacher is clearly identified with the old sources of African culture. As Gareth Griffiths observes, "Teacher is symbol of a kind of experience, a symbol of the timeless, non-technological, romantic and anthropological African experience. He is juxtaposed to Koomson, the black-whiteman, the modern elitist, the hatchet man of the consumer revolution."¹⁴

The man and the Teacher are less energetically rebellious than Soyinka's "interpreters" but feel themselves paralysed by their isolation. They cannot live with others in the corrupt world, and on the other hand, they cannot live without them. The man returns to society just at that moment when he has escaped from it. The naked Teacher, who has stripped of all social ties, still knows that he cannot live fully without love and with the guilt of having rejected his "loved ones."

The Teacher cannot live fully without hope because he is a realist. But without hope and without a vision of a better life in Ghana, he only escapes into the life of books and music. For society crushes the spirit of such individuals because it does not allow them to fulfil their relationships with others. The Teacher narrates the story of

Aboligo the Frog and has shown a book of oddities in which they could see the peculiar picture of a "man-child." It was shown that the peculiar man-child completed the entire cycle of birth, growth, and death in a short span of seven years. Just as the man-child is not destined to its full potential, the contemporary Ghanaian situation portends a life-negating and self-annihilating streak.

Yet another image that reflects the prevailing situation is Plato's Cave. The Teacher frequently narrates the story of the people living in the darkness of the cave. The people cannot believe that brightness really exists. The person who goes outside the cave and experiences the light outside the world turns out to be a misfit among the worshippers of darkness. Groping in darkness, they dismiss him as mad and his outside experiences of brightness as untrue. Like the men in Plato's Cave, the society forces the man to review his position and throws open its options: "When all around him the whole world never tired of saying there were only two types of men who took refuge in honesty – the cowards and the fools? "Very often these days he was burdened with the hopeless, impotent feeling that he was not just one of these, but a hopeless combination of the two" (51). The novel, in these terms, becomes an extended metaphor of Plato's Cave. Margaret Folarin who interprets the novel in the light this recurrent motif says: "The cave image finally serves as a nucleus which holds together positive meanings"¹⁵ of the novel.

In the sixth chapter which is pivotal to the novel, we are presented with a symbolic history of the childhood and youth of the man and the Teacher. In this chapter the narrative view-point moves between the Teacher and the man. The figures and events in this chapter are not merely aspects of an autobiography, but aspects of a historical process and a general cultural experience. The story of a life and the story of a nation are fused. The reminiscences and memories the chapter six are not merely flashbacks in the story of a life, but they are also the images of the colonised, through oppression to liberation and experience and on to disillusion and decay. The liberation movement seemed to offer a new beginning, but that too was subject to decay.

The man debates within himself the validity of present actions in the sixth chapter. Here we notice that the tone is more that of an essay than of fiction or an autobiography. The man reflects the happier moments of his youth. The reminiscences are the most memorable part of Armah's novel relating the childhood experiences of stealing the white man's mangoes at a time prior to independence. While conversing with the man, the Teacher remembers in a flashback his two old friends who shared his revolutionary fervour – Maanan, the prostitute, and Kofi Billy, the dock worker who had lost his leg while doing work. They smoked "wee" together and "swallowed all the keen knowledge of betrayal" (65). But even these memories are tainted

with violence and terror. The white man's dog chases him as he steals the mangoes. Kofi Billy hangs himself and Maanan goes mad, as the whole society begins to break away from its roots. Armah reflects the effects of the colonising process on the psychic life of the African. As a novelist he has dramatized the experience of the people, their tangled hopes, and their feeling that perhaps such decline and such premature destruction of their dream is natural and inevitable.

Armah points out that materialism becomes the new religion and money the new god. He is of the opinion that materialism and westernization worked hand in hand with the continuation of political corruption. Armah asks how long Africa will be cursed with her leaders: "we were ready for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them on to our backs" (80-81). And the new African leaders are simply darker shadows of the white man:

There is something so terrible in watching a blackman trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days... We know then, and we know now, that the only real power a black man can have will come from black people. We knew also that we were the people to whom those oily men were looking for their support (81-82).

Independence thus brought little change and the Teacher comments, "there is no difference... No difference at all between the whiteman and their apes, the lawyers and the merchants, and now the apes of the apes, our party men. And after their reign is over, there will be no difference ever. All new men will be like the old. Is that then the whole truth?" (89) Maanan, even in her madness, is concerned with the plight of the people. She is last heard saying: "They have mixed it all together! Everything! They have mixed everything" (180). Armah shifts his attack directly on the President of Ghana, Nkrumah:

Life has not changed. Only some people have been growing, becoming different, that is all. After a youth spent fighting the whiteman, why should not the President discover as he grows older that his real desire has been to be like the white governor himself, to alive above all blackness in the big old slave castle? And the men around him, why not? What stops them sending their loved children to kindergartens in Europe? And if the littlemen around the big men can send their children to new international schools, why not? That is all anyone here ever struggles for: to be nearer the whiteman. All the shouting against the white man was not hate. It was love. Twisted, but love all the same.

(92)

For the man, work becomes almost unbearable. There is nothing but filth everywhere around him, and he slips on vomit. Everywhere black people are trying to be white:

The office fills up as the day clerks enter, first the small boys and messengers, then other clerks. About nine thirty the Senior Service men come in each with his bit of left over British craziness. This one has long white hose, that one colonial white. Another has spent two months on what he still calls study tour of Britain, and ever since has worn, in all the heat of Ghana, waistcoats and coats. (109)

Walking by the sea is the only thing that gives the man any mental peace, and he wonders why the ocean too is not much dirtier than it is.

The story now shifts to a more prolonged encounter with Koomson. Since by law, the politicians cannot own property, Koomson wants to own a fishing-boat through the man's family. At first, the man warns the family against the purchasing of a boat in which Koomson sees possibilities of furthering his own prosperity. But the family would not pay any respect to his advice. Gradually, despite his attempt to remain as negative as possible in the transaction, he is drawn to a scheme which his wife and his mother-in-law initiate to aid the corrupt minister Koomson. On the refusal of the man to sign the papers, his wife signs it. But ultimately it is Koomson who owns the

boats. The state is supposed to be socialistic, but the corruption by the politicians has made it thoroughly capitalistic. The man and his wife invite Koomson's family to their house and in the evening, as the final preparations are made for Koomson's visit, the man watches Oyo painfully straighten her hair:

"That must be painful," he said. Immediately, he was wishing he had not said it.

Oyo put the comb back among the coals, then lifted up her head and said, "Of course it is painful. I'm just trying to straighten it out a bit now, to make it presentable."

"What is wrong with it natural?"

"It's only bush women who wear their hair natural."

"I wish you were a bush-woman, then," he said.

(128-29)

Here the reader is made depressingly aware of the similarity between contemporary Ghanaian life as presented in this novel and the lives of the black people in the United States. Both groups have been forced to forgo their identities into a lighter shade of the white man's world. Oyo comes to know that Mrs.Koomson wears a wig and so she too wants to make her hair look like a wig. Oyo's final comment on her hair is that if she had a wig, there would be no problem, "'If you had a wig,' the man muttered, 'I'd be in jail'" (129).

Koomson and his wife arrive at the man's house. Estella, Koomson's wife, does not want to drink the local beer that the man offers her. She says, "Really, the only good drinks are European drinks. These make you ill..." (132). Koomson wants to go to the toilet, but the toilet in the complex where the man lives is so foul that once Koomson sees it, he changes his mind. Armah comments, "It was awful, was it not, that the rich should have this effect on the poor, making them always want to apologize for their poverty, and at all times to sacrifice future necessities just so that they could make a brief show of the wealth they could never hope to have" (131). The following week-end Oyo signs the papers but the man refuses even to touch the papers.

In their dealing with Koomson, the man and his family do not get anything profitable. There is, of course, no real change in their lives. Occasionally Koomson sends them some fresh fish, but the registration of the boat in Oyo's name has not brought the riches she and her mother expected. The man gets so much disgusted over the hypocrisy of Koomson that he rejects even to eat the fish sent to him by Koomson. The man realizes that "the net has been made in the special Ghanaian way that allowed the really big corrupt people to pass through it. A net to catch only the small, dispensable fellows, trying in their anguished blindness to lead and to attain the gleam and the comfort the only way these things could be done" (154).

At work, presumably some months later, the man learns that there has been a coup, and when he gets home later that day, he finds Koomson there, fleeing the police and the military who have taken over the government. In the man's mind there is a diffuse uncertainty: "what, after all, could it mean? One man, with the help of people who loved him and believed in him, had arrived at power and used it for himself. Now the other men with the help of guns, had come to this same power. What would it mean?" (157). However, he knows that there will not be very much of a change: "In the life the nation itself, maybe nothing really new would happen...there would only be a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted" (162). Koomson is now in the darkened room of the man's house. He is now thoroughly corrupt and his spiritual rottenness is indicated by the foul smell emanating from his body. Here we notice that Armah cannot resist repeating a motif central to his novel:

His mouth had the rich stence of rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the new smell had gone down in the mixture with the liquid atmosphere of the partyman's farts filling the room. At the same time Koomson's insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder which in its fullness sounded as if it had rolled down all the way from the eating throat thundering through the belly and the guts,

to end in further silent pollution of the air already
thick with flatulent fear. (163)

Out in the hall, Oyo tells her husband, “I am glad you never became like him” (165). We notice a change in Oyo now and it is one real note of change in the story – the relationship between the man and his wife: “In Oyo’s eyes there was now real gratitude. Perhaps for the first time in their married life the man could believe that she was glad to have him the way he was” (165).

The increasing sense of the inevitability of the corrupting process culminates in the third section of the novel in the visit of Koomson, now deposed and fleeing arrest. The sound of the police van is heard and the man realizes that the only escape that is possible is through the latrine hole which leads into an alley behind the housing complex. The descent through the latrine hole symbolically represents the lowermost echelons of hell. The most ironical thing is that this is the same filthy lavatory that nauseated Koomson when he first visited the man’s house. And now he and the man must climb through the latrine man’s hole, through the foul wetness itself. Koomson is too fat to crawl through the hole at the back of the latrine. After stripping him of his coat, however, the man manages to push him through:

‘Push!’ the man shouted, before he had thought of the nearness of the searchers, or of the fact that his companion could not hear him anyhow. Quietly

now, he climbed on to the seat, held Koomson's legs and rammed them down. He could hear Koomson strain like a man excreting, then there was a long sound as if he was vomiting down there. But the man pushed some more, and in a moment a rush of foul air coming up told him the partyman's head was out. The body dragged itself painfully down, and the man got ready to follow into the hole. (168)

Though we are aware of Koomson's corruption we do feel some sort of sympathy for him as he struggles like a frightened animal to squeeze his enormous body through the putrid lavatory hole used by the night soil man. This struggle through the putrid hole enables Koomson to experience the conditions of the life of ordinary men and women whose trust he has betrayed. The lavatory is really the place where Koomson belongs in the end: its putrefaction shows his spiritual rottenness. The man and Koomson walk "along the latrine man's circuit through life" (170) heading toward the ocean and to the boat registered in Oyo's name. The physical, psychological, and moral degeneration of Koomson is brilliantly brought out in the rapid transformation of his bearing. As Charles Nnolim observes:

Symbolically, Armah's *Ghana* is Dante's *Inferno*, and much of the events take place in the circles of the avaricious, the gluttonous and the lustful, which contains sinners who are aptly appeared with dirt and filth and who stink in the mire of their own corruption.¹⁶

Armah juxtaposes the plight of the once powerful person with the relaxed condition of the man. That is how he is able to unveil his moral vision.

The degeneration of Koomson is complete after his journey through the latrine hole. They seek the help of a boatman to cross the shore. But the boatman is unwilling to take them to the shore. The fear on the face of the boatman is “unmistakably the fear of one weak man in the presence of another just as weak” (173). Koomson is unable to speak and he cannot speak in the manner of a master. His voice is subdued now and his tone is much softer than that of a straight bargainer:

‘You know what had happened,’ Koomson said.

‘Yes’. The boatman’s eyes were growing harder, and he smiled a little. Koomson tried to look straight into his face.

‘You used to repeat a certain proverb,’ said Koomson.

‘When the bull grazes, the egret also eats. Do you remember?’

The boatman replied with a surely ‘yes,’ as if to indicate that time and change ought to modify the truth of all such proverbs.

‘If you can help me,’ Koomson said to the boatman, ‘half the boat will be yours.’

‘Where are we going?’ the boatman asked.

‘Will you go then?’ asked Koomson.

Another grudging ‘yes.’ (174)

Thus, finally the “Ex-Minister” also plays the “National Game.” He bribes the boatman and also the watchman to reach the boat and plans to leave for Abidjan, the place where his wife’s relatives are living. Just at that moment when it appears that Koomson’s escape is possible, the man jumps into the water to come out afresh:

It was cold. The man left himself drop deep down into the water. He stayed there as long as he could, holding his breath. He held his breath so long that he began to enjoy the almost exploding inward feeling that he was perhaps no longer alive. (178)

Symbolically, the man has been cleansed by the sea. This is a significant passage of the narrative and we are reminded that the man has had the desire for cleansing and the subsequent longing for rebirth in each of his walks along the sea. And, indeed, when he awakens on the beach the next morning, it looks as though it will be more than a day of reckoning: “when he awake he felt very cold in the back, though already the sun was up over the sea, its rays coming very clean and clear on the water, and the sky above all open and beautiful” (180). In the distance, the man notices a long figure slowly advancing. He recognizes the figure as Maanan and calls her with that name, ‘Maanan,’ who is quite mad now:

The woman laughed at the name, with a recognition so remote that in the same cold moment the man was certain he had only deceived

himself about it. Then she walked away toward the sun with her shadow out in front of her colouring the sand, leaving the man wondering why but knowing already that he would find no answers, from her, from Teacher, or from nobody else. (181).

While walking home, the man notices a police barricade in the distance, and he is playing the role that he has played all along – that of the witness, the voyeur, but not the participant. The man watches a small bus, looking very new and neat in its green paint. It is stopped by a policeman for a road check. The driver of the bus asks the police man for an early clearance saying that his passengers are in a hurry. Then the policeman raises his right hand pointing to his teeth in a slow gesture – a signal for a bribe. The man has seen this gesture before several times:

The driver understood. Without waiting to be asked for it, he took out his license folder from his shirt pocket, brought out a cedi note from the same place, and stuck it in the folder. Then with his back turned to the people waiting in his bus, the driver gave his folder, together with the bribe in it, to the policeman. (182-183)

On the back of the bus the man notices that the green paint is brightened with an inscription, carefully lettered to form an oval shape:

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

In the centre of the oval, there is a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful.

The man realizes that nothing has happened, nothing has changed. The police are the same; bribery and corruption are still the national game. A critic gives three interpretations to the title: 'The Beautiful Ones' – those sea-green incorruptibles are not born but will be born in future; the 'beautiful ones' are not born and will never be born; the 'beautiful ones' are born everyday but are inevitably drawn into the cesspool of corruption.

The title **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born**, is endorsed in the novel by its bleak conclusion. The coup occurs, but corruption continues, and although the man undergoes a symbolic cleansing in the sea, it is only a personal cleansing, unrelated to what goes on in the larger world around. When the new regime begins, there is no false optimism. "New people, new style, and old dance" (157). The man knows pretty well that this is all that he can expect. And he walks slowly to his home. He realizes that the change of regime may not show all that bleakness either. The man is prepared to wait. When the future unholds, it will not take the present models as its beautiful ones. This is summed up by the man himself:

... he was not burdened with any hopes that new things, really new things, were as yet ready to come out. Someday in the long future a new life

would may be 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. (159-60).

What holds good about this passage is also true of the novel and Armah's view in general. Soyinka accurately strikes a positive note in his response to the novel when he says:

The vision of **The Beautiful Ones** is perhaps no more than an aspiration, a pious hope symbolized in that final image of the novel - 'a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, very beautiful,' in the centre of the inscription on the back of a Mammy wagon which reads: **THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN**. This pessimistic suggestion bears the possibility of its own hopeful contradiction, an accurate summation of society only too well understood by Armah and expressed in the main action of the book through the solitary, beleaguered representative of moral possibilities, the central character.¹⁷

In any case, the narrative ends in despair. The man's cynical helplessness is rendered quite significantly through the inscription on the van.

Structurally, the narrative throws up the more contemporary political reality into focus. Aesthetically, the "anonymous man" once again wanes into insignificance. His life is routine and casual. As

usual, he continues his walk. **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born** is a richly evocative work. Its publication placed Armah in the forefront of the new generation of African writers. Armah has created a deeply disturbing picture of the foibles of all decadent political systems. The novel traces the "African image" in realistic terms through a straightforward exposition of everyday life and culture. Margaret Folarin, while discussing the **Beautiful Ones**, compares it with Soyinka's **The Interpreters**: "If **The Interpreters** is more explorative and ambitious than **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born**, the latter novel seems almost more revealing of the same processes at work. Once again the writer presents a work of fiction about the undermining effects of corruption, not simply on economic and political, but also on spiritual life. Again the book is concerned with the individual, who demanding deep aesthetic and ethical satisfaction from life, is pushed to live by and unto himself. Again the satire is interspersed with poetic and symbolic passages which allow the writer to explore the situation in depth".¹⁸

The most striking feature of the novel is the employment of 'human excreta' as a metaphor to display the political reality and moral decay of the Ghanaian society, and by extension, of Africa. The overriding images of the novel are the refuse, mucus, filth, shit, and so on. The extent to which Armah relies on human waste to symbolize

the decay of personal integrity is significant. Commenting on the imagery employed in the novel, Charles Miller remarks:

This is literary talent? You bet it is. And I say that as one who finds most scatological prose not only disgusting but badly written. It calls for no small gift to expound on excreta and neither offend nor bore, even greater ability if this unlovely topic is to be made valued within the context of the novel. Armah brings it off, by highlighting his protagonist's uncompromising ethical rectitude through personal fastidiousness. To the clerk, going to the toilet is a nightmare, not only because the public lavatories which he uses happen to violate every rule of hygiene but because they also represent in a very physical sense, the moral contamination which surrounds him – sometimes even tempts him in its foul way – and against which he must always be on guard. Armah has treated a most indelicate function with remarkable skill – and force.¹⁹

Generally, in the traditional African novel pioneered by Chinua Achebe, metaphor is something that is usually within the limits of proverb, fable, and folk tale. In Armah's **The Beautiful Ones**, the special quality is that the narrative is absorbed into the metaphor. The ancient rot of the staircase banister, the caked excrement in latrines, the aged mud on the shore line, and many more dead and rotten things act as metaphors in the novel. According to Derek

Wright, "In the atmosphere of total corruption provided by Nkrumah's Ghana, Armah's excremental master-metaphor tirelessly constipates voices, flatulates breath, turns aspiration into urination (a bribe-prone bus-conductor is caught "aiming high" on the clean-your-city garbage can) and ambition into excretion".²⁰

The harmful effects of corruption and the difficulty of being engulfed by it are suggested in the novel by a number of powerful analogies and images. The first of these is the rot on the banister of the Railway Administration Block. In the end, it was the rot which won. But the conscious activity of men is inevitably associated with this natural rot and decay:

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 cause towards putrefaction. Left-hand 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 office above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat clothes. The callused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. Afternoon hands not entirely licked clean of palm soup and remnants of KENKEY. The wood always win (12-13).

In a real sense, the physical decay which the book details is the result of people's conscious neglect. The inability of the governing class to maintain hygienic conditions, the inadequacy of the plumbing facilities, the discrepancy between the promises of the anti-litter campaign, and clean your city campaign and the failure of implementing them, are all responsible for the rotten culture. But beyond this, Armah symbolically exposes filth as a necessary condition of life: "Out of decay and dung there is always a new flowering" (85). In this regard we can assume that Armah is anticipating a better tomorrow.

The predominant metaphor is that of eating and excretion. This metaphor is common in African writing and is linked to the theme of corruption and bribery through oral usage. Money is food. The metaphoric link is an illustration of the primitive economic nature of even the wealthiest of the West African states. This phenomenon of corruption is also evident in the bankrupt policies of the government, such as running a lottery. Here is a conversation between the man and the messenger who has won a lottery:

'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 to eat it... I hope some official at all lottery place will take some of my hundred Cedis as a bribe and allow me to have the rest.' The messenger's smile was dead.

'You will be corrupting a police officer.' The man smiled.

'This is Ghana,' the messenger said, turning to go.

(18-19)

Although the messenger wins the lottery, he is not sure of getting the prize amount as he is not in a position to bribe the officials concerned. Nor it is possible for him to take the support of the police. The sad truth of this is very well summed up by his own comments when he says: "It costs you more money if you go to the police." This metaphor of eating helps to structure the book. Just as food must issue excreta, such consumption must issue in bribery and corruption.

But the action taken against the process of corruption and bribery seems to be meaningless. To refuse bribe is not to foil corruption; there is always another waiting eagerly to take it. The timber merchant, on the refusal of the man to accept the bribe, goes to another allocation clerk and gets his work done by the same process. He says to the man, "... you don't want me to eat, contrey? Okay. Take yourself. I get the man who understands. Ei, my friend, why you want

to play me wicked?" He again shouts at the man, "You, you are a very wicked man. You will never prosper" (107). This is very common in Ghana. Armah puts the society's attitude as follows:

Everyone you ask will say the timber merchant is right, the allocation clerk is right, and you are a fool, and everyone is right the way things are and the way they will continue to be. The foolish ones are those who cannot live life the way it is lived by the flowing river and disapprove of current. There is no other way, and the refusal to take the leap will help absolutely no one at any time." (108)

But the man is increasingly aware that he is behaving unnaturally by not accepting the bribe, and that he is out of joint with his society. As he reflects, "It is no normal all this, that the point of holding out against it escapes the unsettled mind" (108)

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born has made a strong impression on the readers of African novels. Though its central themes are familiar, its treatment shows a striking originality, especially in the use of image and metaphor. Armah is a writer of decadence identifiable with Walter Pater, Paul Verlaine, and Joseph Conrad, *fin de siecle* symbolists whose works revealed their fascination with decay, corruption, and with the smell of charnel houses. Chinua Achebe calls **The Beautiful Ones** as a "sick book." It deals with the

sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of the human condition. He writes:

The hero, pale and passive and nameless – a creation in the best manner of existentialist writing, wanders through the story in an anguished half-sleep, neck-deep in despair and human excrement which we rather see a lot in the book ... But his Ghana is unrecognizable. This aura of cosmic and despair is foreign and unusable as those monstrous machines Nkrumah was said to have imported from European countries. Ayi Kwei Armah imposes so much foreign metaphor on the sickness of Ghana that it ceases to be true.²²

Ama Ata Aidoo, while commenting that “the details in the novel are incredible,” says that “this type of purgative exposure, however painful it is, is absolutely necessary, depending upon whether or not one believes that truth as represented in writing can be in any way effective in helping social change.” She is of the opinion that the novel’s tone is a positive one. “What he (Armah) does proclaim is that he thinks of us... Perhaps the beautiful ones, when they are born and let’s pray it will be soon, will take care of everything and everybody once and for all time. The least we can do is wait.”²³ The man realizes that the change of regime may not bring any real change in the structure of the society. Future does not hold all that bleakness either. The man is prepared wait. When the future unfolds, it will not take

the present models as its beautiful ones. This is summed up by Armah himself:

... he was not burdened with any hopes that new things, really new things, were as yet ready to come out. Someday in the long future a new life would may be 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. (159-60)

This is true of the novel and Armah's vision in general. What Ayi Kwei Armah sets out to show is the experience of living in a corrupt atmosphere. He creates a deeply disturbing picture of the foibles of all decadent, political systems.

Thus the social and political corruption of contemporary Ghana are seen to be a legacy even before acquiring independence. The man, by remaining isolated, retains an essentially communal and social vision. The effects of isolation are further explored in Armah's next novel **Fragments**.

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