

Armah's Ghana Revisited: History and Fiction

DEREK WRIGHT, University of Queensland, Australia

The notion that Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), is in some way foreign derived or foreign inspired has become a commonplace in the criticism of African fiction. The novel's treatment of the totalitarian mentality of a corrupt nationalist state and its matching "totalitarian" aesthetic—the disciplined severity of style, the tyranny of metaphor, the oppressively monolithic narrative vision—have, for example, put a number of commentators in mind of the dystopian mode of fiction. Nwoga has discovered a "predominating mood . . . of powerlessness in the face of a normless socio-political state."¹ Kibera complains of "caricature, the refuge of the cartoonist who is pressed for time."² Gakwandi assumes that the novel's evoked reality must "to many readers appear distinctly one-sided" and, comparing it with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, quotes Irving Howe to the effect that "each word is bent to a severe discipline of meaning, everything is stripped to the bareness of terror."³

The question of realism and its literary and historical sources is a vexed one. Western critics who have tracked Armah's route into contemporary Ghana via specific European influences such as Beckett, Sartre, Kafka, and Celine are legion. More pertinent is the abundance of charges leveled by African critics, often with a strong ideological bias. These have alleged a number of specific and general shortcomings: a private and westernized sensibility's rejection of the extended family system's "familial warmth"⁴; an abject failure to differentiate between different kinds of Ghanaian speech and to realize Ghanaian settings⁵; an impaired vision, depicting a falsified, unrecognizable Ghana⁶ and betraying a long-expatriated author's failing insight into the drama of the Nkrumah political experiment⁷; 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 Some prosecutors even use Nkrumah's own statements in defence of their allegations.

Firstly, the family system: it should by now be clear that what Armah was exposing in his first two novels was that very same westernized corruption of traditional family values which, undermined by a perverted individualism, are no

¹ D. I. Nwoga, "Alienation in Modern African Fiction," *Muse*, 5, No. 1 (1973), 25.

² Leonard Kibera, "Pessimism and the African Novelist: Ayi Kwei Armah's 'The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born,'" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 14, No. 1 (1979), 67.

³ S. A. Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 88.

⁴ Ben Obumelu, "Marx, Politics and the African Novel," *Twentieth Century Studies*, 10 (1973), 114-15.

⁵ Charles Nnolim, "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah," *African Literature Today*, 10 (1979), 209; Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 191-92.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 25-26.

⁷ Kofi Awoonor, "Africa's Literature Beyond Politics," *Worldview*, 15, No. 3 (1972), 23.

⁸ Gakwandi, p. 94.

longer an expression of a communal ethic. Secondly, it is simply not true that the novel "has nothing essentially Ghanaian about it: no specifically Ghanaian mannerisms or special brand of politics, no language in the local idiom of the people."⁹ Neither is it true that "the major events in the novel never take place in any well-known geographical or political centre in Ghana."¹⁰ Events take place at the Esikafo Aba Estates, the Sekondi-Takoradi wharves and the Kansawora Railway Office: the supposed movement of the book from the ill-defined and allegoric to the particular and historical has been much exaggerated. In fact, we are explicitly in Ghana from the messenger's lottery win onwards: "But you know our Ghana."¹¹ There are references to specific historical events such as the investigation into government corruption by Legon's Professor Abraham, whose findings were largely suppressed by C.P.P. officials. Moreover, the boatman uses the local idiom of proverb and falls back on "the ancient dignity of formal speech" (p. 174) in his ironic welcoming of the fugitive Koomson, and the local pidgin is not confined by Armah to latrine graffiti because he "probably regards pidgin as unworthy of literary record."¹² It is used by the watchman, the anonymous speakers in the crowd addressed by the new leaders, Koomson to his servant, the remote interlocuter on the morse machine and the white golfers patronizing their black companions. Charles Larson has alleged mysteriously that Armah's work has "few Africanisms"—pidgin, proverb, the ritual motif of the carrier and the mythology of Mummy Water would seem to be likely contenders for this dubious title—and has made the following controversial claim: "On occasion Armah has gone to rather great pains to make it clear that he is writing literature first, and that the Africanness of his writing is something of less great importance."¹³ Taking this for truth, John Povey has repeated it,¹⁴ and even Achebe has picked up and helped to perpetuate the fiction.¹⁵ In fact, there is no record of the novelist making any such declaration and, in a devastating reply to Larson, Armah has vigorously denied these imputations.¹⁶

The other allegations are less swiftly dealt with. It is true that Armah's novels do tend to reduce the "complex process of history" to the suspiciously perfect symmetry of cyclical patterns. Neocolonialism reincarnates colonial and precolonial evils which were never properly expelled: the first novel piles up the vast accumulated filth of Africa's history for the man, in mock-ritual manner, to carry out to sea. But Teacher adds to the causes of personal corruption the factor of power-processes inherited from colonialism: "It is possible that it is only power itself, any kind of power, that cannot speak to the powerless . . . I say this because he is not the only one whom power has lost" (p. 88). Armah seems to have less interest in the particulars of the Nkrumah regime than in what it can be made to represent, in mytho-symbolic form, for Africa in the neocolonial phase. Gareth Griffiths comments: "Nkrumah is only a name. He represents nothing. To name him is merely to reinforce the sense of namelessness, the falsity which such particularisation reinforces in a world where overthrower and overthrown are engaged only in a formal

⁹ Nnolim, p. 209.

¹⁰ Nnolim, p. 209.

¹¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 19. This reference and subsequent references to the novel, which are given in parentheses in the text, are taken from the 1975 reset Heinemann edition.

¹² Obiechina, p. 192.

¹³ Charles Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 258.

¹⁴ John Povey, rev. of *The Emergence of African Fiction*, by Charles Larson, *ASA Review of Books*, 2 (1975), 64.

¹⁵ Achebe, *Morning Yet*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁶ Ayi Kwei Armah, "Larsony, or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction," *Asemka*, 4 (1976), 1-14.

reversal of role.”¹⁷ Nkrumah is no better or worse than his successors: a dubious equality is imposed on all by the power machine. Pattern and process are more important than the persons involved, although selected personnel are needed for the vision to acquire any power of historical relevance. Critics like Achebe and, to a lesser extent, Awoonor and Gakwandi appear to be preoccupied with a literal-minded search for the documentary realism of social history. Anything which is not concretely embodied in historical or geographical actuality is liable to be dismissed as “foreign metaphor.”¹⁸ The expansion of contemporary history into myth is frowned upon as something tendentiously European, and the author is not even allowed licence to develop his symbols according to internal rules of consistency. Nwoga, for example, wonders if the progeric manchild is not a misleading image for national progress and asks if it could not be “that the growing up has been slow?”¹⁹

What Armah is attempting from his first novel onwards is a systematic and visionary reconstruction of the given reality which does not meet the demands of conventional novel structure. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* takes the first steps towards the negotiatory polemicism of *Why Are We So Blest?* (1971) and the histories, abandoning a merely transcriptive for a prescriptive style. Chidi Amuta has written of the ways in which myth, as a psycholinguistic construct, functions through signs and symbols which associatively connote fixed ideas. “Thus in the myth of white racist supremacy over blacks in particular, a definite polarisation of colours and images has been built up Therefore any literature that seeks either to perpetuate or debunk a myth or set of myths usually operates through sets of related or opposing images, symbols and allusions appropriate to its message.”²⁰ In his first novel Armah imposes unilaterally upon his Ghanaians a spiritual or psychological condition of “ghostliness” which may reflect, emulate, or be a victim of the “whiteness” imposed by the ruling elite. The gleam of material power and success is habitually linked with whiteness: white hotels, bungalows, shirts. Things get brighter and whiter as they get closer to the power center—Koomson’s house glitters with silver—and thus closer to the invisible white powers which lie behind it. White-washed power and prosperity are able to keep themselves immune to dirt and defilement: pure water flows from the Hill Stations. Their powers of ownership even extend to the bleaching of the language. Words like “clean” and “pure” are linked with white superiority, the black regime’s language of definition being much the same as that of the former white one. In neocolonial black society whiteness imposes itself as pervasively and contagiously as the spreading whiteness of the desert in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973). Armah’s mytho-poetic hyperbole of whiteness and filth, ghosts and excrement, captures the totalitarian arbitrariness of word-concept control. His dystopian metaphors proclaim their own ownership of reality in a formidably methodical counterattack which, in its respective methods and aims, both reflects and refutes the existing psycholinguistic constructs. For the whiteness of the gleam is a filth-producing whiteness. Its “cleanness” has “more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump” (p. 44). The gleaming white K.C.C. signs are covered over with the refuse of white-modeled consumerism. The white uniforms of neocolonial stewards signal their servitude, and the clean water flowing from the high places of white colonial power is used by lepers, “catching

¹⁷ Gareth Griffiths, “Structure and Image in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*,” *Studies in Black Literature*, 2, No. 2 (1971), 7.

¹⁸ Achebe, *Morning Yet*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Nwoga, 27.

²⁰ Chidi Amuta, “Ayi Kwei Armah and the Mythopoesis of Mental Decolonisation,” *Ufahamu* 10, No. 3 (1981), 49-50.

its cleanness before it reached the mud" (p. 67). Whiteness exerts a power of total absorption and everyone from politician to street seller is drawn into it. The color scheme has not yet polarized into an absolute black-white reversal. But there are incipient signs of the later sharpening of "whiteness" into one of the key characteristics of evil, in *Why Are We So Blessed?*, and into the very epitome of evil in *Two Thousand Seasons*, where everything that is not black/good becomes anti-black and therefore white/evil, Arabs and Europeans alike.

Armah's indictments of contemporary Ghana make a virtue out of one-sidedness, their aim being to redress the lopsidedness of a vast edifice of colonial literature and the parallel imbalance in the value structures of imitation-white societies. The dystopian vision of a world of reversed whiteness, piled high with excrement and constituting a version, or perversion, of white values was surely calculated to horrify Western audiences although, for some African critics, the effort to shock the oppressor almost killed off the victim. Writing about *Two Thousand Seasons*, Soyinka claims that "its validity is not predicated on objective truths so much as on the fulfillment of one of the social functions of literature: the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction."²¹ With the substitution of "present" for "past," this could serve also for the first novel. Indeed, a few pages later in Soyinka's book, it does. Though worried that its "metaphysical dimensions" might not be consistent with the awakening of revolutionary anxiety, Soyinka concedes that "the vision is there, nevertheless, and is perhaps more subtly subversive than in his latter explicit work, *Two Thousand Seasons*."²² The novel does not behave like a piece of "objective realism." Its characterization and metaphoric structure grow intimately out of and are governed by the long crisis of neocolonial exploitation which has become the norm for much of independent Africa. It moves uncertainly towards that divesting the mind of colonial structures which is necessary before the African writer can enter Fanon's "fighting phase"²³ and set about the task of getting the beautiful ones born. This heightened mode of realism invites the reader to make choices which are heavily preempted by the superior attractiveness of one of the options. Even where "disturbing ambiguities" (p. 10) are present, the saturative metaphors which do most of the work in the novel tend to take the decisions out of the reader's hands and make up his mind for him. The gradual intensification of this process in the later works increases their mythic potential but threatens to dilute their artistic power.

Finally, is there not something in the history of Nkrumah's Ghana which invites dystopian treatment? Radical critics have found nothing essentially wrong with Armah's depiction of modern African elites as the slaves of former white colonial bosses.²⁴ Another Ghanaian author has lamented that "we have got this unhealthy attraction for the 'gleam'-ing and very often trashy products of someone else's civilisation . . . this, more than anything else, has been and is our undoing."²⁵ Fanon's view of the neocolonial bourgeoisie as a useless, parasitical, unproductive class which lets economies stagnate and acts merely as the agent of its foreign counterpart and controller, was based on his experiences as Algerian Ambassador

²¹ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 106.

²² Soyinka, p. 116.

²³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 179.

²⁴ Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks* (Harlow: Longman, 1981), p. 67.

²⁵ Ama Ata Aidoo, "No Saviours," in *African Writers on African Writing*, ed. G. D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 17.

to Ghana. "Here, the dynamic, pioneer aspect, the characteristics of the inventor and of the discoverer of new worlds are lamentably absent . . . not a single industry is set up in the country."²⁶ Armah's taxi driver reports that "everybody is making things now except us. We Africans only buy expensive things" (p. 140). A Ghanaian census shortly before the fall of Nkrumah showed that "of the Ghanaian wage-earners in non-agricultural employment, one third are in service occupations . . . only seven per cent are employed in manufacturing industries . . . two-fifths of all Ghanaian wage-earners work in the public sector."²⁷ The novel's inverted economics of unproductive consumption and ever-deepening debt do not seem to be far from the mark. "At independence Ghana, one of the richest tropical countries in the world, had reserves of about £200 million. Towards the end of Nkrumah's rule, nine years later, the reserves were down to £30 million, and debts stood at £360 million."²⁸ Even at the peak of national prosperity, its wages were among the lowest in West Africa.²⁹ In 1961 Nkrumah told the nation on radio that he was aware of increasingly riotous corruption and injustice. "Subsequently Ghanaian politicians were asked to surrender property in excess of £20,000—a sum of money that a local peasant might accumulate in 400 years if he saved every penny he earned."³⁰ This awareness notwithstanding, the "Osagyefo" imprisoned opponents without trial, set up special courts with no rights of appeal, rigged a referendum for a one-party state, and dismissed a Chief Justice for giving an inconvenient ruling. With a firm eye on Ghana, Fanon wrote that when the governing caste vanishes, "it will be seen that nothing new has happened since independence was proclaimed, and that everything must be started again from scratch . . . since that caste has done nothing more than take over unchanged the legacy of the economy, the thought and the institutions left by the colonialists."³¹ Nkrumah falls at the coup but Fanon's "useless phase" of the West African bourgeoisie is not over: the man reflects that "in the life of the nation itself . . . nothing really new would happen" (p. 162). The facts of the regime are their own indictment. "What ultimately crippled Ghana was Nkrumah's grand design for industrialisation and the system of corruption that went with it. With reckless speed he pressed ahead with one project after another . . . although by then factories were starved of raw materials and food queues were a common sight . . . the spending spree went on. The party elite bought huge houses which they filled with expensive furniture and objets d'art . . . the wife of one minister acquired a £3,000 gold-plated bed from a London store, until a well-publicised scandal forced her to send it back."³²

Armah's picture is stark and selective. Trimmed to fit Fanonian theory, it records the speed but leaves out the industry: the frantic rush is to nowhere. But the abortive plans, the false public utilities, the Party's corruption are all there. An understanding of Armah's polemically heightened mode of realism and its exuberant hyperbole should not divert attention from the fact that there is much in the historical reality of Nkrumah's Ghana which invites the dystopian treatment it receives in the novel. In the novelist's visionary reconstruction, that Ghana has not been so subjectivized as to become historically unrecognizable.

²⁶ Fanon, pp. 122-23.

²⁷ P. C. Lloyd, *Africa in Social Change*, 3rd. ed., rev. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 120.

²⁸ Martin Meredith, "The Broken Dream," *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 7 March 1982, p. 29. For a lower estimate of the debts left by Nkrumah, see "What Does Ghana Really Owe?" *West Africa*, 28 Jan. 1972, p. 87.

²⁹ Lloyd, p. 122.

³⁰ David Caute, *Fanon* (London: Fontana, 1970), p. 94.

³¹ Fanon, p. 142.

³² Meredith, 28-29.