

# Ayi Kwei Armah and the Significance of His Novels and Histories

Derek Wright, Northern Territory University, Australia

The stark picture of Nkrumah's Ghana in Ayi Kwei Armah's early novels focuses on the sterility, corruption, and economic stagnation of an indolent ruling bourgeoisie whose chief task is to protect the investments of the entrepreneurial European prototype which it caricatures.<sup>1</sup> *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) depicts a society caught in a trance of whiteness, where everyone from the government minister to the lowliest clerk apes European manners and aspires to Western patterns of middle-class consumerism, privilege, and snobbery. In *Fragments* (1970), colonial dependency complexes produce a modern cargo mentality, and in *Why Are We So Blest ?* (1972), Western luxury, class pyramids, and white mistresses have even infiltrated the fabric of African revolution.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* the anonymous hero, called simply "the man," battles in the course of an average day to retain his integrity against an avalanche of temptation: his wife's clamoring after commodities that only corruption will buy, the bribes offered him by traders and taken by fellow clerks at the office where he works, and the dishonest invitations of an influential family relation, the Party man Koomson, who urges him to act as nominal owner in the fraudulent purchase of a luxurious boat which the politician's official facade of socialist politics prevents him from undertaking in his own name. In the lurid finale, set during the 1966 coup that toppled Nkrumah, the man helps the fallen Koomson, now a fugitive in fear of his life, to escape, by way of his latrine hole, to the safety of the sea. In this episode the malodorous minister is imaged in terms of the filth and excreta heaped in the novel's public places and latrines, and the whole stylized rescue seems to owe something to purification rites in West-African coastal communities, in which the pollutive waste of the dying year is carried in effigy to the water and put to sea in a miniature wooden boat. The man's obsessive ablutions at each point with the Koomsons in the book suggest his need for constant decontamination, as in the presence of a pollutive object. Thus Koomson, at the novel's surreal climax, is simultaneously the nation's collected excrement, about to be evacuated through the national latrine hole and carried off by the communal latrine man, and, tied to this, the accumulated ills of the moribund Nkrumah regime which must be ritually expelled if a new era is to begin.

History is envisaged here as the hoarding of evils in a cycle of consumption, waste, and disposal, and the imagery of consumer waste and excreta is, accordingly, pushed to the point of hyperbole. The ruling elite's immodest consumption of the country's resources without doing or producing anything in return leads, by an interior poetic logic, to mountains of dirt and excrement in the environment: the privileged consumer class which produces the waste also ,

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<sup>1</sup> All references are to the Heinemann editions.

characteristically, embezzles the municipal funds earmarked for its disposal, resulting in litter bins obscured by uncollected refuse. The novel furnishes many epic static descriptions of piled debris and feces, decaying junk on shorelines, and the organic rot of staircase banisters. Its sweepers and latrine cleaners, who anticipate the man's ritualized role, find more dirt in the Ghanaian environment than can ever be cleaned away, and the implication is that all the filth of Africa's history is somehow still in existence. The failure to jettison the old has infected the new, and the metaphoric task facing the man, in his quasi-ritual role, is nothing less than the purgation of the unpurged rot of history, the sweeping away of ancient corrupt heritages to make possible a new start for Africa's future.<sup>2</sup>

Against this fantasy of a panoramic purification of history, however, the only practical possibility contemplated is a break with the immediate past of the Nkrumah regime, and the rootedness of corrupt practices prevents the state from taking advantage even of this limited opportunity. Koomson's reemergence through the latrine hole is a wryly parodic rebirth, more evacua-tive than creative: it is, in its droll irony, the culminating mock-ritual of passage and the ritual disguise of escape as expulsion is at best a half-hearted and wishful business (he gets away to the Ivory Coast where, it is assumed, he renews his corrupt mode of existence, and his parting remark to the man that they will meet again is ominous). Appropriate to the totally saturative ethos of corruption in Armah's Ghana, the reign of bribery must itself be banished by a bribe, since the boatman will not allow Koomson onto the escape vessel until he has taken his cut. Corruption, perpetually self-repeating and self-renewing, is expelled by more of the same. Like the novel's many purifications in private showers and public baths, the cleansing act creates the dirt it is meant to discharge and is a "doomed attempt to purify the self by adding to the disease outside" (40).

The new regime is only a few hours old when the closing bribe given to the policeman by the driver of the sparkling new bus brings the novel back to the opening bribe offered by the conductor of the old rotting one. After leaving the escape boat the man undergoes a purifying immersion in the sea, but he then goes back to the unredeemed world which he left, knowing that no beautiful ones have been born.

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is rescued from the cartoonlike banality of its political themes, the bareness of its plot, and the suspicious simplicity of its cyclical view of history by the performance of its language and its dazzlingly inventive, fantastic hyperbole, clearly influenced by the African oral tradition. With a grim exhilaration and graphic detail, Armah devises an exuberant, seemingly inexhaustible scatology: the results are flatulent breath, constipated voices, fraud and corrupt ambition translated into urination and excretion, and the spectacular physiological imbalance, instanced in the growling entrails and thundering flatulence of the fugitive Koomson, that follows from the ruling elite's greedy consumption of power, privilege, and profit. But this is no mere literary tour de force or reveling in dirt for its own sake. After a while the obsessive metaphoric attributions begin to invade, possess, and become

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller exposition of these themes in the first novel, see: Derek Wright, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of his Fiction* (London: Hans Zell, 1989) 81-137.

identified with their objects, providing the novel's oppressive political ethos with a matching totalitarian aesthetic and capturing the totalitarian arbitrariness of word-image-concept control in single-party states burdened with colonial legacies. The whiteness of the consumerist "gleam" is a filth-producing whiteness that has "more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump" (44). The scatology methodically defiles the language which neocolonial values have bleached, and it does not halt at a loose emotive association between corruption and dirt, or vague analogies between moral and physical uncleanness. On the contrary, it is choreographed by an intricate and formidably symmetrical network of correspondences between the human ingestion-evacuation cycle, the body politic, and the Ghanaian environment: along this metaphoric labyrinth the course of political regimes rise and fall, shrink satirically to the narrow dimensions of the physiological circuit, and swell to the ritualized calendrical evacuation of the nation at the novel's climax. There is a degree of symbolic composition and a poetic intensity here which, surpassing the more fitful figurations of Soyinka's novels, were new to African fiction.

Armah's second novel abandons the almost monolithic perspective of the first book for a triple narrative structure, but one of its narrators is no more than a shadowy presence, and the focus is still upon a single figure. *Fragments* depicts the experiences faced by the scholar during his first year home after returning from America. He is hounded into madness by his family because what he brings back from his studies in America is not the instant return of material possessions and prestige which they expect of him, but a moral idealism which protests at the selfish materialism they have absorbed from Western culture. Baako is not the conventional been-to, the transitional African whose Western education leaves him ill equipped to deal with traditional African society--Obi in Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, for example. He is not caught between Africa and the West, but between the West and a vulgarly Westernized Africa, and reviles the place he returns to only insofar as it imitates the one he has fled from. In his purgatorial passage through the increasingly foreign world of his native Accra, Baako rejects his corrupt government sinecure and abhors his family's materialism, resigns his post at GhanaVision when his idealistic television screenplays are rejected as subversive, recoils in disgust from the colonial posturings of official laureates at state-subsidized literary soirees, and finally, when his inspired notebook expositions on Ghana's modern cargo mentality are mistaken by his mother as signs of madness, is committed to a mental asylum where he really goes mad. The only help Baako receives in his tribulations is the companionship, spiritual and sexual, of the Puerto Rican psychiatrist Juana and the ancient wisdom of his blind grandmother Naana, whose prologue and epilogue encircle in a timeless frame the historical fragmentation recorded in the parallel linear narratives of Baako and Juana.

The urbanized Africa depicted in *Fragments* is crazed by a lust for commodities and status, and the uncritical eye is overwhelmed by the aggressive beauty of externals: notably, empty titles, pompous-sounding sinecures, and the gaudy trinkets of Western technology, towards which the surviving religious emotions of awe and wonder have, in a faithless age, been driven for a correlative. For Brempong, the strutting "big man" Baako encounters on the plane from Paris, worth is measured wholly by "beautiful things" like his Dutch butane lighter which "seemed to have been sculpted entirely out of light" (66),

and at the fantastic airport reception awaiting him on his arrival in Accra his fawning welcomers fall victim to a "confusion heightening the eye-filling impression of an unending swirl of colored cloth and jewelry" (81). This anticipates the hostile glitter of the Onipa family's outdoor ceremony for the newborn child, where the eye is dazzled by "long, twinkling earrings, gold necklaces, quick-shining wrist-watches, a great rich splendor stifling all these people in the warmth of a beautiful day" (259). Baako's mother Efu beholds her returned son as a semi-supernatural being, worshipfully inquiring after his car "in a near whisper filled with wonder and gladness" (101). The passive eye infatuated with, mesmerized by, this superficial beauty is incapable of any deeper kind of perception so that, when Baako refuses the identity thrust upon him by his family, Efu literally ceases to see him: "But his mother was looking at him as if what she was staring at was something behind him" (141). Juana hungers in her work for the "human touching . . . of some kind of sense of inner worth," but is unable to penetrate "the deadly seriousness people here invested in these external things, from the titles to the dozens of graded types of uniform" (19). The general failure to see beyond a luminously impressive outward show to an inner paucity is registered by a strangely disembodied descriptive style that lingers obsessively on hard shiny surfaces, expressing the awe of language in the presence of sheer materiality; and the notion of partial perception, unable to penetrate surfaces and uninformed by any guiding moral or intellectual vision, is reinforced by a rhetoric that affects to fragment characters into partial people--into collections of disjointed limbs that appear to operate independently of any organizing consciousness and do not add up to complete human beings.

*Fragments* abounds in image-complexes: fragmentation, wholeness of vision and a saving blindness, walls between worlds. But there are two leading metaphors. Firstly, the image of the returning ghost recurs in the various forms of the resurrected cargo-spirit in Baako's analogies, the reincarnated ancestor in Naana's traditional Akan beliefs, the repatriated been-to, and, from local mythology, the visionary lover of Mammy Water back from the sea. These figures advance concurrently across the novel's seamless myth-fabric, each amplifying a pattern of outward passage, the suffering of an actual or figurative death and rebirth into an altered state, and a beneficial return, bearing what may be doubtful blessings. In this multilayered tapestry sentences like the following, from Naana's dream--"But Baako walked among them neither touched nor seen, like a ghost in an overturned world in which all human flesh was white" (15)--contrive to conflate allusions to cargo ghosts, the ancestral dead turned white in the spirit world, the lonely African in American exile, and the idealistic been-to, walking unheeded and unwelcome among Westernized Ghanaians.

Secondly, the quasi-infanticide of Baako's week-old nephew, which is foretold by the clairvoyant Naana and hinted at by many omens and signals in the chapter "Awo" (birth), becomes a pivotal episode and a key metaphor for the premature truncation of life that pervades the book. Not only is Baako himself regarded by his family as a mere human conveyor belt for Western cargo: the outdoor ceremony for his infant namesake is a pretext for making money out of the child as well. The ceremony is brought forward to coincide with payday, with the result that the child is exposed too soon and, by a cruel irony, dies before its birth has been properly celebrated. The failure of the Onipa family to keep its offspring alive and well because of its private greed, is reflected in the

architectural miscarriage of Efu's dream house for her son, and finds broader social counterparts in the aborted public utilities of schools and roads quickly abandoned by self-aggrandizing governments, the shut-down distilleries and defunct industrial rail tracks. Everywhere in the novel is the impotent destruction or discarding of whatever fails to provide instant fulfillment, instanced in a crew of technicians who wreck a disputed television set, and this frustrating sterility is aggravated by a colonial dependency complex or "cargo mentality" which causes contemporary Ghanaians to continue to alienate to the white world godlike powers of invention which they are unwilling to develop themselves. Baako's persecution, like the murder of a dog by a sexually disabled man and the exposure of a child by a mother who has already had five miscarriages, seems designed to exorcise a general impotence, and the implication is that this society is jealously resentful of any indigenous creative energy or quickness, and tries to kill or render barren what it cannot itself create.

The dying Naana, who serves as the novel's ritual consciousness, both foresees and reviews events and issues reminders of the lost values of violated customs such as the outdoorings. In her traditional Akan belief the destinies of the newly born are intimately bound up with devotion to ancestors and care of elders: neglect of one end of the circular continuum of living, ancestors and the unborn interferes with events at the other. Filtered through her moral vision, the birth and outdoorings of the child are enveloped by a ritualistic subtext which, in its allusions to Akan religious lore, evokes the gathering forces of an offended moral order and an atmosphere of mounting danger. The greedy acceleration of the ceremony leads to its ominous coincidence with the days of traditional harvest festivities, thus giving pay cycles priority over seasonal ones, money over the fruits of the earth. It becomes, as a result, a grim Earth festival, an inverted fertility rite presided over by Efu who, to show off an electric fan, kills by exposure the grandchild arriving with the harvest. Naana's fears that the scant libations at Baako's departure and the outdoorings will provoke ancestors and elders alike into withdrawing their protection from the young travelers are borne out by events: Baako is driven to madness, and his nephew, as foreseen, dies. No one listens to Naana, however (other than Baako), and her moral imperatives constitute a backcloth of obsolete, nonfunctioning values that constantly declare their failing relevance to the modern world. In the final chapter which brings the novel's year full circle, she dies from a world of impenitent materialism (to be reborn, in her own mind, into the world of the ancestors) and, since she is imaged as the sole survivor of a lost past whose precious beliefs die with her, her release into the spirit community betokens the continuing spiritual captivity of the living one.

In *Fragments* Armah's vision has darkened. 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. If the man in the first novel serves figuratively as a vehicle for purification, then Baako is more properly a sacrificial victim or scapegoat, and the sacrificial pattern focuses the grim insight that only the traumas of madness and death have the power to shock contemporary Ghanaians back into a sense of real value and human dignity. The child's death brings the Onipas briefly back to their senses, and the novel's other death—the accidental drowning of the lorry driver Skido when a ferry holdup

keeps him from delivering the harvest to market--prompts the neighboring people to one of the book's few spontaneous acts of community: this is the nocturnal recovery of the mangled body from the river by men and women working quietly and impersonally together in collective disgust with, and defiance of, bureaucratic indifference. Only the crises of birth and death bring out what is still good in Armah's Ghanaians--"Brother, it's only the blood of a new human being," declares the kind taxi driver who rushes Baako's sister to the maternity hospital (108). Hauling in the ropes with the others by the river, Baako discovers a different Ghana, an inverted night image of the day's danger and death, the calm after the sacrifice, but the peace and dignity have been heavily purchased at the price of Skido's death, which resulted from priority at the ferry being given to lorries carrying consumer goods instead of to Skido's own, carrying essential foodstuffs. One possible reason for Armah's deferment until the eleventh chapter of the revelation of the child's death, which in fact occurs only a month after Baako's return, is the suggestive juxtaposition of the chapters "Iwu" (death) and "Obra" (life) before Naana's epilogue. This invites the reading that something of value emerges as the fruit of sacrifice and, particularly, the inference that Baako's recovery from madness somehow grows out of the death of the child with whom he is constantly identified. Certainly, 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. Upon his slow recovery in the asylum, he is finally rescued from the clutches of his vampiric family, but his rescuer, Juana, is the first to admit that, in the chaotic and destructive environment of modern Accra, psychiatry's periodic patching up of broken souls--salvage, not salvation--is something that will always have to be repeated and can have no permanent value.

Armah's third novel moves away from the narrow Ghanaian circle of the first two books to take in America, the Maghrib, and Europe's remaining African colonies. Set largely in the fictitious North-African city of Laccreyville and at Harvard, *Why Are We So Blest?* traces through their respective diaries the encounters and relations of three characters: Solo, a failed revolutionary and artist from an unliberated Portuguese colony; Modin, a Harvard-educated Ghanaian student in search of African revolution but still clinging to liberal beliefs in interracial harmony; and Aimée, a thrill-seeking, pseudo-Marxist white Radcliffe graduate with whom Modin has become fatally infatuated and who, when he is murdered by marauding O. A. S. terrorists in the desert at the novel's climax, openly displays the vicious psychopathy which the reader has suspected for some time. The focus falls on the career of Modin and his parallel persecutions at the hands of American academic racism, fake white radicals, and hypocritical African revolutionaries. The Laccreyville sections of *Why Are We So Blest?* provide a bleak, disenchanting portrait of the latter figures. The "Afrasia" of the novel is a war-ruined nation of crippled freedom fighters and orphaned beggars, ruled from excolonial mansions by a new French-supported hierarchy of privileged managerial cadres who have vaulted to power over the backs of sacrificed militants. It is also a haven for sham African revolutionaries like the Portuguese-colonized "Congherians" who set up their government-in-exile here, safely installed in first floor luxury behind a facade of ground floor austerity and unable to resist the overtures of the white international press.

In this novel the pervasive imagery is of fire, entrails, livers, and predators, thus endowing its protagonist with Promethean pretensions. The idealistic been-to, like the Greek demigod, tries to shed privilege and crosses over to the side of oppressed humanity to place his gift of education at their disposal: an endeavor that leaves him stranded between, on the one hand, the whites who do not accept him and their black stooges whose privileges he has betrayed, and, on the other, the oppressed whose interests his new knowledge estranges him from and turns him against. The Western-trained intellectual, Modin discovers, is doomed to punitive elevation on a lofty educational peak high above his people. In his particular case, the effort to escape his Promethean loneliness amongst the American Olympians leads him into a series of disastrous affairs with white women and, eventually, to his becoming the tortured prey of the American eagle, Aimée. The novel's reflexive ironies question, moreover, the value which any legend taken from the mythological store of the oppressor can have as a model for revolution in the African context. Modin steals no knowledge worthy of the name from the American Olympus, and in the course of the novel it transpires that the Promethean model is tied to an irrelevant Western myth of progress along divisive "Olympian" lines that are either inadequate to Africa's needs or destructive of her potential, and the system of "Promethean" reverse crossings devised by American educational aid programs for the Third World in fact keeps the cause of black revolution perpetually self-defeating by its subversive input of Western-educated intellectuals into the leadership. Untrained academic revolutionaries like Modin, the ineffectual products of a Western liberal education, are already half-poisoned by the values of the oppressor and actually hamper the revolutionary process. The novel's European mythological scheme is able to offer only parody-Prometheans: notably, the decadent Congherian revolutionaries, at heart secret Olympians who hanker after the trappings of the West and whose entrails, according to Solo, are hardened not to withstand the tortures of colonial oppressors but the enormity of their own hypocrisies. For example, the local Party boss Jorge Manuel defers and then rejects Modin's application to join the movement on the grounds that Modin is a Western-educated intellectual with an American lover: a situation identical to his own. Desperate and demoralized after months of waiting, Modin is consequently persuaded to attempt an individual, back door entry to Congheria, and is goaded by the perverse Aimée into a foolhardy Saharan crossing which results in his death.

It is Jorge Manuel, however, who provides the novel with its central thesis and, indirectly, with another and less self-critical metaphoric complex. In his self-inclusive statement, "an African in love with a European is a pure slave . . . with the heart of a slave, with the spirit of a slave" (255). According to these tenets, all interracial sexual relationships, no matter how worthy as attempts at private remedies by individuals, are doomed to reenact racially predetermined roles and hence to serve as a microcosm of Africa's historical encounter with the West. The results are a powerful if not altogether convincing politico-sexual allegory, in which the proximity of the white woman spells the automatic debilitation and political emasculation of the black man (Solo, Modin, Manuel and Ndugu Pakansa, an East African leader, are all undone by their white mistresses), and some bizarre metaphoric transportations such as that of Europe's economic rape of the continent into America's psychosexual consumption. Aimée's rapacious, fantasy-ridden sexuality is principally a political

metaphor, significant for its exploitative and reactionary nature (she fantasizes Modin into a colonial steward-"boy"). At the book's surreal climax, where Modin is simultaneously fellated by Aimée and castrated by French terrorists who then rape her, her carnivorous carnality blossoms into a full sexual vampirism and the prevailing archetype of colonial predation removes the fiction to a realm of pure metaphor.

In Armah's first two novels the main target is not the white world but those Ghanaians who collaborate with the alien values that are destroying their culture. In the more rigid vision of *Why Are We So Blest?*, however, the arch-enemy is "the West," fired by a satanic lust for destruction and replenishing its spiritual void by draining the vitality of its victims. The ideographic constructs polarize the more densely textured world of the first two books into blest and damned, center and periphery, American Olympus and Third-World Tartarus, and even the black betrayers and neocolonial quislings are now recast as victims, spirited from their native cultures and programmed into privilege by Western education and systematically isolated from the people whose revolutions they lead. This boldly diagrammatic vision, with its stage-set stereotypes of Africa and the West and its provocative racial mythology, signals a major change of direction in Armah's fiction.

*Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), is an important milestone on Armah's own journey out of the privileged circle of the African "blest." In this work the seduction of Solo, the novel's editing consciousness, by the "discrete beauty" of Western aestheticism and European modernism is seen as the artistic equivalent of the sexual infatuation of the protagonist Modin, whose notebooks he rearranges. Solo laments that when the black writer has to borrow from the literary arsenal of the oppressor to bewail his race's destruction, he becomes a modern artistic version of the original slave factor, and writing itself becomes a form of betrayal, recording black suffering for a white readership, designed to salve the Olympian conscience and bearing the Olympian seal of approval. In Solo's self-accusations the novel's Western-inherited aesthetic form declares the worthlessness of its own achievement, signaling some imminent radical shift of focus or formal innovation.

If these signals have been properly registered, the next book will be less of a shock to the Western sensibility than is first apparent. Following logically upon Solo's despair of appropriate artistic form, *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), written during Armah's stay in Tanzania, marks its author's search for a narrative mode that would approximate to more genuinely African forms, and would provide a focus at once more specifically African and more revolutionary than that of the previous books. Nevertheless, after the psychological intricacies, historical precision, and intense concentration upon individual protagonists in the first three books, the fourth one, with its panoramic sweep across time, its polarization of humanity into primal racial forces, and the relentless polemical harangue of its collective narrative voice, is a radical and alarming new departure in Armah's fiction. *Two Thousand Seasons* employs as a microcosm for the whole African historical experience the perilous passage of the Akan nation from its fabled Sudanic origins into slavery and diaspora; its subjection to Arab and European colonialisms and its subsequent freedom struggles and decolonization; and its eventual settlement in modern Ghana and the massive future task of reconstruction that lies ahead. Recorded history makes up only a part of

the narrative, which draws not upon the experience of any specific tribal or ethnic group, but upon the projected race memory of a fictitious pan-African fraternity whose names—in Swahili, Yoruba, Gikuyu, Ibo—are gathered from different parts of the continent. In this book the bounds of historical realism and naturalistic narrative are daringly burst and a new fictional zone entered: the terrain of myth, legend and collective race consciousness. As the tribulations undergone in Africa's long saga of suffering are general and communal rather than individual experiences, characterization is kept to a minimum and individuals are regarded as mere functions of the collective will: the narrator's chief concern is with the representation of group mental and emotional states and shared feats of heroism, not with the fine delineation of individual personalities and deeds. The reader is addressed by a pluralized narrator, an unidentified and undated "We" which speaks for the entire deracinated corporate body during its wanderings across time in pursuit of its racial destiny.

*Two Thousand Seasons* does not purport to be a novel in any sense of the word, and the novel's psychological complexities and traditional fair-minded openness to the variety of human experience are not to be found here. Its polarized racial polemic, preferring partisan invective to critical investigation, simply showers abuse on Arab "predators," European "destroyers," and their African collaborators and agents. These features are, more often, the stock-in-trade of epic, saga, and chronicle which, in their Homeric and Norse forms in the European tradition, similarly trace the migrations of whole peoples and the founding of empires. It seems, however, that a striking original literary form, neither novel nor epic, has been evolved by refashioning the devices of an indigenous African tradition which has an ancient pedigree: the tradition of the "griot," storyteller or oral historian whose proverbial wisdoms and folk legends are drawn from the communal memory, and who thus speaks with the voice of the whole community. The communal voice adopted by Armah's "griotary" narrator assumes a common identity with both the characters of his tale and the audience which the tale is designed to educate and, in its commendation of selfless sacrifice (the woman Abena) and condemnation of selfish preservation (the man Dovi), implicitly improves and surpasses the alienated, locked-in egos of the early novels.

*Two Thousand Seasons* postulates as the indigenous African way of life, anterior to both precolonial and colonial corruptions, the dogma of "the Way," which opposes the ideals of communality, creation, "connectedness" and reciprocity to the selfish individualism, destructive fragmentation and exploitive relationships that feature in the contemporary Ghana of the early books. As history this is, quiet self-consciously, a tentative and theoretical affair. It is doubtful, for example, whether the Way was ever the code of the whole community, since its spiritual guardians are repeatedly persecuted and banished, and it is constantly betrayed by slave kings and parasitical elites in their advancement towards the status-seeking materialism of Armah's modern Ghana. The Way, which can be diverted and deferred but never entirely destroyed, is a developing and potential rather than an actual force. Moreover, the narrative deliberately mixes realism and fantasy in a fictional mode that has its eye as much on promise for the future as on regret for the past. Forgotten and not yet discovered, the alternative ethics of the Way entail a large element of speculation and wish-fulfillment: they are ideal projections yet to be realized rather than experienced life forms to be restored, a phenomenon most marked in the

ideal of an egalitarian, nontribal African fraternity which conveniently ignores obvious ethnic, social, and national barriers across the African continent. The episodes of the successful slave revolt and the guerillas' capture of the slave castle, and the ultimate reunification of the Akan and African people envisaged in the book's finale, are not history as it happened, but history as it might and would have been if the conditions of the Way had been adhered to. The book's moral manifestos and models for progress belong to a higher, hypothetical order of reality, and provide a moral yardstick by which the prevailing destruction in the existing reality--slavery, colonialism and their legacies--can be condemned and transcended. The aim of this remythologizing of history is to present a usable, future-oriented version of the past that can serve the purposes of future reconstruction. *Two Thousand Seasons* is thus essentially a therapy and an exorcism, both for its author and for its African readership. Armah's earlier isolated artists and visionaries are penitentially submerged in an aggressively communal vision and, at the political level, the methodical direction of hatred at Arab and European "whites" is intended to exorcize the helplessness and inertia bred by a century of colonialism and, by airing them, to clear away the remaining negative feelings so that the work of reconstruction may begin: it is a healing catharsis which prepares the decolonized mind for the planning of radical alternatives to the societies left by the imperialists. Meanwhile, the stark monochromatic portrait of white devilry and black victimization claims to be at least as reliable as recorded histories colored by European colonial prejudices, and as more compatible with Africa's narrow experience of the white man as slaver and colonizer, as material and spiritual destroyer.

The historical myths of *Two Thousand Seasons* are fleshed out, and the values and behavioral patterns of a communal ethos more precisely realized in Armah's next and last-published work, the historical novel *The Healers* (1978). In this work Africa's destruction, wrought by a mixture of external depredations and internal divisions, is refracted through the more precise historical prism of the second Ashanti war and the fall of the Ashanti empire. *The Healers* is about a series of outlawed and persecuted healing enclaves whose mission, taking up the mantle of the guerrilla groups of the previous book, is to serve as the Ashanti historical conscience during the nation's physical and moral capitulation and to minister to the wounded Ashanti spirit, torn from its true course by the incursions of colonialism. The damage done to this civilization, both by Europeans from without, and by colonial stooges, like the shallow court intriguer Ababio, from within, is meticulously documented, but the novel turns finally from the trauma of history to a more hopeful future and, on a universal level, from the black diaspora to the prospect of eventual reunification. At its optimistic conclusion the historical wheel is brought to a full circle by the herding together of the black peoples of the world--Ashanti, Hausa, Kru and even West Indian--in the white captivity that originally scattered them, and the woman Ama Nkroma speculated hopefully at the closing dance that "in their wish to drive us apart the whites are actually bringing us work for the future" (309).

The explicitly ideological "Africanness" fabricated by Armah's last two books--the regimentation of bygone cultures into the simplistic dogma of a pristine, precolonial African "Way"--has very little to do with the subterranean ritual currents running through the first two, and follows more logically upon

the despairing conclusions of the third book and its separatist call for Africa's total disengagement from the West. The communal vision of the histories is clearly a positive attempt to find a new direction and more democratic base for African fiction, and aims at a more overt espousal of African values. There seems to be a consensus among all but Armah's most polemically minded critics, however, that the price paid for these gains—a corresponding loss of subtlety and complexity in both symbolism and characterization—has been too heavy, and that these books show signs of flagging inspiration and declining achievement.<sup>3</sup> In *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah strains to reproduce an illusion of orality and, specifically, of vatic utterance through a formidable battery of rhetorical questions, exclamations, and portentous-sounding inversions, but the rhetoric too often overreaches itself and acquires a lugubrious, almost self-parodying note which is at home in neither the oral nor the literary form. There is, moreover, a problem of vagueness of definition as regards the ideology of the Way. Defined almost entirely in negatives, as everything that the "white road" of "Destruction" is not, the harmonious mode of being and drab puritanical communalism projected by the doctrine of the Way emerge as something more anti-European than recognizably African (the rejection of family and kin for the group, and the overriding of territorial by ideological loyalties appear, in fact, to be highly un-African).

Additionally, Western critics have been worried by the fourth book's monotonous racial chauvinism.<sup>4</sup> As Armah's writing moves beyond the complex tensions of realist fiction into the more categoric order of myth, the tendency to lay responsibility for all of Africa's troubles at the door of the West hardens, in *Two Thousand Seasons*, into an obdurate racism: "The white abomination: violence in its pure state, hatred unmixed" (87). Robert Fraser, alone among Western critics, has tried to justify the way in which Africa's beautiful ones are finally born in Armah's fiction, arguing that the complex openness to experience and fundamental fair-mindedness of naturalistic narrative should not be looked for here as they have been sidestepped by the more urgent need to provide modern Africa with a strong curative mythology as an antidote to the sicknesses and corrosive inferiority complexes spread by colonial myths.<sup>5</sup> This explains Armah's strident racist simplicities, but it does not necessarily justify them as it does not show how another false myth—an alternative distortion of reality, serving African purposes—can be any more health giving than the colonial distortions that it counteracts.

Finally, Armah's communal narrative voices and promotion of a group ethic appear to have little effect upon the categoric oppositions at work in his characterization: on the one hand, there are the unenlightened masses ruled by parasitical leaders who cover their emptiness with materialism and, on the other, the persecuted visionaries and healing sages banished with their ineffectual wisdom to the fringes of society. In *Two Thousand Seasons* the "We" of the text identifies not with the multitude but, like the point of view in the first three

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<sup>3</sup> See Bernth Lindfors, "Armah's Histories," *African Literature Today* 11 (1980): 85-96; Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka*, rev. ed. (1971; London: Evans Bros., 1978) 164; Peter Sabor, "Palm-Wine and Drinkards: African Literature and its Critics," *ARIEL* 12.3 (1981): 123.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, M. Mahood, review, *African Affairs* 75 (April 1976): 263; K. H. Petersen, "The New Way," *World Literature Written in English* 15 (1976): 330-35; Moore, *Wole Soyinka*, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (London: Heinemann, 1980) xii, 72, 105-06.

books, with this isolated moral and intellectual elite. Isanusi's fifth grove guerrillas, and Damfo's disciple healers in the fifth book, are, like Baako and Modin before them, natural winners and potential champions who opt out of an unfair competition before their superior talents can be abused by corrupt powers. But, in the absence of the early novels' analytic glimpses into political process and private temperament, the somewhat pasteboard characterization of Armah's historical fantasy tends to conceive these beings along superlative lines, with the attendant problem that their superman and superwoman virtues seem always at odds with their powerlessness. The flawless, beautiful creatures of Armah's way are ethereal, otherworldly presences remote from the solid creations of the early books. Imaginative hypotheses have been substituted for observed realities, type for complex consciousness, ideological for historical imagination. His beautiful ones are stillborn.