

Corruption and Decadence in Ayi Kwei Armah's *the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Okachukwu Onuah Wosu (PhD)

Department of English and Literary Studies,
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT: *The erosion of traditional moral standards is a predominant concern in representations of post-independence Africa. Characters frequently act in abhorrent ways as a way of expressing this worry. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah condemns the public's role in economic destruction and moral decay because almost everyone directly or indirectly aids corruption. Therefore, this study investigates moral decay, degradation, corruption, and filth in all spheres of postcolonial African society. The aim is to condemn the actions of postcolonial leaders who abuse the powers given to them in order to pursue their pecuniary interests. This study adopts postcolonial theory in its examination of our chosen text. It focuses on the literature of cultures that developed in response to British colonial dominance. The study concludes that there is a high prevalence of bribery, corruption, decay, and filth in African society, which has hampered development.*

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial, decadence, corruption, decay.

INTRODUCTION

African writers today demonstrate a strong dedication to nationalistic issues. They share their opinions and inclinations regarding the present problems in their countries through their writing. These authors primarily concentrate on political, economic, and social issues that occurred after the widespread liberation movements across the African continent. The situation in postwar Ghana is discussed by Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah, like most of his contemporaries. Armah does not attempt to cover up political corruption or moral decay in his portrayal of Ghanaian culture and government in his novels, which paint a grim but true picture of the country following independence. The loss of ethics, spiritual emptiness, and the driving thirst for materialism are all depicted by Ayi Kwei Armah.

Famous and prolific Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah depicts corruption and decadence as the plague of a typical African society in his well-known novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Armah uses powerful descriptive imagery that evokes stink and repulsiveness to depict moral degradation in every tier of society in the novel released by Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. in 1968. The author concentrates on the politicians who usurp the authority granted to them in order to pursue their selfish pecuniary interests.

Armah is renowned for his fiction and novels that explore how colonialism affected individuals in modern Ghana and Africa. His novels examine African urban life in the present day. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is one of his pieces that is utilized as a reflection on Africa's colonial past and the difficulties the continent currently faces. Armah is acknowledged as a significant African writer and intellectual, despite the fact that his writing is considered contentious and provocative in Africa. Armah's story, which places a strong emphasis on the corruption that pervaded Ghana after independence and the continent of Africa as a whole, primarily focuses on the bleak picture of Nkrumah's Ghana.

Armah in the novel reveals the antics of the political elite as they maneuver their way into lucrative public positions, promising to eradicate corruption and revitalize the economy but instead leaving the treasury in worse shape than it was before the change of guard. The author laments the public's role in economic destruction and moral decay because almost everyone directly or indirectly supports and abets corruption. Along with the political players, shady activities are also carried out by business owners, artisans, housewives, and domestic helpers, even those at the lowest levels of the civil service. Bribery is seen as normal because many people yearn for filthy money, are envious of those in positions of power, and harbor hidden intentions to advance themselves fraudulently. The system has been designed specifically to work with any ruling government. Therefore, a change in leadership rarely results in an equivalent shift in the behaviour and welfare of the populace. The upright are ridiculed by society. The main character is a prime example of this uncommon group. Instead of receiving praise, the patriot is mocked as being naive, twisted, and ignorant.

Review of Related Literature: Towards Postcolonial Decadence and Corruption

Although much has been written on and about Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, our aim here is to consider the responses of critics and writers to Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which shall cut across literary genres within our reach.

According to Samuel Kwesi Nkansah:

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* is renowned for its in-depth depiction of the flaws and abnormalities of Ghanaian society after independence. Most studies on the text have shown that corruption is the text's primary concern (28).

The position of Nkansah above represents the level of corruption and decay in Ghana. It shows that the real intent of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is to represent the total breakdown of society.

Alexander Dakubo Kakraba, in his assessment of *the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, opines:

The novel is generally a satirical attack on Ghanaian society during Kwame Nkrumah's regime and the period immediately after independence in the 1960s. Armah demonstrates his eloquence and establishes his trademark as a profound moral writer, as stated by Ode Ogede in his study, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast, Pitting the Imaginary World against the Actual* (306).

In *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah is bent on shocking his readers and, in so doing, awakening them to the rotteness in society, which occurs as a result of the lack of a culture of maintenance.

Francis Etsé Awitor, in his article "The Aesthetic of Decay in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, posits that:

Armah and Meja Mwangi describe, in their novels, an environment polluted by smells, filth, and decay. The protagonists, in their daily routine, are overwhelmed by the omnipresence of stench, rotteness, swear words, curses, and insults. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) depicts the daily life of an unnamed railroad clerk in independent Ghana who is torn between his family and his society (47–48).

Using filth, putrescence, and excreta to depict the insalubrious atmosphere of the protagonists, Ayi Kwei Armah exposes the endemic corruption and decay of Ghanaian society and the failure of Nkrumah's regime's economic and sociopolitical policy throughout *The Beautiful Ones*. The pervasiveness of filth symbolizes the system's decay and actually represents the reality of a filthy environment in Takoradi or Accra (the novel's likely settings), as well as in the majority of African cities. In other words, the characters' oppressive and filthy surroundings are depicted using excremental terminology, which also serves to highlight the corrupt society they live in.

Shantha V. aligns with Awitor in his general evaluation of the novel. For him:

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah, right from the first page, captures through his language and tone the decadence of a society where people have lost the zest for life. It is a modern wasteland where the living dead move about mechanically with no purpose. While the novel has a definite structure, with the climax coming with the overthrow of Nkrumah's reign, thematically there is very little actual development (15).

Both the beginning and the end of the book involve bus rides, and on both of those trips, bribes are given. Nothing much has actually changed in the exterior texture of life since the last bus journey, despite everything that has occurred in the interim—the overthrow of the regime and the vindication of the unnamed protagonist's moral stance. Despite being organized along a clear temporal and geographical axis, the novel's opening chapters have a timeless, undefined aspect. The fact that the protagonist is never identified adds to the intended lack of specificity in the events detailed here.

Moussa Traoré and Ruth Bernice Akyen, in their paper "African postcolonial fiction and the poetics of ecocultural decadence: Re-reading Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*," opines:

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* and Sembène's *Xala* in the context of their engagement with environmental degradation that occurs concurrently with the degradation of human life after independence, drawing conclusions from a theoretical perspective informed by studies in postcoloniality and ecocriticism. (56)

Both texts use the environment not just as a framing technique but also as a presence that starts to imply that human civilization is involved in the history of the environment. Both books make use of the metaphors of decay and pollution to blame humans for the environment's downfall.

Charles Larson further demonstrated that Armah devoted more tension to his ascetic writing than his Africanism," making an analogy between *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Ralph Ellison's *1952 Invisible Man* in terms of their essence (Bodunde 23).

Commenting on the portrayal of corruption and decay in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Chukwueloka, Christian Chukwuloo asserts:

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* portrays corruption at its best in Ghana. Every part of Ghana oozes corruption in various forms and dimensions. Armah's method in the novel is that he uses these corrupt practices to portray his disgust and hatred of the state of affairs in Ghana at the time of the novel (72).

Therefore, it is understandable that Armah believes that corruption in the book is the only way for him to express his meaning or intention—that Ghana is one huge, stinking lavatory—effectively and forcefully.

Other critics, such as Chinua Achebe and Charles Nnolim, focused mostly on Armah's overall pessimism and gloom, particularly in his descriptions of Ghanaian culture and the current political climate. Leonard Kibera proposed the theory that, when removed from a negative perspective, the lesson the novel teaches would appear to be easier to comprehend (Adeoti 9). The vulgar language Armah used to depict the dishonesty and deceit of the capitalist class and the economic

predicament that the new capitalism brought about in his book also drew criticism. However, other people, like Ode Ogede, were really taken by the way Armah employed a series of impolite terms to make his point (Bodunde 22).

Theoretical Framework.

The hallmark of postcolonial theory is to explain the political, artistic, economic, historical, and social effects of European colonial control in the world from the 18th to the 20th centuries. It is concerned primarily with literature created in nations that have historically or currently been colonies of other nations. It may also cover literature that was created by or about citizens of colonizing nations and that uses those nations' colonies or citizens as its subject matter. Concepts of otherness and resistance serve as the theoretical cornerstones. Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a representation of political and economic decay and corruption that are prevalent in postcolonial Africa. Armah figuratively links Ghana's post-independence corruption to the depictions of physical decay and excrement. In the 1970s, postcolonial theory entered the critical toolkit, and many practitioners cite Edward Said's book *Orientalism* as its precursor.

Corruption and Decadence in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

The dominant thematic concern of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is the theme of corruption and decadence in society. Armah uses imagery to investigate corruption and decay as major issues, painting a repulsive picture of overfed politicians whom he disparages using phrases like "constipating," "farting," "a group of bellies," "flatulent," "idiots," etc. The lifestyle of self-serving public officials, the general population's cooperation in corrupt acts, and an eyesore with repulsive visuals of dirt and decay are all indications of corruption. It is implied that society as a whole is rotten and depraved beyond redemption. To illustrate the miserable status of the country, unpleasant images are used to show the streets, public spaces, offices, and private residences, especially where the impoverished reside.

Ayi Kwei Armah uses ecologically conscious register and descriptions in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to show the squalor and decay that have overtaken postcolonial Africa in general and Ghana in particular. In this sense, there is both metaphoric filth and non-metaphoric filth. The filth referenced here serves as a metaphor for the moral degeneration that pervades postcolonial Africa. Armah provides accounts of the filth in society in response to this use of the word. Oozing freely, the oil-like liquid" (p. 6) that simply oozes from "the watcher's" mouth is one of the first examples of such a filthy description. This is the first time that filth, ugliness, and dirt are mentioned in the text.

According to Kakraba, Armah uses this derogatory phrase as an "electroconvulsive instrument to call the reader's attention to the decadence that Armah intends to bring attention to (11). Armah powerfully paints this picture to convey the idea of the postcolonial citizen's personal filth or decadence as a result of unsatisfactory governmental structures and discomfort. Armah explores

how man has contributed to society's decay in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. These intentional human behaviours include refusing to dispose of waste in the allotted receptacles and disobeying environmental regulations. He illustrates the government's lack of sincerity by offering trash cans without taking any other steps to stop the rot or decay. The man passes a trash can on the way to work that bears the emboldened inscription:

"KEEP YOUR COUNTRY CLEAN
BY KEEPING YOUR CITY CLEAN" (p.8)

Armah weaves his story around the corruption that is prevalent in his society. These trash cans are part of a program to clean up the city. However, by increasing the project's execution costs, these initiatives are nothing more than ways to steal money from public coffers. The following passage demonstrates the high level of corruption in postcolonial Africa and how government waste management professionals prioritize their own interests over the environment and the welfare of humans:

In the end, not many of the boxes were distributed, though there was a lot said about the large amount of money paid for them. The few provided, however, had not been ignored. People used them well, so that it took no time at all for them to get full. People still used them, and they overflowed with banana peels and mango seeds, thoroughly sucked-out oranges, the chaff of sugarcane, and most of all, the thick brown wrapping from a hundred balls of kenkey. From a distance, [people] aimed their trash at the growing heap, and a good amount of juicy offal hit the face and sides of the box before finding a final place on the heap. (9)

People start looking for other ways to dispose of their waste due to the corrupt and dishonest actions of government authorities. When it rains, the problem is even more obvious. The pile of garbage has an offensive odor and provides a breeding ground for mosquitoes, which prey on the poor and weak and spread diseases like typhoid and malaria. Such outbreaks are a subtle but significant means by which the environment responds to a society that does not protect it. Additionally, it leads to recurring flooding since the garbage spreads over the streets and into the gutters, clogging the waterways. This campaign to "clean the town of its filth," led by a doctor, a Presbyterian pastor, and a senior lecturer from the University of Legon, had at first inspired hope, but this hope was ultimately dashed:

In the end, not many of the boxes were put out, though there was a lot said about the large amount of money paid for them. The few provided, however, had not been ignored. People used them well, so that it took no time at all for them to get full. People still used them, and they overflowed with banana peels and mango seeds, thoroughly sucked-out oranges, the chaff of sugarcane, and most of all, the thick brown wrapping from a hundred balls of kenkey. People did not have to go up to

the boxes any more. From a distance, they aimed their trash at the growing heap, and a good amount of juicy offal hit the face and sides of the box before finding a final resting place upon the heap (8).

The inability of the political elite to handle public affairs is demonstrated by the failure to implement this anti-litter campaign, which also demonstrates how deeply ingrained corruption and decay are. In order to expose and criticize the corrupt system, Ayi Kwei Armah employs the metaphor of a "receptacle of garbage" that is perpetually overflowing as well as the ubiquitous appearance of squalor and trash on the streets.

The text also mentions the writing in the lavatory at the man's workplace as another example of moral decay. The wall of the restroom is physically defaced by the inscription "VAGINA SWEET." Such a phrase is forbidden by morality. Such a portrayal of a woman's genitalia is disgusting. However, as it is publicly printed in the restroom at The Man's job, this cultural purity of the female genitalia is brazenly desecrated. This illustrates the cultural and moral decadence that has set in within the postcolonial African state. Since what was formerly regarded as sacred—the vagina—is now degraded to a public exhibition of derision, these moral decadences point to the amount of cultural decay that the postcolonial African space has reached. Armah illustrated this in the passage below:

The bathroom's zinc roof was low, and the compartment was compact. The wall fissures grew wider at night and appeared snake-like during the day. Grey light slats penetrated through the dense blackness. Slimy materials stuck to the walls. A slimy pool of stagnant water covered the floor. Ifeyiwa was startled by the sound of something thrashing around in the water as she stood there. It was a rat that was swimming in the toilet paper. (78).

The personification of corrupt leadership is Koomson, the hero of "the glimmer" in Ayi Kwei Armah's work. In fact, while Koomson was a minister, he used to live in opulent luxury at the expense of others. He hides in the man's chamber out of fear of being killed after the military overthrows his party. The man finds it difficult to stand the foul smell coming from his body, especially his mouth, as a result of his decay.

The smell was something the man had not at all expected. It was overpowering, as some corrosive gas, already half liquid, had filled the whole room, irritating not only the nostrils but also the inside of the eyes, ears, mouth, and throat. His mouth had the rich stench 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 party man's farts filling the room. At the same time, Koomson's insides gave a longer growl than usual—an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder. The man thought he would surely vomit if he did not get out of this foul smell (161–163).

Koomson's degeneration in the previous passage alludes to his moral depravity. And Oyo, who has always admired Koomson's accomplishments, even remarks to her husband about how he smells. It's fascinating to note that Koomson used to "enjoy the world" with the same mouth that now has the "stench of decaying menstrual blood. The Minister also partakes in what might be described as disgusting bodily pleasures with the same body that is currently decomposing, including young, juicy vaginas waiting for him at some hired place paid for by the government" (89).

Another serious instance of corruption expressed in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is African cynicism, where Armah spitefully criticizes the postcolonial African, as seen in the passage:

...but the same old stories of money changing hands, throats getting moistened, and palms getting greased Only this time, if the old stories aroused any anger, there was nowhere for it to go. The sons of the nation were now in charge, after all. How completely the new thing took after the old. (10)

The coprophilic (excrement) motifs in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* consequently demonstrate the pessimistic tone of Armah's bigger vision for the postcolonial African states' inability to achieve sanity, and this is implicitly niched in the "Not Yet" expression in the title of his work. The money changing hands shows how the government officials keep looting the public fund through the same sharing formula amongst themselves as they are seen as being in charge.

The novel's title is what makes it so unique. Readers can never discern the title's true importance or how it relates to the content at first glance. The phrase "the beautiful ones ARE not yet born" does not emerge in a very significant way until the very end scene. The man sees a brand-new bus on his route home that is painted green and has the written phrase "related to solitude flowers" printed on it. However, after feeling some optimism from the redemptive moment with the water, the man is most frustrated to witness the bus driver bribing the policeman to let him through. Armah frequently depicts the same cycle of Ghana's corrupt government and emphasizes the lack of beautiful ones. May be in the future, but for sure not now (183).

CONCLUSION

Ayi Kwei Armah's extremely imaginative work, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, strives to show what he observed in his society and in Africa as a whole. His intent is very clear from the language and style that he uses. His own grief and pain stemming from the repeated failures he witnessed in his country are expertly conveyed through the choice of characters and the order of the events. After Kwame Nkrumah withdrew, the military coup assumed a purging mission,

replacing former rulers with others coming from the same source. Armah shed light on this purging objective.

The predominant political, economic, and social conditions are unquestionably the most important factors that have shaped Africa's ridiculous representation. The only issues facing the entire continent are the challenging cash deficit the working class worries about and the opulent lifestyle the few enjoy. This hierarchy is a result of the incorrect turn the political sector took; hence, there is a high prevalence of bribery, corruption, decay, and filth in African society, as represented by Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

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