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Ayi Kwei Armah

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EDUCATION: A.B., Harvard University, 1963; Columbia University, 1968-1970.

BOOKS: The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968; London: Heinemann, 1969; reset edition, London: Heinemann, 1975); Fragments (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970; London: Heinemann, 1974); Why Are We So Blest (New York: Doubleday, 1972; London: Heinemann, 1974); Two Thousand Seasons (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973; London: Heinemann, 1979; Chicago: Third World, 1980); The Healers (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1978; London: Heinemann, 1979).

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Nairobi East African Publishing House

PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS:

Fiction: "Contact", The New African, 4,10(December 1965): 244-248; "Asemka", Okyeame, 3,1(December 1966): 28-32; "Yaw Manu's Charm", Atlantic(May 1968: 89-95); "An African Fable", Présence Africaine, 68(1968): 192-196; "The Offal Kind", Harper's Magazine, 1424(January 1969): 79-84; "Halfway to Nirvana", West Africa (24 September 1984): 1947-1948.

Non-fiction: "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?", Présence Africaine, 64(1967): 6-30; "Pour les ibos, le régime de la haine silencieuse", Jeune Afrique, 355(29 October 1967): 18-20; "A Mystification: African Independence Revalued", Pan-African Journal, 2,2(Spring 1969): 141-151; "Fanon: The Awakener", Negro Digest, 18,12(October 1969): 4-9,29-43; "Chaka", Black World, 26,4(February 1975): 51-52,84-90; "Larsony, or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction", New Classic, 4(November 1977): 33-45; "Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-a-vis African Revolutionary Theory and Pra".

POEM: "Aftermath", in Messages: Poems from Ghana, eds. Kofi Awoonor and G. Adali Mortty(London: Heinemann, 1970): 89-91.

Ayi Kwei Armah is perhaps the most versatile, innovative and provocative of the younger generation of post-war African novelists and, like all authors who express extreme views in their books, he

has become a controversial figure ~~in both African and Western critical~~

~~circles~~ - but the controversy has been centred exclusively on the

works and not on the man, about whom extremely little is known.

Armah is a very private ~~and anonymous~~ person. He gives no interviews,

attends no conferences or writers' workshops, releases no press

statements, and does not seek to promote or publicize his work

outside of Africa in any way. Only on ~~one~~ ^{two} occasions ~~when provoked~~

~~beyond endurance by the American critic Charles Larson's misreading~~

~~of his novels~~, has Armah broken his rule of silence about himself

and his work, and it is to ~~that single~~ ^{two} autobiographical essays, "Larsony" and "One ^{Writer's Educati}

owe nearly all of their biographical information about this author.

Born to Fante-speaking parents in a sea port of the then British

colony of the Gold Coast at the start of the Second World War, Armah

was apparently too young to take in the full import of his country's

post-war social unrest - the strikes, unemployment and the shooting

of demonstrating ex-service men back from the colonial war by the

British authorities. But the first twenty years of his life coincided with the growth of Ghana, through a mixture of political negotiation and violent struggle, into Africa's first independent state, and the violence of this period and the nationalist hopes of the independence movement clearly left their mark upon him. These are convincingly documented in the sixth chapter of his first novel, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born(1968), where the reminiscences of the two characters provide what is really a collective autobiography of the new nation.

Armah left Ghana on an American scholarship, to Groton school and then on to Harvard, shortly before his twentieth birthday: this was two years after independence and before Nkrumah had turned Ghana into a one-party state and shut down all political opposition. No doubt he carried with him to an America caught in the throes of Civil Rights agitation the youthful idealism of Nkrumah's socialism, and the betrayal of that idealism in the 1960s and subsequent disillusionment were to color all of Armah's early writings. The early short stories and polemical essays on African socialism, independence and Fanon, written in the decade of post-independence disenchantment, contain in embryonic form the themes of the novels: Africa's continuing

oppression under the "mystification" of independence and entrapment in a cycle of neo-colonial dependency in both the political and economic spheres; the failure of human reciprocity in the lives of modern urban Africans under the pressure of a manipulatory and exploitative system of relationships; the resistance to genuine revolutionary growth and regeneration in the politics of the post-colonial world. Notable among these early pieces are the essay, "A Mystification: African Independence Revalued"(1969), which charts the unchanging economic flow-pattern from African province to Western metropole in the neo-colonial economy, and the story, "Yaw Manu's Charm"(1968), a remarkable and disturbing study of the far-reaching effects of neo-colonial psychology, even at the lowest levels of aspiration, in the lives of Westernized clerks. The American-set story, "Contact"(1965), is a subtle exploration of the ways in which the racial stereotypes of colonial history still penetrate to the private corners of inter-personal and sexual relationships and, along with the novel Why Are We So Blest?(1972), clearly draws upon Armah's experience of America in those years of racial confrontation which saw a marked shift from Integrationist to Black Separatist politics.

An early poem, "Aftermath"(1970), which telescopes themes of personal, artistic and racial betrayal, reveals an early fondness for the syncretic image which is a marked feature of his mature work.

Armah has financed his writing by a mixture of teaching, script-writing, translating and editing, and his work, along with his desire to write from an African base and find a genuinely African focus for his novels, has taken him to a number of African countries. He has been employed as a translator for Revolution Africaine in Algiers(1963), and, in his native Ghana, as a scriptwriter for Ghana Television and an English teacher at Navrongo school(1966). In 1970, after a productive six-year period which saw the publication of his first novel, the completion of a second and commencement upon a third, he settled in Tanzania and taught African Literature and Creative Writing at the College of National Education at Chang'ombe from 1972 to 1976, when he left to teach the same subjects at the National University of Lesotho. Interspersed with Armah's African travels were periods in Paris as an editor of Jeune Afrique(1967-1968), and in the United States, as an Assistant Professor at the University of Massachussets(1970), and, more recently, as an Associate Professor at the University of

Wisconsin(1979). He has since returned to Africa and is currently living in Dakar, Senegal.

Armah's early departure and lengthy absences from his native Ghana, together with his setting of his early novels in an unashamedly modern, urban and Westernized Africa, have helped to create the impression that his writing reveals little real knowledge of or interest in traditional African culture. The fact that he has always eschewed the notion of exile and has spent his longest periods of residence abroad not in America and Europe but in other parts of Africa seems to have done little to correct this misapprehension. Armah's combination of an African background with an American education has made the question of the literary sources of his fiction a vexed one. During the 1970s the notion that the vision and techniques of his first three novels were foreign-derived or at least foreign-inspired became a commonplace in the criticism of African fiction, and Western commentators who detected echoes of French writing - Sartre, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Celine - were legion. In the case of the third novel, Why Are We So Blest?, black American literature and polemic might have been added to the list of influences. More seriously,

the divergence of Armah's visionary, symbolic fictional modes from the realist mainstream of African fiction provoked charges from African critics, notably Achebe, that his characterization and style were "un-African" and had more in common with expatriate fiction about Africa written by Europeans than with African writing. In fact, the modern malaise of the alienated "been-to" hero in the second and third novels is not simply a foreign literary imposition, either of existential angst or absurdist ennui, which upholds an un-African view of the universe. Armah is a historically[#]minded writer who trained as a social scientist and the Western-induced paralysis diagnosed by his heroes in their own conditions goes much further and deeper than mere literary influence. This paralysis is transparently the product of an exploitative politico-economic process through which the West not only exports its psychological maladies to its former colonies but maintains a stultifying interference in and control of African affairs: this posthumous existence in Africa is upheld indirectly by means of political influence, educational programs and economic strangleholds which force Africa to remain a subordinate partner in what is still an essentially colonial, cash-crop

economy. . . Armah delves deeper than the personal disenchantment of his protagonists to historical determinants and, most especially, to the colonial continuities identified by Fanon in his analysis of post-colonial society. His small body of fiction, like Fanon's political theory, reveals a deepening suspicion of all conceptual systems derived from Europe, and this is extended, finally, to their concomitant literary styles and techniques, even when discernible in his own work. In the exclusively literary zone of influence, there are no doubt vestiges of the French nouveau roman in the descriptive tableaux of The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, indicating francophone leanings which are unusual in an anglophone African author. But these Westernized stylistic excesses are pressed into the service of ritualistic and peculiarly African concepts, particularly in the matter of the spatial conceptualization of time: the first novel's hallucinated epic descriptions of journeys up a staircase or along a coast, suppressing event in favor of sheer phenomena, give occasion to a descriptive treatment of time, as object and state rather than motion and process, which owes more to African than to European thought. Neither do the hero's anonymity and impersonality in the first novel

have anything to do with an everyman typicality or a generic significance as "working man", after the pattern of Western allegory. The protagonist, called simply "the man", is not representative but untypical of his society and his class of railway-clerks and, in a world of Westernized go-getters with anglo-African names where naming is itself authentic, his unassuming honesty and ordinariness are singled out as different and given special and peculiar expression in anonymity. Remote from class identity, this anonymity has to do essentially with his society's refusal of an identity to one estranged from its values and its sheer incapacity for recognizing value beyond its own narrowly materialistic definitions. Significantly, the unnamed man and Teacher are the novel's only coherent subjectivities, whilst the named characters are shallow stereotypes used for purposes of satiric representation.

Bound up with the focus in the early novels on the dilemmas of the isolated and estranged individual is Armah's neglect or negative evaluation of the African extended family system, which has come under fire from Achebe and other African critics. In his treatment of the family Armah appears to offend all the traditional pieties. Children

are generally cause for mourning rather than joy. For the man of the first novel they mean the caesarian scar that deadens desire and the increased pressure to acquire material commodities, and his wife's initial pregnancy is seen to have trapped him in the deadness of familial materialism. On his return from his American studies in the second novel, Fragments(1970), Baako, the only son of the Onipas, is regarded by his family as a human conveyor-belt for Western cargo, and the outdooring ceremony for his newborn nephew is simply a pretext for making money out of the child: the ceremony is brought forward to coincide with pay-day, with the result that the child is exposed too soon and, by a cruel irony, dies before its birth has been properly celebrated. Everywhere in these novels children have more to do with death than with birth(the new Ghana is even seen as a ~~progerie~~ death-child, born out of war and anarchy), but this is chiefly because the erstwhile communalizing energy of the African family system has, in its transposition to a modern urban context, become locked into the service of a viciously selfish and deadly materialism. Far from upholding or condoning the Westernizing corruption of traditional family values, Armah exposes and excoriates the perverted individualism which so completely undermines them that they are no longer the

expression of a genuinely communal ethic. Once the linchpin of the traditional community, the extended family structure originally acted as a bulwark against social discontent by ensuring some share of prosperity for all but, in the different circumstances of the centralized nation-state, the system no longer functions in this way. Only a few families have power and influence, concentrating more wealth into fewer hands and, instead of serving the community, the system undermines it by turning against it the hedonistic interests of a few powerful careerists. As Baako perceives in Fragments, the return of material cargo by the Westernized been-to serves only the false micro-communities of selected "loved ones" at the expense of the larger community, and when the provider falls from political favor, a new set of families enjoy the prospect of prosperity. The family has now come to reflect the modern state insofar as it has ceased to be a solidarity of reciprocal interests and has become a means for manipulation. In The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Armah uses the grand crystallizing, syncretic image of a white fish's cannibalized body to draw together in a logical chain the power-elite scrambling after white power from the corpse of colonialism, the communal body fed off by a few privileged

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families, and the family members themselves feeding parasitically upon the single providing member. When the Nkrumah regime is toppled, the corrupt minister Koomson bribes his way to safety, quoting to the boatman the traditional proverb, "When the bull grazes, the egret also eats." But current ethics have twisted the saying out of its proper meaning by providing huge short-term gratification for the "bull", a few pickings for the smaller animals in his vicinity, and nothing for the rest. The politician, like the short-changing conductor on the symbolic social bus in the first chapter, offers to those who have found him out only a fraternity of fraud, a false community of corruption. Inverting the traditional pattern, the bull feeds from the egret, the big fish from the little ones. Personal greed is furthered by a system originally designed to check such excesses and the paradoxical result is that anyone with a surviving spirit of community, like Baako and the man, is cut off from the body which his beliefs were intended to serve. By a similar irony, modern Africa's rejection, in Fragments, of Baako's traditional priest-like approach to his artistic vocation as a self-effacing communal service drives him reluctantly inwards into the position of the Western artist-recluse, thus alienating him further from his audience. Parallel perversions have befallen traditional

ritual practices, which are kept on solely for convenience, expedience and profit. In Fragments, libation is a pretext for an uncle's bibulous indulgence, the sacrifice of a ram to mark the birth of a child is performed with an irreverence appropriate to a drunken feast, and the greedy acceleration of the outdooring ritual speeds Baako's nephew and namesake in and out of the world before it has completed its first week of life. Armah's picture of the modern family in urban Africa is brilliantly scathing but it is also full of poignant ironies and is touched by a deep sadness about disappearing and debased traditions.

Early critical allegations that there are few "Africanisms" in Armah's first two novels and that they do not draw upon Ghanaian settings, speech or history have not held up under the pressures of close investigation. But, beyond these pedestrian issues, these books are so imbued with surviving ritual forms, ceremonial motifs, local mythologies and residual ancestral beliefs that traditional West African culture is always powerfully, if vestigially, present, both in its superior ethical imperatives and its inherent deficiencies. The cyclical pattern and pollution concepts of an indigenous purification rite form a haunting ironic backcloth to the man's involvement with and rescue of Koomson in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born and, in

Fragments, Armah again underpins the narrative with a ritualistic subtext which, in this case, draws upon arcane areas of Akan custom and theology to rehabilitate a dead order of value as a living presence in the novel. In both of these works the exploration of debased ritual practices establishes a complex and problematic continuity between a corrupt modern present and a corruptible traditional past.

Armah's contemporary urban Africa is a complicated amalgam of vanishing but unvanquished pasts and bleakly futureless presents. In this fictional realm, traditionally honored ancestors are starved of libations by drunken modern priests and the few remaining gods are being driven from almost deserted groves by a self-worshipping materialism. Racked by a self-distrust which reflects a national failure of confidence in the constructive potential of indigenous culture, the contemporary cognates of traditional chanters and sculptors have gone overseas in search of foreign approval. Even local folk-myths, like the Mami Water legend in Fragments, have been tampered with and turned into insidious neo-colonial propaganda by television technocrats angling for foreign foundations. Yet in spite of this degenerative process, and as if in wilful resistance to it, the past in the early novels contrives to be dormant rather than dead: its complex interplay with the modern world

in which it has a residual presence is expressed through Armah's imaginative possession of ancient West African coastal mythologies and ritual forms and the traditional religious beliefs which inform them. The author's figurative treatment of the intricacies of ritual process gives his work an unexpected and seldom-noticed common ground with work from which his own art has been thought far removed, such as the tradition-oriented plays of the early Soyinka, and with the writing of authors who have adopted a hostile critical stance towards him, such as Kofi Awoonor. Those African commentators who adhere to more broadly hospitable, catholic concepts of traditionalism, notably S.O. Iyasere and D.S. Izevbaye, have drawn attention to the first novel's indebtedness both to African fable and to the graphic personifications of the oral tradition, and to the last novel's striking simulation of the oracular and editing devices of griotary narrative. Thus, the "Africanness" of Armah's imagination is not a shallow property which can be easily substantiated or refuted but a subtle, elusive and many-sided quality which reveals itself to a correspondingly subtle and probing critical approach, and the author may have done himself something of a disservice by his later reservations, quoted in Gwendolyn Brooks's autobiography, about the first novel lacking "an absolutely African focus."

This novel, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, burst upon the international literary scene in 1968 and quickly became a classic of African fiction. Armah's talent seemed to have been sprung upon his readers fully ^{9/8}formed, matured, without any apprenticeship, but this impression probably owed something to the fact that the novel had been a long time in the making. It was written, in fact, between 1964 and 1967, a period of composition sufficiently protracted to permit the incorporation of events surrounding the anti-Nkrumah coup of February 1966. There is in Armah's first novel a kind of inverse proportion between its formidable stylistic complexities and the simplicity of its plot, which divides, symmetrically, into three cycle-shaped parts of roughly equal length. During the first part of this tripartite structure the anonymous hero is carried through the cycle of a single day, during which he battles to retain his integrity against an onslaught of temptation. This takes the form of bribes proffered or accepted by traders and bus conductors, the graft of venal fellow-clerks at the Railway Office where he works, and the corrupt invitations of an influential family relation, the Party man Koomson. The latter tries to persuade the man to act as the nominal owner and "partner" in the fraudulent purchase of

a luxurious boat which his facade of socialist politics prevents him from undertaking in his own name. Later in the novel the man, under pressure from his wife Oyo and his mother-in-law to enter into the corrupt boat^{d/}deal, finally relents before what he cannot prevent. The first part of the novel dwindles to a halt with the man's arrival, in the evening, at the house of his friend, "the Teacher"^u. Here the narrative movement is suspended and the day-cycle gives way to recollections of the violent birth of the independence movement and the cycle of growth and decline of the Nkrumah regime, now only a few weeks away from its downfall: the nine years of the first independence government are figuratively contracted to the life-span of a ~~progeric~~^o manchild who completes his whole life-cycle and dies, prematurely aged, at the end of his seventh year. At the end of the long flashback and the completion of the one day in the man's life, the third and final part of the novel stretches over an indefinite period of weeks, ending with the February coup and the lurid episode of Koomson's escape. During the man's rescue of Koomson, by way of the latrine-hole and the back lanes and sewers that lead to the sea and the escape^{d/}boat, the malodorous minister is imaged in terms of the filth and excrement which pile the streets and latrines throughout the novel, and the whole highly stylized

finale appears to owe something to the purification rite of the carrier in West African coastal communities, in which the detritus of the dying year, its ills and misfortunes, are ceremonially carried out to sea in the form of a miniature wooden boat. The man's fanatical bathing rituals, before and after each contact with the Koomsons, have earlier emphasized his need for constant purification from their pollutive presence, as if to strengthen his purity in preparation for an act of social decontamination. The symbolism of the novel's surreal climax invests Koomson with the twin-identity of the nation's collected excrement, about to be evacuated through the national latrine-hole and carried off by the communal latrine man, and, closely linked with this, the collected ills of the moribund Nkrumah regime which must be ritually expelled at the completion of its life-cycle and carried to sea so that a new historical era can be born.

The novel's implied view of post-colonial history as the hoarded accumulation of evils in a cycle of consumption, waste and disposal calls for the imagery of consumer waste and excreta to be pushed to extremity. Thus, the power-elite's intemperate devouring of the country's resources without performing any productive work in return becomes the cause of a spectacular physiological imbalance, instanced in the growling entrails

and thundering flatulence of the fugitive Koomson, and leads, by an interior poetic logic, to mountains of shit and dirt in the environment: there is also a socio-economic rationale here, since the privileged consumer-elite which produces the waste also embezzles the municipal funds allocated for its disposal. But this is not all. The novel's two twilight creatures, the office sweeper and latrine man, both of whom are proleptic of the man's cleansing role, find more dirt in the Ghanaian environment than can ever be cleaned away, enough to provide the sweeper with three daily cleaning jobs. ^{Long, graphic} ~~Origins~~ of descriptions are lavished upon refuse heaped around litter boxes, impetuously piled excrement in latrines, the viscous organic rot of a staircase banister, and the decaying junk on the shoreline, "so old it has become more than mere rubbish. . . It has fused with the earth underneath." The implication seems to be that all the filth of Africa's history is still in existence and the failure to jettison the old has contaminated the new. Amankwa, the timber trader who tries to bribe the man, is a walking antiquity who speaks with "the voice of ages" through "generations" of "piled up teeth". Neo-colonialism in independent Africa has reincarnated colonial and pre-colonial evils which were never properly expelled, and the daunting task facing the man in his mock-ritual role

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at this late stage of African history is the purgation of this vast accumulated filth, as a new start for Africa's future demands nothing less than a complete break with the past, a thorough sweeping away of ancient corrupt heritages. In an environment polluted by the unpurged rot of history, things are born infected and prematurely aged by what came before: hence the manchild, the aged new leaders, the putrid polish on floor and stair, the ancient smell of the new banknote. The accelerated overuse, wearing out and emptying of resources, bequeathing a growing detritus and diminishing means to the next generation, is the novel's paradigm for African history.

But the ritualized fantasy of a panoramic cleansing of history, like the Teacher's thwarted millenarian faith in messianic saviors bringing the "future goodness", falls a victim to the irony of events. The only practical possibility envisaged is a break with the immediate past of the Nkrumah regime, but the inveteracy of corrupt practices prevents the nation from availing itself even of this limited opportunity. Koomson's excretory "rebirth" through the latrine-hole, symbolically naked and pushed head first by the man as midwife to the new age, is the purest parody, a mock ritual of passage too deliberately droll in tone and surreal in style for the ritual disguise of escape as expulsion

to be anything but ironic. Koomson gets away to the Ivory Coast where, we assume, his corrupt way of life starts over again, and it is significant that, in the totalitarian ethos of this novel, the era of bribery is itself banished by a bribe (Koomson, with the man's help, bribes his way onto the escape-boat). Corruption, eternally self-renewing, is expelled by more of the same: the last purgative act of the old order triggers the first guilt of the new one. Koomson's last words to the man - "We shall meet again" - suggest that his evils, like

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the debris heaped by the returning tide, will not be washed very far away. The forced celebrations at the coup are tainted by fear and suspicion and the regime is only a few hours old when the bribes begin again. The bribing of the policeman by the driver of the shiny new bus on the last page brings the novel full circle by repeating the corrupt practices of the conductor on the old rotting bus on the first page. As he reaches the shore after his purifying immersion in the

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sea, the man awakens to the reality that there can be "no saviors", "no answers", and no permanent expulsion of ills of the kind ritually simulated by his own act. The knowledge brings only a solitary release, a limited personal renewal which is not transferred to the community at large. In the world nothing has altered much. The beautiful ones have

not been born and the man wearily returns to the cycle of things that do not change: "Oyo, the eyes of the children after six o'clock, the office and every day. . ."

The novel's conclusion is, with a few qualifications, a despairing one and the overall view of political developments in independent Africa pessimistically one-sided. Trimmed to fit Fanonian theories about unproductive bourgeois administrations in post-colonial countries, its political cartoon of Nkrumah's Ghana records the speed and waste, the abortive plans and false public utilities, but leaves out the industry and the constructive achievements. What rescues the novel from the banality of its political themes, the bareness of its plot, and the suspicious simplicity of its cyclical view of history is the sheer penetration of Armah's imagination, the vitality of his style. The power of The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born lies in the performance of its language, and most especially in its dazzlingly inventive, graphic hyperbole, influenced at least in part by African oral tradition. With a kind of grim exhilaration, Armah's indefatigable scatology flatulates breath, constipates voices, and turns fraud and corrupt ambition into urinary and excretory activities until the metaphoric

attributions have wholly invaded, possessed and become their objects. Organizing and orchestrating them is 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 courses of political regimes rise and fall, shrink satirically to the dimensions of the physiological circuit and swell to the ritualized calendrical evacuation of the nation at the novel's climax. There is a poetic intensity and symbolic composition here - note particularly the man's seashore epiphanies and Teacher's recollections of the wee-smokers - which were new to African fiction; a metaphoric richness which, with the possible exception of Soyinka's two novels, has not been surpassed.

This richness is nothing diminished in Armah's second and semi-autobiographical novel. Fragments(1970), tells the story of a been-to who is hounded into madness by his family because what he brings back from his stay in America is not the instant return of material possessions and prestige which they expect of him but a moral idealism which interferes with the selfish materialism they have taken over from Western culture. Baako is not the conventional been-to, caught between Africa and the West or even between a modern and a traditional Africa:

divided instead between the West and a vulgarly Westernized Africa, he is a reverse been-to who reviles the place he returns to only insofar as it imitates the one he has fled from. The only help Baako receives in his purgatorial passage through the increasingly foreign world of his native Ghana comes from the companionship, both spiritual and sexual, of the Puerto Rican psychiatrist Juana and from the traditional wisdom of his blind grandmother Naana. The latter's ancient order of values is reflected in the Akan chapter titles that divide the novel into the thirteen lunar months of the traditional Akan year and, though she can neither make sense of the modern world nor resign herself to the mindless reception of its confusing material impressions, it is Naana's encircling monologue and epilogue which enclose in a timeless frame the historical fragmentation recorded in the linear narratives of Baako and Juana. Naana reflects upon this disintegration: "The larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago has shattered into a thousand and thirty useless pieces. Things have passed which I have never seen whole, only broken and twisted against themselves."

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In the new urbanized Africa depicted in the novel, an Africa besotted by commodity and status, the uncritical eye is dazzled and

overwhelmed by the aggressive superficial beauty of externals: empty titles and ceremonials, pompous-sounding sinecures, the gaudy trinkets of Western technology in airports and hotels. The general failure to penetrate a luminously impressive outward show to an inner paucity, thus mistaking the visible appearance of things for the things themselves, fragments form from meaning, perception from understanding. In particular, attention is diverted from the inherent power and value resident within traditional ritual properties to their material exteriors, turning the furniture of festivals into a succession of spiritless objects and, as in the fantastic airport reception of the returning "big man" Brempong, making ceremonial forms evasions rather than expressions of reality. Hence the novel's strangely disembodied descriptive style, the obsessive lingering on hard shiny surfaces, the awe of language in the presence of material objects. The notion of partial perception, unable to see beyond surfaces and uninformed by any guiding moral or intellectual vision, is reinforced by a rhetoric which does not merely shrink characters like the Bremongs to the size of their objects of worship but physically fragments them into partial people, into collections of disjointed limbs which appear to operate independently of any thinking, organizing consciousness and do not add up to complete human beings. As the first

book graphically endows characters with excremental characteristics that take on a quasi-literal status, the second one affects to disintegrate them, rendering them as fragmented and humanly incomplete as their perception of the world.

Although Fragments is about fragmentation, it is in fact the most intricately structured and least fragmented of Armah's novels. Psychic vibrations pass in abundance between the narratives of Baako and Juana, whose paths cross many times before they actually meet, and the circular thinking and phrasing of Naana's monologues, in which "each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost", percolates into their interlocking records. Each of the novel's partial and often mutually uncomprehending viewpoints contributes some important mythological fragment to what is really a single diffused consciousness, a collective psyche at its invisible core: Juana, for example, sits for Baako's portrait of Mammy Water whilst failing to register the relevance of the myth to his own situation, and Baako tentatively grafts a cargo mythology of the ritual dead onto imperfectly understood beliefs about ancestors gathered from Naana's prologue. Meanwhile, at the imagistic level, the thirteen narrative fragments are bound by a sometimes heavy-handed and over-suggestive network of foreshadowings and echoes, turning

large stretches of the novel into a tone-poem whose limping narrative and dialogue are borne along on a tide of recurring leit-motifs. The spectre of a dog murdered in mock-sacrificial manner in Juana's opening narrative prowls the pages of the succeeding chapters, spreading an aura of persecuted pain, and finally resurfaces in the hounding of Baako by his relatives in a ritualized chase across the city. The motif of penetrating walls between worlds links Baako's "expanded consciousness" with that of visionaries and madmen observed in both the Parisian and Ghanaian sections of his narrative, and the conscious decision of Juana, her husband and the other expatriates to accept the necessity of fragmented perception and a limited wholeness is epitomized in Naana's blindness as a refuge from insanity, "which would surely have come with seeing so much that was not to be understood." The leading metaphor of the returning ghost recurs in the form of the resurrected cargo^rspirit, the reincarnated ancestor, the repatriated been-to, and the visionary lover of Mammy Water, back from the sea: the figures advance concurrently across the novel's seamless myth-fabric, each going to come again and amplifying the pattern of an outward passage, an actual or figurative death and rebirth into an altered state, and a beneficial return, bearing what may be doubtful blessings. In the rich and multi-layered tapestry

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of this most poetic of novels, 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" - conflate allusions to cargo^gghosts, the ancestral dead turned white in the spirit world, the lonely African in American exile, and the missionary been-to, unwelcome because of his idealism and walking unheeded, both invisible and untouchable, among Westernized Ghanaians.

Most importantly, the pivotal episode of the death by careless exposure of Baako's week-old nephew has a protracted imminence in the ~~mind of the~~^g novel. Foretold by Naana, feared by Baako and alluded to by a plethora of omens and danger signals in the chapter "Awo"(birth), it becomes a key metaphor for the premature truncation of life which pervades the book. The failure of the Onipa family to keep its offspring alive because of its greed for riches has logical socio-economic extensions in the aborted public utilities of schools and roads quickly abandoned by self-aggrandizing governments, the shut-down distilleries and disused industrial rail tracks, and the architectural miscarriage of Efua's dream-house which is the sequel to the five actual miscarriages of her daughter. Omnipresent in the novel is the impotent

destruction or desertion of whatever fails to provide instant fulfilment, by those who cannot themselves produce or possess: a syphilitic dog-slayer, a crew of Ghanavision technicians wrecking a last disputed television set, an impecunious "nexologist" who, like a cargo-cult devotee, destroys what little he has left to get more. This sterility is exacerbated by a "cargo mentality", a colonial-derived dependency^g complex which causes contemporary Ghanaians to continue to ^{attribute} ~~alienate~~ to the white world god-like powers of invention and innovation which they are unwilling to develop themselves. The persecution of Baako follows the pattern of the dog-slaying by the sexually disabled and the quasi-infanticide of the outdooring insofar as it is an attempt to exorcize a general impotence. Mistaking his artistic self-communings for madness, his acquisitive family declares him a bad investment and packs him off to the lunatic asylum. The overriding implication, as Robert Fraser has observed, is that this community is jealously resentful of any creative energy or quickness and, even if it does not go so far as to actually kill what it cannot create, at least tries to make those who possess creative gifts responsible for its own frustrating sterility and perversely demands that they too be made like its own barren self. The family's crippling neurosis enables the sick ones to stay well by making the well ones sick: it passes its own madness

onto its son, who expresses its illness for it.

There are signs in Fragments of a darkening of Armah's vision. The more openly aggressive and destructive pressures to conform in the second novel call for something stronger than the man's passive endurance in the first. The intolerances of Ghana in this book, and of white America in the next one, demand offerings for the altars of their respective materialism and purblind racism and, since their sins against humanity are deadlier and less forgivable than the corruption of the first book, a heavier price than mere relief-actions must be paid for their purgation. If the man in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is some kind of purificatory vehicle, then Baako and Modin are, more immediately, sacrificial victims. They are also scapegoats whose suffering should, in theory, release the community from the burden of false hope and shame which it has heaped upon their heads and, hopefully, through the pain of loss and remorse at their disintegration or death, restore to that community the traditional wisdoms that were missing from its management of their lives. But the sacrificial pattern focuses the sombre insight that it is only the trauma of death, whether from maternal neglect(Baako's nephew) or bureaucratic incompetence(Skido), that has

the power to shock contemporary Ghanaians back into a sense of real value and human dignity. Only the crises of birth and death bring out what is still good in them and only in the sudden experiences of fraternity which these inspire, and the brief and bitter wisdom got from error, can Baako find any faith in his people. There is in the novel a reluctance to believe in total loss and waste, given its purest and most positive expression in Naana's energy-conserving cycle.

Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether any painful redemption, either of family or community, has emerged from Baako's sacrifice.

In a moving episode near the end of the book, Baako's mother takes him to the ruined foundations of her unbuilt mansion and, formally lifting her curse on her son, confessionally off-loads onto him the burden of her disappointed hopes and thwarted cravings. But the purity of Efua's "soul-cleaning" is suspect because her relief at being lightened of the weight of her dreams is still mixed with grudging regrets that they could not be fulfilled, and the result is that Baako is left with a load of guilt which is the crucial factor in his drift towards madness.

Upon his slow recovery in the asylum, Baako is finally rescued from the clutches of his vampiric family but his rescuer Juana is the first to admit that psychiatry's periodic patching up of broken souls has no

permanent value since it will always have to be repeated, and her concern is, moreover, with one man's personal salvation - or, more precisely, salvage - and not with some wider social regeneration.

The ambivalence of Fragments is perhaps most poignant in the presentation of Naana's beliefs and the traditional order of value in which they are rooted. In the first novel ancient African customs, such as the giving of kola, appear to be still moribundly alive and potent with their own corruption, like the still viscous, aged filth in the latrine tunnel. In the second book, however, they seem rather to have died and been cynically resurrected in altered forms which have no kinship with their original spirit. Folk-myths pass to propagandizing poetasters, outdoor rituals to private profiteers, praise songs to toadying television producers who disguise their sycophantic opportunism as traditional respect for elders. In a faithless age the surviving religious emotions of awe and wonder have been driven for a correlative to modern technology's glittering profane paradise of material objects and the bringers of its gifts. Thus are the unseen ancestors of Naana's dream and the conceits of Baako's figurative exposition on cargoist superstitions visibly vulgarized into flesh, materialized into reborn cargo-spirits, by Sissie Brempong: "Oh,

they have made you a white man. The big man has come again. . . .

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The air where he has been is pure, not like ours." Efua beholds her newly^greturned son as a semi-supernatural being, inquiring after his car "in a near whisper filled with wonder and gladness."

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Yet, the sudden death of the past notwithstanding, its order of value insinuates itself in the novel through its surviving^{te} representative and spokeswoman Naana, whose ancient ghostly traditions appear to some extent to revenge themselves upon their modern violators. Naana is the novel's "ritual consciousness"^u. She foresees and reviews events and issues reminders of the lost ritual values which attach to customs: for example, the original communal significance of the outdoor rite, now perverted into an exhibition of private wealth and prestige, and the traditional importance of libation in maintaining the cyclic continuity and interdependence of the living, the ancestors and the unborn. In Akan belief the destinies of the newly born are closely bound up both with devotion to the ancestors who watch over them and with care of the elders who are closest to the ghost world from which new lives are sent. The neglect of one end of this circular continuum interferes with developments at the other, and it is significant that Araba's five miscarriages coincide with the five years of Baako's exile, during

which Naana's power as an elder within the family suffers a drastic decline. Araba's childlessness is a traditional form of poetic justice: those who prematurely forget the elders are allowed no progeny so that they themselves will be quickly forgotten at their deaths. Naana's traditional wisdom is allied to common sense values which tell her that "a child too soon exposed is bound to die", but, above and beyond this practical wisdom, the birth and outdooing of the child are surrounded by a ritualistic sub-text which uses ritual and mythological allusion to evoke the gathering forces of an offended moral order and an atmosphere of mounting danger. The money-making ceremony takes place in the week of traditional harvest festivities, giving pay cycles priority over seasonal ones, and becomes a sombre Earth-festival, a grimly inverted fertility rite presided over by Efua who kills the grandchildren arriving with the harvest: in the death scene it is Efua, repeatedly linked with the things of earth, who switches on the fan and turns the air current directly against the cradle. The poetic logic implies that an outraged Earth, in order to punish those who abuse its fertility at a time when this is ritually renewed, demands the sacrifice of the child itself: a pattern repeated one year later at the drowning of the lorry driver Skido when a ferry hold-up prevents him from bringing the harvest to market.

Events appear to have been orchestrated in such a way as to color them with Naana's moral and teleological perspective and give life to a dormant and suppressed Akan ethos. Her fears that the scant and omitted libations at Baako's departure and the outdooring will provoke ancestors and elders alike into withdrawing their protection from the young travellers are similarly borne out by events: Baako is driven to a mental breakdown and the child, as foreseen, dies as the dire consequence of the premature ceremony. The traditional responsibilities urged by Naana upon Baako as maternal uncle are also vindicated to the extent that Baako, in his disinterested concern for the child's welfare, proves to be a fitter father than Kwesi, who allows his wife to blackmail him into endangering their son's life.

At the same time, however, the reader is made painfully aware that this traditional order of value is a dead order, artificially resuscitated by an allusive sub-text to breathe some moral energy into a spiritual wilderness, and that, in the final analysis, it has its unity and power only in the minds of the author and his lone oracular elder. Its superior but obsolete ethical imperatives form a backcloth of non-functioning values which consistently declare their absence from and failing relevance to a world in which they can have no continuing currency or claim. The

centrality which the Akan ethic assumes in the novel's composite psyche is inversely proportionate to its influence on behavior: ~~no~~^oone listens to Naana and at the outdooring the family looks to Baako not for avuncular moral guidance but for the prestige which his educated presence lends to the proceedings. In the last chapter which brings the novel's year full circle, Naana dies from a world of impenitent materialism and, in her own mind at least, is reborn into the world of the ancestors. Her death, along with the deterioration of her family and nation, is subsumed into a cycle of renewal and restoration charted by the unceasing progress of the spirit: "The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again." But from the more material viewpoint of the age, the historical process has already subverted this circular passage. Naana's name, the singular of Nananom, figuratively renders her as the last fragment of a community of elders and ancestors, and in the epilogue she effectively sings her own funeral dirge, knowing that ~~no~~^oone in the family will sing it for her. Imaged as the sole survivor of a lost past whose beliefs die with her, she implicitly brings to an end the age of cyclical belief and her release into the spirit community betokens the continuing captivity of the living one. Moreover, the

infiltration of Naana's Akan eschatology by salvationist notions of terminality from Christian religion suggests that she has not escaped complicity with the demise of traditional African beliefs. Meanwhile, in the here and now, Baako's slow emergence from his entombment in the asylum holds out faint prospects of new beginnings.

Finally, Armah's occult restructuring of the novel's tripartite consciousness by prefigurative devices, coincidence and underlying ritual patterns offers only a fragile aesthetic unity in token resistance to material fragmentation: Naana's random "momentary happenings" are reassembled into the only kind of ordered wholeness or "larger meaning" - an artistic one - that is now available to them. Her monologues offer not a practical corrective to an errant contemporary Africa but an abstract and now merely imaginative, other-worldly alternative, and her spiritual meditations, like Baako's artistic ones, are taken as signs of madness in a materialistic age. For Baako, who is not ready to trade a physical for a spiritual existence, the cyclic passages and transactions between the seen and unseen worlds in her faith have no value beyond the metaphorical. The strong intimations in the novel that Naana's traditional view of the universe is better than what has replaced it, or what it has been corrupted into, are balanced by the realistic

admission that there is no longer any way to draw upon the old to improve or temper the new. Fragments does not fatuously urge a return to values rooted in a way of life that has vanished: Naana's is a lost and failed order which cannot be restored. The timeless perspective of the Akan world-view which frames and contains the novel's interior linearities and deteriorative historical processes is also undermined and exploded by them. The problematic positioning of her circumscriptive narrative at the outer ring of the novel, denoting at once an absolute over-view and her peripheral remoteness, her distance from the centre of things, leaves uncertain the final value which is to be attached to Naana's vision.

Though flawed by some facile social and political satire at the expense of contemporary historical personalities, Fragments is a complex and problematic work and is the most densely textured and richly poetic of Armah's novels. The next novel, in contrast, displays a rarified thinness of texture which is unparalleled in his writing. Why Are We So Blest? takes little trouble over the sensuous evocation of fictional locales, merely pegging notebook speculations to settings which are no more than their names, and its overworked symbolic shorthand of predator and factor archetypes, white deserts and bleached Africans, though

powerful and startling, is disappointingly telegraphic after the labyrinthine metaphoric structures of the first two books. Set largely in the North African city of Laccreyville (a thin disguise for post-revolutionary Algiers), the novel traces through their respective diary entries the encounters and relations of three characters: Solo, a failed revolutionary and artist from one of the unliberated Portuguese colonies; Modin, a Harvard-educated Ghanaian student in search of African revolution but still clinging to liberal beliefs in inter-racial harmony; and Aimée, a thrill-seeking, bogusly revolutionary white American girl with whom Modin has become fatally infatuated and who, when he is murdered by marauding O.A.S. terrorists in the desert at the climax of the novel, reveals herself to be a vicious psychopath.

The book's bleakly cynical, disillusioned portrait of African revolutionaries, which grew out of Armah's stay in Algiers in 1963, provides some continuity with the political scepticism of the first two novels. The Laccreyville sections of Why Are We So Blest? constitute Armah's requiem for the Algerian revolution and epitaph to Fanon's hopes for his adopted country. His "Afrasia" is a war-ruined nation of crippled moudjahids and orphaned beggars, ruled from ex^gcolonial

mansions by privileged managerial cadres who combine a colonial "white hunter" mentality with the traditional chauvinism and machismo of Islam. Punning on the meanings of "essence" Solo explains grimly to an old mutilé de guerre in the hospital that the militants who are now excluded from government serve as the sacrificial fuel for the revolution, carrying its opportunistic executives and diplomats to power on their backs: they are cynically duped pawns whose Sisyphean struggle installs a new French-supported hierarchy in a "colony only freshly disguised as a nation." In this haven for sham revolutionaries, the Portuguese-colonized "Congherians" receive little inspiration from their Afrasian hosts. Ensclosed in luxurious first-floor offices behind facades of ground-floor austerity and constantly currying favor with the white international press, the Congherian exiles find their will to action sapped and their power emasculated in the midst of a revolution very much in decline. A little more decadence and they could sit for Armah's satiric essay portrait of "fiery revolutionaries who have never ventured within smelling distance of a revolution, freedom fighters whose suits are made in Paris and whose most hair-raising campaigns are fought and won in the scented beds of posh hotels." In

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"African
Socialism..."
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the novel's mythological scheme, these men are parody-Prometheans, at heart secret Olympians who hanker after the trappings of the West, and their entrails are hardened to withstand not the punitive tortures of colonial oppressors but their own hypocrisies. Jorge Manuel defers and then rejects Modin's application to join the movement because Modin's situation is identical with his own: a Western-educated intellectual with an American lover. After being kept hanging around for months, the demoralized Ghanaian is finally persuaded to attempt an individual, back-door entry to Congheria and is goaded by Aimée into the foolhardy Saharan crossing which leads to his death.

The novel's reflexive ironies question the value which any legend taken from the mythological store of the oppressor can have as a blueprint for revolution or model for progress in Africa. Nevertheless, although Modin steals no knowledge worthy of the name from the American Olympus and dies a useless, unenlightening death, the pervasive imagery of fire, entrails, livers and predators invests him with Promethean pretensions. The idealistic been-to, like the Greek demi-god, tries to shed privilege and crosses over to the side of oppressed humanity to place his gift of education at their disposal. The endeavor 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 he is estranged from and opposed to by his new knowledge. Even before he speculates about Promethean descents and becomes the tortured prey of the American eagle, Aimée, Modin's analysis pictures the Western-trained African intellectual as doomed to punitive elevation on a lonely, lofty educational peak far above his people. Since knowledge is the property of the alien, the thirst for knowledge alienates. For the intellectual to stay at home is to join the "peripheral" masses who are afflicted by "manipulation, mystification, planned ignorance", whilst the alternative is to gravitate guiltily towards manipulatory Western "centres" where there is "high information" and "overall clarity" but also isolation and betrayal.

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"The things he wrote of were in general not events; they were more

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like concatenations of ideas," Solo summarizes Modin's journal and is

himself admonished by a Congherian exile: "You interest yourself in

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abstractions. There are concrete problems." Reading at times more like

a treatise than a novel, Why Are We So Blest? stands accused of the same

charges. The lonely pondering mind of its lusophone narrator broods over

the notebooks of its anglophone one, rearranging their contents after his death and subjecting them to a theoretical analysis which shows more interest in patterns and processes than in people: the exchanges between the two men are not the dramatic interaction of living people but the posthumous dialogue of ghosts. Exposition, hitherto confined to the discursive sixth chapter of the first novel and Baako's abstract screenplays and cargo } theories in the second, now swamps the narrative, and its central thesis is that, in the self-inclusive words of Jorge Manuel, "an African in love with a European is a pure slave. . . with the heart of a slave, with the spirit of a slave." Inter-racial sexual relationships, no matter how worthy as attempts at private remedies by individuals, are doomed to re-enact racially predetermined roles and thus to serve as a microcosm of Africa's historical encounter with the West. The lethal aspects of Western imperialism are seen to penetrate beyond the political and economic arenas into the most private corners of human relationships, making the colonial model of exploitation and servitude the key to each, and black expectations of white friendship, under the impression that certain basic human values transcend racial divisions, are judged to be universally suicidal. A powerful device in the novel and also, finally, a source of its weakness, is the politico-

sexual allegory that passes each of its sexual relationships through a kind of political "blender" in which personal and political fates - the private disposition of black to white and Africa's deadly molestation by the West - are telescoped so as to become virtually the same thing. Thus, the acquisition of white mistresses is not merely incidental but is integral to the refusal of Ndugu Pakaṅṅa to join the independence struggle of an East African colony visited by Aimée. It is also made to account for Manuel's introduction of a class hierarchy and Western luxury into his government-in-exile and for the failure of Solo's political aspirations and his current defeatism. The colonial-sexual paradigm postulates quasi-organic, causative connections that make the proximity of the white woman spell the automatic debilitation and decline of the black man, and the sexual attraction of black to white is uniformly characterized as a "sickness" or "disease". The result is the often bizarre metaphoric transposition of the West's devouring of Africa's material resources into a corresponding draining of black sexual energy by white women and of Europe's economic rape of the continent into America's psycho-sexual consumption: by day the obedient "factor" and puppet trained by his neo-colonial academic masters to further America's African interests, Modin is by night the exotic

rarity needed to titillate the jaded sexual appetites of their wives and daughters.

The characterization of the white women in the novel suffers accordingly. These are given virtually no traits other than a frigidity meant to represent white America's arid sensibility or, alternatively, depraved sexual hungers which symbolize the West's plundering of the manpower and material wealth of a subsequently impotent Africa. Aimée herself is an almost entirely schematic personality, her need to sexualize the public life to compensate for the frigidity of her private one making her a ready tool in the politico-sexual allegory. Aimée's rapacious sexuality is principally a political metaphor, significant for its exploitative and anti-revolutionary nature. In Africa she sleeps her way through the ruling bourgeois elites and identifies with dead colons in bullet-holed bedrooms, and in America her sexual fantasies transform the Harvard scholar Modin into Mwangi, a colonial steward-boy, and conjure orgasms to the statistics of massacred African freedom-fighters in history lectures. The dominant archetype of colonial predation transforms oral sexual practices into a murderous cannibalism and at the surreal climax, where Modin is simultaneously fellated by Aimée and castrated by French terrorists who then rape her, her carnivorous

carnality burgeons into a full sexual vampirism. The improbable finale takes the novel on a flight into pure metaphor and is perhaps best read on a wholly abstract level: for example, the terrorists' use of Aimée to arouse Modin and so moisten her, in turn, for their own use, suggests the white world's temptation of the African with privileges he desires but is not allowed to enjoy, whilst perversely siphoning off Africa's energies for its own profit.

The habitual identification of white seduction with political infiltration, totally fusing political tenor and sexual vehicle, promotes resistance to white sexual charms almost into an article of the new revolutionary faith and produces some unreal oppositions and misleading parallels: for example, Modin's positing of American stud-service as the been-to's natural alternative to renewed contact with his people's deprivation, and Solo's twinning of Aimée's psychopathy with Sylvia's weak-willed submission to Portuguese racism on the grounds that both are white girls. As an allegory of black-white relations presented in remorselessly destructive sexual terms, Why Are We So Blest? is able to overlook exceptions and discrepancies. Redeeming white virtues are outside its racial polemic, as the white depravity manifested in slavery and genocide are outside the scope of the crass, self-gratulatory New

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York Times Thanksgiving editorial which gives the novel its title.

James Booth has described this novel as a racist fiction about racist fictions. Certainly, white racism as presented here assumes almost metaphysical proportions, as if the result of some mysterious inherent diabolism or inheritable genetic disorder which places whites beyond ordinary human understanding. Moreover, the book's symbolism does appear to decry those white-promulgated sexual myths which degrade black self-images whilst assenting to those which flatter it - notoriously, myths of white deficiency and black prowess, of fantasy-ridden "clitoral" white sex and perfectly reciprocal "vaginal" black sex.

The extreme vision of Armah's third novel is partly accounted for by its origins. Although the book has its setting and genesis in the author's first American visit and education at Harvard, from 1959 to 1963, it was completed after his second visit, from 1968 to 1970, and its militantly separatist racial polemics and uncompromising sexual attitudes represent a stage of black revolutionary thought a decade on from the period of its setting. These are best seen against a backcloth of late 1960s black radicalism - notably Black Power - which saw American race-oppression as a species of internal colonization, American integration schemes as variations on colonial assimilation programs, and dissociated

itself from the whole edifice of white civilization, including white revolution. In the novel the "African" and "Negro" experiences have, in their common uprooting and alienation, become almost interchangeable and the dramatic evidence for Africa's victim-status in Modin's paradigm is drawn almost entirely from his American experiences. The book's racial typology of sexual jealousy and revenge, rape and castration(not to mention a Negro called Lynch), owes more to black America than to colonial Africa, and black American polemics supply the scenario for its sexual psychology, in which white male impotence and the subsequent nymphomania of wives combine to project upon the figure of the black man the mythical sexual vigor which is respectively lacked and craved. The resulting sexual paranoia about blacks in the white mind awakens deeply secret sado-masochistic longings and fears and the desire to see them enacted: thus Mrs Jefferson's orgasmic moans guide her sexually dormant husband to the spot where she lies with Modin so that he may, in prurient self-torture, briefly relish his wife's forbidden pleasures before assaulting their supplier. Armah transposes this essentially American model to a colonial context. The mentally over^gdeveloped nations in receipt of African sexual aid appear to need, to revive their exhausted sensibilities, fantasy re-enactments of the original colonial violence which deadened

them. In their sexual recolonization of Africans Mrs Jefferson and Aimée orchestrate their respective orgasms to the phallic stab of a knife-blade and the explosion from a gun barrel aimed at the head of a steward-boy seducer: during the real-life enactment of the Mwangi fantasy by the O.A.S. thugs, Aimée reaches the peak of her sexual excitement at the moment of Modin's lethal castration. In the novel's sexual allegorization of 1960s American politics - in which revolutionary energy, black and male, is sapped by the powers of reaction, white and female - Modin's various lovers represent the stereotypes of a traditional paternalism(Mrs Jefferson), a hypocritical Civil Rights integrationism (Sandra), and a sensation-seeking, slogan-mouthing Marxism(Aimée) which attaches itself like a leech to the causes of black minorities. On the other side of the racial divide, the tender and expert black lover Naita who warns Modin off white women indexes black separatism to sexual harmony as integration has been indexed to sexual discord and exploitation.

In his third novel, urgent polemical pressures, many of them coming from outside Africa, have rigidified Armah's vision and left the enemy perhaps too easily identifiable: it is "the West" and, beyond that, the whole white race, fired by a pathological lust for destruction and materially powerful enough to replenish its spiritual void by draining

the superior vitality of its victims. In the first two novels the white world is not wholly diabolical, and the enemy is rather the Ghanaians who, mindlessly or cynically, adopt its worst elements and collaborate with the alien values which are destroying their culture. The three-storey universe of the third book crudely polarizes this more densely textured world into "blest" and "damned", Sacred Mountain and Plain, American Olympus and Third World Tartarus awaiting Promethean deliverance: in between wander the half-blest, half-cursed évolués who have been spirited away from their native cultures by Western education. Armah has not entirely lost sight of the Koomsons and Brempongs who enslave their people from within, but now even the betrayers are recast as victims. The Jorge Manuels are themselves manipulated and, albeit willingly, programmed into positions of privilege and prosperity by Western educational schemes which isolate them from the people whose revolutions they profess to lead.

Why Are We So Blest? is an ideographic construct with bold diagrammatic outlines and low specificity. Its facile, uninvestigative symbolism opposes to a stereotypical idea of the West an equally stereotyped, stage-set Africa, shorn of its multiple complexities and contradictions, and the higher visibility and sparser texture are especially noticeable in the areas of ritual and mythology. One of the secret strengths of the early

novels is the subtle subtextual pattern of ritual process which runs beneath and often counter to the narrative. The purification motif in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born invests the coup with the potential of a turning point in Ghanaian history and, in Fragments, the Onipas have the theoretical option of embracing the artistic gifts which Baako, like the singer in the Mammy Water myth, brings back from across the sea, although in practice the collective and familial wills prove too weak to make use of the opportunities. These ritual options in the fictive sub-conscious are absences which have the power of presences; negatives that function, albeit with guarded promise, as positives. But in the third novel their quiet potencies have been dissolved and the ritualistic dimensions of the narrative emptied of their suggestiveness by making the unapparent too apparent, the sub-conscious self-conscious. This is due chiefly to a change in the mode of rituality, from an implicit and largely metaphoric presence charged with the independent significances and determinisms of the African tradition to the grotesquely artificial, sinister foreign arrangement of the American educational process which trains the African neophyte in mindless obedience to the dogma of Western superiority: "alien communal rituals designed to break me and my kind,"

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comments Modin, "a ritual celebrating a tradition called great because it is European, Western, white." The rule of these "rites of secrecy" is that the initiate will duly decry his race whenever prompted and confirm that his exceptional intelligence is proof of the general rule of African stupidity. In Armah's cross-cultural conspiracy cartoon, American educational aid programs constitute a series of pseudo-Promethean reverse-crossings which in fact co-opt into power a minority from the underprivileged to help keep the many out: the cause of black revolution is thus kept perpetually self-defeating by maintaining a subversive input of Western-educated intellectuals into the leadership. America expends a few philanthropic flames to dampen the revolutionary blaze and the small loan of fire is returned with interest to stoke the Olympian furnace. Meanwhile, the blind and uphill Sisyphean struggle of the real revolutionaries - the slain or mutilated militants - is doomed because its repeated failure is ordained within the Olympian system.

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This "elitist ritual for selecting slave traders" enjoys, in the novel's political and sexual arenas, a preordination which makes white values and neuroses the black man's fate and the African's life a creation of whites. "Our disease is ordained," Solo concludes. In a world where educational exchanges have caused white-imitative aspirations even to

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permeate anti-white revolution, it is no surprise to find the novel's sole traditional African image - a mask of Ananse - in the custody of a black American academic integrant. Neither is it odd that the complementarity that marks much African ritual process should be viciously appropriated in defence of universal inequalities by the obtuse American student who reads out the titular editorial. The book's Western-controlled, fabricated form of rituality is given its most theatrical expression in the cult-murder of Modin at the mock-sacrificial climax: the French terrorists swoop in, fate-like, from the desert to crucify and castrate Modin on the back of an O.A.S. jeep whilst Aimée, as malevolent American priestess, erotically prepares the passive victim and then catches his blood.

In this novel ritual symbolism no longer controls the protagonists and narrative consciousnesses but is controlled by them: it no longer undermines the action but is itself undermined. By bringing myths and archetypes to the full glare of consciousness, this new ambience of self-regarding, self-advertising pseudo-ritual denies them their latent power and severs them from the African origins which have hitherto been its source in Armah's work. Modin remarks that there are "other myths" of enlightened reverse-crossings, apart from the Promethean one, and indeed

his own West African coast has a few(Ogun, Mummy Water), but for the first time in the fiction these "other myths" - the African ones - are completely silent. The novel's internationalized voices contrive to give the impression that, on a Europeanized earth where Africa is a mere prop to Western supremacy, African myths are either extinct or have lost their authenticity and there are no remaining intellectual or spiritual properties which are not white-originated. What is interesting and hopeful about Why Are We So Blest?, however, is the transmission of these anxieties to the search for appropriate artistic form. Solo argues that when the black race has to borrow the stylistic devices and narrative techniques of its exploiters and destroyers to bewail its own destruction, then writing itself becomes an act of betrayal and destruction. He is aware that his rearrangement of Modin's fragments, never anything more than a spurious aesthetic refuge from chaos, reflects in its dislocated time schemes and multiple consciousnesses only the splintered life of the Europeanized évolué and, more seriously, imitates the "discrete beauty" of a despised European modernism. Solo's seduction by Western aestheticism parallels the political and sexual infatuations of Manuel and Modin: he is the artistic middle-man or factor whose art bears the Olympian seal of approval and is designed essentially

for Olympian consumption. He makes interesting art out of defeated revolution, aesthetic success from political failure; his task is to turn thwarted rebellion and its punishment into high tragedy for the purification of an Olympian conscience which craves exorcizing insights into its own iniquity. Why Are We So Blest? is a milestone along Armah's own chosen route out of the circle of the expatriate African "blest" and out of the dilemma of the factor-writer who is invited to enrich himself by writing about black oppression for a primarily white audience; whose literary capitalization on distress effectively disarms revolutionary energy by its sublimation of suffering. Along with the hint of a radical shift of focus goes a growing distrust of ritual process, either as a fatalistic and diversionary substitute for real change or as a force which enshrines the cult of the special, outstanding individual and upholds a subjectivism that Armah has been keen to avoid in his later work. The author's dissatisfaction with inherited artistic forms, already discernible in his treatment of artist-figures in Fragments, has now come to include the book's own narrative mode. The novel's aesthetic form reflexively declares its achievement to be worthless, signalling Armah's arrival at a terminus and the imminence of some radical formal innovation: "There is no creative art outside the destruction of the destroyers,"

Solo declares. "In my people's world revolution would be the only art, revolutionaries the only creators."

For those readers who have registered these warning signals, the next book will not be the total shock to the sensibility which appears to have been its intended effect upon Western audiences. Nevertheless, after the first three works, the fourth one, written during Armah's six-year stay in Tanzania, comes as an alarming corrective. Two Thousand Seasons localizes the historical experience of the whole African people to the troubled migrations of the Akan nation from its Sudanic origins, through slavery, exile, Arab and European imperialisms, guerilla resistance and decolonization to its settlement in modern Ghana and future task of reconstruction. As such, it is only in part recorded history and the narrative draws not upon specific local tribal memories but upon the hypothetical race consciousness of a fictitious pan-African brotherhood whose names are taken from all parts of the continent. In this book Armah surprisingly bursts the bounds of historical realism, period-setting and naturalistic narrative and moves into the terrain of myth, legend and racial memory. The group experience is now paramount, so characterization is minimal and concerned with the representation of collective states and feelings rather than the fine delineation of individuals. The reader is

addressed by a pluralized narrative voice, an anonymous and timeless "We" which represents the whole social body throughout its wanderings across history. Two Thousand Seasons does not purport to be a "novel" in any sense of the word. Few novels create deliberately unmemorable characters who are merely functions of a collective will or ramble episodically over vast spans of time in pursuit of racial destinies. Even fewer novels start from the premise that certain racial groups and their imperial underlings have engrossed most of the human vices and are helplessly predictable before the evil of their own natures. Abandoning critical investigation for partisan invective, Armah makes no claim to criticize his colonial "destroyers" and "predators" and their African quislings but simply hurls abuse at them, more after the fashion of the Ewe halo than that of Western satire. It seems rather that the author has evolved a strange and arresting new literary form by some daring experimentation with the devices of an indigenous African tradition which has, in fact, an ancient pedigree: the tradition of the griot, story-teller or oral historian, for which the nearest equivalents in European narrative would be those epics, sagas and chronicles which also trace the migrations of whole peoples and celebrate the founding of nations and empires. The griot speaks with the voice of the whole

community and his legends, folk^gtales and proverbs are stored in the communal memory. Armah's griot^g~~narrator~~ narrator self-effacingly assumes a common identity both with the specific audience which his tale is designed to educate and with the characters of the tale itself; thus the "reciprocity" which he preaches is enacted between story^gteller, tale and listeners by his narrative technique. The alienated individuals of the early novels are implicitly reprovved and outgrown, as instanced in the exemplary harsh treatment of "the selfish, cut-off spirit" Dovi and Abena's selfless sacrifice, which submerges the individual self into the group mentality: "There is no self to save apart from all of us." Furthermore, by an interesting historical sleight-of-hand, Armah is able to grapple with the problems of artistic form confronted by Solo in the previous novel. In Two Thousand Seasons he artificially resolves the dilemma of the contemporary African artist by setting his tale in an indeterminate past when the artist was not yet alienated from his society but still immersed in a collective and egalitarian ethos, and then using the griot's voice vicariously to advocate communal commitment and popular revolution in a period of fragmentation and elitist privilege, when such conditions no longer prevail. This is, however, a deliberate

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polemical strategy which carries an urgent ideological message. Armah's newly Africanized narrative mode is, of necessity, a pseudo-oral, simulated exercise, in which the traditional communal intimacy of artist and audience is a mere fiction of the plural voice. Lacking a traditional audience, the book is aimed rather at those anglicized Africans who have ventured furthest from what Armah postulates as Africa's true self. His didactic purpose is to cure an errant Africa of its diseased distrust in its own indigenous forms and values, not to reproduce an exact copy of those forms, and there is thus no inconsistency between the book's form and its initial African publication.

In practice, however, the greatest strengths of the oral tale seldom survive its transposition to written form and it may be questioned whether, in execution, any real justice is done to Armah's oral models by the book's peculiar mixture of oracular and idiomatic styles, its portentously inverted vatic utterances, its lustreless demagogic jargon of a pre-colonial African "Way", and the rhetorical redundancies that result from oral modes of editing (by recantation rather than omission). The presentation of the ideology of "the Way" is marked by a banality, a vagueness of definition and a disregard of concrete particulars which are, in fact,

quite alien to the oral tradition. Paradoxically, the dazzling inventiveness and exuberant hyperbole of the griot are more in evidence in the scatology of the supposedly Western-oriented first novel than in the affected griotature of Two Thousand Seasons, where the literary compromise with oral form, far from being enriched by it, results in a restricted and impoverished verbal code.

Two Thousand Seasons succeeds, however, as a kind of therapeutic exorcism, both for its author and for its African readership. The book works from the assumption that the remembrances of oral narrative are no more unreliable than recorded history, especially when the written record is a European one colored by colonial prejudices; it argues that a starkly monochromatic portrait of white devilry and black victimization is at least compatible with Africa's narrow experience of the white man as slaver and colonizer, as material and spiritual destroyer. The dogma of the Way follows from the premise that one ethno-centred^e history, serving indigenous ideological needs, is as good as or better than another which serves alien needs: Two Thousand Seasons thus stands, self-consciously, in the same relation to the work of black ethnologists and historians such as Cheikh Anta Diop and

Chancellor Williams as Rider Haggard and Conrad do to the Eurocentric ethnology of Western scholarship. The Prologue's rhetoric of fragmentation and dismemberment reminds the reader that it is the fragmented part of Africa's history - the colonial period which cut the continent off from its past - that, until recently, has alone constituted "African History" in Western study. As Armah's writing heads off beyond the tensions and ambivalences of realist fiction into the unifying simplicities of mythology, the growing tendency to blame all Africa's woes upon the West stiffens, in Two Thousand Seasons, into an explicit racism which portrays whites as pathologically evil. The systematic direction of hatred at Arab and European "whites" is intended to exorcize the sensations of helplessness induced by colonialism and to clear the air of negative feeling so that the work of construction may begin: it is a healing catharsis which prepares the mind for the creation of radical alternatives to the societies left by the imperialists. These alternatives necessarily involve a large element of hypothesis and wish-fulfilment since they are ideal projections yet to be realized, not experienced life-forms to be restored - for example, the ideal of an egalitarian, non-ethnic African fraternity, which flies in the face

of tribal, social and national divisions. Armah does not so much record history as correct and reinvent it: the successful slave rebellion in the second half of the book is history as it might and should have been and as it might yet be if the conditions of the Way are adhered to. This makes for rousing racial propaganda, if for somewhat unengaging fiction. The principal aim is the remythologizing of history, or what Soyinka has called "the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction." The book's ethical manifestos belong to a higher, speculative order of reality and provide a frame of reference from which the prevailing destruction in the existing reality can be condemned and surmounted. The author, as griot-like activist, joins in the struggle between creation and destruction depicted in his tale, paradoxically valorizing new models for progress by inventing a mythical ancestry for them in the form of the doctrine of the Way.

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The historical myths of Two Thousand Seasons are fleshed out in Armah's next and most recent novel, The Healers. In this work the prism through which he chooses to refract Africa's destruction, wrought by both external depredations and internal divisions, is the specific

historical episode of the fall of the Ashanti empire. The abstract oppositions of Two Thousand Seasons - of "Destruction" and "Unconnectedness" to "Creation" and "Reciprocity" - give way to the more substantial ones of "Manipulation", as demonstrated by the shallow colonial stooge and court intriguer Ababio, and "Inspiration", as practiced by Damfo's outlawed and persecuted healing enclaves. The mission of the latter is to serve as the Ashanti and, ultimately, the African historical conscience and to minister to the wounded Ashanti spirit, torn from its true course by the incursions of colonialism. More concretely than Two Thousand Seasons, the novel turns from the pain of the past to a more hopeful future, from the black diaspora to eventual reunification. At its conclusion the historical wheel is brought, perhaps too neatly, to a full circle by the enforced regathering of the black peoples of the world in the white captivity which first sundered them. Anna Nkroma's wishful speculations at the closing dance inject a note of optimistic resolution, albeit forced and unwarranted by events: "Here we healers have been wondering about ways to bring our people together again. And the whites want ways to drive us further apart. Does it not amuse you, that in their wish to drive us apart the whites are actually bringing

us work for the future?" Its ending notwithstanding, The Healers is a more solid and better-executed book than Two Thousand Seasons. Its wealth of circumstantial detail manages to supply something of the feel of lived history, the solemn racial vituperation of the fourth book has at least mellowed to sardonic scorn (as in the portraits of Glover and Wolsey), and the values and behavioral patterns entailed by a communal ethos are more precisely realized.

The histories are an important turning point in Armah's career. The author's penitential submergence of his earlier isolated artists and visionaries in a communal vision is clearly an attempt to give his art a more democratic basis and seems, on the surface, to be a step towards a more overt espousal of "authentic" African values. The rejection of despair and the rousing call for a halt to the further fragmentation of African society by the doubtful blessings of Western culture are positive gestures in a new direction. If the first novel approximates to the "assimilation phase" of Fanon's tripartite scheme for the decolonized writer, insofar as it is partly influenced by the literary techniques of the colonial power, and the next two novels fit into the second phase of disturbance and painful liberation, in which

the uprooted writer tries unsuccessfully to recross the immense distance which has grown between himself and the African community, then these last two novels clearly subscribe to the militant posture of Fanon's "fighting phase", in which the writer devises a future-oriented revolutionary literature to address and awaken his own people. They are also flamboyantly original achievements, the works of a tireless experimenter who never does the same thing twice and who has a genius for finding new mediums for old messages. After a classical-cum-allegorical first novel, a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman and a polemical roman à thèse come an epic and a historical novel. Nevertheless, the underlying message - that Africa's only hope for the future lies in breaking the paralyzing grip of Western values and controls - is still the same and the basic paradigms of Armah's fiction - healing creators, persecuted visionaries and parasitical rulers who desire only to live in old slave castles and cover their emptiness with materialism - have not changed very much. Koranche and Ababio are the historical prototypes for Koomson and Asante-Smith. Moreover, Armah's promulgation of group values and adoption of communal narrative voices do not successfully disguise the continuing polarization of his characters into benighted multitudes ruled by crass potentates and isolated sages and hermits banished, with their

impotent wisdom, to the fringes of society - a polarization which derives from a fundamentally elitist outlook. Isanusi's fifth-grove guerillas and Damfo's disciples are certainly closer to the communal heart of their societies than the Western-educated intellectuals of the early books. But Densu and Anan, like Baako and Modin before them, are also natural winners and champions in any meritocracy and, like their precursors, choose to opt out of an unfair competition; they abdicate from the superman virtuositities which render them superior to the community at large before these can be manipulated and misused by corrupt powers.

The most striking shift of emphasis in these two books lies in their historical outlook, which constitutes a largely negative departure rather than a positive development from early practice. In the complex, shifting vision of Fragments and The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, the past is by turns an ideal yardstick, a lost alternative and a vulnerable mine of temptation, already potent with its own corruption. In the histories, however, its vanished cultures have been regimented into the simplistic dogma of a pristine, indigenously African "Way", a harmonious mode of being anterior even to the evils of pre-colonial

society from which colonialism and neo-colonialism germinated, and signposted by the mystical healing seers Isanusi and Damfo. This fabricated, ideological "Africanness" is very different from that which resides in the subtextual undercurrents of the first two novels; the fictive richness which arises from the imaginative engagement between myth, ritual and historical realism is clearly lost when there is a substitution of ideological for historical imagination, and of type for complex consciousness. Since they deliberately mix realism and fantasy in a fictional mode which has its eye as much on the future as on the past, it would be inappropriate to fault the histories for being "unhistorical". But the remoteness of their settings results in those weaknesses which are often the lot of historical fantasy: unreal dialogue, a thinness of characterization, and a general failure to create a convincing, authentic world. Naana's gnomic utterances, in Fragments, give her a numinous quality which makes her a stranger to the modern world she finds herself in, but she remains a creature of a solidly historical past, with its own finely delineated customs, rituals and faiths, and her reality is never in doubt. Isanusi and Damfo are, in comparison, ethereal other-worldly creatures, beings of another order

which is too distant for identification, and their codes of behavior no more than imaginative hypotheses. The interminable repetition of Isanusi's sacred trinity of neologisms - "Reciprocity", "Connectedness" and "Creation" - is accompanied by so little explication of what they practically involve as a lived social pattern that they tend to become lifeless verbal tags, self-enclosed abstractions which leave the Way an essentially unknown quantity. Defined mainly in negatives, as everything that "Destruction" is not, the Way at times seems to be no more than a convenience category for lost virtues and its rather drab and joyless communalism emerges as something more non-European, and anti-European, than specifically and recognizably African. In fact, certain features, such as the total rejection of family and kin urged upon Dovi and Araba Jesiwa in the name of a higher ideal and the overriding of territorial instincts by abstract ideological loyalties, would appear to be highly un-African. Forgotten and not yet rediscovered, the Way to which the enlightened few act as spiritual guardians never becomes the code of the community; the latter, in reality, is always heedless of or opposed to the Way and, in its advancement towards the status-seeking materialism of Armah's modern Ghana, isolates integrity and intelligence with such

ease that the communal narrative/view and the validity of a responsible communal ethic are constantly undermined.

Armah's search for a more overtly African focus in his later works is, by virtue of his choice of different genres, necessarily marked by a corresponding loss of subtlety and complexity in both characterization and symbolism. It may yet prove to be the case that this African focus is really most profound and authentic where it is least insistent - when immanent in a fabric of ritual and mythological allusion, as in the early novels - and, conversely, least authentic where it is explicitly formulated and unambiguously schematized into ideology, as in the last two books.

The histories have had a mixed reception. Some Western critics, notably Gerald Moore and Bernth Lindfors, have expressed reservations about them and there seems to be a consensus of opinion in the West that they show signs of waning inspiration and declining artistic achievement. Robert Fraser, on the other hand, has argued strenuously that their apparent radical line of departure is really a curve in an arc of continuous development and achievement from the early novels, and has fewer reservations about the method and manner by which the beautiful ones are finally born in Armah's fiction. Meanwhile, the last two books have been

widely hailed by African critics as evolving what promises to be a major new style for African literature. Significantly, they have not given birth to further published novels by Amah himself. Although it is rumored that he has produced two more novels since The Healers, he has, for whatever reasons, not seen fit to publish them and has, in fact, published only ~~three~~² short pieces since 1978: ~~a political~~ essay assessing the relevance of Marxism to African revolution (1984); ~~a~~ reply to Per Wästberg, president of PEN International and, in his view of African history and literature, a latterday and diehard practitioner of "Larsony" (1984); ~~and the short story "Halfway to Nirvana" (1984), a poignant satire on the lives of United Nations conferees who wine and dine on Africa's catastrophic drought and~~ hunger.

Whether the forced conclusions of the histories, confidently envisaging victorious struggle and ultimate reunification, have left nothing to be said or the author has run himself into some kind of formal cul-de-sac can only be a matter of speculation until the appearance of some more major fiction. At present, one can only guess in what direction this fascinating and most secretive of

writers will go next. ^{more than} Twenty years on from The Beautiful Ones Are
Not Yet Born, he remains something of an enigma.

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- "The Oxygen of Translation" West Africa (11 February 1985): 262-~~263~~ 263;
- "The Lazy School of Literary Criticism" West Africa (25 February 1985): 355-~~356~~ 356;
- "The Caliban Complex" West Africa (18 & 25 March 1985): 521-~~522~~ 522, 570-~~571~~ 571;
- "The Festival Syndrome" West Africa (15 April 1985): 726-727;
- "Our Language Problem" West Africa (29 April 1985): 831-~~832~~ 832;
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- "A Stream of Senegalese History," West Africa, (9 March 1987): 471-473.

Add →

Change in entry on AYI KWEI ARMAH:

"Doctor Kamikaze," Mother Jones, 14, 8 (1989): 34-38, 46, reprinted
as "The Development Agent," CODESRIA Bulletin, 4 (1990): 11-14.



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2/5
2/21
DR. D. L. WRIGHT
MYILLY POINT CAMPUS
N.T. UNIVERSITY
P.O. BOX 40146
CASUARINA N.T. 0811
AUSTRALIA

30 May 1991

Dear Bernth,

A kind friend in Ibadan just sent me a new story by Ayi Kwei Armah. I've included it at the end of the Fiction list on the first page of the entry: the rest is as it was. If it's too late to include, it doesn't matter - my own fault as I did say that I didn't wish to update it.

I have just one chapter to go on the Soyinka book (on the Poetry). It should be done by the end of June. I've had no reply from Twayne as regards the letter I sent a month ago, so I've written again. I assume they don't mind me taking a few more weeks. I've taken note of your coming changes of address for the manuscript.

You'll be interested to know that I received this morning from Three Continents Press the proofs of C.P. on A.K.Armah, containing your own article. They've done a nice job with the type-setting. With luck, it should be out early next year.

By the way, you have a very nice line in postcards. I'm sending this to both addresses as usual.

Cheers,

Derek Wright

May 1991

DLB Volume on African & Caribbean
Literatures, eds. Bernth Lindfors
& Reinhard Sander

AYI KWEI ARMAH

Derek Wright

Northern Territory University,
Darwin, Australia

BIRTH: Takoradi, Ghana, October 1939.

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14 November 1989

Dear Bernth,

Please find enclosed amended pages of my DLB entry on Armah, with updated bibliography of primary works. Please note:

Pages 1 and 1(a) replace the former first page.

Page 2 replaces the old p.2 (this alteration is to take in a later autobiographical piece).

Page 70 replaces the old pp.70 and 70(a) - to take in the later journalism.

Page 71 (References) is the old p.71 but with my recent book on Armah added at the bottom of the list.

I hope this suffices. Is there a publication date for the DLB volume yet?

I got the Soyinka record, and a few other useful things, at New Beacon Books in London back in August (thanks for the tip), and James Gibbs kindly sent me a copy of Before the Blackout and is sending Before the Blowout at Christmas. Neither of these contain Childe Internationale, however - do you have a copy of this by any chance?

I had lunch with Hans Zell in Oxford on the way back to Heathrow in September. He's toying with the idea of a cheaper paperback version of my Armah book at some time but needs ammunition to take to Butterworth H.Q. If you think it a good idea, and the demand to be there, perhaps you could mention it when you are next in contact (I note you are editing two new series for him). This might expedite a version of the book that academics can actually afford!

My sabbatical, from November to next July, starts now so I can get stuck into the Soyinka project at last.

Hope you are enjoying life without RAL. I enjoyed re-experiencing your paper on Great African Authors' Popularity Ratings etc. in New Literatures Review.

Best wishes,

Derek

Derek Wright

P.S. Hope no more updatings are needed:
I've just about had it with this author!

DR. D. L. WRIGHT
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Ayi Kwei Armah is perhaps the most versatile, innovative and provocative of the younger generation of post-war African novelists and, like all authors who express extreme views in their books, he has become a controversial figure - in both African and Western critical circles - but the controversy has been centred exclusively on the works and not on the man, about whom extremely little is known. Armah is a very private and anonymous person. He gives no interviews, attends no conferences or writers' workshops, releases no press statements, and does not seek to promote or publicize his work outside of Africa in any way. Only twice, when provoked beyond endurance by the American critic Charles Larson's misreading of his novels and later, in mellower mood, when correcting an African critic's errors about his education, has Armah broken his rule of silence about himself and his work, and it is to these two essays that Western critics owe nearly all of their biographical information about this author.

Born to Fante-speaking parents in a sea port of the then British colony of the Gold Coast at the start of the Second World War, Armah would apparently have been too young to take in the full import of his country's post-war social unrest - the strikes, unemployment and the shooting of demonstrating ex-service men recently back from the colonial war by the

widely hailed by African critics as evolving what promises to be a major new style for African literature. Significantly, they have not given birth to further published novels by Armah himself. Although it is rumored that he has produced two more novels since The Healers, he has, for whatever reasons, not seen fit to publish them. Since 1978 Armah has published mainly short journalistic pieces which have explored the practical dimensions of the histories' polemics and the only creative work of note has been the short story "Halfway to Nirvana" (1984), a poignant satire on the lives of United Nations conferees who wine and dine on Africa's catastrophic drought and hunger.

Whether the forced conclusions of the histories, confidently envisaging victorious struggle and ultimate reunification, have left nothing to be said or the author has run himself into some kind of formal cul-de-sac can only be a matter of speculation until the appearance of some more major fiction. At present, one can only guess in what direction this fascinating and most secretive of writers will go next. Twenty years on from The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, he remains something of an enigma.

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