



Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in the History of African Literature: A Critical Analysis of a Landmark Novel.

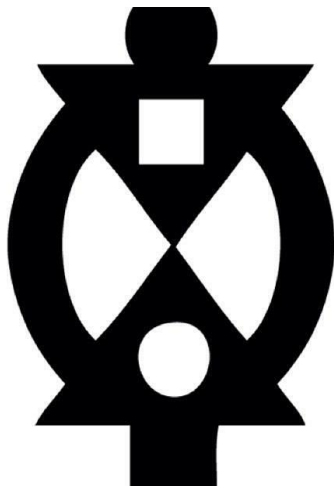
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ABSTRACT

This study shows the central position held by Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in the African literary world. It tries to prove that the publishing of this work was a landmark in the early post-colonial context of African literature. Through a series of breaks from still prevailing colonial and neocolonial literary discourses, it has initiated an innovative aesthetics which has left a tremendous legacy which is being continued by subsequent generations.

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Introduction

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*¹ is one of the most reviewed and commented upon work in African literature. It would be legitimate to wonder what else can be said about that piece of fiction. But the characteristic of the authentic work of art is that it is an inexhaustible source of meaning over generations and beyond cultural boundaries.

The reactions to the book since its publication can be classified into two main categories. Many a critic, generally from western critical readership, have traced its genius to a long tradition established by tutelary figures such as André Gide, J.P. Sartre, and A. Camus (Nkosi 18). The writer, Ayi Kwei Armah has strongly reacted to this trend of criticism (Armah). As for the African critical school, it has had a mixed reaction toward a work that has become a classic in the African literary canon. For the African critics (Gakwandi 3; Obumselu; Aidoo, Collier-Macmillan), this work clearly shows "a detached clinical interest" (Achebe 57) for the African people it stages in the story, a lack of patriotism and no clear political commitment to the masses. Armah is clearly reproached for airing Africa's dirty laundry in public at a time when colonial wounds were still fresh. As it is clear through these reactions (those of western critics and their African counterparts), this artistic work has been praised or criticized for reasons which are far from being located in the specific domain of artistic creation. These politically motivated reactions indicate the state of autonomy of the African literary "field" (Bourdieu), which assess literary creations through the lenses of "fields" that are not specifically literary.

We would expect a novel which is being praised or repelled for wrong reasons not to survive its author's era. Yet TBO has continued to arouse interest against all odds. What reasons can account for this continued interest in this literary work whose jubilee we are celebrating? Are these reasons purely aesthetic or sociological?

The answers to these questions will require a methodological approach which escapes the impasses of both internal or external approaches. Internal critical approaches reduce the success of a work to its internal coherence and reference to itself, its technicalities as structuralist or post-structuralist theories claim. As for the externalist approaches, they relate the literary text to its extra-referential components (ideas, biographical details, ideology to which it alludes) that are believed to have precedence over its internal ethical and aesthetic coherence and logic.

A sociohistorical approach in conjunction with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary field will help reconcile TBO with its social underpinnings, individual writer's subjectivity, and the internal logic of the literary texts as claimed by theories such as postcolonialism and structuralism. This theory preserves the autonomy of the literary field from any invasion by external competing fields like politics and economics.

Bourdieu's concept of "literary field" rejects both extreme positions which consist, on the one hand, in reducing literature to a mere reflection of social realities as is generally found in some Marxist critical circles or, on the other hand, in seeing literature as an internal speculative juggling with words. For Bourdieu, there exist several fields: political, economic, academic,

¹ From now on, it will be abbreviated as TBO.

scientific, religious, et cetera. These fields co-exist and try to annex one another. If in some specific context, the literary field has not achieved its autonomy from the political field as it often happens in traditional societies, it claims a relative autonomy in some other contexts.

Using the concepts of the quest for autonomy, the internal struggle in the specific field between the actors of the field and the different strategies that are set by these actors, we will analyze TBO as Armah's attempt to secure a position and privileges within the field by a heretical ethical and aesthetic attitude. TBO becomes a motivated attempt within the field to have access to symbolic assets and privileged positions.

We will study the break that TBO initiated with all established traditions that prevailed at the time it was published. We will also analyze the innovations that it brought at the ethical and aesthetic levels with the writer's counterparts of the same generation. We will then see, in an analysis of its motifs, referential codes and narrating strategies, the revolution the novel initiated, and which is responsible for its seminal position in the African literary field. We will end with the legacy of TBO not only for the subsequent works of the same writer but also for other writers of the younger generations.

The context of a textual strategy

The works of first generation of African postcolonial literature cannot be fully grasped without relating them to the colonial adventure. The significance and "relationality" of the allusions to that painful experience and its underlying discourses (scientific and artistic) is the condition for a good appreciation of that literature. With the first generation, this relationality and intertextuality are largely oppositional. For the founding fathers of the Negritude Movement, for instance, if Reason is Hellenic, then Emotion, its absolute reverse; it is Negro. The trend was to praise anything African, to claim a glorious past and an idyllic sociocultural background to their artistic creations. The urgency of fighting for one's political and mental decolonization imposed an alliance between politics, science (ethnological and anthropological discourses) and arts. The converging views between colonial anthropology and the Negritude movement has been analyzed by many a thinker. Many writers included in their texts ethnographic details to give a local flavor to their works. The western audience was often in the mind of the authors as the target of their writings. In such a context, cultural allegiance to one's people's civilization was prioritized over the creative output.

Once African countries achieved or were about to achieve independence in the early 1960s, there was a reverse trend. The criticisms and thematic focuses were now inwardly oriented. The writers were concerned about denouncing the damaging effects of the still prevailing effects of colonialism but mainly of neocolonialism. The traditional themes of the black identity are progressively replaced by concern about current issues. African literature started its liberation from politics by renouncing the rhetoric of the revolutionary fight and the ideal of political commitment to the national cause. Notwithstanding, the concern about one's own indigenous community still prevails with the first writers of that generation. Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall*

Apart), Wole Soyinka (*Kongi's Harvest*), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*A Grain of Wheat*), Gabriel Okara (*The Voice*) among others, were still 'writing back' to the colonial empire (Ashcroft et al.). With some of these writers, the alliance with politics is still affirmed after the disillusionment of the first years of self-management. Up to 1981, Ngugi was still urging the socially responsible African writer to be a political activist and oppose the hegemony of western imperialism and now locate state authority through his art. "Literature and writers cannot be exempted from the battle field" (Ngugi 73). That "literature of resistance" has nothing to do with literature conceived as a "higher" form of art which excludes the masses and is beyond the reach of common people. As for Achebe, he advocated a critical tradition that considered literature as a pedagogical tool. The writer is thus a teacher whose role is crucial in ensuring psychological and cultural revitalization. The dominating trend with this generation is that literature is expected to play a social role and show solidarity with the people who, until recently, had been dominated by presenting the events narrated in the fictions from their perspective.

The publishing of TBO marked a seminal stage in the history of African literature as this work initiated a series of breaks with all these critical traditions. The first break is with the colonial literature and discourse. Like most works of earlier generations of the first decade of independence, TBO is a counter discourse to colonial literatures which used to present the African people, their cultural, artistic values in a racist and negative light. Although the colonial period is not the main focus of the criticisms of Armah's narrator, it still appears with the painful recollections of the character named Teacher and the narrator. These recollections of the past are even more painful as they are being repeated in the present days after all the hopes raised by the nationalist phase. TBO also marks a change from a traditional conception of art and literature. This implicit break can be implied by the rejection of self-glorifying epic narratives of the Sunjata or Kunene's types,² which prospered during the nationalist phase and the early years of independence. It also marks a departure from other traditional oral entertaining narratives.³ While these works presented heroic figures, TBO does not allow any of its historic figures to be recorded as a hero. Nkrumah's heroic stature during the revolutionary years is mentioned but to show that he did not live up to the hopes of the people and betrayed them in the vilest way.

The decisive break is yet the distance that TBO takes from other works of the post-colonial era of its generation. In spite of the different perspectives that can be seen between the first generation of the Negritude movement and the second generation, the rhetoric of cultural authenticity still prevails in the works of Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, Sembène Ousmane, just to mention a few. It was not until 1968 that the type of novel that TBO represents was published. Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* (*Bound to Violence*), Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (*The Suns of Independence*) were published the same year, ruling out the option of a possible influence of one on the others. 1968 was therefore a turning point in postcolonial African literature and TBO served as a milestone for a new type of literature. These African

² D.T. Niane's *Sunjata an Epic of Old Mali*, then M. Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*, Senghor's *Chaka*.

³ Daniel O. Fagunwa or Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*.

writers' approach to African history, cultural values and the legacy of ancestral aesthetics is an ambivalent one. Earlier norms are approached and represented with irony, paradox verging on ridicule and mockery as if they were disqualified as values for the future. If they are allowed to appear under any positive light, it is at the level of a symbolism that is reworked to suit the artistic and personal goals of the writer. TBO disparages the norms that had prevailed so far, overturns artistic rules and traditions and set new ones. This work initiates a new form of liberty that is at the same time political and aesthetic not only from preceding generations but even among the works of contemporaries of the same generation.

The advent of TBO established a new rapport of writers to age-long aesthetic and sociocultural codes in African literature. It has taken away the sacred characteristic attached to some themes and way of narrating. From the purely literary perspective, it has greatly contributed to the liberation of literature from a critical tradition that still weighed on the artist's freedom to create stories from his own perspective. With writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, the move towards a certain distance from the obsolete rhetoric of the indigenous cultural affirmation, of the return to the sources now analyzed as probable causes of some present problems is initiated. Yet there is still some sentimental attachment to one's community of origin and its story. Achebe is faithful to the Igbo land and its stories so is Soyinka to the Yoruba people, whose myths and symbols are being narrated. These stories and the traditional ideology that they sustain are offered as a way out of the impasses encountered in the modern life. The heroes of Achebe, (e.g. Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi) Soyinka (Baroka, Eman,) Ngugi (e.g. Njoroge, Mugo, Matigari) still offer some hope and enlist the empathy of the readers. They are a sane source of reference in a context of disillusionment. Ayi Kwei Armah's TBO seems to have boldly assumed a pessimism whose signs the author's contemporaries had identified but had been reluctant to systematize for sentimental or political reasons. With TBO, it is no more possible to blink on the disillusion and its subsequent despair. After 1968 and the advent of TBO, it has become almost impossible to continue to write as before. A new literature seems to be born which has thrown away the taboos of solidarity and sympathy for one's people's values and practices. The future trend is toward assuming the failure and not allowing the survival of any false illusion to mislead the people. For writing the current state of affairs to its logical conclusion, Armah, through TBO, can be considered as an inventor of a new aesthetics, a "nomothete" and his aesthetic the "nomos", i.e. the aesthetic model. Such a pioneer position in initiating a new thematic and aesthetics is, in our view, the cause of the exceptional position and impact of his first novel in the history of postcolonial African literature.

TBO and the new aesthetic norms

Through the creative transgressions that he initiated in his debut novel, Armah can be considered as a "nomothète", a sort of founding hero (Bourdieu 62) in the African literary field. TBO is by many aspects, as we will show, an initial founding act. The African republic of letters (Casanova), like any republic, has its specific rules and actors. It is a space within which a competing spirit prevails between the different actors. Its main agents are writers, publishers and critics, and it is dominated by unending tensions and conflicts. It is no homogeneous social

and spatial arena. The positions of its agents in the field are the results of the struggles between contenders themselves, between the latter and those who are already in the field and try to set its specific rules.

It has its fathers/mothers, senior brothers/sisters and late comers into the republic. The competition is fierce between these different protagonists in their pursuit of what is at stake in the literary game. The literary republic or field is a special context with specific values which are appreciated for their symbolic value. These symbolic goods are the stakes of the harsh competition between the protagonists of the literary field or republic. The predecessors have a reputation and a position in the field which make them the legislators of the artistic rules they contributed to establish. They therefore hold a coveted position in the field that those knocking at the door would like to have. The latter have no other way to enter the field if not by an artistic heresy which will bring in new artistic forms that tend to disqualify the prevailing forms.

It is in that sense that TBO is a landmark in the history of African literature. The novel can be analyzed as waging an implicit artistic war against the works of the icons of African literature of the second generation who had proceeded in exactly the same way with the first generation. By the time Armah's novel was published, J.P. Clarks, Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensy, T.M. Aluko, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, among others, to limit ourselves to Anglophone Africa, were the rulers and legislators of the field. TBO belongs to a different artistic generation from such works as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, or Soyinka's poems and plays. He will better be ranked with an artistic generation of young angry writers for whom it seems necessary to be pessimistic. Among these we can list Yambo Ouologuem, Kofi Awoonor, Sony Labou Tansi, etc. The target is no more the white empire nor its aesthetic and linguistic canons. The battle is internal between contenders maneuvering to get into the field and those already inside protecting their positions. Even though TBO shows no explicit allusions to the works of contemporary counterparts, these allusions and intertexts are to be grasped at the implicit level.

Through TBO, Armah is putting in artistic form his ideological conception of literary production. This ideology is explicit in essays that he published several decades after the piece of fiction. He clearly rejects what he labels as tribal art. He refuses to be a tribal African whose allegiance is with his tribe or clan rather than searching for a more inclusive identity. He is an African writer writing for African readers about African problems. To reach that artistic goal, he will focus on African history instead of the shreds of any specific ethnic group. "I had no intention of being a tribal being. Or a colonial being. I wanted to be an African, to think as an African, to live as an African" (120). That is why he would not agree with Ngugi's option of writing in the tribal language. "It is an unsatisfactory compromise that will last all my life, but I prefer to use any language, however flawed, that enables me to communicate with Africans in Angola, Botswana, Chad, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe while dreaming of, and when possible working toward the future emergence of our common language" (Armah 121). Rejecting what he refers to as "village narratives", or "families' narratives" which are fragmented and specific, he opts for "general narratives".

We will later see in the text analysis that the shifting from allegory to social realism, the focus on modern urban context, of an African world without frontiers partake of that pan Africanist ideal in a general context where most writers were for the presentation of the truncated history of their tribe, the local values of specific clans and villages. It is in that sense that *TBO* is a criticism of his predecessors' option. *TBO* is no Akan setting novel. If the Akan symbolism is there, it is not focused on a restricted community whose values are presented and explained as an exotic documentary material. The urban realism of this novel takes literature out of the grandiloquence of the narrative of traditional heroism of the Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Chaka and Sunjata type. These heroes have a system of values in which they believe and express a strong allegiance to the indigenous cultural universe. By this choice of the urban context, Armah writes the trivialities of modern postcolonial Africa into the heart of the postcolonial novel. It thus counters what can be regarded as the grand narratives of these novels with heroic and sympathetic heroic figures. The grand narratives were not simple myths to entertain a disenchanted audience but alternative literary means for emancipation. Armah's debut novel can be considered to have invented a new identity for African literature, taking it along paths its writers had not or had been reluctant to explore.

Many of the elements we use to back up our claim of the centrality of *TBO* in African literature may seem too presumptuous if not out-of-date. Armah was not the first writer to write on the African crisis. He was not the first to present problematic characters or a pessimistic mood in his works. For instance, as early as 1961, the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* had already sowed the seeds of that thematic issue of disillusion. The gist of our argument is that, with Yambo Ouologuem and to a lesser extent Kourouma, he is the first to systematize that theme. If we must mark a year on the historical timeline of African literature for this topic and its accompanying aesthetic, it will be 1968. That is why, to our sense, Ayi Kwei Armah deserves the title of the writer of the crisis. His first novel can be considered as a starting point for a general trend in African literature. This in no way implies that all writers started writing about despair and disenchantment or that Armah himself remained faithful to the artistic norm he contributed to set. The evolution of his career is telling about the thematic shift that has been embarked upon in 1973 with *Two Thousand Seasons*, then *The Healers*, *Osiris Rising*, *KMT*, and *The Revolutionaries*. These works are resolutely optimistic in tone and offer new perspectives for a qualitative change in Africa. *TBO*, to him, was only the literature of a moment and for a context. His conception of literature must answer three questions: 1- what is the state of the society the writer lives in? 2- What is responsible for that state of the society? 3- What are the alternatives or solutions to this state of crisis? The early works of Armah, i.e. *TBO*, *Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest?* are therefore an artistic endeavor to account for that state of the African society at the dawn of independence. But even with these early novels, *TBO* remains the most emblematic of the topic of disenchantment. But it is also the writer's most important aesthetic achievement. It is indeed a beautiful novel about ugly realities. The following paragraphs are about analyzing the text of *TBO* to identify these elements that convey the idea of a persistent crisis.

Armah rejects a traditional conception of the artist as a mere entertainer or an accomplice of the traditional ruling class. The artist should not put his art at the service of the *status quo ante*

belum of the domination of one entity over the rest of the community. He should refrain from facile art of enticing emotions in listeners. Against the tradition of narrating self-gratulatory illusions about oneself, he substitutes writing a true picture of oneself. The cultural codes that feed the narrative can be regarded as problematic as they are reprinted with hints of parody and irony. The symbolic system borrows from the local symbols. These local symbols are represented through the sensitive consciousness of a disenchanted narrator. They are characterized by their ambivalence. So far we had been familiar with literary texts which presented a symbolic system borrowed from the local communities and which served as an alternative to the cultural impasse of the postcolonial context. With Armah, the work of art should exist in context. If that context is not satisfactory, there is no reason why the writer should try to blink the social uglinesses.

The “gleam”, “cleanliness”, “speed” ... which are the favorite images and symbols of the novel offer no alternative to the darkness, dirt and slowness as one would expect. In TBO, the people who are on the side of darkness, dirt and slowness are the ones to offer a ray of hope as “[s]ome of that kind of cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump” (Armah 44). The mytho-poetic hyperbole of whiteness refers to filth, ghosts, excrement.

There is also an ironic representation of most rites. The rite of purification, for instance, never allows the character who goes through it to come clean out of it. There is no easy solution to the problems that the novel raises. Even religious systems, which are a typical case of hybrid systems of belief do not work for the salvation of souls. TBO is a universe whose moral and religious categories are far from being clearly set out: good and evil are no antithetical categories. Spiritual and material values function in a similar way making it almost impossible to choose from one or the other. Rama Krishna, the Indian god could be seen as a foreshadow of the fate of Teacher who is presented in the narrative in such a way as to render his option unworkable. TBO offers no alternative neither from new religious systems, symbols, rites nor from traditional ones setting this novel apart from anything that had been published before. The society of Achebe’s Umuofia, for instance, believes in values that are suggested, with their weaknesses, as possible alternatives to the colonial values. Ngugi’s *The River Between* clearly favors female circumcision as a reaction to Christianity, which is trying to outlaw that tradition. Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* depicts a hero whose main problem is his inability to choose clearly between the local values and his westernized personality. Soyinka’s characters in *The Interpreters* fully conform to the prevailing stereotypes of the time which the writer is trying to oppose. Okara’s Okolo (*The Voice*) is equally nauseated by the moral corruption, deceit and materialism and decides to work for change by a conscious struggle to bring sanity and moral order. He goes to the leaders and the people and ask for “it”, that is for goodness, truth, etc. In all these examples, the elites are criticized for their inability to find solutions to the problems by an intelligent and critical use of local values thus saving these novels from the general despairing tone that has come to be associated with TBO. The carrier rite, which is one of the cultural code referred to in TBO is generally used to help the traditional society get rid of its evils before entering into the New Year. In the novel studied, reference is made to these rituals of purification but they are of no use and help. The rite with its paradoxes and by many images brings back to the community the evils it was supposed to carry away. Koomson who is the

living embodiment of the ritual dirt and evils leaves signs that he will come back to harass people again. No sooner has the carrier (The Man) taken away his symbolic load (the evil represented by Koomson) that The Man is confronted with new scenes of corruption at an early hour of the day in the closing pages of the narrative. This recurrence symbolizes the perpetuation of the past bad habits in the new regime. Nothing seems to have changed. The dirt and evil seem to be part of the everyday life and will never be disposed of.

The apparently chaotic characteristic of TBO makes it difficult to put this novel into any specific category of narratives. It is neither an allegorical narrative nor a realist novel from all points of view. It has been read as an existentialist novel by some critics, as a realist one by some others while some others have identified Albert Camus' absurdity motif in it. The man's sense of loneliness reminds of Sartre's description of Roquentin and the character Teacher's indifference can be read like an echo to Meursault's in Camus *The Stranger*. Some motifs of the Nouveau Roman have been identified but many other critics have read the novel from the perspective of traditional oral narratives with their underlying myths and rituals. The wisest thing to say is that TBO is a combination of all these types of novels.

In some passages, it is obviously an allegorical narrative throwing in some details about the history of Ghana to give it an air of authenticity. Ghana is in that sense only a pretext to speak about human kind and the African part of it. That is why the main characters of the novel remain unnamed to adapt to their general stature of representatives of human kind. That is the substance of the criticism Achebe levelled at Armah's "unAfrican" aesthetics. The Nigerian writer mischievously advised his younger counterpart to use an unnamed country inhabited by some unnamed beings to reflect his Universalist philosophy. The diegetic republic of TBO is peopled by The Man, Teacher, the Loved Ones, the Silent One. Sometimes the narrative is animated by some *teeth* (those of Amankwa), by a *costume* (that of Koomson), et cetera. The name Nkrumah is used to represent, in a mytho-symbolic form, leaders of Africa if not of the world. This idea is summed up by Gareth Griffiths:

Nkrumah is only a name. He represents nothing. To name him is merely to reinforce the sense of namelessness, the falsity which such particularization reinforces in a world where overthrower and overthrown are engaged only in a formal reversal of role. (Griffiths 7)

The Ghanaian ruler is a figure who is no better nor worse than his predecessors. He tragically repeats what they did before him. He will betray the way they had earlier betrayed their people. This message is more important than the characters who illustrate it. The criticisms levelled at TBO by critics like Achebe (26), Awoonor & Gakwandy show that these critics were merely looking for documentary realism of social history which they did not find in the novel. A critic like Achebe seems to dismiss anything that does not reflect reality as embodied in social and historical actuality as being foreign metaphor.

On the contrary, by many of its aspects TBO is a realist novel. Realism implies the idea that the novel borrows many details from known literary and historical sources. Critics have identified European influences like Samuel Beckett, Kafka, Celine, etc. A critic like Nwolin goes as far

as to say that the novel “has nothing essentially Ghanaian about it: no specifically Ghanaian mannerisms or special brand of politics, no language in the local idiom of the people.” (Nwolin 209) But references to Esikafo Aba Estates, Sekondi-Takoradi wharves, the Kansawora Railway Office etc. will suffice to show how Ghanaian this novel is. The Ghanaian pidgin and the local idiom of proverbs and popular sayings show the writer’s familiarity with local forms of address from the ancient dignity of formal speech to urban ‘broken’ Englishes. Besides, readers can pinpoint many references to concrete specific historical and social events of the Ghana of Nkrumah.

The hybrid nature of the TBO, which is responsible for the chaotic narrative type, shows out in the nature of the intertexts that are used in the novel. We have local and foreign rites, rituals and myths in the same text. Mamy Water’s myth, the carrier’s rite, Akan’s cyclic ritual of regeneration appear in the same text with the narrative of Plato’s cave, Kalil Gibran’s spiritual poems. Akan symbols are coupled with western ones thus establishing a very hybrid identity of the narrator. Such a narrator who is familiar with local texts (myths, rites and symbols) and those of foreign cultures to Africa cannot but claim an equally cosmopolitan narratee who is yet familiar with indigenous thought systems. Fanon’s influence can be felt in the futile and boring activities of The Man. The psychiatrist’s analysis of the neocolonial bourgeoisie as a useless, parasitical and unproductive class is not explicitly referred to in the text but the reader can hardly miss the allusion to the scholar’s analysis of the neocolonial bourgeoisie as an agent of foreign domination. When the taxi driver tells Koomson that “everybody is making things now except us. We Africans only buy expensive things” (140), the accusation of that parasitic class of the African bourgeoisie is clear. With such a class in power, Africa will not invent anything original as they do not have the dynamic and inventing potential of their western counterpart. That is why no change of regime will bring any revolution.

The text is relatively demanding on its narrator and narratee for the decoding of its symbolism and socio-cultural codes. But the narrator is also demanding on the readers by the codes he refers to. It is no surprise that TBO did not receive the popular attention that books like *Things Fall Apart* received. It has generally been referred to as a difficult novel. Allusions are made to the Bible with several references to verses and hymns, to local highlife songs. Local sociocultural realities are sometimes just mentioned with no further explanation to shed some light on the type of narratee and readers postulated by the text. The terse statement by the man “Winneba, the ideological thing” is innocent only to a reader who does not know Winneba. It would mean nothing to the casual reader but it is pregnant with meaning to the informed reader and most Ghanaian readers of that generation who would know that this town hosted Nkrumah’s CPP party and ideological institution. Such is the case with the local proverb that the policeman uses to drive the usual code of corruption to the driver. The narrator and narratee of TBO are intellectually equipped to use and decode the historical, symbolic and mythic references that abound but often remain unexplained in the novel.

We must add to that difficulty the shifts of focalizations. Some passages are narrated from the point of view of the third person singular narrator who often does not know more than any of the characters or readers. The next moment the narrative is made by the Man himself and the

next moment it is made by Teacher. In the same chapter, it is possible to have two or three voices narrating the story or presenting the events from their own perspectives. Very often it is almost impossible to establish clearly who is in charge of the narrative. We thus go from focalization O to an internal then to an external one⁴. So far, readers had been used to a clear narrative voice conducting the story addressed to an equally clear audience able to decode all the allusions and socio-cultural references.

If by all these aspects there is nothing new under the sun, Armah seems to have been a pioneer in writing a novel that takes his ideology to its extreme consequences. It escapes literary categories and tries to make an identity for itself. He may have not been the first to speak about pessimism but he has represented it the way few had done before him. That is why *TBO* remains a landmark in the history of African literature whose consequences are still felt in the way new generations of writers are practicing their art and choosing their themes.

The legacy of TBO

TBO has contributed to the growth of the African literary field by pushing further the frontiers of its autonomy from other neighboring fields. A.K. Armah, through this novel, is among the writers who have contributed to achieve for African writers more freedom from the external straightjackets that its recent history had allowed to interfere with the internal functioning of its specific field. With Armah's attempt, the writer could boldly take liberties with topics that were regarded as sacrosanct principles to be followed. By discarding the rhetoric of rehabilitating the past or cultural values of his ethnic or tribal community, he has established a new tradition. The new generations take it for granted to write about themselves, their everyday preoccupations, and the uglinesses of their countries. They do not fear to be accused of unpatriotism and do not have to beautify what is ugly. They share this sense of commitment to one's art which Rushdie sums up: "It matters, it always matters, to name rubbish as rubbish; to do otherwise is to legitimize it" (Rushdie 1984). The motto is no more to write back to any entity or in defense of any value or community. Armah may not have invented, for instance, the scatological description, the divorce of post-colonial politics and the contemporary writers, of moral norms and artistic expression, etc. but while his African counterparts still had recourse to all sort of stylistic devices to refer to anything considered a cultural taboo, for instance, he would call a spade a spade. While Achebe, for instance, used euphemism to report the crudeness of an insult, Armah bluntly referred to the "mother's rotten cunt" (Armah 9, 106). *TBO*, to my modest knowledge, has had the scandalous honor of being a pioneer in introducing the female sex, or for that matter, the maternal sacred sex into postcolonial African fictions. We had to go to francophone Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* to have this literary heresy. This aesthetic shock which he shared with very few confirmed writers of his generation marked a new beginning in African postcolonial literature. It is not so much the conjunction of political, cultural and sexual liberties but the frame of mind on which his art is based that is so inspiring to other writers of later generations. Armah thus enters the African literary field as the precursor

⁴ See Robert 25-47

of a new modernity whose principles are inspired by the artistic freedom to invent original forms.

Younger generations take that artistic freedom to its logical conclusions by starting innovative aesthetic experimentations which go from political, cultural to linguistic and stylistic liberties. What literature seems to lose in moral virtues, it gains in autonomy from hypocritical and dubious moral values. *TBO* has therefore contributed to the growth of the field and its progressive autonomy from neighboring fields. The writers now may be addressing social or political issues in their narratives but they do not allow fields exterior to literature to dictate their rules.

What is more, the postcolonial trait of “oppositonality” which is articulated as resistance, subversion and contestatory narrative (Ball 2) has changed the targets of its criticisms. The white empires to which earlier generations necessarily wrote back and which had been a remarkable or necessary stage has given way to black empires ruled by black emperors. Sometimes the new emperors to write back to are other writers with whom their colleagues are fighting to gain control of the field. Or they simply choose to write beyond what earlier generations said, i.e. about new issues like gender, immigration, ecology, same sex love, etc. It is no more about representing oppositional relationality and intertextuality with Europe as it was the case with Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi or Armah himself but writing the complexities of a life of immigration and integration into countries whose values and countries have become theirs.

This quest for autonomy of the African literary field can take the form of unpatriotism. Many writers have rejected the ethnic or racial label to their artistic production. As early as 1963, the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo was already dismissing the ethnic or racial straightjackets that are imposed on writers by announcing himself a writer, not an African one. The same argument which had been used by Salman Rushdie is used today by Ben Okri who described himself in the following words almost fifty years after Okigbo:

I think Ben Okri is a writer who works very hard to sing from all the things that affect him. I don't know if he's an African writer. I never think of myself in terms of any classification. Literature doesn't have a country (Selasi 3).

TBO was foreshadowing this development of African literature. Each generation, not to say each single writer, must establish specific rules that fit his/its purposes and context. The original work will necessarily be heretical.

The different reactions to *TBO* may have been decisive in the evolution of the artistic career of Ayi Kwei Armah. After the first triad of his novels which had consisted in rubbing noses into the shit or dirt in the first novels, the writer has initiated, after this triad, a new type of novels which are resolutely optimistic. These last novels offer perspectives out of the gloomy atmosphere of his earlier novels. The writer has argued that after presenting the state in crisis, analyzing the causes of this crisis, the time has come to suggest artistic solutions to the decision makers. We suspect that after the mixed feedbacks to *TBO* by part of his African audience to the writer's artistic endeavor, the latter is trying a reconciliation with that audience. But this

move, instead of increasing the autonomy of the field, is reducing its scope which it contributed to widen. The evolution of his literary career is paradoxical as he seems to be making a backward movement through novels that his African readers are likely to like for the optimism it creates in the fictions.

TBO, like Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence*, and to a lesser extent Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, has contributed to free writers from the burden they have always been expected to carry. Many writers today refuse to be "ethnic writers" like Armah but seem to go as far as to refuse the label of African writer. We know that Achebe reproached Armah for the universalist tone of *TBO* and the recourse to foreign metaphors. (Achebe 26) The writer overreacted to this criticism which could not be regarded only as the opinion of an ill-intentioned senior peer (Armah 2010). The clear option for his people and their values which Achebe wanted his junior peer to have has become difficult to defend for current generations. Many African writers today, generally from the Diaspora, squarely reject the tradition of essentialising their artistic productions by linking them to some ethnic or racial origins. As Rashna Batliwala Singh argues, the new generations rather target their own societies and their leaders rather than an external cause to the failures of their countries contrary to earlier generations. For the Indian critic, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, No Violet Bulawayo, Chigozie Obioma, Taiye Selasi, Ben Okri et cetera rather "write beyond" the white empire. Being confronted with new realities, the new generations, following the example of *TBO*, have inaugurated a paradigmatic historical shift:

Things started to fall apart because of the economic and political bankruptcy of the Mugabe regime. This initiates an exodus where the people must flee to strange and faraway lands, the lands of the very people (broadly speaking) who were responsible for the falling apart in Achebe's novel (Singh 3).

Tensions and conflicts are confined to the more intimate space of the nation ruled by its own sons. The tradition of writing back is still there for many creators but writers generally write back to their own peers of past and current generations making intertextuality a key methodological instrument in current literary criticism. Although the tone of that internal criticism of predecessors and current peers is generally careful and respectful, the repartee is sometimes harmful. Some of the criticisms against *TBO* as being unpatriotic echo recent criticisms levelled by Nigerian writer Helon Habila who accused Zimbabwean writer Bulawayo of "performing Africa" to make it agree with western media coverage of Africa with images that evoke pity, fear, and poverty. To this, Taiye Selasi claimed the right to write beautiful novels about very ugly truths that can be seen first-hand in their countries (Selasi 4). She adds that it is not the role of the writer to blink facts out of some dubious patriotism. This criticism of Habila reminds us of Achebe's criticism of *TBO* while Selasi's answer is valid to counter both Habila and Achebe's arguments. It supports the aesthetics Armah initiated in the 60s and 70s.

There are no more taboos in African literature as far as the topics and modes of representation are concerned. Scatology, sexuality, same sex relations, social anomy, immigration, environment, criticism of political leadership and nefarious traditional values are the subject of artistic representation. Armah who has opened the Pandora box may not recognize or agree

with the use that is made of the artistic freedom he contributed to achieve. What new direction the new generations will give to the artistic freedom achieved by writers like Armah remains something that cannot be predicted. Yet, it is unlikely that any reversal or movement toward sacrificing the autonomy of the literary field to the norms of an external field will take place with the present and coming generations.

Conclusion

Artistic works outlive their authors not by strictly following the set norms of their time. Authentic works of art generally break the codes and cross over boundaries that preceding generations had established. In that sense TBO is an authentic work of art as it did not simply repeat any form. As a consequence, the novel met the fate of all original works, those works that initiate changes and open new artistic perspectives. It was rejected by those who conceived of a work of art as the respect of established norms. On the other hand, it was praised by some others for the novelty of its style and freshness of ideas. These last ones are prepared to see their “horizon of expectation” (Jauss 1982) violated and taken beyond its set limits. TBO initiated changes from the traditions of African literature from precolonial to the first generation of postcolonial writers. Armah has been the main contestant inside the African literary field of his time. He has maneuvered to become one of those actors of the field who have had the privilege of establishing the rules of the game. With TBO, Armah became a field founder of a new trend in African literary history. His artistic adventure will inspire new generations of writers. The artistic freedom he granted himself by not allowing external out of date rules to silence his artistic voice is being pursued with the current generation of writers who do not want to have to carry the burden of representing any community. They want to write about anything in their specific interest. They understand their job as fiction writers, storytellers not anthropologists or native informants. They want to widen their audience and talk to a global audience. For these generations of artists, Armah is the nomothète or the ancestor of all those experimentations that they are initiating.

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