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Permanence of the Negative in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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PERMANENCE OF THE NEGATIVE IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*

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ABSTRACT

The present essay identifies the defining feature of Armah's first novel as changelessness in the negative carried by language steeped in scatology. It pitches this reading against Armah's later efforts at signaling missed optimism. The later reading raises also technical considerations that should make the novel's scatology less irritating to readers' senses. This essay argues that the changelessness derives from the perspective that frames the novel. That perspective, cast in the metaphysical method of reflection, conceives the world as made up of things 'ready-made', 'rigid'. This, the essay argues, forbids the possibility of change and regeneration that Armah reads, post facto, into the novel.

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Context

The French language has a dictum that fits well the *éclat* of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as the author's first published novel: 'coup d'essai, coup de maître'. 'Trial stroke as master stroke'. It has mastery, indeed, of language that tells a story that is engaging, in a style linking form and content. Copious exercise of the narrator's generalising function urges a reading that emphasises changelessness of the negative. It was met generally with critical acclaim. Its momentum and outlook are carried into the author's next two novels that followed almost in quick succession: *Fragments* (1969) and *Why Are We So Blest?* (1974), also encountering critical acclaim.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, was first published in 1968 by Houghton and Muffin, New York. The first Heinemann edition appeared in 1969. Heinemann that Armah, in *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2010), accuses of stealing, having sold tens of thousands of copies of the novel without paying him a pesewa. The novel follows hard on the heels of the 1966 American CIA-organised coup d'état that toppled the nationalist administration of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. (Richard D. Mahoney (JFK: Ordeal in Africa 184-185) gives account of an event that has significance in the history of the relations between US diplomatic missions and agents recruited by the CIA. Dr. J. B. Danquah is named in that narration as an agent of the dreaded CIA). In current geopolitical discourse, that intervention would be called regime change operation.

Armah's first novel tells the story of a land, Ghana, irremediably trapped in corruption and degeneration imaged as rot and putrefaction, achieving ultimate expression as s-h-i-t and variations of it. The novel connects with the tradition of scatological writing which dates far back, surely beyond Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and François Rabelais' *Pantagruel*. The medium of scatology serves the mood of anger and revulsion that propels the creative energy behind *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Same scatology drives Ahmadou Kourouma's (1967) *Les Soleils des Indépendances* and Yambo Ouologuem's (1968) *Le Devoir de violence* which share with Armah's first novel the disappointment that fuels the critical introspection that marks the literature of Africa's immediate post-independence period. There is also Kofi Awoonor's (1972) *This Earth, My Brother...* which, astoundingly imitative of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, struggles to smell scatological and arty. We find, more recently, the Cameroonian Calixte Beyala dabbling effusively in scatology in her very many novels in a manner that appears intended to shock, and one might say, is artless. Otherwise, scatology gets practised in a manner that achieves art. As the renowned 19th century French poet, Charles Baudelaire (1991), quips: 'Tu m'as donné ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or'. 'You gave me your mud and I made gold out of it'.

In Armah's first novel, scatology takes over the depiction of the Ghanaian social political reality in a manner that does not spare the person of Ghana's first head of state, now revered. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and his entire political career show as one load of s**t. In *This Earth, My Brother...* (1972), Kofi Awoonor, who had been a functionary of the Nkrumah administration, apes the tongue-lashing against Kwame Nkrumah (and Ghana of the period)

that occurs in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Two decades later, in *Comes the Voyager At Last* (1992) which in places targets Ayi Kwei Armah, Awoonor attributes to a character named 'our Harvard novelist' (obvious reference to Armah) the following finger-pointing at Nkrumah that does not reference his own vilification of Nkrumah in *This Earth, My Brother...: 'Ghana under Nkrumah was nothing but excrement, corruption and thieving'* (*Comes the Voyager at Last*, 90). Kwame Nkrumah's mind-boggling achievements in post-colonial reconstruction stands out nonetheless. At all events, Armah's first novel achieves artistic freshness in its imaginative reconstruction of the orchestrated vilification and demonization of Nkrumah that followed the 1966 CIA-organized military coup d'état. It provided thus needed grounding for the CIA's hatchet job. Serving same purpose is the Legon Society on National Affairs and its organ *The Legon Observer*, founded in the aftermath of the coup and focused on systematically rubbish what Nkrumah stood for and achieved. Standing in the same line of duty is the pretentious essay by the Kenyan academic, Ali Mazrui (1966), entitled 'Nkrumah, the Leninist Tsar'. The essay thrashes about to make Kwame Nkrumah into a Russian Tsar and a Marxist Lenin. The result is a rough-hewn profile of Nkrumah that is at once feudal and socialist. It was published in the journal named *The Transition*, edited at the time by Rajat Neojit, Kenyan of Indian extraction. The journal was reportedly sponsored, unsurprisingly, by same CIA.

The rebound has been enthralling but also hostile. Armah has had obvious difficulty staying indifferent to negative criticism of the novel's pessimism and the scatological (his own word is 'coprophilic') that carries it; and which smears the person and administration of Kwame Nkrumah whose image, after the many decades, gives the lie to the dirtying it suffers in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The present essay seeks to place the perspective that produces changelessness in the negative beside Armah's effort at re-directing the reading of the novel along lines benign.

Anomie frozen in changelessness

We organize our reading of the changeless around motifs in the novel that show Ghanaian society as caught irremediably in degradation and degeneration. The very early pages of the novel show a bus conductor interacting with a brand-new Cedi bank note. He is struck by the stench of age and decay in its newness. This inaugurates a motif that gets repeated, motif that we may designate as the old-in-the-new. It gets expressed as the 'brief brightness' (7) of the KEEP YOUR CITY CLEAN waste box. The waste box, overwhelmed by garbage, gets copied and pasted in Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* as 'the forgotten refuse dump' (27)). In the nine years that his administration lasted, Nkrumah raised hundreds of publicly-owned enterprises to break the monopoly of private ownership of means of production. Taking over the Greek-owned A. G. Leventis stores fits within that drive. In the novel, the passage from the Greek-owned A.G. Leventis stores to the Ghana-owned GNTC (Ghana National Trading Corporation) stores is characterised as sunk in corruption right from the onset: 'the new thing taking completely after the old' (9). A variation of the motif signals itself as the end-in-the-beginning. It gets a scatological expression as "The nostrils, incredibly (...) joined in a way

that is most horrifyingly direct to the throat itself and to the entrails right through to their end (40). The end of course is the anus, point of exit of solid waste. The narrator connects it to the nostrils, the point of entry, the beginning, through the entrails, through the throat, assaulting, in a single movement, senses of taste, touch and smell. The senses get activated again in this account of the man's interaction with a nocturnal scene, carried by the motif:

After the wall of the loco yard, the breeze blowing freely in from the sea, fresh in a way that has in it traces of living things from their *beginnings* to their *endings* (40) (emphasis added).

The suggestion of newness (*beginnings*) disappears (and with it, processes that produce things coming into being and passing away) as the plainly scatological takes over the frozen reality:

In gusts the heat rises from the market abandoned to the night and the homeless, dust and perpetual mud covered over with crushed tomatoes and rotten vegetables, eddies from the open end of some fish head on a dump of refuse and curled-up scales with the hardening corpses of the afternoon's flies around (40).

The motif of the old-in-the-beginning gets a pithy rendering in the portrayal of Kwame Nkrumah, from the point of his entry on the Ghanaian political scene bursting with regenerative energy: "How could this have grown rotten with such obscene haste?" (88). The 'haste' tagged on to 'obscene' drives out whatever transition between the freshness, vigour and promise of the beginning, of the new, and the 'rotten' end. The variant expressed as the old-in-the-new is used in the more vicious depiction of the politicians (the J. B. Danquahs of the United Gold Coast Convention) preceding Kwame Nkrumah: "[They] were old before they had even been born into power, and ready only for the grave" (81).

Thus, when Maanan announces the new man to her coterie of nationalist-fired friends, one of them, Etse, charges: 'A new old lawyer?' (84). Teacher, philosopher, draws the universalizing conclusion: 'When you can see the end of things even in their beginnings, there is no more hope' (61). Connected to this is the motif of the permanence-of-the-negative as additional reinforcement of the theme of changelessness. The man's encounter with the banister in his office sets him reflecting on the triumph and permanence of the rot in the wood:

The wood underneath would win and win till the end of time. Of that there was no doubt possible, only the pain of hope perennially doomed to disappointment (12).

The freeze, heightened by 'no doubt possible', is reinforced by 'till the end of time', 'perennially' and 'doomed' which plunge into metaphysical idealism. It generates obscurantism by evoking the manipulation of supernatural powers deemed to be irresistible. The narration has recourse to the use of the image of the woman in pursuit of the permanence-of-the-negative, of the rot, of system failure. The story line has to account for the presence of the foul, of enduring corruption and the human agent in the pursuit of it. The choice falls on the woman, the man's wife, Oyo, and her mother who inexorably push the man to go the way

of everyone else, and grab, using the only way to reach the gleam: “cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud” (95). The woman as conduit for the negative of course shows in lots of narratives, including the biblical myth of creation with its account of the advent of sin. Kobina Sekyi deploys primary nationalist fury in *The Blinkards* and *The Anglo Fanti* (1974), published in a single volume, to chastise excessive addiction to the ways of white people: *borɔfosɛm*. It locates the more baneful addiction in the woman not the man.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the woman is set as the negative other, second sex, the inactive principle at the whim of the active male principle. Thus, women’s sexuality gets portrayed as a medium for the display of male power and wealth:

‘Ah, life is like that,’ ‘Ei, and girls!’ ‘Running to fill his cars. Trips to the Star for weekends in Accra. Booze. Swinging niggers, man.’ ‘Girls, girls. Fresh little ones still going to Achimota and Holy Child...’ ‘These Holy Child girls!’ ‘And Achimota too!’ ‘He is cracking them like tiger nuts.’ ‘Contrey, you would do the same...’ ‘True...money swine, ‘Money swine’ (110).

‘Swinging nigger’ is a term used in the 50s and 60s to designate the man-about-town, good-timer. We find it stuck on the character named Asante-Smith in Armah’s second novel, *Fragments*. Note the revulsion the narrator invests in this representation of gender disparity tilted against women. Note also the blame that the narrator heaps on the ‘girls’, otherwise victims of the state of rot, with males as animators.

The portraiture of women does not stray much beyond their sexual being, when they are not fitted into the negative roles we see Estella, Oyo and her mother perform. Maanan is, otherwise, the one female character who is not depicted in a degrading manner. She is alert to the nationalist cause, the only female in the troop of all-male nationalist enthusiasts. They are not presented as part of the movement launched by Nkrumah. As they watch/judge, from the sidelines, the new man, Nkrumah, holding forth, exuding power and hope and promise, Etsé remarks: ‘Maanan is wetting her womanhood over this new man.’ And Maanan’s response: ‘Ah, man, let me wet it’ (87). And what the narration retains of the wives whom soldiers, returning from forced participation in inter-imperialist wars, find in their homes, is what the narrator projects as their corrupted sexual beings. They have not remained faithful; i.e. they have failed in the gate-keeping role patriarchy imposes on women:

So there were men who, against the human wishes of some women they had married in their youth, did not die in the foreign lands but came back boldly, like drunken thieves in blazing afternoons and cold nights, knowing even before they had drunk the water with the lying smile of welcome that they had been betrayed’ (64).

The scenario is imitated in Awoonor’s *This Earth, My Brother...*: ‘A few [same soldiers] returned home to kill their wives for sleeping with other men’ (68). It is repeated two pages later as ‘[a]fter two years in prison’ ‘[tailor] came back home, broken. His three wives had married other people (...)’ (70).

The theme of degeneration is pursued through female biology. The taxi driver's expletive thrown at the man, 'your mother's rotten cunt' (9), connects with the foul smell exuding from the mouth of Koomson in flight from the military coup. The narration likens the smell to 'rotten menstrual blood' (163). Awoonor reprises in *This Earth, My Brother...* the exact same scenario of a taxi driver nearly running over a distracted pedestrian, complete with the taxi driver's irate expletive, 'Your mother's arse' (17), in place of 'your mother's rotten cunt'. Socialism gets attacked in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as part of the baggage of objectionables of the Nkrumah administration. *This Earth, My Brother...* reprises the objection, dragging the woman's genitalia after it: 'Socialism, their mothers' vagina' (23). Representation of the function of reproduction, is given same scatological expression:

It is true that we are men, but not so long ago we were helpless messes of soft flesh and unformed bone squeezing through bursting motherholes, trailing dung and exhausted blood' (62).

The organ that delivers, crucial for the survival of the species, is designated 'motherhole'. Motherhole echoes 'arsehole', 'fuckhole' which are not just dirty words but also insults. Mother's childcare follows reproduction. It receives same scatological brushwork:

Under a dying lamp a child is disturbed by a long cough coming from somewhere deep in the center of the infant body. At the end of it his mother calmly puts her mouth to the wet congested nostrils and sucks them free. The mess she lets fall gently by the roadside and with her bare foot she rubs it softly into the earth' (35).

Within the context of the novel mother-care gets messy and generates disgust, nausea. The mother spits out the mess she sucks out of her baby's nostrils and rubs it into the earth adding to the surrounding filth.

Living with it, but pitched high above it, observing and judging, is the man, alone, lonely. The loneliness is brought on by his insistence on being apart from the rest of society. It gives certain 'comfort' sometimes (27), and other times some 'terrible feeling' (153). His profile is replicated in that of Baako Onipa (One Person) of *Fragments* (1964). Imbued with a drive towards creativity and, unlike the man of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, seeking to be part of efforts at post-colonial re-generation, he finds himself locked in battle against the rest of society revelling in same anomie. His clout of no more than positive aspirations stands diminished against the physical might of the rest of society rooted in the defence of the status quo. Baako Onipa, the one person, unconnected, bearing hope and possibility of change, gets immobilised. He is bound and locked away as insane. The fate that befalls Baako Onipa, is recounted as Armah's true life story in *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006). The name of the lead healer in *The Healers* (Armah), Damfo, translates 'friend' or 'mad person' [bɔ]damfo. Baako Onipa's fate is presaged in what Teacher (*The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet born*) conceives as the truth about the rest of us and which even the man finds painful: '(...) men were all free to do what they chose to do, and would laugh with hate at the bringer of unwanted light if what they knew they needed was the dark' (79). That is Baako Onipa's story. Teacher,

who, as a “human being hiding from other human beings” (78), illustrates the conceit in his observation with what he calls the myth of Plato’s cave. It is the story of a people chained and trapped for ages in the impenetrable darkness of a cave, with what appears like no hope of possible escape. One of their number breaks free and discovers the beauty of the world outside. He goes back to his people with a message and promise of liberation. They spurn the message and promise of liberation as they tighten their embrace of negative changelessness.

The One Person shows again, in *Why Are So Blest?* in the figure of Solo (alone, singular) Nkonam (Walking/Being Alone) of the ultimate judgement, ‘Our disease is ordained’. Permanence-of-the-negative. He provides the explanation for the judgement: it is the attraction to whiteness: same attraction to whiteness that, already in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, pulls Nkrumah into the rut: ‘After a youth spent fighting the white man, why should not the president discover as he grows older that his real desire has been to become like the white governor himself, to live above all blackness in the big old slave castle?’ (92) The anti-colonial struggle is racialised here as in all of Armah’s other works, making it a fight against white people, not against capitalism that defines colonialism. Modin (*Why Are We So Blest?*) gets destroyed physically through his attachment to his white girl friend, Aimée Reitsch. Solo Nkonam gets broken by his Portuguese girlfriend. The armed struggle of the People of Congheria, with its bureau in Laccryville (Algiers), has aspirations towards whiteness etched into the structures raised for the struggle. The Maji Maji peasant uprising, conceived according to prescriptions Fanon provides in *The Wretched of the earth* (Les Damnés de la terre), runs aground because Ndugu Pakansa, equipped with knowledge of the ways of the white race, crucial for the struggle, cannot give up his white partner, technically an enemy, for the cause. That seals it for Africa.

And *Why Are We So Blest?* illustrates the futility anyhow of the anticolonial struggle with other scenarios. Permanence-of-the-negative. One is independence obtained through negotiations: the case of Modin’s country, Ghana. This is a modus that Fanon (1961) condemns wholly. Entries in Modin’s diary show stark signs of the colonial having survived the post-colonial. The second independence scenario (carried in Solo’s diary) is the case of the country whose capital city is named Laccryville, city of tears. That is Algeria in the aftermath of the armed struggle, having wrested independence through armed struggle. (Fanon insists on violence as key for attaining colonial freedom). Post-colonial Laccryville exhibits staggering signs of the inequality and social injustice that marked the colonial era. The third scenario, independence being prosecuted through peasant-based armed struggle, has a fair chance of suffering same fate. Our disease is ordained. The changelessness, permanence-of-the-negative, generating pessimism then would seem to mark a phase in the development of Armah’s thinking reflected in his art. He tries to break the cycle in the later novels and essays. But also, daring the impossible, in his re-reading of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

Reading Armah’s re-reading

As is well known a published work assumes a life of its own nourished by its readership, freed of what its author wills subsequently. Armah in later years had to confront negative criticism

of the novel's anomie. We notice an effort nearly three decades later to obliterate its pessimism in *Osiris Rising* (1995). Here the beautiful (sic.) ones, otherwise consigned to an unfathomable future get actualized in a declaration by a character named Netta:

I was also a teacher, once. Ideals. Ideas. Midwives for a coming generation. Uniter. Liberators. *The beautiful* (sic.) ones, you know, *born* to bring Africa together (...) (Osiris Rising 78) (emphasis added).

A more substantial re-reading occurs in the introduction to the Per Ankh edition of the novel reproduced in *Remembering the Dismembered Continent* (2010). It talks of critics missing the 'cultural identity and social meaning of (...) the beautiful ones' and missing the significance of 'yet' and therefore 'the thematic thrust of the book' 'imaged in the possibility and the timing of that possibility' (Armah 173). It also mentions 'thematic energy behind' descriptions of situations, locales and scenes' that focus on issues of degeneration 'pushing back the promise of regeneration'. So, there is promise of regeneration which gets swamped by degeneration. There is present in the novel itself some promise, slight for having been 'pushed back', of regeneration as in '[y]et out of the decay and dung, there is always a new flowering. Perhaps it helps to know that' (85). Then also, the immediate aftermath of the coup sets the man clawing at an elusive ray:

Someday in the long future a new life would flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as its instruments the same people who have made a habit of killing new flowers. The future goodness may come eventually, but before then where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it?' (159).

Thus, what elude the hopeful 'are the things which would prepare the way' for change.

In *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, Armah essays also to blot out the mess splashed about in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The charge of corruption transposed from the propaganda sheets of the immediate aftermath of the coup into the first novel is dropped. What later assessment (Armah) retains as unforgivable in Nkrumah and his career is ignorance of ancient Africa and the culture trope that holds what it takes to free Ghana and the rest of Africa from Euro-American, white, stranglehold. Nkrumah even gets positioned as a trail blazer beside Cheikh Anta Diop whom Armah lifts high for having unearthed solid facts about the racial blackness of ancient Egypt. According to the later perspective (imagined history), Nkrumah started off with not much of black consciousness. He attracted the attention of the CIA at the point where he started readying to place Africa's resources at the disposal of Africans. All of that represents efforts at breathing optimism into the novel, optimism that runs counter to the framework which informs the narration and which generates changelessness and pessimism.

Marxist dialectical materialism isolates two methods of reflection: metaphysical and dialectical. The metaphysical method takes off from the principle that sees the world as made up of objects, finished and dry. The dialectical method on the other hand takes off from the consideration that all things are subject to change. It conceives of the world as made up, rather,

of processes in which things apparently stable are constantly coming into being and disappearing. As stated by Engels (1962):

The world is not to be comprehended as a complex of things, but as a complex of processes, in which things apparently stable (...) go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away.

Maurice Cornforth (1978) expatiates on the metaphysical method as

a way of thinking which tries to fix the nature, properties and potentialities of everything it considers once and for all: it presupposes that each thing has a fixed nature and fixed properties.

This characterizes the perspective that informs the narration in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. That perspective freezes reality. In the context of the novel, this reality is degenerate. It leaves no room for regeneration. That is the trajectory in which *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is set. It is informed by the metaphysical method that throws up things already set, ‘rigid’, ‘ready-made’: the old-in-the-new, the end-in-the-beginning, the permanence-of-the-negative.

Marxism is of course anathema to Armah. However, he exhibits, several decades later, an awareness of the materialist dialectical method. This shows in the discussion of Wole Soyinka’s embrace of the validity, still current, of Africa’s cultural resources:

Wole Soyinka has not attempted a definitive definition of the African worldview. There can be no such thing, since under the best circumstances, an African worldview has to be a *constantly self-developing reality* (Armah 71) (Emphasis added)

The ‘constantly self-developing reality’ is a world away from the worldview that drives *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* into changelessness, and which in the words of Maurice Cornforth, ‘presupposes that each thing has a fixed nature and fixed properties’ (op. cit.). Same awareness of the materialist dialectical method shows again in Armah’s review of *Dreams of my Father*, one of the two books that former President Barack Obama used to launch his bid for the presidency of the United States of America. Armah claims for Obama in that review (very partial to the ‘black brother’ and so missing Obama’s allegiance, beyond race, to America’s ruling oligarchy) that he “does not think of communities as something *rigid, ready-made*, but as *project and processes*’ (Armah 234) (Emphasis added).

Armah does not indicate the source out of which he reformulates the materialist dialectical method he flashes in *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*. There is no evidence of his application of the method in any of the other essays gathered in that collection or in the earlier *Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006). Certainly, what he says of that method was not available to him at the time he wrote *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. What is in evidence is a rigorous application of the metaphysical method that freezes reality in order to comprehend it, as we have seen in the motifs signaled. Or in the cyclical movement which, a feature of the

metaphysical method, focuses on changes in the position of objects which changes do not affect the inner quality of those objects. Thus, Teacher's hopeful-beginnings-leading-to-rotten-ends describes a cycle that runs through the novel. Indeed, the motifs signaled—the-old-in-the-new, the end-in-the-beginning, permanence-of-the-negative—quicken the movement of the cycle set in vicious mode.

Thus, the novel has Kwame Nkrumah, endowed, in the initial stage of the nationalist struggle, with drive and promise of change. But he runs the machine, 'with obscene haste' (88), into a rut that shows no way out. This account represents a quickening of the movement of the cycle. It gets strung out in emphatic ways, as in this generalising function of the narrator:

How often had he not said it—that this was the way with all life, that there was nothing anywhere that could keep the promise of the fragrance of its youth forever, that everything grows old, that the teeth that were once white would certainly grow to be encrusted with green and yellow muck, and then drop off leaving a mouth wholly impotent, strong only with rot, decay and putrescence, with the smell of approaching death' (85).

The transition (movement of the cycle) gets stretched out but it does not produce change in the defining character of objects. The cycle gets reinforced in Teacher's observation that shows what to expect after the military coup that topples the Nkrumah administration:

I saw men tear down the veils behind which the truth had been hidden. But then the same men, when they have power in their hands at last, began to find the veils useful. They made many more. *Life has not changed*' (92) (emphasis added).

Thus, with tragic inevitability, men, carried on the cycle, stay the same, given once and for all, changeless, as one set after another, moves from a state of powerlessness to a state of powerfulness. The vicious mode of the cycle gets reaffirmed as

[t]he man remembered times when Teacher had talked with eagerness about hopeful things, but then always there was the ending, when he would ask whether the rot and the weakness were not after all the eternal curse of Africa (91).

The cyclical motion yielding permanence-of-the-negative draws strength from the mystical mode expressed as 'eternal curse'. It is in alignment with Modin's (*Why Are We So Blest?*) pronouncement: 'Our disease is ordained'. The state of changelessness then is a given, decided by the demiurge, before the coming into existence of black people.

The materialist conception of history, Marxist, provides a framework for comprehending social reality. The absence of that framework casts the anomie, reflected in gender disparity tilted against women, in changelessness. A historical materialist reading of the gender disparity unearths the class factor that drives it: men's access to resources denied to women. The novel puts on show, as part of the negative count against Kwame Nkrumah, the new petit bourgeois

class of men, epitomised in Koomson, owing their place in social production to favours enabled by party membership and other forms of corruption. We note that the property that the narration flashes about as constituting the wealth of this petty-bourgeois class is chattel, consumables, summed up as the gleam. The man's wife, Oyo, dreams of duping her way, with help from Koomson, to acquiring a fishing boat. But the immediate object of her envy is the perfume on Estella Koomson's hand. She uses it in baiting her husband: 'When you shook hands with Estella Koomson's hand, was not the perfume that stayed on yours a pleasing thing?' (44). As against means of production, means of generating wealth, that founds the social power of ruling classes. Such property, means of production, and the class that it distinguishes, do not show in the novel. The petty bourgeois class, in the world of the novel, excludes women. They are not shown as having a place in social production or as having whatever means of independent livelihood. In the narrator's comment that follows, women show as powerless victims of male clout; with the men in possession of what it takes, trifles in this case, in the estimation of the narrator, to access women's sexuality.

Women, so horribly young, fucked and changed like pants, asking only for blouses and perfume from diplomatic bags and wigs of human hair scraped from which decayed white woman's corpse? (89).

Note the narrator's discomfiture apparent in the observation. A historical materialist reading that picks out the class dynamics subtending the gender disparity leads away from the drive into the negative changelessness that overwhelms the narration. Change then becomes possible through a reconfiguration of the capitalist (neocolonialist) class dynamics of the society. This calls for a revolution that overthrows capitalism and installs socialism in its place. But this is the Marxist frame of reference which Armah misses no opportunity to attack as one more trick of white people to perpetuate their domination of black people or, at any rate, of the non-white world.

Therefore, what Armah wishes as 'the thematic thrust of the book' 'imaged in the possibility and the timing of that possibility', as well as the promise of regeneration are post-facto projections. They point to a desire to breathe into the novel some later life that should encourage a reading to counter the 'coprophilic', the metaphysical changelessness as well as the fixation on Nkrumah that leaves out his, so far, unmatched achievements.

Conclusion

Colonialism, surfacing in the monopoly phase of the development of capitalism (Lenin) has to be read as capitalism. The structures that the independences inherited are at the source of the anomie which *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* reads as despairingly changeless. This essay uses Marxist dialectical materialism/historical materialism to identify the source of changelessness which is an ingrained quality of the novel. Change cannot be read into the novel because the perspective that informs it does not allow it. Change can be envisaged in a counter of defining perspective which *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, already set on a trajectory driven by the metaphysical method, cannot benefit from.

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