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**Futuring Africa: Immature Men and the Utility of Hope in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born***

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## FUTURING AFRICA: IMMATURE MEN AND THE UTILITY OF HOPE IN ARMAH'S THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a re-reading of Armah as a writer of decadence and frustration. I argue that such readings remain prejudiced since scholars rarely identify Kant's ideas of maturity and immaturity as a particularly useful resource which will aid one to understand the full complexity of Armah's vision for postcolonial Ghana. Drawing on Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?', this paper redeems Armah's debut of pejorism by locating the novel's diagnostic function within the complex paradigms of maturity and immaturity. Thus, this paper examines the ambiguities of Armah's characterization and how it strengthens the utopian sensibilities embedded in the text. The paper concludes that Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* remains therapeutic for the advent of the new nation.

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## **Introduction**

Ayi Kwei Armah's debut, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, remains a vibrant source of engagement as far as the history, transitions and the re-imagination of the prophetic future of Postcolonial Africa is concerned. Fifty years after its publication, scholars continue to engage with and participate in several discussions that emerge from the masterpiece. Some critics pay attention to the puzzle of corruption, embezzlement and socio-economic issues in relation to the survival of the postcolony (Lutz, 2003; Chukwueloka, 2011; O'Connell, 2012; Charef, 2015). Others have paid attention to symbolism, the aesthetics of decay/filth and the stylistic significance of vulgar language, (Arko, 2012; Emike, 2014; Awitor, 2014) and the socio-political policy of the Nkrumah regime, failed postcolonial nationalist movements, pessimism and weak utopian vision (Nnolim, 1979; Ogunbesan, 2008; Asempasah, 2012; Ashcroft, 2013; Awitor, 2014). While these readings find relevance based on the beleaguered efforts to characterize tomorrow's Africa, it is also clear from the literature that the novel's optimistic school suggests a weak utopian impulse focusing on the ultimate corruption of the main character, the Man. This paper however argues that we can better understand Armah's hope in the postcolony when we engage with Kant's idea of Immaturity. To this end, the objectives of this project are two pronged: to examine postcolonial habits that obscure the desire for a different state of affairs; it is committed to identifying and discussing instances of what constitutes postcolonial immaturity and maturity and second, to demonstrate how the hope of the new nation is located within the complex paradigms of immaturity and maturity.

## **Kant and the idea of Immaturity**

What is enlightenment? The enlightenment age was a period of intellectual exchange in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A period that saw the desire for political and social change and also signalled the beginning of the modern world. Thus, key thinkers of enlightenment including Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant believed in the idea of progress, where there is confidence in the individual's ability to use reason as a tool for change. In responding to the critical question what is Enlightenment, Kant defines enlightenment as the courage and capacity to think for oneself. For Kant, the more critical questions are: why do we hold ourselves back from enlightenment? Why do we enjoy 'being' because others are? And why do we frown on agency? He states that:

Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. 'Sapere aude! Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!' is hence the motto of enlightenment.

Idleness and cowardice are reasons why such a large segment of humankind, even after nature has long since set it free from foreign direction (emphasis is mine), is nonetheless content to remain immature for life; and these are also the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so comfortable to be immature. If I have a book that reasons for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who determines my diet for me etc., then I need not make any effort myself. It is not necessary that I think if I can just pay; others will take such irksome business upon themselves for me. The guardians who have kindly assumed supervisory responsibility have ensured that the largest part of humanity (including the entirety of the fairer sex) understands progress toward maturity to be not only arduous, but also dangerous.... It is thus difficult for any individual to work himself out of the immaturity that has become almost second nature to him. He has even become fond of it and is for the time being, truly unable to make use of his own reason because he has never been allowed to try it (Pascoe, 115).

Kant criticizes persons who slack in claiming their intellectual maturity. He isolates traits including dependency, idleness, cowardice as detrimental to progress and ultimately to independence. Although some scholars (Rosseau, 1997; Allais, 2016) find in Kant's call for awakening a seeming patristic agenda and the fact that his ideas were central to the colonizing enterprise; particularly in ways that his ideas of maturity and immaturity feed into the thesis of civilizing the childish colonized Other and highlighting the quality of the rational European adult, Kant remains resourceful in thinking decolonization within the context of Armah's revisions of the new Africa. In keeping with Hedstrand (2007) and Trakulhun (2013), Kant's ideas of maturity and immaturity are still essential since it overextend to universalize human behaviour. In other words, Kant's philosophy broadens the everyday influence over one's self beyond the rigid opposition between colonizer and the colonized. Thus, this paper argues that his claims find affinity with Armah's political arguments about genuine liberation or independence. In other words, Kant's idea should be considered as a self-critique of the ethical practices of postcolonial subjects; it has an emancipatory motivation that goes beyond western hegemony. For Armah, independence is strengthening the importance of community over individual sentiments; an audacity to confront the status quo and a willingness to be. Therefore, what appears to be Armah's frustration is the inability to forge paths different from where we have travelled despite the spikes. Thus, part of his strategy to draw attention to the ethical decay and the need to revisit the aspirations of freedom resides in the ambivalence that permeates the novel.

Hedstrand defines immaturity as:

Showing a mental disposition that is focused on an individual's interest to the detriment of others (41)

For Hedstrand, immaturity is an introverted selfish desire that lacks the capacity to show commitment in group interest. Hedstrand further asserts that the immature person “has no moral relevance, s/he may be a danger to herself or himself and s/he has minimal autonomy” (42). In consonance with Hedstrand, I use the term immaturity to encapsulate all forms of unethical behaviours, attitudes and practices that are inimical to the realization of postcolonial futurity. Contrastively, maturity connotes everyday human goodness – being interested in and showing concern for people for their sake. In drawing connections with Kant, I argue that Armah’s perception of maturity is Africa’s ability to re-engage with community in the interest of progress – eschewing all forms of unethical behaviours, attitudes and practices that frustrate the realiation of real of independence.

### **The Men in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born***

The events of Armah’s debut novel take place between Passion Week in 1965 and February 25, 1966, the day after the fall of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president. The novel describes the political failures of his government, replicating the whites during the colonial regime. The novel therefore records Armah’s disillusionment with the post-colonial experience in Ghana and illustrates the variety of issues that existed in African countries highlighting the wide spread corruption by both leaders and the citizenry. The novel is divided into three parts; the first part describes a day in the life of the Man and his encounters with varying forms of corruption. Part two of the novel traces the history of the Man’s progress within a corrupt society, the notable transitions of the Nkrumah regime represented through the strenuous life span of the “man child” and finally the events leading to the military overthrow and the attendant reactions.

Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is about conditions that delineate the operations of freedom. While we recognize his obvious disgust for the corruption in the postcolony, we also recognize his desire for a better society via the purposeful ambiguities in his characterization. A close assessment of the character of the Man crystalizes the route to maturity and progress. The Man is portrayed as an upright individual who tries to set himself apart from the society by refusing to participate in the dubious cravings for material wealth. Amala (2013), for example, graciously describes him as ‘intellectually and actively alive in his condemnation of corruption and moral decay of the society. A man of unquestionable integrity (33). This effort, which arguably signals his commitment to re-building the foundations of national pride, is carelessly wasted by the singular attempt at supporting an old friend who swims in corruption. Thus, the Man becomes culpable of the bigger crime he appears to detest – the chichidodo – a metaphor of his passive civic duty.

Somebody offered me a bribe today,’ he says after a while...To get him an allocation.

And like an Onward Christian Soldier you refused? ...What were you afraid of then?' the woman asked. '...Is there anything wrong with some entertainment now and then? ...You are the chichidodo itself (43-44).

Indeed, we find in the metaphor of the chichidodo an ambivalence of connivance and disapproval which goes to describe the mental state of the Man and the unfamiliar nature of his environment. Arguably, part of the Man's inability to confront the socio-economic pollution in his immediate environment is as a result of the regularity of corruption. Notwithstanding, the Man's dissimilar approach to dealing with Amankwa and Koomson is an indication of an immature temperament and a willing reluctance to initiate transformation. It is important to recognize that Armah carefully juxtaposes the two incidents in praise of communal vision as the praxis for the emergence of the new nation. Thus, by conniving with Koomson, the man plunges himself into a perpetual mental alienation which is detrimental to postcolonial consciousness. The Man's eventual corruption therefore de-affirms the potential of individualism, passive civic duty and cowardice and consequently relocates the possibility of hope in the collective. The character of the Man, as Mazrui (2005) rightly submits, is archetypal of the psychological menace in postcolonial African societies marked by "conquerability, docility, malleability, and fundamental inferiority" (69). Such traits, as I argue, deflate the possibility of promise in the new Africa.

While we recognize the frustration of the Man's introverted advocacy in a corrupted mainstream just like Onipa Baako in *Fragments*, Armah appears to highlight the trouble with the morally compromised elite and solitary existence as a negative framework in post-independent Africa. Indeed, Africa's crawling democracy is evidence of this deficiency. Much of this misfortune derives from a continued undermining of the Afrocentric ideals that are capable of generating the necessary stimuli for change. Adeoti (2013) succinctly re-echoes this fact when he indicates that part of Armah's call of awakening is to stress the dangers associated with adopting a socio-political formation that is not totally free, but dependent on Europe and America and that a social system that promotes equality, freedom, secularity, self-reliance, enlightenment and enhanced self-worth holds promise for Africa. Thus, the ethics of maturity as Armah tries to suggest demand an audacity to radicalize the social front with a sustained commitment for change. His call for a united effort against corrupted power remains cardinal.

The character of Amankwa is an archetype of the 'connection man'/corrupt figure who bribes his way into getting favours and/or fast-tracking deals. The description given to Amankwa resonates with his introverted selfish interests:

In through the door came *a belly swathed in Kente cloth* (emphasis mine).  
The feet beneath the belly dragged themselves and the mass above in little arcs, getting caught in angular ends of heavy cloth (27).

The synecdochic representation of Amankwa, where he is identified as ‘a walking belly’, reiterates a popular Akan notion of greedy people who only care about their stomach (needs). He is adorned in Kente, a very expensive cloth, which shows he is well to do; however, Armah de-emphasises his wealth and rather amplifies his ‘lack of beauty’. Thus, even before Amankwa establishes verbal contact with the Man, Armah foregrounds his lack of ethics and integrity through Amankwa’s grotesque appearance.

Amankwa’s lack of moral relevance is again highlighted in his conversation with the Man. The former’s visit to the allocation clerk was based on a third party’s recommendation: “...someone told me this was about the right time to come” (28). Here, Armah emphasises some practices of civil servants that are inimical to the realization of postcolonial futurity. The allocation clerk stays after work and engages in shady deals, and Amankwa, who is frustrated by the fact that his timber remains in the forest and has not been given any allocation, comes to fast track the allocation process. After the Man refuses his bribe, Amankwa cautions:

...But you also know that everybody prospers from the work he does, no?  
Everybody prospers from the job he does (32).

This rather self-centred notion is what Armah confronts in the novel as anti-nationalistic. Just like Amankwa, other characters like Oyo and her mother see the Man’s refusal to selfishly amass wealth from his position as a wasted opportunity, and they react to this rather selfless and moral-conscious attitude of the Man with scorn and disaffection. Amankwa’s lack of social commitment is judiciously encapsulated in the linguistic choices of “work” – which signals a fair degree of legitimacy to ‘job’ which is relatively callous in terms of its inherent dubious connotations. By the semiotics of his linguistic choices, Amankwa draws attention to the varying grades of public servants in post independent Ghana; professionals with minimal autonomy and professionals with unreflected dispositions using the circumstance of the space allocation clerk at the Railway and Harbour Administration as reference (28).

Armah’s aesthetic resistance to an unnatural cycle of immature tendencies continues with the character of Koomson. As a political figure, Koomson is representative of all corrupt politicians who use their position to amass wealth for themselves. In his conversation with Oyo and her mother about securing a fishing boat in their name, Koomson assures them:

...the money is not the difficult thing. After all, the Commercial Bank  
is ours, and we can do anything (136).

The semantics of ‘anything’ reveals his lack of social competence as a public officer – he clearly demonstrates his lack of commitment to national interest and clearly exposes the endemic selfishness and lack of good citizenship in public sector.

The character of Teacher does not escape our interrogation as far as Armah’s therapeutic vision for Africa is concerned. In the world of Armah’s novel, we find that Teacher recuses himself from

his immediate family and society in view of his disappointment at the new political terrain in order to save himself and his inner integrity. Albeit the Man's concerns:

The man wonders, sitting there, whether this resignation does not make his naked friend infinitely smaller than he could be. Why should there be such a need for shrinking the hoping self, and why must so much despair be so calmly embraced? Is so much protection necessary for life itself? (69)

Teacher's withdrawal is a signification of underwriting collective consciousness - a move that contributes to the pervasive dangers at the time. While the above passage discloses the treachery in self-alienation, it also bemoans the extent to which such passivity could disintegrate community and consequently blur the hope of tomorrow. Such traits, as I argue, compromise the promise of liberation in the postcolony. As Wright rightly remarks, "the only hope for the future lies in breaking the paralyzing grip of controlling Western values" (1992). Armah's novel supports a conscious deconstruction of values in order not to frustrate the operations of total independence.

In a conversation with the Man, Teacher admits that:

You have escaped the call of the loved ones, as you say.

Yes, but I am not free. I have not stopped wanting to meet the loved ones and to touch them and be touched by them. But you know that the loved ones are dead even when they walk around the earth like the living, and you know that all they want is that you throw away the thing in your mind that makes you think you are still alive, and their embrace will be a welcome unto death' (55-56)

The paradox of the loved ones being dead and yet alive indicates that the loved ones have been robbed off all forms of dignity so much so that merely associating with them is an open endorsement of corruption. Thus, although Teacher appears to justify his move to take a back stage in fighting in the interest of community, he finds his civic duty as threatening to his personal integrity so that any attempts at challenging the status quo means an eventual corruption of moral character. Indeed, Teacher's convictions of safeguarding communal spirit as problematized in the metaphors of life and death heightens the ambivalence in Armah's characterization of postcolonial subjects. He appears to suggest that the new age will require an audacity to confront the crises in the postcolony and a sustained desire to inject newness into the society. Thus, to choose life means to choose to remain a passive agent of reformation - the bigger crime that frustrates the operations of freedom. Arguably, choosing death becomes a signification of bringing finality to or terminating the fraud of being. Teacher's choice therefore (to live) amounts to frowning on the agency that is required in postcolonial Africa. Arko (2012) corroborates this assertion when he notes that:

What Teacher urges is withdrawal; withdrawal from the people devoted to darkness instead of the beauty of light. Teacher's response is to keep quiet and not get close to people. Teacher's decision is a univocal



engagement with despair – building an unbridgeable gulf between words and action. {...} Teacher’s position amounts to a separation of theory from politics, which indeed is an abandonment of revolution (268).

Accordingly, Teacher’s conduct becomes a betrayal of the revolution that is required for the total independence of Africa. It is important to indicate that Armah’s supposed call for revolution and instigating a vigor for action is not necessarily a call to political upheaval. Rather, his criticism is a quest to overcome immaturity which holds the potential of deferring the hope of Africa. Thus, Armah’s vision for the new nation is powerfully captured in the words of Nkrumah when he announces his political dream that:

Alone, I am nothing. I have nothing. We have power. But we will never know it; we will never see it work. Unless we choose to come together (87).

Drawing on this conviction, Teacher’s withdrawal and the Man’s passivity in fighting against corruption restricts the promise of hope and devalues the power of the collective.

### **Futuring Africa: Armah and the Utility of Hope**

In dealing with the dynamics of hope in Armah’s debut, I rely on Ashcroft when he asserts that the nature of “Africa’s utopianism finds its most powerful expression in persistence of hope for freedom from colonial oppression” (18). In other words, the future imagination in the African context emphasizes human agency and revolution as capital for change. While this is so, Armah’s revisions of the new Africa thrive on acts of solidarity – becoming more involved in each other’s destiny – and a willingness to operate within a positive intellectual climate in the bid to inaugurate a new order. The core of this motto of change, as Armah tries to propose, begins with the individual’s commitment to strengthening democratic values - an evidence of the ambiguities in characterization. Thus, the strategic characterization of the nameless Man divulges critical issues of tenable futuristic tendencies.

Niemi boldly alludes to Armah’s utopian vision in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* from Hannah Arendt’s political perspective. She claims that part of Armah’s futuristic commitment is not to underline individual obligation to rebuilding the nation but rather a sustained emphasis on democratic communal existence so that the transformation of the nation-state resides in the plurality of consciousness. While I find her reading particularly useful in the face of several pessimistic readings of the novel, I argue that divergent to her dismissal of the significant role of the individual, Armah’s therapeutic utopian quest, though ultimately strengthens men existing together, begins with a persevering determination of the individual beginning with the Man.

Part of Armah’s strategy to affirm the productivity of the public realm as Niemi puts it, is to treat solitary existence as immature and feeble since it restricts the possibility of change – which is why

Armah's Man becomes the corrupted voice of reason despite his internal desire for transformation. Teacher's withdrawal and his subsequent self-isolation (breaking ties with family) is yet another irresistible pointer of Armah's emphasis on individualism. That naked we came and naked we shall go robs him (Teacher) of any obligation to initiate change in the interest of community.

Armah's vision of the new nation is strangely encapsulated in bouts of ambivalences – summoning the people to come through the complexities of being, critical metaphors and the regenerative potential of the filth that permeates the novel. Reading Armah's novel in the light of Kant's ideas, hope is located in the absence of immaturity – a relinquished desire to move towards community. So that maturity, which is defined by plurality and inclusiveness, becomes the key of the people to come – the beautiful ones. The dialectics of the 'not-yet' in Armah's characterization is an indication of hope – that immaturity will make way for the matured to emerge. Indeed, by problematizing the ethics of being in postcolonial Africa, Armah calls for a cultural renaissance that places moral reasoning and agency at the centre of transformation. Kant's philosophical reflections lead us to appreciate Armah's conceptions of moral agency and how the particularities of ethical behaviour become necessary in the revisions of the new nation. Indeed, Kant's perception of appropriate conduct – what it means to be enlightened helps us to interpret Armah's definitions of independence. So that independence becomes the unity of autonomy and obligation. Thus, through the characterization of the Man and Teacher, Armah calls for a replacement of unethical postcolonial behaviour to make way for fundamentally positive attitudes that corroborate national efforts.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shifted the focus of the critical commentary on Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. It has demonstrated that although Armah's debut novel cannot escape the skepticism and its pessimistic outlook, there is also an embedded optimism that frames the novel's fundamental motivation. While such optimistic readings are not unknown (Arko, 2012; Nieimi, 2017), my analyses have shown the centrality of Kant's conceptions of enlightenment to Armah's utopian quest. I have demonstrated that Kant's ideas help us to know how the cloak of pessimism - which is shaped by immature tendencies of individualism, self-alienation and the reluctance to confront the status quo in the interest of community- may be undone to engineer the emergence of the new nation. In other words, I have argued that immaturity becomes pernicious to the mental and spiritual freedom of postcolonial subjects. The paper has maintained that the hope of the new nation lies in the maturity of postcolonial subjects – demonstrated through a move towards community, inclusivism, audacity and a commitment to public order. Thus, the novel's futuristic content is made clearer utilizing Kant's idea of immaturity as an interpretive framework. The paper concludes that Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is optimistic about Africa's future in terms of its therapeutic vision.

## **AUTHOR'S BIO**

Christabel Aba Sam holds a PhD in Literary Studies, MPhil in English Language and a Bachelor of Education (English option) degrees from the University of Cape Coast where she currently works as a Lecturer in the Department of English. Her current research interests include Masculinity Studies, Postcolonial Futures, Spatial Politics and Contemporary African Literature. She teaches Gender and Writing, Aspects of Postcolonial Literature, Studies in Literature and Society and Principles of Prose Fiction to undergraduate and graduate students. Email: [christabel.sam@ucc.edu.gh](mailto:christabel.sam@ucc.edu.gh)

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that I have no competing personal, professional or financial interests that might have influenced the conduct of this study.

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