

THE PORTRAITURE OF MODERN AND TRADITIONAL WOMAN IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*, *FRAGMENT* AND *TWO THOUSAND SEASONS*

Okachukwu Onuah Wosu

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the decadent portraiture of modern female characters in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragment*. It also examines the representation of the traditional African woman in *Two Thousand Seasons*. By spotlighting the moral degeneracy of the modern woman and its implications on their men as they all struggle through Armah's themes of corruption, greed, exploitation, and acquisition of material wealth, it also highlights the traditional African woman as not being instruments of social change but agents of positive cultural revitalization, thereby repositioning them for greater self-actualization. The chosen texts are analysed through the postcolonial lens, which focuses on literature written in English in formally colonized countries and concerns the struggle that occurs when one culture is dominated by another. In articulating the pains, traumas, and challenges arising from both colonial and neo-colonial experiences, Armah therefore used the traditional female character to enforce moral standards and so address sociocultural norms that are inimical to female growth and development.

Keywords: Portraiture, postcolonial, corruption, modern female, and traditional woman.

Introduction

Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the most vocal and outstanding novelists who channelled his creative energy on the evils of colonialism and neo-colonialism, as well as the social ills of modern African societies. Armah, in his treatment of female characters in his

early novels such as *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, presents modern female characters whose roles and actions in the story are characterized by corruption and decadence. He, however, in his other novels, such as *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, tries to liberate or redeem the image of traditional female characters. Armah's treatment of the African woman in his novels, especially the traditional ones, constitutes in a way a re-defining of the status of African women, which could change the way she is perceived in a patriarchal society and, in turn, improve her overall contribution to her society. According to Jasper Onuekwusi:

It is indeed progressive for genders in any culture and space to aspire to reduce the gap in role definition between them. It is acceptable that in response to education, experience and technology the genders can shift positions in their roles in recognition of each other as important in the business of living.... (211)

Over the years, women have traditionally been regarded as inferior to men, both physically and intellectually. This idea of inequality, or "patriarchalism," has created a significant crack in the relationships that exist between men and women.

In the novels of Cyprian Ekwensi, characteristically, a woman's individuality is asserted only through prostitution. Chinua Achebe, in his classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* also traded in the patriarchal direction, where women are traditionally regarded as inferior to men. Achebe represented this ideology thusly:

Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into tough young man capable of ruling his father's household... and so he (Okonkwo) was happy when he heard him grumbling about his woman folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man. (37)

Male writers from Africa naturally wrote from the male perspective, giving superiority to male characters and inferiority to females. The male characters occupy the central position. According to Simone de Beauvoir, as quoted by Roger Webster:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... she is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with relevance to her; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute-she is the other. (74)

Unlike Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and other male writers in Africa, Armah's creative ingenuity in terms of the description of female characters in his novels is not that of the usual docile, submissive, and vulnerable victims of male dominance. Armah's women, on the contrary, are assertive and strong, even when they play minor roles in the novel.

The peak or climax of the portraiture of Armah's female characters, always in charge of their own affairs, is in *Two Thousand Seasons*. According to Busia Abena, in her essay "Parasites and Prophets: The Use of Women in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels," she affirms:

Armah has broken away from one tradition altogether. He does not subscribe to the convention of the free-spirited harlot, there are not whores in any of his texts, heroic or otherwise. In this he breaks away from a tradition which has existed for several centuries in the west (represented by such well-known characters like Defoe's Moll Flauders, and Dickens' Nancy), and which has also been reflected in the contemporary African novel by such writers as Ekwensi and Ngugi. (106)

Images of women in Armah's first three novels, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest?* are of two types. The first group is made up of women of strong character but negative attitudes. They are materialistic and selfish, and their constant demands on their male protagonist put undue pressure on them, which in turn leads to their downfall. This is exemplified in the character of Oyo in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Oyo is married to the man. She is materialistic. Her crave for wealth can drive a husband into soiling his hands. Oyo, though belonging to the downtrodden class, knows that

corruption pervades the entire society and cannot be the only saint in a society where everybody is corrupt; she encourages her husband to collect bribes as others do. In spite of the fact that her husband earns a meagre sum that cannot feed the family, she is extravagant. She queries the locally brewed beer her husband bought for the entertainment of Koomson and his wife. She makes unguarded utterances, which culminate in making his (the man's) condition worse.

The second group also consists of strong women, but unlike the first, they are self-reliant and able to provide support and a form of refuge for their male heroes, especially when under pressure. In *Fragments*, Naana, together with Juana, Baako's Puerto Rican girlfriend, reflects the second category of Armah's women. The two are the supportive women behind Baako's survival. Without them, Baako might not have made it in the end. But these two positive women pace in the face of the sheer intensity behind the violent force of the women who play negative roles in the novel. Baako's mother and sister represent this second type of female in *Fragments*. They are strong but negative characters. Like the man's wife and mother-in-law in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, they are hostile, possessive, materialistic, and overweening. They are figures of oppression for Baako. Their perversion of custom and traditional practices and lust for material things epitomize their role in the novel.

In Armah's novels, there are actually no weak female characters in the sense of being victims of patriarchy. That is, no obedient housewives in the novels of Armah are wholly dependent and ruled by the bullying husband. This is where Armah's novels essentially differ from other male novels in African literature.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonialism is an approach to literary interpretation that focuses on literature written in English in formally colonized countries. Postcolonial critics stipulate that to be colonized is to be removed from history, and the colonized culture is forced to go underground or obliterated. According to Bressler, "postcolonial literature and its

theorists investigate what happens when two cultures clash and, more specifically, what happens when one of them, with its accessory ideology, empowers and deems itself superior to the other” (200). Therefore, this theory is basically concerned with the struggle that occurs when one culture is dominated by another.

Our primary texts are therefore properly situated within the context of postcolonial theory, as Armah has represented the notion that literature has no meaning detached from the feelings of the people whom it represents. Since it is from the lives of these people that literature draws its significance, our major concern shall be to investigate the decadent portraiture of modern female characters in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragment* before shifting our focus to the portraiture of the traditional African woman in *Two Thousand Seasons*. The female characters featured in *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments*, like Oyo, Estella, Efua, Araba, etc., bear the brunt of Africa’s colonial encounters, such as the enthronement of dishonesty, fraud, and corruption as replacements for age-old values.

The Portraiture of Modern Female Characters in *the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*

As we consider the issues as reflected in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, one must observe that the issue of materialism that crept into the national ethos of post-independence African societies is quite pronounced in African novels. Armah, while searching for the fundamental outlook of his people, integrates his plots, characters, and settings in ways that illuminate the decadence pervading the moral fiber of a Ghanaian society. This general determination, which is prevalent in the economy, the government, and the governed, was quite devastating. Its overwhelming manifestation in the lives of Armah’s post-independence female characters was lucid.

Armah somehow has represented through these works the notion that literature has no meaning detached from the feelings of the people whom it represents. This is a postulation affirmed by Irele as he

observes that “the sacredness of the work of art resides in the human beings behind the work” (40). And since it is from the lives of these people that literature draws its significance, we shall first investigate the decadent portraiture of modern female characters in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragment* before shifting our focus to the portraiture of the traditional African woman in *Two Thousand Seasons*.

The female characters featured in *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments*, like Oyo, Estella, Efua, Araba, etc., bear the brunt of Africa’s colonial encounters, such as the enthronement of dishonesty, fraud, and corruption as replacements for age-old values. They do not have an acute desire for material goods but have an intense craving for other earthly gains. They have been moved from an earlier condition of excellence to a degenerate period characterized by gross self-indulgence. Armah’s effort has been to expose the influence of these degenerate modern women in their society and, in the process, expose the effect the muddled and highly corrupt new world had on that society.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, we are faced with situations that satirize the general moral decline of the Ghanaian people and, by extension, post-independence African society. The devastating impact of this encounter takes its toll on the lives of Oyo and Estella, the wives of both the protagonist and the antagonist, respectively. No wonder, therefore, that at home, where husbands are supposed to find love, acceptance, and security, wives like Oyo constitute a major obstacle.

Oyo is at odds with her husband’s moral principles, which she considers obsolete. She has neither integrity nor moral virtue. She is promiscuous, and her earlier lecherous adventure with her husband, who was also a philanderer, landed them both in early marriage, which truncated their opportunity for further education. Finding no other way to remedy the situation, Oyo becomes obsessed with how to possess material wealth. She becomes disdainful of her husband’s indifference to his family’s need to acquire the good things of life through looting of the national treasury like the Koosons.

Estella and her husband are the symbols of their society. They thrive on 'cutting corners' and 'eating the fruits of fraud', which Oyo approves of and believes to be an ideal type of life. From Oyo's perspective, the husband is the foolish one who cannot live life the way it is lived by all around and those who will "stand by the flowing river and disapprove of the current" (108). That her husband did not want to sign the boat deal with the koomsons but is ready to eat from the fruits of the deal attracts her keen resentment and cynicism. On account of this, Oyo calls her husband "a chichidodo... a bird that hates excrement but feeds on maggots that grow best in the excrement in the lavatory" (45), "a bird longing for its maggots but fleeing the feces that gave them birth" (47). In actual fact, he detests corruption but enjoys that which is procured by it.

Oyo's mother, rather than becoming a traditional role model to her daughter and grandchildren, inculcating in them creativity that could induce positive value and a high moral standard, succumbs to the newly introduced materialism, which is marked by greed and eventually leads to decay. She fails to see "fraud" in the fact that her son-in-law's consolidated salary for one year could ill-afford the value of one fishing boat. In her morally disciplined son-in-law, she perceives 'ill-manners and a lack of patriotism' (58). Armah, in foregrounding the activities of Oyo and her mother in their quest for material wealth, highlights the prevailing deep erosion of the moral virtues of traditional African women: Affirming here Fraser's insight that "history is rotten through and through" (28).

Estella and her husband are symbols of exploiters in our society, who sell their own as slaves in exchange for exotic, imported, worthless things from Europe. Evidently, Estella, having been so privileged by her husband's position, lives in real splendour. She has around her enough things "for a human being to spend a lifetime desiring" (144). And naturally, these desirable things have been extended to another member of the family—her sister, Regina. She is currently at a university pursuing a degree, albeit in dressmaking, in faraway London, under a national scholarship arranged for her by Estella and her husband. Her latest

treat, which could cause another loot of scarce foreign exchange from the national treasury through Estella's influence, is meant to enable her to acquire a Jaguar sports car with which she had just fallen in love, failing which she threatens to commit suicide (149).

Through Estella's corrupt influence, her family becomes materially opulent and morally bankrupt. She precipitates taking the only open route to success, which is the "rotten" route. Oyo believes this extravagant and debased lifestyle to be purposeful and satisfying. She makes it clear to her husband in this dialogue that she would like the type of life Estella is living. According to her, "maybe you like this crashing we do, but I am tired of it. I would like to have someone drive me where I want to go" (44).

As we turn to *Fragments*, one is confronted again with other fascinating female characters devoid of moral rectitude. They have shattered those basic ethical principles that gave meaning to their being. Embedded in Naana's lament at the end of *Fragments*, which captured the central theme of this work, "the larger meaning that lent sense to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago has shattered into a thousand and thirty useless pieces" (250).

The protagonist, Baako, is the man of the moment. Having been away in the United States as a student of creative writing, his sudden homecoming becomes one event that unravels the true image of the women in his life. The family is taken unawares, and this proves disastrous to the female members of his family, who would have preferred a more dramatic and boisterous entry that would have given prestige to the family.

Armah wielding his satirical whip allows it to descend on one such entry demonstrated by the morally depraved sister of another returnee, Brempong. Robert Hudson Brempong is a typical "been-to." He has been in and out of Ghana several times and never fails to bring back some treasured goods. The sister's welcome speech as he touches down with Baako provides a graphic description of the irresponsible part of that decadence in the VIP car park, and she admonishes the crowd thus:

Move back you villagers... don't come and kill him with your TB. He has just returned, and if you don't know, let me tell you. The air where he has been is pure, not like ours. Give him space. Let him breathe! She pushed till she had created some space around the hero.... (84)

In *Efua* and her daughter, Araba, one witnesses another morally bankrupt set of characters. *Efua Onipa*, the mother of the protagonist, *Baako*, represents a modern, educated African woman who has lost her traditional values through western education. Expecting a change in fortune in her life through her returnee son, she demands to know when the car he ought to have shipped will arrive, "so that my old bones can rest" (101).

As a result of this insatiable quest for wealth, *Efua* and her daughter *Araba* violate the traditional procedure governing the infant out-dooring ceremony. They had calculate that such a ceremony held a few days after payday is "useless" since it will not yield the desired dividend. They thereafter decided to make money out of their child by moving the ceremony to the nearest pay day. In their greed and desperation, the child dies due to negligence and insensitivity. It is therefore ironic that *Efua*, who once acknowledged to *Juana* at the beach prayer ground, "that where she came from, people will do anything to get a child" and that "children are the most important things in this life" (50), would, in her greed, descend to such a murderous level.

Efua, in her blighted hopes, laments that *Baako* represents "some ripe fruits of her womb that have turned green and hard, hurtful to her open, consuming mouth" (251). Using *Efua*, *Armah* also castigates black African women without moral scruples. We see *Efua* falsify the son's age to hasten his early entry into school. This makes her, as a teacher, moral builder, and image maker, a highly dishonest and unreliable character.

Armah also lashes upon one of the oldest professions that debases womanhood using the character of *Christian*, as revealed in

this conversation when asked how soon she will be seen again by Williams. According to her:

You know it depends on you... and your holy wife who won't let you come out and play... and your beautiful car which she wants to monopolize... and your money which she wants for herself alone, and your sweet *kojo* magic which she can't share at all. But as for me, I'm ready any time. (97)

Armah, in this satiric swipe, ridicules and, to a large extent, denounces vices such as illicit sex, concubines, covetousness, "sexploitation," and other forms of immorality as a means of social mobility for African women. He places emphasis on the fact that economic independence must not be acquired at the expense of one's personal integrity.

We are also confronted with another advanced corruption in the character of another educated woman, Akosua Rusell. Akosua is the editor of *Kyerema*, the country's most prestigious quarterly magazine, which nevertheless appears once every two years, not due to a lack of funds but more to mismanagement. She conceals the huge grants solicited from American foundation agents in her private pocket. Meanwhile, she is quite reluctant to organize workshops for grooming future writers, which is one reason for the issuing of grants by the philanthropists. Adogboba's effort in this direction is one such frustrated effort (163). The narrator describes her as some "sweet poison" who hates hard work and finds ways to make money without working for it (159).

Portraiture of the Traditional African Woman in *Two Thousand Seasons*

Here, our focus is on the positive portraiture of the traditional female characters revealed by Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*. While seeking the motive behind their creation, the work monitors how realistically they have been made to function as it demonstrates the following: their wisdom and leadership qualities; their roles in building up the family enterprise; and their spirit of valour in the execution of

their roles. Armah has shown in this novel that traditional female characters are agents of positive cultural revitalization. In assessing some aspects of these traditional women, Ezeigbo has observed that:

Armah's exploration of the humanity and vitality of the African woman is without prejudice and rancor... in addition to other preoccupations, Armah celebrate the psychological Strengths, weaknesses, traumas, defeats and glories of the African woman. (55)

Armah sees nothing wrong with a prosperous, comfortable, and successful life for his traditional female characters. He does not subscribe to the peripheral characters described by Katherine Frank as "Shadowy figures who hover on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking, and plaiting their hair" (15), nor does he entertain the stereotypical roles of "girl friends or good-time girls, courtesans, or prostitutes sketched by Kenneth Little" (Njoku, 199). Armah brings his traditional women out of their fringes of life and releases them into the mainstream of issues in their society. With the energetic creative vision he instils in them, they are empowered to operate beyond the status quo.

When we look at *Two Thousand Seasons* critically, we can infer that Armah was poised to celebrate the black African woman's intellect and leadership qualities. Through this work, he has tried to deconstruct male-enthroned ideologies in literature and history. In pursuance of this objective, Armah demonstrates the physical resilience and moral superiority of traditional African women. Delineating these with the internal rift besetting the Akan people during the rule of men, Armah shows us a period characterized by "greed, laziness, and contempt for justice" (9). He focuses on men who are glad to indulge themselves "at the expense of their own people" (90), and at a period that breeds jealous, cowardly men who are determined to cling to power. The result of that determination becomes "the slaughters of honest people, the banishment of honest words, the raising of flattery and lies into the authorized currency of the time, the reduction of public life to an unctuous interaction" (9).

These acts of greed and aggression exhibited by men cause so much masculine carnage that they destroy the rule of man. Armah's vision for his society abhors a vacuum. He therefore creates a rule for women that contrasts with that of men. This period is "violent-free, with easy movement, natural, and imperceptible to impatient, unconnected eyes (10).

With the conducive atmosphere required for the heavy patient work of rehabilitation and maintenance, Armah puts his women to work. The men, in their indolence, have taken to brewing and drinking their favourite drink, "ahey." Their primary task is to provide security and adequate provision for the family they have abandoned, claiming that they are reserving their strength for heroic tasks that seldom come. When eventually they do come, the men are too drunk to be of any use; hence, the women become "maintainers...their own protectors, finders, and growers both, (10). In eulogizing these women, Armah recounts their exploits as they dared:

The lost exile seeking an end to his loneliness in rape out of the open farm; the huge python blindly spreading the terror gripping it in sudden discovery; the cat of the fields hunting unusual food; the maddened elephant: every danger the women tamed, bringing tales and skins and meat home to triumphant husbands. (10-11)

In this state of feebleness, the men have neither courage nor initiative to offer a solution to the devastating drought that is ravaging their land. Their preoccupation is more with having enough water for the brewing of their precious drink. No wonder Armah, at this stage of imminent threat of starvation of the entire race, crafts a situation that deplores the outdated cultural doctrine that women are born inferior. This is disproved by the exploits of the dynamic, sensitive woman of 'the way', Yaniba. This courageous and ingenious woman, having sensed the impending catastrophe, defies the elements and provides the necessary leadership needed to explore the feeder spring to the source. The reward is a pool of water at the furthest tributary, which brings relief to her people.

Yaniba and the other resourceful women do not stop there. They go a step further by instituting a welfare type of administration for the equitable distribution of resources. It is therefore ordained that the scarce water newly discovered must not be wasted “cooking selfish food” (11). Brewing “ahey” is thereafter forbidden ‘until rain comes in abundance’. Not only that, the women raze all the men’s ‘unearned privileges and refuse to supply the unnecessary wants of men”.

All enjoyment is to be the result of the work accomplished. (11) There is no way a society run on these seemingly edifying principles would not prove beneficial to all its people. Armah’s men have more or less social abnormalities that hinder the fulfilment of their primary objective, but Yaniba is given the foresight and courage to effect changes for the overall benefit of all in society.

On Ndola, another fundi, he bestows the art of eloquence. She has the courage to openly criticize the king in public ceremonies. For one of such destructive criticisms, the moron-Tutu, who craves pleasant songs of deceit, banished her, just like Koranche had banish Isanusi for failing to use his power of eloquence to mystify their people. Akole, another sage, and Fundi, from the “Duiker clan,” are given the spirit of truth. She too has the courage to interrupt the king’s flatterer, who lies about the true mission of the white man. In a soul-guiding speech, she sensitizes the people in the following passage:

The white men from the sea were homeless brigands and soulless too, men roaming the seas till they came upon a people they could scatter into endless barren emptiness. Monsters they were, and even if we did not have in us the courage of truth to execute them outright as punishment for their crimes against all people of the way we should at least have the wisdom not to welcome them among ourselves. (78-9)

This unsettling speech is enough to stir the anger of the king and his flatterers, who perceived, in Akole’s words, wisdom capable of disrupting their imaginary dreams of power. We are told that when the king’s spokesman silences Akole with an oath on account of this

provocative and inspiring speech, “The people murmured their disappointment, for when Akole had spoken, it was as if the people had been waiting all day for just such a voice” (79). Akole’s voice is here elevated to a voice of last resort in contrast with the male voice, which is consistently unreliable, deceitful, and dishonest.

In another development, when the people of the Way in their travails have thought it more prudent to leave their land, out of four pathfinders detailed to search for a favourable destination, two were women and the other two men. The men naturally assumed the mantle of leadership, which ends in a fiasco that claims the lives of all the pathfinders. It is yet two other women—Ningome and Noliwe—who, sensing the hopelessness of their situation, assume leadership. These two legendary female pathfinders, whose fortitude and resilience are tested and found to be resolute, pilot their people to their final destination, Anoa.

In these contrasting roles, Armah has made more prominent the indomitable spirit of the female gender, giving credit to her wisdom, fortitude, and leadership qualities. In Anoa, a prophetess and ‘fundì’, Armah has endowed an uncommon privilege generally bestowed on men like Ezeulu in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*. She becomes the guiding spirit of their race, showing the people just how much, they have deviated from the way and predicting future events that would redirect them back to the way again. Armah, on this account, endows her with the “intensity of hearing, clarity of vision, and sharpness of feeling,” quite unlike anybody of her age. This intensity, we are told, “marked her but did not isolate her from her group.” In addition, Armah’s characterization of this humble woman reveals another aspect of her nature, namely, a phenomenal capacity for innovation. We are informed that Anoa, “From the smallest sensation entering her, like river soil, she put out more, made more things audible, and made more things visible out of what had entered her than others had an art to do” (14).

These qualities of originality and resourcefulness are also found in another woman of great moral strength, Abena. Functioning as the

moral voice of her group, she has the courage to spit on the king's face during their captivity. She is the one who suffers most keenly from the greed of her fellow initiates. Her loyalty and commitment to the search for 'the way' are total, but it never really isolated her from her group, just like Anoa. Her renowned advocacy for collective consciousness is highlighted in this exchange with Kwesi: "But you, Abena, how shall we ever deserve your forgiveness?" In her responses, Abena asks, "Why forgiveness?" but is informed by Sobo that Abena 'could have saved herself' (111), being the only one who strongly resisted the festivity and their captivity. Abena, responding again, explains, "But I could not have saved myself... There is no one to save apart from all of us. What would I have done with my life alone, like a beast of prey?" (111). From these responses, one is made aware of the fact that what is generally emphasized in Abena's character is group solidarity and the need for collective action.

Conclusion

We have examined Armah's depiction of female characters in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born*, *Fragments*, and *Two Thousand Seasons* based on their roles as a result of their sex. Having identified the behaviours of the female characters in *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments* as being decadent and ignoble has adduced reasons for their special attachment to corrupt living as it exposed their influence on the actions of the story. There is also a focus on the portraiture of traditional female characters in *Two Thousand Seasons*. In articulating the concerns, pains, traumas, and challenges arising from both colonial and neo-colonial experiences of African people, Armah therefore used the traditional female characters to enforce moral standards and address socio-cultural norms that are inimical to female growth and development.

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