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Postcolonial Disgust or Regenerative Vision?: The Values and Significance of "The Man" in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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ABSTRACT

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* has been condemned for its severe criticism of newly independent Ghana, its disdain for its leaders and officials, and for the absence of hope displayed for a future in which the individual and the nation might triumph over societal corruption. This article analyzes Armah's controversial novel through the caustic response of its main character, The Man, to contemporary national ethics and to the possibilities he himself embodies for genuine change and regeneration. The conflict in The Man's alienated consciousness is rooted not only in the expediencies of the newly postcolonial Ghana he fastidiously observes, but also in his loyalty to the traditional Ghanaian values he inherits, remembers, and practices, thus indicating the possibility of hope and change for both character and nation.

It is commonly believed that revulsion against corruption and disillusionment with the national condition are central to Armah's intentions and aspirations in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. This belief has persistently drawn critics to evaluate the work in terms of its predominant and powerful imagery of rot and decay, contending that Armah's depiction of corruption of all kinds does not provide an accompanying "strategy" of escape from this canker. This article seeks to analyze Armah's work through close textual reading and analysis and examining Armah as an engaged writer. Furthermore, it will discuss narrative elements that portray Ghanaian sociocultural values that it argues are crucial for change and regeneration in the postcolonial society of Ghana.

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The Beautyful Ones is a philosophical novel that interrogates how the main character, The Man, traverses his corrupt society while trying to uphold values of honesty and integrity. The Man's integrity undermines the glamor that the affluent and corrupt politicians in the society exert on the populace and affirms the quest for the model of moral integrity that Armah promotes. *The Beautyful Ones* recounts the day-to-day life of a rail office worker, simply called The Man, over a series of days and follows his thoughts. He endures insults from his family and fellow workers but resists the pressure and the temptation to accept bribes and to take part in the corrupt practices of the time. The purpose behind these corrupt practices is the acquisition of material goods. Those workers who accept bribes are able to live a relatively normal life, while, because of The Man's refusal to accept bribes (depicted in one episode in the novel), he and his family live from payday to payday, struggling to make ends meet. His inability to provide his family with the latest commodities and luxuries leads him to perceive himself at times to be a moral failure. His wife, Oyo, in spite of her dedication to the welfare of the family and her affection for her husband, frequently scolds him for not involving himself in the pursuit of material goods and wealth.

The Man is taken on a "journey"—we see him literally moving through his city—through the complexities and dynamics of Ghanaian society so that he can be refined for the regenerative role that Armah's narrative sets out to perform through him. Through his actions, judgments, and thoughts, we see his awareness of the socioeconomic situation of postcolonial Ghana at his local level; we appreciate the lack of value for humans in the society around him and the ascription of importance to material wealth and the lack of confidence or trust in the post-independence Ghanaian bureaucracy. The Man's attitude toward the corruption and decadence in Ghana and his personal qualities suggest the roles he plays in this process of rebuilding the sociopolitical terrain of Ghana. Before proceeding to my close reading of the novel, I will outline how the novel has been received by Armah's contemporary postcolonial critics and writers.

Both Ama Ata Aidoo and Chinua Achebe see *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as an expression of doom. In her introduction to the 1969 Collier-Macmillan edition of the novel, Aidoo, in the spirit of "patriotism," observes that Armah foregrounds the negative by deliberately leaving out "whatever is beautiful and genuinely pleasing in Ghana." As it stands, she argues, Ghanaians "could find it difficult to accept in physical terms the necessity for hammering on every page the shit and stink from people and the environment" (xii). Achebe in *Africa and Her Writers* describes the book in strongly distasteful language as "a sick book. Sick, not with the sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of the human condition" (24). He criticizes Armah for adopting a Eurocentric perspective through his projection of a tainted view of "the human condition" onto Ghana, asserting that Armah is "in grave danger of squandering his enormous talents and energy in pursuit of the human condition" (24). Charles Nnolim describes Armah as a pessimist whose imagery of Ghana focuses on "slime, lubricity, mucus, urine" (207), and does not indicate any possibility of regeneration, but rather discloses a Swiftian vision of disgust and the grotesque. Leonard Kibera characterizes Armah's work as shallow and superficial, adding that "in castigating us, the writer should not be shy of possibilities even though in the end he may find none" (71). Ojong Ayuk suggests that Armah decides to "plumb the reasons for the decay of his society

and to combat, through fiction, the factors which have inhibited revolutionary growth" (35). For Akaeke Onwueme, Armah's novel serves as a sort of spiritual exercise performed on the soul of the main character and all the others in the novel. Onwueme argues that Armah has to adopt this form of spiritual exercise in order to "exhume, excoriate, and churn out dirt," which will finally generate "a motion not just to produce a cathartic effect but to reveal 'the way' hidden beneath the depth of decay so as to unravel its beauty and open up new frontiers and vistas of hope" (75).

However, in another important article Minna Niemi emphasizes that the ethical choices of Armah's nameless individual are pointers to a better communal future. She argues that Armah pays "meticulous attention to individual attempts to devise a way out of the disillusionment that results when a united effort against corrupted power in the style of the decolonization movement, has lost its effectiveness" (219). She further assesses the main character as being "capable of active moral resistance to corruption and of individual thinking" (4). This is a productive reading of Armah's work and serves as the starting point for my own reading. However, Niemi's reading does not focus on the traditional Ghanaian values that I will argue serve as the basis for the main character's decisions and choices. Niemi's reading fails to recognize the redemptive qualities—strong family values, honesty, and hard work—that make The Man capable of resisting the negative forces around him and acting as a figure of hope.

This idea of the promise of regeneration in *The Beautyful Ones* offers a significant departure from other works of criticism on Armah. The notion of rebirth in my reading derives from the narrator's comment in the novel about the expectations for independence—"we were ready for big and beautiful things" (94)—and that "the promise was so beautiful. Even those who were too young to understand it all knew that at last something good was being born" (100). While criticism has focused on the disappointment of that promise in the novel, there are pointers in the novel to regeneration emerging from the decadence and corruption that has engulfed the independent Ghanaian state. Armah, as an engaged writer, holds up a mirror to his society that offers hope for the nation after the independence experiment has thus far failed to produce any significant results. In his portrait of The Man he indicates both despair at national shame and redemptive possibility.

The Beautyful Ones is more than an accusatory documentation of the causes of the decadence, corruption, and disillusionment experienced by the masses after independence. Armah proposes as a counter to the "sons of the nation" who have taken over political power and adopted the corrupt practices of the colonialists, a new conception of "Ghanaian identity," one that includes hard work, determination in the face of oppressive socioeconomic factors, and strict familial values. In the novel, Armah gives his protagonist the generic title "the man," suggesting that he is an emblematic, everyman figure. In doing so, he creates his protagonist as an icon of a specific and incorruptible identity, which, I will argue, draws directly on traditional Ghanaian values. This representation provides a model for redefining, regenerating, and rebuilding the future of the nation—in short, hope for change. The importance of the man's steadfast qualities becomes apparent in the social context Armah builds for him, a society in which almost everyone is drawn into the corrupt economy of greed and self-interest.[1]

As I will argue, Armah's first novel can be read as affirming that, despite the decay and the decadence, society can experience regeneration and reconstruction if the model of The Man is adopted. The protagonist is an icon of the specific identity that Armah seeks to create. This model, Armah hopes, will help redefine the sociopolitical future of the nation, which, in the midst of corruption and decay, seems to be at a standstill with no visible signs of development—governments change but nothing else really does.

Armah's personal experience as a Ghanaian man had a major influence on his writing (*Eloquence of Scribes* 13) and on this novel in particular. These influences include the supportive nature of his father's family, clan and tribe, the joy of listening to the stories of the grandmother (*Eloquence of the Scribes* 20, 25–26), his negative attitude to matters of social privilege (29), his refusal to take higher salaries than others doing the same work (101–03, 126–27), and his intellectual curiosity. The values expressed in his own personal life are also those located in The Man: the need to remain truthful, having regard for loved ones, reverence for others, the importance of the nuclear, as well as the extended family, and the value of moral integrity and hard work. The values of reconciliation and self-control can also be deduced from The Man's character in *The Beautyful Ones*. If in the novel he emphasizes certain values of Ghana through the main character he calls The Man, presenting them as a model for future regeneration and reconstruction of the postcolonial corrupt Ghanaian society, it is because he himself was brought up in an environment that gave him strong views about the retention of cherished traditional values. However, the values promulgated in the larger society, especially his school environment, conflicted with those he learned at home. He explains this conflict thus: "I grew up in a home environment that gave me a point of view from which I could see that the vision of reality that the established world offered me in its magnificent schools was an atrocious lie" (15). As a "serious African artist who combines the craft of creativity with the search for regenerative values" (Armah, "Masks and Marx" 35), Armah imbues his protagonist in *The Beautyful Ones* with these values. This is the point of departure of Armah's cure for the ills of the nation. He seeks to resuscitate the hope of the nation of Ghana by implanting the seeds of regeneration and regrowth in the person of the main character, The Man, with hope of those seeds germinating, growing and bearing fruit in the future.

For Armah, then, the main protagonist is an example of how his proposed project of regeneration can be achieved. Yet, as Neil Lazarus observes, "many commentators have struggled in vain to retain their grasp on the work's vision of regeneration," focusing rather on "the bleakness of the material universe that the novel postulates" (139). This reading is understandable, but it does not allow for the traditional nature of the values that shape The Man's behavior and influence his choices to be highlighted. Lazarus does not analyze how these values are encoded and displayed in The Man's actions, thoughts, and refusals to accommodate the sociocultural milieu that have made him who he is. Many critics have missed this point as they only consider the various derogatory labels assigned to The Man in the novel: the bus conductor calls him "a bloodyfucking sonofabitch" and "an article of no commercial value" (6). The driver labels him an "[u]ncircumcised baboon" and "a [m]oron of a frog" (10), while his wife Oyo calls him "Chichidodo" (52). However, Armah shows a second perspective of The Man, different from the ideas of his fellow characters.

The Man experiences a series of testing events and is then rewarded with the title of a "man of integrity." Testing events ranging from his wife's constant nagging and reprimanding for his actions and inactions, his mother-in-law's constant provocations and insults and her allegation that he is not a responsible father, and his work colleagues' belief that he does not know the reality of the endemic corruption situation in Ghana, his constant self-interrogation to be sure he is on the right path, his friend's (the Teacher's) challenging views on marriage, relationships, and national affairs. The Man's resolve to remain "clean," in the face of all these testing events, exemplified by the scraping of dirt off his shoes and his frequent bathing (*The Beautyful Ones* 114, 139), is analyzed as being unrealistic on many different levels and as symbolic of Armah's own undisguised philosophical pessimism and despairing view of Ghanaian society (Nnolim 207). Little, however, has been written about the protagonist's deep desire to remain morally upright. Armah shows that this pursuit of integrity is only achievable through physical, spiritual, and moral suffering and repeated effort. It is The Man's capacity to adapt to and endure all the conditions of life thrown at him that allows him to achieve this end.

Before delving into details about the characteristics that make The Man an icon of values worth pursuing in the quest to rebuild Ghana, let us look at an example of how the personality of The Man connects with the attitudes of his society. An incident, which occurs in chapter 9, when The Man, in consultation with his wife, goes to the shop in preparation for the arrival of the Koomsons, clearly reveals some aspects of his personality and attitudes. The third-person narrator takes us through the thoughts of The Man and his assessment of the general economic situation around him:

> The day before, going into the shops with his new money in his pocket, he had had the uncontrollable feeling of happiness and power, even while knowing somewhere in the back of his mind that the expensive things he was buying would deepen the agony of his next Passion Week. When he has asked for all that white man's food, the beautiful long grain rice in the packet with the Afro-American Uncle Ben smiling on it, . . . for the moment, all demanded that he lose control of himself and behave like someone he was not and would never be? Money. Power. (*The Beautyful Ones* 134–35)

Here Armah reveals The Man's thoughts on the main issues that cause people to chase after "the gleam"[2] and behave as other people around them do. Indeed, the passage has been used by critics (Ayuk 36–37; Goldie 100) to depict the hesitant and unstable resolve of The Man, which, to them, ultimately leads to his anguish and despair and hence his inability to be a strong or worthy symbol of regeneration. However, upon a closer reading one realizes that The Man is, rather, enumerating and delineating the causes of corruption and self-deception that have plagued society after independence in a self-aware manner. The passage illustrates The Man's foresight, his planning acumen, and his consciousness of the general economic situation around him. He knows that even though there is an uncontrollable feeling of happiness when there is money in one's hand, there will always be a day of drought when one will have to go through the agony of Passion Week—the last week of the month before payday.

The Man shows his awareness of the consequences of over-indulgence in things that bring a temporary sense of self-worth to people but are not worth the financial pain in the long term. He calls the groceries he is buying "white man's food"—something that is exotic as compared to what he usually buys. He stresses that "he could not, in the end afford" them. His motivation is simply the momentary satisfaction he feels in the moment of enjoying them. On many such occasions, "the foolish happiness of the moment" ultimately produces what he calls "a bitter cursing of himself." The Man is aware that he is as susceptible as anyone else to the appeal of these products, but his sense of financial responsibility makes him equally aware of the consequences. In addition, his moral indignation and political awareness of the larger implications of small indulgences in luxury cause him both pleasure and disgust.

The conclusion of the quotation emphasizes postcolonial Ghanaian society's penchant for material wealth and the ascription of value to the "gleam," which ultimately results in a lack of value being given to human beings. The value that this society ascribes to people depends on what they have—their material possessions. Ojong Ayuk observes that the values that Armah's characters hold in high esteem "are essentially material. Accordingly, a hero is someone who amasses a substantial lot of blessings and the means by which he has obtained them are irrelevant" (36). What is evident in the above description is that most of these people, who pursue the "gleam," as Armah describes it, do so because of societal pressure. This pressure is strongly suggested in the line "all demanded that he lose control of himself and behave like someone he was not and would never be" (135). The Man is tempted to lose self-control and behave like someone he is not so that he can satisfy the desires and aspirations of his family and fit in with his society. The case of The Man suggests that social, rather than innate, forces often control the action and inaction of members of society. For Armah's main character to be able to control this tendency and overcome the temptation that comes with it, he must go against social conventions or norms. For this purpose, in his portrayal of The Man, Armah goes to great lengths to elucidate differences between The Man and his colleagues at work, on the one hand, and the corrupt nouveaux-riche represented by Koomson and the like, on the other. As such, although The Man is typically a modern man beset with challenges of survival in an unfriendly Ghanaian social system, he refuses to give up his ethical sense—even though he is aware of the conflict that this entails.

In *The Beautyful Ones* Armah employs The Man's perspective to expose what Achille Mbembe's theoretical framework of the *postcolony* calls all the "particular signs that confer on the current African age its character of urgency" (15); that is, the corruption and decadence that is mirrored in the novel is seen and condemned through the eyes of The Man. In his attempt to remain honest, he exposes the greed and the corruption around him at the time of independence. Many associated the birth of the new nation with prospects of a bright future. In particular, the masses yearned for a free climate in which they might conduct their business and for a government that would respond to their needs and communicate with them in ways that they could understand. In *The Beautyful Ones*, The Man observes that even though the nation is born "anew," the situation of corruption that existed before independence has not changed: "[T]he same old stories of money changing

hands and throats getting moistened and palms getting greased" are still there but, painfully, the difference this time is that "the sons of the nation were now in charge, after all. How completely the new thing took after the old" (11).

In the corrupt world painted by Armah, the only way out of poverty and lack is the pursuit of the "gleam" through bribery and deceit. As The Man observes, "[t]here would always be only one way for the young to reach the gleam. Cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud" (*Beautyful Ones* 112). It is important to note here that the character appreciates the difficulty of living an upright life in this society but, instead of taking the easy way out—that is, giving and accepting bribes—he decides, as Lazarus urges, to fight "against the gleam" and "to conquer it by living positively in the face of its negatory imperatives" (162).

A typical case in point is his encounter with Amankwa, the timber merchant, which helps uncover a practice that has been accepted in Ghanaian post-independence society (34–35). The merchant comes to a public office after working hours, asking for the allocations clerk in order to strike a private deal with him in order to facilitate the moving of his timber from the forest to the city. The Man's instincts prompt him to ask the visitor why he comes so late to a public office, to which the visitor replies: "But someone told me this was about the right time to come" (32) and "[A]ctually, actually, it is a bit private" (32), then adding, "Brother, brother, you also can help me" (33). The Man looks on without uttering a word and the timber merchant responds again, this time imputing wrongdoing to The Man: "Brother, why are you making everything so difficult for me?" (33). His response and question take The Man completely by surprise and he answers "Now what have I done?" (33). The third-person narrator's commentary in the text indicates that The Man's response came out "entirely by itself" (33), revealing the extent of surprise, confusion, and weight of accusation felt by The Man. When Amankwa explains that he cuts timber and he is a contractor, one can feel The Man's suspicions about the merchant's purpose in visiting the office and realizes that he intends to bribe him and therefore he replies: "If you can come back tomorrow. . . . I have nothing to do with allocations" (34).

Immediately, this response sits badly with Amankwa, who, realizing that The Man will not budge from his position, replies angrily, "I am not a child, my friend. . . . You can see the clerk for me" (34–35). Again, from closely reading the text, one realizes that the answer also gives the timber merchant the idea that The Man needs educating on how things work in a public office such as his. He takes the opportunity to explain to The Man what has become the order of the day in society, what most people do and what he should do—people "eat" from their jobs and so it must he. However, The Man insists that he does not have anything to do with allocation of freight carriages. Amankwa seizes the opportunity to offer him some money toward facilitating this process of "seeing" the other clerk: "[L]ooking in the wallet . . . the fingers brought out two carefully held-out notes, two green tens. The man said nothing. Take it, the visitor said. One for you, one for him" (34–35). Here, Armah emphasizes the kind of atmosphere that reigned in post-independence Ghana, at all levels, where one "must prosper" from one's work at the expense of the state and the citizens. Thus, the overt nature of bribery and corruption is depicted here but is not effective because of the scrupulous moral standards of The Man and his resistance to the attraction of "the gleam."

The Man's character also reveals what Mbembe's theory describes as the "distinctive mark," "the vocabularies," and the "eccentricities" of the post-independence nation of Ghana (15). In a conversation between The Man and the messenger in his office, we clearly see how certain ways of thinking and behavioral patterns have been accepted as normal. In the said interactions, the messenger announces to The Man his success in the lottery and his fears that he will not receive his winnings: "I know people who have won more than five hundred cedis last year. They still haven't got their money" (*The Beautyful Ones* 22). Recourse to law and order is not an option in this particular circumstance where everyone knows that the only accepted vocabulary is the giving and acceptance of bribes. If anyone seeks to follow the appropriate channels to get redress, he ends up paying more than he wins, as the messenger comments, "You're joking. . . . It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all" (22). This intervention is significant since it exposes the fear of the clerk and confirms the difficulty that one faces in trying to abide by the law: it is a painful and costly thing to do. One cannot seek the intervention of the police without incurring more debt, so the simple solution is to hope that some official at the lottery place will take some of his money "as a bribe" and allow him to have the rest of it (22). The Man, who does not play by these rules of his society, accuses the messenger of intending to corrupt a public officer and the messenger responds: "This is Ghana" (21–22). This answer represents a clear indictment of post-independent Ghanaian society where corruption is prevalent. Through The Man's conversation with the messenger, we understand people's resignation in the face of deep issues of corruption and morality by which it is expected that a bribe will change hand for any transaction. Above all, we see and The Man's rejection of that acceptance.

The Man is shown as endorsing the fact that all must work toward ensuring that there is a proper functioning of the administrative systems of the nation. For the nation to get to the stage of regeneration and regrowth, the administrative and bureaucratic systems must work properly and impartially. As indicated earlier, The Man occupies a sensitive position—the maintenance of the smooth movement of people and merchandise by rail to and from the ports—and he is expected to follow established procedures so that operations at the Control Office run efficiently. The Man believes that when the systems function properly, people can access services without hindrance and on time. He therefore stresses the need for the administrative systems to run without interference. Robert Fraser emphasizes the protagonist's insistence on the normal course of action. He maintains that The Man's attitude is that of "a straightforward insistence on taking prescribed procedures literally" (43). However, there is more at issue here than strict adherence to procedures. Rather, The Man's portrayal in the novel underscores Armah's view of the administrative system and implies that the only way to eliminate the dysfunctional system is for procedures to be followed without interference—society must work and systems must function. Furthermore, The Man's role as a railway administrator is not a coincidence—he is a metaphor for Ghana's need for guidance on its journey if it is to reach its destination as a nation.

The Man exhibits the character traits of sobriety and reflection. He dedicates much time to pondering issues concerning his life, his family, and the future. In one particular instance, he considers those people who "chose to join the increasing

numbers who had decided they were so deep in despair that there was nothing more to fear in life" (25). Helpless "to break the mean monthly cycle of debt and borrowing, borrowing and debt," they adopt a passive stance toward the economic misery of national life (25). Refusing such acquiescence, he determines not to be one of those who accrue debt unnecessarily. The Man also shows sobriety in the way he reacts to issues. Even in the face of extreme provocation from his mother-in-law and his wife, he responds only after a period of silent reflection. These characteristics are demonstrated, for example, when his wife, Oyo, accuses him of being an "Onward Christian Soldier" and "a chichidodo" for refusing to take a bribe he was offered and hence denying the family and Oyo the opportunity to live "like Estella Koomson," who has someone to drive her and "smells sweetly of perfumes" (*The Beautyful Ones* 51, 105). The Man's response to Oyo's demands sums up his rigorous stance toward bribery and corruption: "But why should I take it?" because, "it wasn't even necessary." Next, he specifically addresses the issue of Estella, by telling the wife, "we don't know how she got what she has" (51), to which his wife shouts back provocatively, "and we don't care" (52). She observes that Estella's life is nice and clean, to which The Man replies calmly that "some of that kind of cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump" (52). In these interactions, we see indications of Armah's conviction that situations and events should not push people into blind and impulsive emotional reactions. The Man demonstrates here, as well as his visceral association of corruption with filth, an unwillingness to be corrupted by privilege, angered by insults, or cowed by social pressure.

Armah's depiction of these qualities of sobriety and reflectiveness in The Man's character can be related to an age-old model of practical wisdom of the Akan (one of the Ghanaian ethnic groups to which Armah belongs), summed up in the maxim: "You first find an escape route before taunting the cobra" (Nebo 89). This model of pragmatic knowledge urges people to hold on to personal and communal integrity and to think actions through before undertaking them and indicate a source of Armah's inspiration in creating the character of The Man.[3]

This model is also represented by the popular adinkra graphic symbols, traditional representations of concepts, and aphorisms about human and animal life and history. For the purposes of this discussion, two adinkra symbols are pertinent to the traits of sobriety and reflectiveness I have identified in the novel's protagonist. First is Akoma, the heart, that is rendered as "nya akoma" in Akan, literally meaning "look for the heart and have it," which represents patience and tolerance. Armah's protagonist can only survive in post-independence Ghanaian society if he is patient and tolerant of the happenings around him, but he also has to be steadfast and resistant. This leads us to the second symbol. This particular symbol is a snake trying to pass through the raffia tree, a concept expressed in Akan as "wo foro adobe," symbolizing steadfastness, prudence, and diligence, as the raffia tree is a difficult one for a snake to climb due to its thorns (Azindow 32; Asihene 65). Armah's representation of The Man struggling through his interactions with his society as he fights the attraction of the gleam is similar to the climbing motion of the snake. The Man intimates that, even though it is difficult to forget about the gleam and its attraction, it is better for one to go softly and slowly, an attitude emphasized in the words of the song he hears on radio: "[L]et them go / I will journey softly / but I too will arrive"

(*The Beautyful Ones* 60)—just as the snake slowly goes through the thorns of the raffia tree. Despite the challenges, once the snake is able to climb this thorny tree, it is able to enjoy its fruit.

Another significant aspect of Armah's regenerative purpose is highlighted in The Man's portrayal: a kind of family life "that all can share in" (Mbembe 15)—a kind of relationship that the rest of society can easily identify with. The Man is characterized as the embodiment of a loyal, dedicated, and responsible husband who takes care of his family—the smallest unit and the foundation of society—as best as he can. It is The Man's commitment to family responsibility that leads him to remain loyal to his household—unlike his friend, the Teacher—even though his family does not always recognize his dedication to them. He continually warns them of the gleam of corruption even though they are determined to go after it. In Armah's later novel, *Fragments* (1969), Onipa Baako, the main character, cannot triumph over the forces that are pushing him to go after material things, consequently ending up in a psychiatric hospital. As Minna Niemi suggests, "Baako feels that he fails to fulfil his family's expectations because his own worldview directly clashes with theirs. He is expected to bring material wealth to his family, but, if he did so, he would need to betray his own ideals and play the corrupt national games that he despises" (288). This is not the case with The Man in Armah's first novel who is able to resist the attraction of the gleam and remain morally upright throughout the novel.

In *The Beautyful Ones*, The Man triumphs over the accusations of his most constant critic, his wife. Oyo and her mother decide to collaborate with Koomson in an illegal procurement of a boat against The Man's wishes and, in opposing the deal, he incurs the wrath of the old woman. As the deal goes through the process of frantic verbal negotiation, The Man cannot help but laugh at the old woman's eagerness to see the deal sealed and the prospects of fish that the boat will bring to the family by saying, "[Y]es, we shall be rolling in fish. . . . And you will have a boat in twelve years, perhaps" (164). Oyo defuses this tense atmosphere by pulling the arm of her husband before he says more, but the hornets' nest has already been stirred up. His mother-in-law, obviously angered by the comments of The Man, spits violently on the ground saying, "Foolishness . . . Sheer foolishness" (164). The Man, now knowing the extent of the damage caused, turns back to say good night to his mother-in-law but "[h]is good-night went ringing through the night, unanswered." Worse, he "thought he heard something said about useless men" (164).

The Man's steadfastness with his family is contrasted with the behavior of The Teacher, his character foil, who decides to abandon his family because of the pressures they pile on him. The Teacher declares: "I have spent so much time running from it [family and family issues]. 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" (64–65). In contrast to The Man, The Teacher considers the loved ones as "dead people"—a deadly and suffocating family life—and observes that going back to them will be going back to dead people "and their embrace will be a welcome unto death. . . . And so I run" (65). And yet, without his family he is not necessarily happier. While The Man stays loyal to his family in the midst of the taunting from his wife and his mother-in-law, the character who acts as his advisor and confidant in the novel decides to run. In juxtaposing these two characters, The Man's strong sense of loyalty and commitment to his family becomes even more apparent.

There seems to be a constant push toward alienation from The Man's family because of their demands but, like the proverbial snake, he confronts this push in a brave manner by returning home (climbing the tree) each day after work to meet the flat eyes of the wife. As the narrator describes it, her eyes are those of "a person who has come to a decision not to say anything;. . . . And because these eyes are there the air is filled with accusation" (49). When he cannot endure the eyes of the loved ones any longer, The Man conveys his feelings in a silent, but loud apostrophe: "O you loved ones, spare your beloved the silent agony of your eyes" (49). The importance of unity as a vital family value for Armah as a writer is also depicted in his dedication of parts of chapter 4 and the whole of chapter 5 to how loved ones make or unmake people. Chapter 5 starts in this way: "The reproach of LOVED ONES comes kindly when it comes in silence" (52). He indicates at the beginning that the issue of loved ones and the pain they can cause or the joy they can bring to one's life will be addressed in the chapter. In order for the family to survive the turbulence of the postcolonial socioeconomic realities, they have to stay together, strive together for the highest moral values and have a strong head of family who will resist the unreasonable demands of other family members.

The relationship between The Man and the wife at the end of the novel is a template for a close-knit post-independence Ghanaian family relation. Although in *The Beautyful Ones* Armah is not overly concerned with what occasioned a change from strong family ties, values, and aspirations to a more individualized, closed, and alienated kind of family, one cannot turn a blind eye to his desire for a strong traditional family relationship. He makes clear the kind of family ties his main characters have. Some are dysfunctional: the Teacher cannot live with his loved ones and The Man's friend Maanan cannot sustain any of her love relationships. On the other hand, The Man himself has a close relationship with his wife and children, despite the conflicts already described. We see hints of this friendly rapport in the incident in which The Man is seen standing by his wife and "resting a light arm on her shoulder" (135). There is another occasion when, for the first time in the novel, the woman is observed eating with the husband. Later, we see The Man and his wife exchanging pleasantries as Oyo is combing her hair with a red-hot metal comb (140, 151). And of course, finally we see her appreciation of his integrity. At the end of the novel, she expresses her appreciation of him, holding his hand tightly and saying: "I am glad you never became like him [Koomson]" (194). This conciliatory gesture can be interpreted in three ways: first, it could mark the beginning of her appreciation of The Man's steadfastness and resilience in the face of all the corruption and decay; secondly, it suggests her newly discovered support for the values that have been eroded by the incessant quest for money and material things; and thirdly, it might be seen as The Man's reward for his efforts to remain with the family, despite her temper tantrums and name-calling. Even the corrupt Koomson has a wife and children and they have a good relationship with each other.

Another aspect of the character of The Man that Armah implies is needed for the regeneration of postcolonial Ghanaian society is his espousal of the ideals of hard work, punctuality, and a strong sense of duty—the official party ideals proclaimed by all the speakers at political rallies in the text. The character of The Man embodies these ideals as he interacts with and encounters other characters in the novel. The Man exhibits extreme punctuality in his daily routine—sometimes

arriving before the cleaner comes to the office and thus demonstrating a strong work ethic. He is always at his desk making sure that the railway system works properly. What is more, he does this job without any expectation of extra reward in return, as seen in his refusal of the bribe offered to him. Moreover, at the end of the novel, when asked why he did not participate in the demonstration in favor of the new government, he replies, "If two trains collide while I'm demonstrating, will you take the responsibility?" (186). The Man's attitude at work stresses the vital point that the new nation of Ghana can only be reconstructed as a better society when people are responsible in and for what they do. Indeed, in the course of being responsible, people should exhibit a sense of duty to work and this will eventually contribute to the betterment of society and not the perpetuation of self-indulgence and self-gratification.

The Man is portrayed as a symbol for the Ghanaian values of communalism, unity, and cooperative action. As African Christian religious philosopher John Mbiti explains in *African Religions and Philosophy* (1989), when individuals are responsible for their actions, they extend this responsibility to the community and this reinforces corporate group responsibility. At this level, avenues are created for the maintenance of communal unity and moral standards (201). At the end of the novel, The Man helps the corrupt Koomson out of trouble by letting him escape through the pit latrine of his house and through the grounds to the seaside. For the human capacity of unity and cooperative action to be achieved, there is the need for postcolonial Ghanaian society to look beyond the decadence and the corruption to recreate a new society based on unity, corporate responsibility, and human relations. This new society cannot be built on destruction of property or the maiming, lynching, or killing of corrupt officials, but by the implementation of what Carl Ratner, the cultural-psychologist, calls "concrete cultural-political action" (31). As another leading African philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, explains in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (1995), in the context of Akan "social and humanistic ethics," an action is deemed morally suitable mainly if it improves the welfare of the society and fosters "solidarity, and harmony in human relationships" (132). Therefore, moral worth is "determined in terms of its consequences for mankind and society" (132). Armah, being in tune with the socio-politico-cultural repercussions of the coup d'état in the novel, portrays The Man as a compassionate channel of peace and reconstruction when he protects Koomson from the angry mob. In this manner, Armah adopts a humane and viable approach to dealing with the chaos that emanates from the coup and the consequent mob actions. One of the main reasons the critics give for seeing the man as a failure rather than a role model is that he lets Koomson go unpunished, I think this is a virtue rather than a failure.

Key in this process of regeneration is The Man allowing the old, corrupt, and culpable Koomson to escape so that he does not stain any present attempts at renewal, at regenerating the society—an act of The Man washing his hands of the sins of Koomson so that society is purged and purified of his negative traits. Armah's vision is to purge the local society of its greatest negative influence, Koomson, and he does this through a rite of passage—the escape via the latrine into the sea before being finally sent off to Ivory Coast. Koomson cannot be allowed to remain in the society while the situation of corruption is being dealt

with. Significantly, after Koomson's departure and as the work concludes The Man sees "a single flower" (214). This flower at the end of the novel is another significant image of regeneration. Appearing on the back of the van, this flower is a brightly colored symbol located in the middle of the writing that bears the title of the novel. It stands for beauty and a new beginning, a rebirth after all the decay and corruption experienced by society. Its appearance at the end of the novel is also significant, a reminder that, after all The Man's struggles to stay clean, there is hope: "In the centre of the oval was a single flower, solitary, unexplainable and very beautiful" (214). The reference to the prospect of a new birth or hope as indicated earlier is reinforced here with the words describing the flower as "very beautiful," and this time, the word "beautiful" is written correctly. Moreover, the hope comes in the germination of The Man's seeds of uprightness and hard work. The flower's disappearance and its replacement by "a single, melodious note" (214–15) are crucial to the theme of regeneration. It points to a future of possibilities embodied in the flower and in the melodious sound.

Vital to Armah's project of regeneration and regrowth is the portrayal of The Man as steering clear of pretense and maintaining his dignity. The Man is depicted as an "authentic" local person who does not aspire to be a European by consuming foreign products or changing his name. When Oyo tries to find out exactly what kind of drinks her husband will get for the Koomsons' visit by saying she does not like "made-in-Ghana spirits," The Man gives his wife a long lecture, which ends with this conclusion: "Besides, there is nothing wrong with beer. After all, Koomson knows we are not rich, so *why should we pretend*?" (135–36; emphasis added). This attitude of eschewing pretense is reflected also in the quotation cited at the start of this chapter that recalls The Man's determination not to buy things on credit as his colleagues do, thus pretending to live a lifestyle they cannot afford. Estella Koomson, the man in the Control Office, and some Senior Civil Servants reveal this tendency of pretense and lack of confidence in themselves in the way they dress, act, and live. Koomson's wife prefers European drinks to local ones as the local beer allegedly does not agree with her constitution (154–56). In the Control Office, we see one of the clerks, who is referred to only as the "little man," make a hilarious attempt at speaking like an Englishman while conversing with The Man (28).

In the closing section of chapter 9 of *The Beautyful Ones*, Armah presents us with individuals showing symptoms of being bitten by the bug of "Europeanism," whom he calls "the dark ghosts of a European" (95). These people readily dismiss anything local in favor of foreign alternatives, especially regarding where they choose to live and the names they adopt. The higher-level civil servants live in the Upper Residential Area and the Esikafo Aba Estates alongside white men, party men, and lawyers and change their names to sound like European names, which try "mightily to be white" (147).[4] The Man walks through this area and, in his thoughts, mocks some of these names in detail:

> In the forest of white men's names, there were the signs that said almost aloud: here lives a black imitator. MILLS-HAYFORD . . . PLANGE-BANNERMAN . . . ATTOH-WHITE . . . KUNTU-BLANKSON. Others that might have been keeping the white neighbors laughing even harder in their homes. ACROMOND . . .

> what Ghanaian name could have been in the beginning, before its Civil Servant owner rushed to civilize it, giving it something like the sound of a master name? GRANTSON . . . more and more incredible they were getting. There was someone calling himself FENTENGSON in this wide world, and also a man called BINFUL. (147)

As can be seen, Armah is very critical of those Ghanaians who have aspired to a more fanciful and status-changing European culture, as seen above. This vehement criticism of these lifestyles is in agreement with Armah's strong desire to validate and renew a culture that some Ghanaians have rejected for foreign ways of life, although this alien culture does not help in regenerating life or preserving it, but rather promotes death. Rama Krishna, whom Armah describes as a Ghanaian who takes a far-off name and who involves himself in meditative exercises and special diets as he begins the project of reincarnation of his soul, does not succeed in this quest, but rather ends up with his entrails decaying and his heart eaten up by worms (55–56). Rama Krishna's example is a case of an adoption of a new identity—through a new religion—but ultimately he fails in his attempt to "escape from corruption and of immorality" external to him, as "his body inside had undergone far more decay than any living body" (56).

Finally, certain narrative elements emphasize the regenerative tone and mood of the novel. Music appears earlier in the novel with a message of hope. In an earlier scene, The Man and the Teacher listen to a series of songs being played on the radio. The Man describes the first song as "a sweet sadness of a song" (58), which is immediately followed by another one, a more lively *highlife*.[5] Moreover, just after this song comes what he describes as "another, slower softer song" (59). To The Man and the Teacher, these two songs following each other is a miracle (59). The songs are indications of changes, motion, and renewal. The last song has a profound impact on The Man, making him think positively about life and the fact that no matter how slowly the serpent might climb the raffia tree, once there is motion, change will surely come:

> Those who are blessed with the power
> And the soaring swiftness of the eagle
> And have flown before,
> Let them go. I will travel slowly,
> And I too will arrive. (59)

After listening to the song, The Man and the Teacher are curious to find out what makes the writers of the song have such hope and aspiration that they too "will arrive" one day. In addition, the song echoes, for them, the vital idea that with determination and hard work, no matter the present position and condition, growth and rebuilding can be achieved in the future. Armah looks forward to the day that "the beautyful ones" will be born and the nation of Ghana will be fully put on the path of restoration and development. The initial appearance of the songs and the final appearance of music in "a single melodious note" (215) are significant moments and a high point on which Armah ends the work. This "victorious" ending of the work is substantiated by the reappearance of a bird (the "sankofa bird"[6]) with another song, which is described as "strangely happy"—happiness at the prospect of a future time of a new birth (215).

There are other instances of hope in the novel. Early on, The Man perceives smooth pebbles with clear water flowing over them: "[H]e drew back his gaze and was satisfied with the clearness before the inevitable muddying. It was a satisfaction of a quiet attraction, not like the ambiguous disturbing tumult within awakened by the gleam" (27). The Man appreciates the natural beauty around him, which he compares to his inner desire and the struggle to resist the attraction of the gleam. Further, he compares the clearness of the water to the dirtiness of the gleam and expresses his preference for the cleanness of the water thus: "[A]nd yet here, undoubtedly, was something close enough to the gleam, this clearness, this beautiful freedom from dirt. Somehow, there seemed to be a purity and a peace here which the gleam could never bring" (27). In the eleven lines of this paragraph on page 27, we see many words that emphasize that moment of peace and tranquility when there is no contamination or blockage to growth. The phrases "clear water," "beautiful freedom," "the sea," "the stream," "quiet attraction," "clearness," "satisfaction," "satisfied" are all enhanced by the words "peace" and "purity" and hence accentuate the nature of the new birth that Armah is seeking for postcolonial Ghana. The beauty of the stream and the pebbles are escape routes to freedom, avenues to the cleansing of the dirty self and the beginning of a new life of freedom. On another occasion, he sees the seawater to be clearer than he thinks (139), and he observes a sweet breeze on the bridge where he used to walk (145). These hints and glimpses of clean beauty strengthen the observation that "out of the decay and the dung there is always a new flowering" (199–100).

Armah, then, presents the central character of his fiercely disillusioned novel as possessed of qualities that make him a symbol of or an icon for a more positive vision of the possible future of Ghana than that indicated in the everyday betrayals of its postcolonial condition. The Man's repugnance against the new nation's accommodations with colonial squalor and corruption is a blueprint for the regeneration of a truly postcolonial society, reflected in its African past and in his own unbudging values. In remembering a Ghanaian past independent of that tainted by colonial and postcolonial power, he imagines a future that is true to possibilities it has already realized but forgotten.

NOTES

1. Armah's later works such as *Osiris Rising: A Novel of Africa Past, Present, and Future* (1995) and *KMT: In the House of Life* (2002) offer similar visions of regeneration and regrowth. *KMT* indicates a "vision of future life" and of "a universe of no masters and no slaves, just equal persons sharing work and rest in respect" (140, 318), while in *Osiris*, Armah advocates working toward "a society without established hierarchies and privileges" (156).

2. The internalized and insatiable desire to acquire wealth is what Armah calls the chasing after "the gleam."

3. Ayi Kwei Armah was born to Fante-speaking (an Akan group) parents in the port city of Takoradi, Ghana. He grew up listening to *Abakosem*—the narratives of people who had lived and died. These were ancestral narratives that explained the history of the people of the land (*Eloquence* 55). Armah draws on these narratives in his work.

4. "Esikafo Aba" literally means "the rich/wealthy men have arrived," hence denoting the existing divide between rich and poor in postcolonial Ghanaian society.

5. An indigenous Ghanaian musical form that became popular in the nineteenth century. It is a combination of traditional musical rhythms and melodies, which is played with foreign or Western instruments. It became popular in West Africa at the later part of the century. See Collins.

6. In Ghanaian cultural traditions, the concept of *sankofa* is captured in a bird that walks forward but turns its head back to pick up what is depicted as an egg. In Akan, it is captured in the phrase "go back to the source and take," and it is encapsulated in the maxim "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki"; literally, "it is not disgraceful or taboo to go back and retrieve what one left in the past" (See Williams 172). This concept refers to the process of returning to the past and retrieving what is left there in order to use it for the development of the future.

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