

AYI KWEI ARMAH AND THE MYTHOPOESIS
OF MENTAL DECOLONIZATION

By

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...colonial state generates a colonial posture. This posture automates a series of complexes which remain with the African long after the colonial stimulus has ceased to have direct contact. The continuation of these complexes is seen in a state of mind which permits colonialism as a reflex. During this period the remoteness of the stimulus is often misinterpreted as non-existent, thus generating a false sense of security in the minds of Africans lately out of bondage...

The future of Africa depends entirely on the ability of the African to overcome his own colonial mentality, which permits erstwhile colonial masters to manage him by impulses generated from a remote control station, usually some European capital.¹

Odumegwu Ojukwu, Biafra

Introduction

At the center of Armah's astringent social commitment is a certain self-righteous concern for what we, as Africans, feel after reading his novels. This needs to be said

because a work of art affects...people-- it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals or values--and is a social force which with its emotional or ideological weight, shakes or moves people. Nobody remains the same after having been deeply moved by a true work of art.²

Thus, in the numerous authorial intrusions that characterize Armah's "narrative polemics" in his five novels, we witness his passionate attempt to communicate directly to us his peculiar ideological stance on issues of our time. Perhaps in no other area is this audience consciousness so marked as in Armah's de-

sire to exorcise the African mind of the unsettling hangover of the phenomenon commonly referred to as the "colonial mentality," a state of mind in which the African seeks to view himself "through Western eyes." In its classical and more pathological manifestation this ailment shows up among the elite in "their hunger for praises by the West, and their corollary dread of adverse Western opinion"³ which is accompanied by a religious acquiescence to the cultural coup d'etat of the West which demands that they molt and cast off their cultural identity totally. The rest is easily told!

As a preliminary digression, it is necessary to remind us that "the colonial mentality" is a by-product of the cultural axis of the colonial enterprise, for the economic aspect of colonialism could only be assured and "maintained by the permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned."⁴ More important for the purpose of this essay is the fact that the colonial cultural alienation program had a mythic base. Since the authors of colonialism sought justification for it in the myth of white racial supremacy, it became necessary to build the other pet assumptions of colonial cultural policy around this mythic base. Therefore for the colonized elite to qualify for the heaven of his masters, he had to cast off his inferior "native" culture. Consequently, in any honest attempt at genuine national liberation "a reconversion of minds--of mental set--is thus indispensable to the true integration of people to the liberation movement."⁵ And literature as an arm of national culture is particularly equipped for this role because of its appeal to the consciousness.

As a writer whose avowed commitment is to Africa, a certain concern with myth is fundamental to Armah's interest in mental decolonization. One must quickly add that Armah is concerned with myth not as an anonymous tale of ethnic origins or the geneology of the pantheon of godlings in the ethnic arsenal but as a consistent pattern of perceiving reality or relating with it. He is allergic to myth as a commonly held figment, a consciously invented belief system that is fostered and perpetuated for the specific purpose of advancing the interests of the myth-making group at the expense of all other groups. One such myth is that of Western (white) supremacy about which Armah indignantly declares:

...as far as prejudices go, Western assumptions about Africa are well known....It's enough to point out one key Western idea, and the way to all the other pet assumptions of Western racism lies open: Africa is inferior; the West is superior.⁶

Armah is aggrieved not so much by this myth in itself as its

implicit acceptance by the African elite (who are the bulk of his readers!) as a mode of self-perception and a basis for action and leadership.

In Armah's five novels the use of myth to achieve mental freedom involves, first, the debunking of the outgrowths of the primary racist mythic supposition, accompanied by the erection of counter myths. This often dictates the aesthetic make-up of the novels and even shapes the author's social vision. This paper is out to explore this line of thought.

De-Mythification and Mythopoesis

Declares the enigmatic narrator of Two Thousand Seasons: "The capture of the mind and the body both is a slavery far more lasting, far more secure than the conquest of bodies alone."⁷ Against the background of this injunction the militants of "the way" are poised to challenge both forms of slavery. Under the leadership of the mystic, Isanusi, they free themselves from physical slavery by revolting against the slave-drivers at sea only to return home to face the kings who have become puppets in the hands of the white "destroyers." It is significant that apart from the uprising of these young slaves the narrative of this novel is swallowed up in very polemical intrusions by the narrator so that the rather epical experience of the novel becomes an exercise in re-educating both the protagonists of "the way" as well as the audience. In addition to the much talked about preoccupation with historical reconstruction, Two Thousand Seasons contains a great deal of de-mythification. The ideological launching pad of Western imperialism as contained in the Christian faith is easily deflated: "They have a road they follow, and something called a god they worship--not the living spirit there is in everything but a creature separate, raised above all surrounding things, to hear them speak of it rather like a bloated king..."⁸ Implicit in this unmaking of the Christian masquerade is the superiority of the belief system of "the way" which emphasizes anthropomorphism over "the fables of children" which Christianity advances.

Even the cultural hypocrisy of colonialism receives a big jolt in this novel. Isanusi's vatic voice rises from the past to tell of a time

*When we [will] have lost our way completely,
lost even our names; when you will call your
brother not Olu but John, not Kofi but Paul;
and our sisters will no longer be Ama, Naita,
Idawa and Ningane but creatures called Cecilia,
Esther, Mary, Elizabeth and Christina.⁹*

In the African world of those of Armah's novels set in contemporary Africa we seem to have arrived at this time. As the Man, the battered psyche that presides over the moral world of The Beautiful Ones, rides in a taxi cab through the government residential areas, we share his shock find: the modern Ghanaian elite have reached an advanced stage of cultural transmutation, for they are shedding their very names for European ones!

Here and there the names had changed. True, there were very few black names of black men but the plates by the roadside had enough names of black men with white souls and names trying mightily to be white. 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.

Indeed, "there is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European."¹¹

Koomson is a concrete example. With little or no education he is minister in the Osagyefo's government. As he oscillates between the perfumed embrace of international prostitutes at the Atlantic Caprice and the suffocating lavishness of his ministerial mansion, he strikes us as an extremely alienated African elite. His wife, Estella, does not make things better. As she strokes her wig of horses' hair in the fashion of a Hollywood actress, we recoil at her extreme grotesqueness. It is to the credit of Armah's satirical method that such assimilated personages as Koomson and Estella arouse only revulsion in us.

Brempong in Fragments completes the picture where Koomson left off. For him the opportunity to go and study abroad at public expense is a chance to ferry in a plane load of Western material things. While Koomson is at home wheeling and dealing to swindle the people in order to acquire a personal fishing boat, Brempong is prepared to contravene all known customs processes in order to bring home "German cars, right from the factory"! Hear Brempong: "You just have to know what to look for when you get a chance to go abroad. Otherwise you come back empty-handed like a fool, and all the time you spent is a waste, useless."¹²

The tragedy of men like Koomson and Brempong, Armah seems to suggest, is that they seek money and influence as a way of approximating their erstwhile colonial masters, a fact which the Man laments in respect to Koomson.

He lives in a way that is far more painful

to see than the way the whitemen have always lived here...There is no difference at all between the whitemen and their apes, the lawyers and merchants, and now the apes of the apes, our party men.¹³

In the same vein, Modin in Why Are We So Blest? notes in his diary that

*the main political characteristic of African leadership since the European invasion is its inability and unwillingness to connect organically with the African people because it always wants first of all to connect with Europe and Europeans.*¹⁴

It is also the tragedy of their societies whose political future is entrusted into the hands of such men, for, as Armah points out in his essay, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?"

*it is not every age or every continent which can boast of fiery revolutionaries who have never ventured within smelling distance of a revolution, of freedom fighters whose suits are made in Paris and whose most hair-raising campaigns are fought and won in the scented beds of posh hotels, and of militant workers who ride to work in chauffeur-driven German limousines.*¹⁵

Against this backdrop of leadership by a consumerist elite, Armah does not proceed to eulogize the oppressed. In the context of the prevalent colonial mentality the people who accord the thievish Brempong a red-carpet reception while the more creative, more purposeful visionary Baako passes unnoticed or, for that matter, the roadside bread hawkers who variously address Koomson as "my own lord," "my master" or "my white man" do not enlist our sympathy. There is, in fact, a faint suggestion that the society in Fragments that erects the myth of the returnee as cargo-bringer has finally taken its place among victims of the colonial mentality.

Modin in Why Are We So Blest? is crushed between identifying with these betrayed masses of Africans at home and the soul-killing imperative of his American experience. While he realizes that "the educated Africans, the Westernized African successes are contemptible worms," he is compelled by his Western education to advance the betrayal of his people. He is aware that the coup of cultural alienation of his continent will succeed through people like him.

I should have stopped going to lectures long ago. They all form a part of a ritual celebrating a tradition called great because it is European, Western, while the triumphant assumption of a superior community underlies them all, an assumption designed to reduce us to invisibility while magnifying whiteness. My participation in this kind of ritual made me not just lonely, not just one person unsupported by a larger whole, but less than one person: a person split, fractured because of my participation in alien communal rituals designed to break me and my kind.¹⁶

But these faint stirrings of the urge to get mentally liberated are extinguished before long. His efforts at sexually rehabilitating a frigid American girl, Aimee, hasten his movement towards final disintegration in Western hands.

While Modin dies because he realizes his predicament but fails to live up to it, Baako and the Man live a half-life because they entertain a vision of society that seeks to banish the devotees of the "cargo cult." Similarly Isanusi in Two Thousand Seasons dies because he seeks to confront the forces that thrive on continued captivity of the mind and body. The credibility of their vision is, however, celebrated by Densu, the hero of The Healers, in his moral victory over the manipulator, Abbabio.

Taken together these visionaries are pitted against the Koomsons and Brempongs as a counterforce. But they are not revolutionaries. They only represent the preliminary stage in the liberation process, the stage of mental liberation. And in this respect, it is significant that they are manifestations of the creative imagination.

Aesthetics and the Mythic Imagination

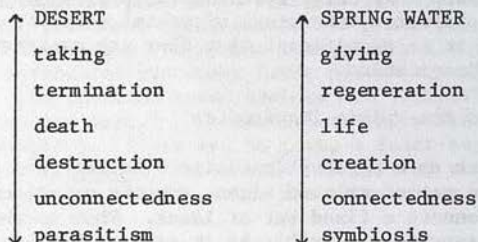
Myth as a psycho-linguistic construct/phenomenon operates through a set of related signs, symbols or objects which by association connote a fixed set of ideas. Thus in the myth of white racist supremacy over blacks in particular, a definite polarization of colors and images has been built up. Thus words like white, emaculate, clean, etc., have come to be associated with the superior race (they own the language!) while sinister terms like black, dark, devil, etc., have come to be associated with the inferior race. We only need to turn to Christian mythopoesis to remember that cleanliness (whiteness) is next to godliness while Lucifer himself is an African! Therefore any literature that seeks either to perpetuate or debunk a myth or set of

myths usually operates through sets of related or opposing images, symbols and allusions appropriate to its message.

In Armah's art we notice that his mythic sensibility manifests itself in the aesthetics of his novels. A novel like Two Thousand Seasons derives its plot and overall metaphoric structure from a delicate balancing of the opposing qualities of the "destroyers" (the aliens) on the one hand and the "creators" of "the way" on the other. The Arabs and the Westerners are linked with such words and phrases as "predators," "ostentatious cripples," "destroyers," "zombis," etc. Similarly, their way of life, constantly referred to as "the white road," is characterized by "unconnected sight," "shattered hearing," "broken reason." Against the superlative negativity of the "white road" is counterposed the values of "the way," which consist, among other things, of reciprocity, connectedness, life, creativity, community, etc. The two sets of values derive their source from the opposition between the central symbols of the desert and the spring water, respectively:

Springwater flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration. The desert takes. The desert knows no giving. To the giving water of your flowing it is not in the nature of the desert to return anything but destruction. Springwater flowing to the desert, your future is extinction.¹⁸

The diametrical opposition between the two sets of forces can be structurally represented along two parallel axes because their irreconcilability is decisive.



The same pattern is repeated in The Healers in which the central conflict between the visionary healers of society on the one hand and the perpetrators of the disease of social destruction on the other is registered in the opposition between disease and wholeness and their respective symbolic cognates. In both novels, the reader is invited to take sides and the irresistible human urge is to associate with the more attractive option. It is in the neatness of this choice that the limitations of these

novels as works of art reside. They tend to succeed more as mythic creations than as art.

However, the pattern is not so clear-cut in those of Armah's novels set in contemporary African society. In The Beautiful Ones, for instance, the only progression is within an essentially scatological medium. In other words, we descend from one level of filth to a greater depth. From the Man's earliest perceptions of filth we move downward through clogged gutters and end up in the lavatory. The pattern is something like this:

| slime
| mucus
| rotten wood
| rotten vegetables
| rotten menstrual blood
| shit
↓ decayed body

Through the conscious piling up of scatological imagery we are repelled from the system that exudes such decay. That system is an outgrowth of the pretensions of a "superior" Western culture. Our protagonist, the Man, undertakes the epic journey through the filth and emerges at the end of the novel renewed after the symbolic immersion in salt water.

The mythic sensibility is even more pronounced in Fragments. Here again two sets of values are in opposition, namely, the traditional value system represented by Naana, the blind grandmother of the hero and the fragmented new world of Efua, Araba and Brempong. The former is associated with vision, cohesiveness, continuity and regeneration while the latter is governed by materialism, unhealthy competition and the cargo mentality. In the thematic ambiance of the novel, we easily come to recognize persons like Araba, Efua and Brempong as inhabitants of a different universe in which man seems trapped in a circle of uncanny possibilities from which there is no possibility of escape. In this closed world, the ever-presence of danger is increased by the hurry to appease the new god, the god of materialism. Thus, whether a little boy narrowly escapes being crushed to death by a petrol tanker or the lorry driver Skido is mangled by his cargo-bearing lorry, the wheel grinds on. And the wretched of the earth celebrate their lot by wearing "T-shirts with cartoons of sweating wrestlers on them under the printed caption, Strugglers!",¹⁹ which is an implicit acceptance of the cryptic dictum "Obra ye ko" (life is war). This is their

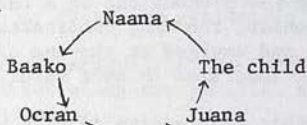
world:



On the contrary, we have the other world of Naana's vision. It is reminiscent of "the way" in Two Thousand Seasons in its emphasis on reciprocity and regeneration, a world circumscribed by the myth of the eternal cycle:

Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns round. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things.²⁰

This is the world of Naana, Baako, Juana, Ocran and Araba's ill-fated child.



Armah reposes the revitalizing vision in this mythic world.

The Limits of Mythopoesis

The mythic alternative contains both the credits and, paradoxically, the limitations of Armah's art as a novelist. In his preference for communalism over individualism in novels like Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers, in his uncovering of the hypocrisy inherent in "the destroyers' arrangement" and in the satirical unmaking of the alienation of Africa's bureaucratic and political elite, he demonstrates sufficient awareness of the dynamics of neocolonialism, especially in its cultural dimension, an awareness which he invites his African audience to share with him.

Armah goes further than this. In all his novels there is an explicit recognition of the fact that there is no hope for Africa in the existing arrangements woven by the West, a reality which dawns early on Modin in Why Are We So Blest?:

"The directions made available to me within this arrangement are all suicidal." Through Modin the imperialist design to use the educated elite to further the cause of exploiting Africa is revealed:

Our history continues the same. Horrible thought. I am here because I am a factor... A factor in our destruction...

Factors then, scholarship holders, B.A.s, M.A.s, Ph.D.s now, the privileged servants of white empire, factors then, factors now. The physical walls stand unused now. The curious can go and look at them, as if slavery belonged to a past history. The destruction has reached higher, that is all. The factor's pay is now given in advance, and sold men are not mentioned, not seen in any mind.²¹

Against this backdrop, there is a tacit recognition of Western capitalism as cardinal to Africa's predicament. There is even in these novels, especially Why Are We So Blest?, the realization that salvation lies in the revolutionary imperative: "In this wreckage there is no creative art outside the destruction of the destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art and revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction."²² But tragically enough, neither in his artistic objectification nor in his social vision does Armah sufficiently demonstrate confidence in the revolutionary alternative.

If we accept the thesis that meaningful mental decolonization is not an end in itself, that it does not stop at inspiring the necessary awareness of the imperialist design or even instilling the necessary psychological confidence but should aim at creating a mental posture that aspires to dismantle the structures that in themselves make the "colonial" posture possible, then Armah leaves a lot undone. This calls for a sort of comparison and distinction between Armah on the one hand and novelists like Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi on the other in view of attempts to lump all of them together.²³

Armah fails to provide a social vision that could galvanize the mental freedom which his works permit. The faintest attempts in this direction in Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers suffer from a certain ideological timidity. The militancy of the protagonists of these novels is dissipated in attempts to resurrect decadent myths of a pristine African essence which views Africa as a continental continuum. This negates the reality of rugged nationalism in Africa and the fact that each African country has peculiar socio-historical contradictions to

grapple with. Thus the revolutionary call to which the militants of "the way" and the healers are martialled is rendered ambiguous by their continental context. This is unlike the challenges of Wanja and Karega in Petals of Blood to the cogs in the wheel of Kenyan capitalism or, for that matter, the concerted revolutionary uprising of the railwaymen and their kith and kin against the exploitative antics of French colonial vagabonds in Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood.

Thus, while the Man realizes that the trouble with modern Ghana lies in the adoption by successive regimes of the same tools employed by the colonialists, he is not cast in any mold to do something. Instead the power of decay and despair rise to the level of being deified in The Beautiful Ones. Similarly, both Baako and Modin are destroyed despite their ability to divert their minds of the colonial posture. The problem here, to my mind, is that Armah localizes the heroic function in single individuals who, pitted against the forces in their societies, degenerate to the level of existential isolates who perceive injustice in the society but crumble under the weight of their own despair and existentialist angst. It is the paradox of Armah's art that he opts for a society based on community while confining the heroic functions to single individuals who are incapable of championing the communal cause. In this regard he loses to Ngugi and Ousmane Sembene, for the latter "democratize" the heroic function in line with their adherence to the Marxist myth of the equality of proletarian fellow travelers.

In the final analysis we must concede that along with Ousmane, Ngugi, Omotoso and Osofisan, Armah belongs to Fanon's "fighting phase" in the development of African literature in which the writer "after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people."²⁴ In this process of shaking the people Armah provides them with the awareness and what Cabral calls "a reconversion of minds" which is the prerequisite for the liberation struggle. Ngugi and the rest artistically objectify the struggle itself.

Armah's position in the ongoing use of literature to alter social reality in Africa could be summed up thus: irresistible myths, excellent art and defective social commitment.

Notes

1. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Biafra: Selected Speeches with Journals of Events, New York/Evanston/London: Perennial Library, 1969, p. ix.

2. Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez, Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 113.
3. Chinweizu, The West and the Rest of Us, New York: Random House, 1975, p. 384.
4. Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," in Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral, ed. African Information Service, London: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 39.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
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7. Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973, p. 42.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
9. *Ibid.*
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11. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
12. Armah, Fragments, London: Heinemann, 1969, p. 66.
13. Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
14. Armah, Why Are We So Blest?, London: Heinemann, 1974, p. 221.
15. Armah, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?", *Presence Africaine*, No. 64, 1967, p. 28.
16. Armah, Why Are We So Blest?, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.
17. Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 2.
18. Armah, Prologue to Two Thousand Seasons, *op. cit.*, p. ix.
19. Armah, Fragments, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
21. Armah, Why Are We So Blest?, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-61.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

23. In Chapters 3 and 4 of Myth, Literature and the African World, Soyinka lumps together works of such dissimilar writers as Armah, Ousmane Sembene, Beti and Laye as examples of "literature of social vision."
24. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967, p. 179.



Freedom of All Animals
Hezbon Edward Owiti