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Portrayal of Corruption as Narrative Technique in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Pp. 71-82)

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Abstract

Narration according to Gertrude Stein is what anybody has to say in any way about anything that can happen, that has happened or will happen in any way [iv]. Narration can be nuncupative when it is printed and read as fiction. It is the point at which the writer articulates all the modes or techniques of narrating within his confine to produce a fine story. Jeremy Hawthorn sees narrative technique as a technique that is used when one is told of "what is happening rather than witnessing the happening directly as we can with a play or film" [57]. Writing on its own has an implicit notion of finding techniques of expression that will make the work accessible. The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is a novel in which Armah expresses his disgust on the level of corruption prevalent in Ghana during its first republic under Nkrumah. Corruption was so rampant and deep that every nook and cranny of Ghana showed it. This paper, through a systematic and close reading of the, examines the narrative modes or techniques through which the novelist depicts the level of corruption prevalent in Ghana as at the time of the novel. Armah uses the progressive tense form of the verb, ellipsis, analepsis and prolepsis, characterization, homodiegetic narrator, and narrative situation to tell his story in the novel. The language he uses mesh with the theme of the novel.

Introduction

Ayi kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* portrays corruption at its best in Ghana. Every part of Ghana oozes out corruption of various forms and dimensions. Armah's method in the novel is that he uses these corrupt practices to portray his disgust and hatred of the state of affairs in Ghana at the time of the novel. It is therefore agreeable that Armah sees corruption in the novel as the only vehicle or technique through which he can effectively and pungently show his meaning or intention, – that 'Ghana is one giant stinking lavatory'[Nnolim 111]. To achieve his target, Armah uses various modes of narration to explain in details what he means. The nub of this paper is to explore these various narrative techniques that aid Armah in his portrayal of corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* – corruption which stinks in all facets of Ghana as at the time the novel was written.

Techniques used to Portray Corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Ayi Kwei Armah, one of Africa's foremost novelists uses diverse narrative techniques to portray corruption in Ghana during its first republic, in his novel - *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The following techniques are artfully used to effect in the novel: progressive tense, ellipsis, analepsis, and prolepsis, characterization, homodiegetic narrator and narrative situation.

The use of progressive form of the verb is a narrative technique progressively adopted by Armah in his bid to portray the extent of corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. He uses this to show continuity which marks the gradual deterioration of morality in the Ghanaian body politic. The progressive tense which is also called 'Aspect' goes with the '-ing' form of verbs, hence it suggests progression. A careful balancing of the fact of the progressive tense with the state of affairs at the time of Nkrumah's regime reveals that just as the Man is always in motion in the novel, so does corrosion of morality in the country go on without cease. Every aspect of life in Ghana – politics, civil service, family life etc, is continuously deteriorating. Koomson started as a railway worker and later graduated into an avaricious and corrupt politician who offers and takes bribe with reckless abandon. The narrator accounts that the Man moves slowly [just as Koomson's metamorphosis into immorality was gradual]. He says: 'when he [the Man] began to cross over the other side of the road, his eyes were still fixed on the tar in front of him, and he worked quite slowly [8]. Kofi Billy sees the vision of the destruction of Ghana after he has been initiated into the

world of 'wee-wee' by Maanan and this is presented in the progressive tense – a repetition of the main verbs of the sentences with the ' - ing' attached to show progression. He says:

I see a long, long way; it is full of people, so many people going far into the distance and I see them all like bubbles joined together. They are going, just going, but in the very long lines of people I am only one. It is not just at all possible to come out and see where we are going; I am just going [74].

Koomson is also pictured as he walks with the Man towards the latrine, looking for a way of escape after the coup. The two 'were walking along the latrine man's circuit through life' [170]; Koomson is again seen as 'walking like some wooden thing, not seeming to care where it was he was going'[170]. Also in chapter six, the Teacher records that there is 'the wondering and the shaking and the vomiting horror' not from the inward sickness of the individual, but from that of Ghana, presumably. What gives him the more concern is the 'dizzying speed' at which the corruption goes. These excerpts above show the repetition of the verbs in their progressive form: 'going', 'walking', 'seeming', 'wondering', and 'vomiting' and these conform with the continuous moral decay in Ghana. It is important to state at this point that Armah chooses the progressive tense as a narrative technique in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to match the gradual but continuous wearing away of life, of morality in Ghana – a society where corruption stinks at every nook and cranny during the reign of Nkrumah. The use of progressive tense adumbrates the 'journey motif' which Onwe speaks of as a narrative technique prevalent in Armah's works.

'Ellipsis' is another superlative technique which aides Armah in his portrayal of corruption in *novel*. A writer that creates omissions and absences either advertently or inadvertently in the organization of his work uses ellipsis. Ellipsis also represents dots which show omissions in a novel. Hawthorn differentiates between 'unmarked ellipsis' and 'marked ellipsis'. An unmarked ellipsis exists when a text does not display that something is actually missing. Armah tauntly and luminously uses marked ellipsis in the course of the development of the plot of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. In almost every part of the novel, Armah uses marked ellipsis. The Man goes to work and in the office sees the clerk on duty sleeping. He tries to wake him gently and like a 'walking sleeper', the clerk smiled. When

asked why he is sleeping, the clerk says: 'no country, no work; but when man is alone here all through the night . . . [Armah 15]. As the clerk cannot voice out all that he actually wants to say, the Man listens with corrugated brows. No one can fathom rigidly what those attendant gaps in the excerpt above stand for. Oyo's mother, who is as anxious as the daughter to see the boat business materialize so that they will be counted among those that can 'drive fast', makes her speech with lapses. Leaving one in doubt of what she specifically wants to say at one point or the other. In one of the occasions, she says, it is about the Ahead . . . [135]. The speaker [Oyo's mother] cannot complete the utterance/sentence in order that Koomson will understand. This is because she knows the corruption involved in aiding and abetting a corruption politician. The result is that she speaks with lapses until the daughter picks the temerity to complete the information. Oyo's mother could not voice out completely what she wants, probably because she knows that the Man will not attest to such corrupt imagination, as everything about Koomson appears corrupt.

In chapter nine where the Man and Oyo prepare to host Koomson in their house, the Man comes out to inspect what they have prepared for Koomson and his wife. He sees the wife standing there and goes to her and asks, 'did I live anything out?' Oyo answers and says: 'the food is fine but the drink . . . [115]. Oyo leaves the later part of the statement because she can imagine the implication of voicing that out. In fact, she means that the local 'made-in-Ghana spirits' the Man bought is not good to be presented to Koomson – the party man, more so as Oyo is expecting a favour from him. Oyo will prefer white Horse whiskey or Vat 69. Oyo admonishes the Man to smuggle such wine into the country if others can do it. Oyo, in fact, tries to coerce her husband into involving himself in corruption but he does not want that. She asks him to take bribe from Amankwa and also to involve himself in the boat business. When he refuses, the wife calls him a 'chichidodo'. Ayi Kwei Armah may have generally made use of ellipsis in the novel because he does not want to perturb his readers with issues that are corrupt, and which he stands to oppose. It may be on the other hand that the writer wants to keep his readers on the thinking lane so that they can make up within them what ought to be, having followed the stream of the narrator's story.

Still in one of the discussions on the boat business, Oyo's mother says "I thought . . . [138] and the narrator states that in the middle of what she wants to say, something seems to have struck her mind and she stops. Armah appears to have made use of marked ellipsis in the novel to show that corrupt

practices or statements stick to the mouth and as such sometimes avoided completely, hence the use of the dots to represent the unvoiced words, phrases and ideas. Still in some other places in the novel, the novelist uses ellipsis. These exist on pages 120, 132, 167, etc in the narrative. On page 167, the Man urges Koomson to pass through the latrine man's hole in order to escape, after the military coup. The Man says, 'if they come' The thought and construction of every sentence in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are propelled by corrupt practices which exist in Ghana, and which the writer decries, hence the ellipsis in the novel are variously positioned to depict one level of corruption or the other.

Another heuristic device used by Armah in the portrayal of corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is 'analepsis' and 'prolepsis'. The plot of a work of art may move backward and forward in time instead of moving rigidly and stealthily forward in chronological order. Modern literary theorists consider any deviation from such chronological progression as 'anachrony [Hawthorn 94]. According to Hawthorn, a number of such deviations are possible and the most frequent of them are 'analepsis' and 'prolepsis'. These terms are actually preferred to the terms of 'flashback' and 'flashforward' which they stand to represent. One major reason proffered for the preference to 'prolepsis' and 'analepsis' is on the account of their having more period of duration than flashback and flashforward. Ayi Kwei Armah's implantation of the character and quality of the Man – a man standing different in the face of a corrupt and dissident society, is proleptic of the hope of a better society which will be born in future. Corruption in Ghana as at the time of Nkrumah was at its apogee. Everybody in Ghana, as may be represented by the characters in the novel seems to have no hope of a better Ghana in future and so burry themselves neck-deep into corruption.

The Man says that he has 'seen corruption, public theft' in Ghana. Life is so corrupt that the good ones are imprisoned while the corrupt ones who are 'cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud' are surviving and are cherished too. Zacharias Lagos sells 'great length of healthy wood' [96] he has written off from the saw-mill. Abednego Yamoah, in his corrupt practices sells 'government petrol for himself' [96] so smartly that there is always someone else, 'a messenger, a cleaner' to be jailed and never Abednego. They are those who have seen 'the way' [cutting corners and eating the fruits of fraud] – to survive. But people like the Man and Teacher who want to do things rightly are castigated, condemned and branded 'saboteur, nation wrecker' [95] and 'chichidodo'; just as the man who tries to reduce his house rent is

abused and later taken to Accra 'since he will not stop his talk of justice' [95]. Even the inscriptions on the latrine walls show the extent of corruption in the country. Some of these inscriptions read: *Vagina Sweet – Money Sweet Pass All; who born fool, Socialism Chop Make I Chop, Country Broke; You Broke Not So? – Pray For Detention, Jailman Chop Free*, etc. These show the scatological language which Armah uses in the novel, and which will be considered later. Thanks to the likes of the Man and Teacher who, standing firm and unbending, refuse to join in the corrupt practices. Such characters will build up the dilapidated Ghanaian society in future. The Man refuses to take bribe from Amankwa, the timber merchant, despite the pressures from the merchant himself. The Man also refuses to be influenced by the wife's desires and pleasures.

Analepsis, which involves a dive into the past, like flashback, though with a more sustained period of time, is also used by Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to frown at corruption and build up hopes also for the future citizens of Ghana. This is encapsulated in the character of the Man in the novel. Ghana has been metaphorically reflected as an 'old man-child', as represented by the story told by Aboliga the Frog. According to the story, the picture was of the, 'man-child in its gray old age, completely old in everything save for the smallness of its size' [63]. Ghana is a newly independent country but deep in corruption, just like the man-child looks 'irretrievably old, far more thoroughly decayed than any other ordinary old man' [63]. But through the activities of the Man, new hopes of better life in future begin to be felt. The Man, in chapter fourteen of the novel, comes home happy and meets the wife in front of his hall door; being happy, he had an analeptic look into the past 'thinking of youth and days in school when the sun had shone sweetly in the field [Armah 160]. He could see in the wife's eyes 'something he could only think of as a deep kind of love, a great respect [160]. The result of this is the warm embrace that follows between them – a union of the Man and the wife after a long period of problems and disunity. According to Ogede, this type of alliance of husband and wife, 'signals the collaborative action needed by male and female members of the society [of Ghana] in their struggle for emancipation [from the shackles of corruption] [125]. Armah has dexterously used the union of this micro family of the Man and his wife to adumbrate the togetherness that is needed of the macro family of Ghana to rid it of corrupt practices, despite its apparent lack of remedy as depicted by the 'irretrievable old' nature of the old man-child. The

terms 'prolepsis' and 'analepsis' are utilized by many theorists when a past or future event is evoked rather than invoked.

Besides 'analepsis' and 'prolepsis', Armah adroitly exploited the benefits of characterization to the full in his portrayal of corruption in the novel. He uses characterization to discuss the dangers and vicissitudes of life, without intrigue, corruption and dissimulation in the novel. He uses the expository or 'showing' technique as well as telling or 'summary' method to reveal his characters. Through this expository or showing method, the characters are known by their actions and utterances. In the novel, the Teacher stands out to be a glaring of example of a character revealed through his actions. Nothing is known about him until the fifth chapter of the narrative when he is introduced to us through the dialogue between him and the Man. It is learnt at this point that the Teacher despises the conditions in his country, hence his total withdrawal from the society. The Teacher contends that it does not even worry him if people start to look at his nudity from the window. This is of course because he seems to have lost every atom of hope of societal survival. The Man told the Teacher about his wife who called him a 'murderer' for letting 'ten cedis' which Amankwa gave as go; he does not lead the life of others in the society and that life, that one way, is 'the path one wants to avoid'[54]. In chapter six also the Teacher bares his soul of the much he knows or has seen about the ills prevalent in his country. In a flashback, he recounts the story of the struggle from the colonial days to the independence and maintains unequivocally that life is an ugly rigmarole of experiences: a succession of frustrations with firefly-like pleasantries as the intervening episodes; a doomed existence with hope and courage coming together.

Consequently, the Teacher sees no hope in either 'driving' like Koomson or 'walking' like the Man, since all will come to naught. He therefore withdraws himself from the society, running away from the 'national game' [55], instead of waiting for the embrace of the loved ones, which is a 'welcome unto death' [56]. And the Man, on his own, sits on the fence. Nevertheless, he represents the alienated masses through which there must always be a change in any society. He does not keep himself away from the corrupt group; he welcomes Koomson to his house; led him out through the latrine man's hole after the coup; loves international schools and shiny cars etc. These notwithstanding, he never degenerated into the corrupt styles of the society. He is not privileged to 'drive' and this is not only because he is afraid of crashing in an accident but that he despises 'driving' entirely.

Through the use of symbolic characters, Armah is able to portray the nature of characters and situations that he wants to criticize or uphold. Consider the lives of characters like Koomson, Amankwa [the timber merchant], Zacharias Lagos, Abednego Yemoah, and even that of the Teacher one side, and that of the Man on the other. While the first group is corrupt and avaricious, the later is good and cherished. Again, Armah uses the 'telling' or 'summary' method to reveal his characters and their corrupt tendencies in the novel. In a dialogue between the Man and the Teacher, the latter talks of Koomson and the nature of his job before he became a politician. He was

'a railway man, a docker at the harbour, with blistered hands, toughened, calloused hands'[88]. The reader is made to understand that the Man is a Grade II certificate holder. The point to stress here is that those who suffer initially, whenever they have opportunity for any good thing, it becomes excessively done and that those who are rigorously groomed carry the discipline acquired till the end. Consider the lives of Koomson and the Teacher respectively.

Aligned with the technique of characterization is that of narratorship which Armah uses to advantage. Much of the revelations from chapter six of the novel show that the novelist uses homodiegetic narrator in telling his story. This narrator is the Teacher who tells the major stories in the novel and who as well listens, as a character, to the embittered remarks which Armah showers, not just on him alone, but on all the corrupt inhabitants of Ghana. The chapter six of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is regarded by most critics as poetic. This section of the novel is a kind of mental ransacking of the whole life activities in Ghana, from Aboliga the Frog and his story of the old man-child, to Maanan [and initiation of people into the world of wee-wee], and to Kofi Billy and his life style. Here, through the Teacher Armah speaks; although he [the Teacher] narrates the story, he and the Man appear to be individual listeners too, listening to the problems of Ghana especially as caused by the profligate county politicians. His conclusions from the understanding he has, seem to have conditioned him so that he sees no hope in the future and only waits in nudity on his bed for the time of extinction. Ogede argues that the Teacher is one of Armah's 'most ambiguous narrators, for he is both a vehicle through whom the author's satiric attack is directed at objects, events and people, as well as a target of the attack himself [124]. Although Armah uses the Teacher to launch an embittered swipe at the elite as well as display their corrupt tendencies, he is also critical of him. The Teacher's conclusions are unreliable because of cynicism. Like the Man, the

Teacher disapproves of corrupt materialism and ostentation, but his cowardice and pessimism threaten to defeat the very course he advocates.

Armah has used what is called projection characters [characters into whom the novelist projects aspects of himself or herself, often aspects which cannot be acknowledged either to others or to the author]. Characters like Koomson, Amankwa, Zacharias Lagos and Abednego Yamoah are all projected to expose corrupt and illicit life style and this is what ruined Ghana during its first republic. The novelistic is not happy with these characters and so exposes them for the world to see. The Teacher is also a projected character. He cannot stand firm to fight corruption in Ghana but only withdraws in disgust and lives a solitary life, which neither helps him nor the society. Armah uses this to shun evil which is prevalent in the society. These people who bear these unwholesome ways of life, which he uncovers, are referred to as 'hypocrites' and 'cheats'. They do not know that while they climb up to 'shit' on their people's faces, their assholes are seen and so moved away from in disgusted laughter.

The Teacher after picturing the author's position, and after thinking on the African problems and ways out of them, concludes that these African leaders cannot help. This is because they are interested in showing, "the white master how reasonable, how faithful, how unlike 'ekpeteshi' drinkers they are and how desiring to have power over their people shared with them "[Armah 82]. In his pessimism, the Teacher concludes that there is no way out, hence his death as symbolized by his nudity. The Teacher's nudity symbolizes the death of Ghana until the 'beautiful' ones who will redeem the country from its state of dilapidation and ruin are born. The Teacher says during his conversation with the Man, "it is not a choice between life and death, but what kind of death we can bear in the end. Have you seen there is no salvation any where?" [56]. Ogede further contends that the thrust of the new members of the society who will save them from the sword of Damocles must be similar to the Man's vitality – his ability to stand firm despite all odds, and not to 'take a jump and arrive like others'".

Armah's greatest quality as a novelist lies not just in the nature of the story he tells but primarily in the way he tells the stories. His narrators maintain a consciousness of themselves as story-tellers and so function as mediating consciousness between reader and writer in most of his works. When a story is verbally rendered, there is always a second person [a character] who receives it directly. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the narrator of

the main story assumes the position of speaking to someone. There is therefore an internal character, the inscribed, encoded or postulated reader in the text who receives the story. This character or characters are seen as receivers of the narrator's story as found in the novel. The Man on one hand, and both the Man and the Teacher on the other hand, are the postulated or encoded characters. They appear to be conversant with the Ghanaian environment. According to Jeremy Hawthorn, this character[s] can be," the actual reader, but not necessarily so; another intra-fictional target or destination, or even a void to which something is projected [67]. A text reveals its receiver's knowledge and identity in analogies and comparisons [Lorentzo 59]. Also the exhibition of the knowledge of the repertoire of the societal ways accounts for the knowledge of the receiver of a novels main story. Through this technique the writer feels assured that he is speaking to someone who shares the same predicament with him. Like in oral rendering, the speaker is assured of continued attention so that he tells his stories till the end. Armah tells stories of filth, corruption, to the encoded reader[s] and watches his reactions; as well as purges himself of ill-fillings about his country.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the Man, [the unnamed protagonist of the novel], stands as the receiver of the narrator's story on the one hand, and the Teacher, on the other [believing the whole story of the novel to be an out-pouring of Armah's grievances about the country's way of life]. The Man is first noticed in the bus as a sleeper – "the watcher was no watcher after all, only a sleeper"[5]. In chapter six, the Teacher relates his experiences to the Man from his early days when he "used to see some hopes", to the present when there is only knowledge, "knowledge of betrayal and deceit" and "quick decay" [62]. Through analogy, imagery and symbolism - the picture of the 'old man-child', the over-flowing dust bin where everyone throws in refuse, etc, the Teacher gives the picture of the situation in Ghana. Both the Man and the Teacher addressed are not lost in the knowledge of what is narrated. They know the time and setting of the story; the city of Accra, in Ghana, about the time of the military coup of 1966.

One obvious benefit of infusing a receiver inside a narrative is that it sustains the story as the narrator still feels every moment that someone is with him. The reference to 'Winneba'[89], 'Esikofe Aba Estates'[140], for instance, reveals that the narrator is communicating to people who are conversant with

the city. The narrator presumes that his listener is very much acquainted with Akan and so familiar with Ghanaian allusions and references.

The nexus or relation between the telling and what is told always stands out to form the narrative situation in a novel. This can cover the areas of mood, tone, voice, and even focalization. Concerning the narrative situation in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the tone alone will be focused on. Tone, in fact, is another technique which Armah uses to portray his abject rejection of the bastardized life in Ghana at the time of the novel. Armah in the novel mixes self-pity with hopelessness. All the physical things in the novel ranging from human beings to objects [buses, offices, buildings, etc], appear deplorable, pitiable and poor. What kind of conductor of a bus will clear his throat and eat the phlegm [5] if not one debased. The Man in the bus, at the beginning of the novel, “licked the wetness around his chin” [6] as he woke up from sleep. Even the Teacher’s resignation to fate when he felt that there was no help coming from anywhere manifests hopelessness and self pity.

Armah uses nauseating phrases as well as scatological language in the *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. These phrases like ‘your mother’s rotten cunt’, ‘mess of some travellers’ vomit’, ‘hand dripping of after-piss’, ‘generous gob of mucus’, ‘rotten’ [as the cedi smells], ‘rotten menstrual blood’, etc remind every reader of the kind of language used in the novel – the language of scatology. This use of scatological language meshes with the theme which the writer portrays in the novel. Oyo speaks of getting involved in the boat business, Amankwa wants to give bribe and have his timber carried, Abednego Yamoah makes his money through the sale of government fuel, just as the Man encourages Koomson to give money to the gate-man for a pass. The fact is that Armah carefully used language that depicts corruption to discuss the theme of corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

Conclusion

By all standards, Ayi Kwei Armah exploits many techniques of narration in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and these enable him to clearly discuss the level of corruption that has eaten up the moral fabrics of Ghana during its first republic ruled by Nkrumah. Through prolepsis and analepsis he is able to flash backwards into the poignant memories of his sad times and even projects into the future of the society. Here, he sees people with life style of the Man as rallying point for unity. The narrator drones querulously over the inadequacies and immoralities that eat up the country. Also through the use of the progressive tense, Armah keeps his readers moving on as corruption in

the country goes on unabated. This paper therefore deduces that Armah realizes his artistic goal in the novel through the use of techniques of narration such as analepsis and prolepsis, progressive tense, characterization, homodiegetic narratorship, as well as the use of scatological language to demonstrate how Ghana's newly won independence smouldered away on the altar of capitalism, avarice and unquenchable corruption.

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