

All Life Converges to Some Centre

*Modernity and Alienation in the Early Ayi Kwei Armah*

Kavish Chetty / chtkav003

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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### *Abstract*

This paper examines representations of existential alienation in two early novels by the Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah. The introductory chapter extrapolates an account of how the representational strategies of existential alienation produce specific effects on the act of self-writing. From there, the paper explores these effects in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), arguing that alienation is a valuable heuristic in unlocking the novel's complex meditation on how abstract, macrohistorical forces like neo-colonialism come to be registered in the most intimate aspects of the subject's experience of the world. As such, if one restores the historical details of Ghana's "post-colonial" moment, the novel is redeemed from Chinua Achebe's assertion that the novel is "sick [...] not with the sickness of Ghana, but the sickness of the human condition". Representations of alienation have a diagnostic function in *The Beautiful Ones*. The second chapter examines alienation under the new imaginative terrains of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), and articulates the experiments in formal representation in that novel with Armah's inaugural concern with the possibility of a prognostic appraisal of the alienation so widely thematised in his earlier trilogy. Both studies are undertaken, finally, to explore the ways in which modernity has been received in African literature, and to demonstrate the analytic value of existential alienation in understanding the crises of a specifically African modernity.

*Introduction: An Alienated Modernity*

The present thesis is born of a restlessness with modernity: both conceptually, which is to say, an impatience with institutional Eurocentric *and* postcolonial accounts of the phenomenon<sup>1</sup>, and in sensory terms; the restlessness inherent to the condition of modernity itself, encountered as a reorganisation of sensory experience or a smearing of the senses. In previous graduate work, I had explored the category of “alternative modernities”<sup>2</sup> from the synoptic vantage of world-systems theory: I sought to oppose the triumphal inauguration of a multiply-located, geographically-dispersed and centre-less set of modernities with the sobering Marxist vision of a “singular modernity”<sup>3</sup>, which posits the global ascendancy of capital as the occulted macronarrative of all locally articulated cultural modernities. My site of exposition was, and continues to be, Africa. However, an elaboration of the geopolitical networks within which such modernity arises, and the material effects of capitalist hegemony upon this process, forms only a partial and incomplete contribution to the problematic of an “African modernity”. A total vision of modernity’s operations must account for its psychic, epistemic and existential domains.

For the purposes of bridging the material with the psychoexistential, and the structural with the experiential, I have found two exploratory media of immense analytic value. The first is literature, acting here as a “privileged microcosm”, as Fredric Jameson writes, “with its characteristic problems of form and content, and of the relationship of superstructure to infrastructure”<sup>4</sup>. Literature grants access to a psychic reality which is always implicated in vaster structures of articulation. The second, which I argue is the bridging medium *par excellence* between the structural and experiential effects of modernity, is that

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<sup>1</sup> Modernity, as shall be elaborated in the course of the present discussion, is a protean and polysemic signifier, the derivatives and satellites of which – the modern, modernisation, modernist and modernism – delimit multiple domains of inquiry across a centuries-long historical arc; indeed, a “restless” word. The term “modern” first enters the English language, from its earlier cognates *moderne*, *modernus* and *modo* (“just now”). The sense of being “contemporary” or “of the present” defines much of its prehistory as rooted in a language of time, or temporal relations, and is further expressed through the conventional distinction between the “ancient” and the “modern” (common from the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE). For a fuller cataloguing of uses, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, page 208. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a dichotomisation between “tradition” and “modernity”, and the teleological implication that the former advances or improves toward the latter, is common in discussions about Africa and the Third World. See Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003, pages 40 – 79 for a discussion on the exercise of this binary in Africanist discourse.

<sup>2</sup> A useful exposition of these ideas is to be found in Dilip Gaonkar’s “On Alternative Modernities” in Gaonkar et al., *Alternative Modernities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001, pages 1 – 23.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase belongs to Fredric Jameson. See *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London; New York: Verso, 2002 at page xi. For other critiques of alternative modernities, and the conception of a “decomposing modernity”, see James Ferguson, “Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development” in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, pages 176 – 194.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971, page xi.

of existential alienation. Alienation, with its many historic registers and inflections<sup>5</sup>, generates particular idiosyncrasies in the writing of the self and of identity, and as such, its analysis in works of African literature should prove a productive method for fathoming a psychoexistential crisis which arises under the aegis of modernity. I have selected, as my first locus of inquiry, a novel which thematises alienation, bringing together its diverse expressions toward the articulation of this psychoexistential crisis. The novel is that of Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). I intend to enlarge upon the “hall of mirrors” effect at work in *Beautiful Ones*, whereby individual narrative episodes compress and reflect its grander thematic preoccupations. In this sense, I hope to take very seriously Georg Simmel’s remark that, “To the adequately trained eye [...] the complete meaning of the world as a whole, radiates from every single point.”<sup>6</sup>

It is analytically important to distinguish both the various *orders* of alienation a subject can incur – material or, social, existential, psychic, cultural, racial, sexual, which might be thought of as epistemic – and the various *mediatory levels* at which alienation can operate in literature – alienated character/protagonist within the novel, the text itself, representations of the sociopolitical and epistemic condition, and the grander level of global capital – whilst upholding the heritage of dissociation or severance which is common to most understandings of the term. It is my ambition to argue that alienation has a psychosomatic versatility, evident in the corporeal language of *Beautiful Ones*, which allows the representation of affective states such as pain, narcolepsy, living-death and anaesthesia to carry ciphered socio-political and epistemic charges. Alienation is thus the experiential medium through which a dissonance between the subject and its lifeworld is filtered: rather than merely signifying a degraded form of experience, alienation may be redeemed as a valuable heuristic in the analysis of the crises of an African modernity.

My second locus of inquiry is Armah’s fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), in which I argue Armah shifts from the diagnostic of alienation – which so thematically preoccupies his first three novels

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<sup>5</sup> An institutional pre-history of alienation, beyond its pre-materialist formulation in the works of G.W.F. Hegel, would account for its elaboration in, representatively, the following works: Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988; György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. London: Merlin Press, 1971 (1923) [Lukács discovered the *1844 Manuscripts* subsequent to the publication of this volume, and in its republished editions, his prefaces admits of an essential confusion he had made between the alienation respectively operative in Hegel and Marx]; Herbert Marcuse, “The Foundation of Historical Materialism” in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*. London: NLB, 1972 (1932); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*. United Kingdom: Vintage Books, 1968 (1957) [Unlike his *Being and Nothingness*, which poses alienation as an ontological condition, the present volume links it to contingent material scarcity]; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986 (1952); Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life (Vol I & II)*. London: Verso, 2008(1974, 1961); for an attempt to re-signify alienation as a positive counter-reaction to the vicissitudes of colonial modernity, see Abiola Irele, *In Praise of Alienation: An Inaugural Lecture*. Ibadan: New Horn, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Teacher’s College Press, page 69.

– to a prognostic account of overcoming alienation. The attempt to thematise a transcendence over alienation leads Armah into experimental patterns of representation, unique not only in their departure from the sensuous, “phenomenological” registers of the early oeuvre, but also in the ways they correlate to the insurgent nationalisms of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Africa. I argue that the dynamics of alienation provide the interpretative key to understanding both novels. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, alienation is countered with a sophisticated crypto-nationalistic idiom – the peculiarities of which return our attentions to underdevelopment and the compensatory “short-cut” (nationalism) used to enter into modernity from a position of extreme structural disadvantage.

As I conceive of alienation not as an untranscendable ontological horizon of human existence, but rather as a particular experience which arises responsively within a specific set of socio-historical conditions, it stands to reason that the alienated thematic in African letters will share a conceptual inheritance from, yet remain constitutively different to, its artistic expression in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century works of European literary modernism, where, as the classic sociologists of the period inform us, alienation exists in an inseparable causal relationship with the rise of “industrial society”<sup>7</sup> and its representation is taken as a signal marker of Euro-American modernity.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence of the peculiar centre-periphery relationships of colonialism and coloniality established on the African continent, it may be helpful to recontextualise alienation within the challenges posed by a specifically *African* modernity. The problematic of modernity is not formulated here as one of a “belated-ness” or of the temporal lag or developmental stasis implicit in modernisation theory. Instead, it is conceived of as a *spatio-political* relation, wherein Africa’s location of disempowerment simultaneously propels and allows European and American modernisation, whilst arresting its possibility in Africa.

Biodun Jeyifo has circulated a productive account of African literature’s embattled engagements with the problematic of modernity, in which he identifies three recurrent themes which have preoccupied the imaginations of African writers and theorists over the last half-century. Of the first, he writes of the “deep sense of perplexity with regard to all available cognitive or explanatory models and paradigms [...] for making confounding or traumatic experiences comprehensible or negotiable”, a perplexity “so deep,

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<sup>7</sup> The sociologists referred to here are the triumvirate Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Emile Durkheim. For a discussion on their analyses of alienation – and its relationship to the emergent industrial societies of Europe – see Joachim Israel, *Alienation: From Marx to Modern Sociology*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1971, pages 97 – 149.

<sup>8</sup> Alienation in European modernist literature compels newfound relationships to the inner life of the subject, registered and explored through the innovative and erudite techniques of literary modernism. It is well expressed in such notable works as T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), and Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (1912) and *The Trial* (1914).

so profound that it amounts to nothing less than an *epistemic impasse* [original emphasis].”<sup>9</sup> The second theme, which he designates as *radical alterity and hegemony*, comprises two elements: firstly, the sense that within the “global order of late capitalism, very powerful, almost insuperable forces and interests are ranged against Africa [...]” and secondly, “the *idea* [emphasis added] that these mostly Western foreign interests and forces are so alien to our cultures and societies as to constitute, compositely, a difference that is *radically incommensurable* to Africa [original emphasis]”.<sup>10</sup> The third theme – in which he observes the dialectical counter-reification of an African culturalism in response to this radical alterity – will be discussed expansively in the second chapter. For the moment, however, the themes of an *epistemic impasse* and of *radical incommensurability* provide crucial sign-posts, lodestars for the analysis of an alienation rooted specifically in the African continent.

Before moving to an elaboration of the instruments with which to diagnose alienation in *Beautiful Ones*, I shall have to introduce the historical contingencies which give the theme of alienation its resonance. The continued subjugation of Africa, both prior to and beyond the liquidation of the exploitative metropole-colony relationships of administrative colonialism, has been analysed and documented extensively.<sup>11</sup> *Beautiful Ones* was published in 1968, an epochal period in the history of African decolonisation, and especially so in Ghana, which constitutes the novel’s landscape. Kwame Nkrumah, who had presided over the Ghanaian transition to independence in 1957, had been deposed in a bloodless military coup two years prior, and in 1965 had published his influential text, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. His argument provides a legend with which to apprehend the diegetic interactions of the avaricious, materialistic lifeworld of *Beautiful Ones*, especially in its key proposition that African states appear to luxuriate in the outward trappings of political independence whilst actually being directed from outside, or in his famous phrasing, that “a state in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny.”<sup>12</sup>

The problem being formulated here is that of an *absent centre* to national economics and politics, where the impulses of state formation and policy are coerced by the historic centres of power originating in the metropolitan “first-world”; an occult colonialism reproducing itself through new strategies. Such mechanisms, which anticipate the “structural adjustments” of the 1980s *avant la lettre* include the conditionality of integral foreign aid: lowering trade barriers, protecting private investments, determining

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<sup>9</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *An African Culture Modernity: Achebe, Fanon, Cabral and the Philosophy of Decolonization*. *Socialism and Democracy*, 21: 3 (2006), page 126.

<sup>10</sup> Jeyifo, at page 127.

<sup>11</sup> One may point in this regard to the following exemplary texts: Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Cape Town, Pambazuka Press, 2012 (1972); Frederick Cooper et al., *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labour and the Capitalist World-System in Africa and Latin America*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Panaf, 1965, page 4.



the use of funds and drawing upon supplies of raw materials.<sup>13</sup> In thinking through the internal politics of the Ghana of this period, it is important not to narrow the window of observation, to the occlusion of these external pressures. In 1960, Ghanaian society was characterised by a “considerable disparity in income”<sup>14</sup>. This situation is recorded in its connotative suggestiveness by one commentator, who writes that the Accra professional elite received an annual income in excess of \$16, 000 - and lived in houses patterned on the “English country mansion” – whilst unskilled labours earned 63c per day, consigned to congested “tumble-down” houses of sun-dried mud (colonial architectural influence materialises divisions in wealth and advantage).<sup>15</sup>

The widespread immiseration of the working-classes was worsened by the price crash in principal export, cocoa<sup>16</sup>. Reliance on East-bloc importation resulted in shortages of essential goods.<sup>17</sup> A crisis in balance-of-payments forced the country to “draw heavily on its rapidly diminished reserves.”<sup>18</sup> These indexical abbreviations of Ghana’s pauperisation should be read as part of the uncomfortable accommodation of the independent African state within the pre-established networks of global capital. As eminent Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen writes, African states were “turned into markets for the consumption of manufactured goods of their metropolitan countries and producers of raw materials.”<sup>19</sup> A deeper, metonymic parallel exists between this location of the African state under conditions of neo-colonialism and the alienated existential subject. If, as the above snapshots suggest, sovereignty is an illusion undone by the impulses of an *absent centre* which organises the possibility and formulation of the state, then perhaps the sovereignty of subjectivity can also be creatively undone by the compulsions of a centre which directs it from outside. As we shall see, drawing on the resources of Ato Quayson’s recent account of existential alienation and self-writing, the neo-colonial relationship excellently metaphorises alienation at the level of global politics.

The object of the present section is to offer a thorough account of both “self-writing” and “existential alienation”, for the purposes of distilling a critical focus, to bring to bear on novels which take such alienation as their organising principle. “Self-writing” is not to be understood as mere “self-accounting”,

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<sup>13</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, “The Mechanisms of Neo-colonialism” available at: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/ch01.htm> (last accessed 19 September 2014 at 16:34)

<sup>14</sup> Roger S. Gocking, *The History of Ghana*. London: Greenwood Press, 2005, page 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ioné Acquah, quoted in Gocking, page 116.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past in the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pages 95 and 106.

<sup>17</sup> Gocking, page 135.

<sup>18</sup> Gocking, page 133.

<sup>19</sup> Adu Boahen, “The Legacies of Colonialism and Nation-Building” in Toyin Falola (ed.), *The Adu Boahen Reader*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004 at page 338.

which is to say the act of explicitly narrating from the perspective of the individual, but rather through the more expansive sense which emerges first in the work of Michel Foucault, and is glossed by Quayson here as “writing the self in its dialogic interiority.”<sup>20</sup> This does not imply a strict conception of *the* self writing itself into dialogic existence, but rather signifies the fraught relationship of discursive instruments arced towards the writing of *a* self. The problematic of “self-writing” consists in the necessarily limited available means with which an author can construct selfhood. We are therefore not only among the genres of autobiography or memoir, although these are certainly within the theoretical horizon. The conception of “self-writing” at work here has a vaster ontology that may operate on at least two discernable levels: the first is the more immediately graspable “self-writing” as the act of writing fictional *selves* (as literary figures), and the second is “self-writing” as an act of ordinary socialisation, of creating and curating one’s own identity through dialogue and contact with the world. Certainly, by the time Achille Mbembe introduces “self-writing” into Africanist discourse, he takes the position that “contemporary African modes of writing the self are inseparably connected with the problematics of self-constitution and the modern philosophy of the subject.”<sup>21</sup>

Foucault’s locus of inquiry was the writing practices of pre-Christian ascetics. He posited the existence of an “implied addressee” (although, Quayson prefers the dialogic “interlocutor”) to which all writing is oriented. This interlocutor is not (strictly) material, singular or indeed human – it is better comprehended as imagined, or as a structural condition of writing. In this sense, it may be helpfully abstracted to constitute a “horizon of expectations”, a discursive system of anticipations and anxieties within which writing inevitably finds its emergence. Foucault’s ascetics could rely upon a sympathetic interlocutor, a shared horizon of expectations, together with which the self-writer could find harmonious expression. After modulating this argument with the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin, Quayson suggests that the interlocutory structure becomes far more diverse, able to accommodate interlocutory positions which range from the sympathetic to the indifferent and finally, the skeptical; they emerge either in sequence, or as oscillations between one another.

Having introduced the skeptical interlocutor, Quayson proceeds to argue that the expectations such an interlocutor generates “[transpose] a sense of incommensurability into the discourse of the self, since this interlocutor is implacable in its<sup>22</sup> demand for a form of coherence,” a coherence that is finally

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<sup>20</sup> Ato Quayson, “Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature”. *Research in African Literatures*, 42: 2 (2011), page 31.

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing”. *Public Culture*, 14:1 (2002), page 240.

<sup>22</sup> The use of “its”, rather than a human pronominal form such as “their”, seems to suggest a genuflection toward the “non-human”; that these demands are the composite and sediment of culturally, institutionally and discursively sanctioned forms of self-coherence, congealed over time.

impossible to achieve under conditions of modernity – the very conditions which sponsor the yearning for this utopian state. The skeptical interlocutor is not a mere “feature of writing”, but rather a “category in relation to which the identity of the individual is shaped”; it is therefore a “foundational matrix of socialization, severed from particular beings and inextricably tied to discursive horizons of expectations.”<sup>23</sup> Identity, or the self, is figured as inherently *intersubjective*, dialogic and always in-relation. It emerges as part of the dynamic process within this structure of interlocution. Quayson’s primary thesis is that “it is the inescapable and necessary elaboration of the skeptical interlocutor as a horizon of expectations, incorporated into the processes of self-fashioning yet remaining radically unassimilable to self-identity that produces existential alienation.”<sup>24</sup> In the other words, the writer of the self, in his or her endless encounters with a negative horizon of expectations, is met with rupture rather than mutual incorporation.

I have drawn upon two appraisals of the value of literature to my inquiry so far (the Jamesonian “privileged microcosm” or “laboratory situation” of the novel, and Mbembe’s conception of “self-writing”), and a clarifying interlude on the interactive productivity of these two articulations is required. Jameson’s account of literature is enabling inasmuch as it formulates the general problematic of literature as a *mediation*, in which we must confront the question of how to move from the domains of the psychological to the social, the social to the economic, and how these movements are negotiated within the work of art. He inquires into the relationship of the artistic artefact to “the more fundamental social and historical reality of groups in conflict,” and how the latter should be approached if “we are to be able to see cultural objects as social acts, at once disguised and transparent.”<sup>25</sup> Mbembe’s contribution is the particularised question of another mediation: how selfhood and subjectivity, as mediated through literature, become formally problematised on the page; a problematisation which, in my reading, can only be accounted for with reference precisely to the historical, psychological, social and economic domains which inform it. To reiterate, I wish to argue that the literary representation of alienation may function as a diagnostic which alerts us to the presence of foreign forces (absent centre) in the constitution of the self. Both Jameson and Mbembe’s formulations posit literature as an exploratory medium through which to test this hypothesis.

As I argued above, the contingencies of history provide a geopolitical relationship (colonialism) in which to situate Quayson’s analysis of alienation. Colonialism signifies the constellation of administrative and political strategies through which Africa and its diverse cultures and territories were conscripted into

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<sup>23</sup> Quayson, page 32.

<sup>24</sup> Quayson, page 32.

<sup>25</sup> Jameson, page xiv.

capitalist modernity in a relationship of core to periphery, disintegrating pre-existing cultural and cognitive modes and placing them in a troubled adjacency to European forms of cognition and social organisation. Nelson Maldonado-Torres defines colonialism as “... a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on another nation, which makes such nation an empire.”<sup>26</sup> The present study, in its desire to move through the realms of the sensorial-experiential, psychosocial, economic and political, and the literary, may benefit from a more epistemically-grounded reading of this relationship. The terms for its analysis are provided by the idea of “coloniality”, or the “colonial matrix of power”, terminologies of an emergent, predominantly Latin American, scholarship whose projects of border gnosis, epistemic delinking and the critique of invisibilised forms of existent colonial power coagulate as “decolonial theory”.<sup>27</sup> Coloniality is the continual reproduction and ordering of everyday practices according to colonial hierarchies or heterarchies of power, integrated and naturalised into the social order. It is a discriminatory discourse, a logic of inferiority or subordination which operates epistemically upon the once-colonised, coercing them to self-constitute in the umbrae of colonial discourse. Coloniality gains a productive and explanatory power when placed in proximity to the literary theme of (recalling Jeyifo) an “epistemic impasse” and to Quayson’s “skeptical interlocutor”, or negative “horizon of expectations”. The sociologist Anibal Quijano writes of the influence of coloniality upon cognitive modes and self-expression:

The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns and instruments of formalised and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. [...] The colonisers also imposed a mystified image of their own patterns of producing knowledge and meaning. [...] European culture became the universal cultural model. The imaginary in the non-European cultures could hardly exist today and, above all, reproduce itself outside of these relations.<sup>28</sup>

The transformations of colonialism and coloniality have entered Africa into a peculiar historical space, and it is with this background that we can better interpret Quayson’s argument that in Africa “the discursive instrumentality of communal pasts and the assumed heroic gestures upon which a commonly shared horizon of expectations might be built are found to be historically compromised.”<sup>29</sup> Under such conditions, the instruments of self-writing become “absent”, “debased” or otherwise deteriorated such that “all that remains for the individual is the rehearsal of the attempt to speak compulsively, hedged by

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<sup>26</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being”. *Cultural Studies*, 21:2 (2007), page 243.

<sup>27</sup> The essential propositions of this scholarship are contained in the multi-authored volume, Enrique Dussel et al., *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Anibal Quijano quoted in S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA (2013), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Quayson, page 32.

doubts and revisions.”<sup>30</sup> Existential alienation, in this reading, results from a radical destabilising of the structure of interlocution.

The following inquiry takes the representation of alienation (language, figural expression, tropes, symbols, modernist technique) as its organising principle. I will argue that alienation in *The Beautiful Ones* can only be understood by reconstituting neo-colonial relationships of disempowerment upon the axis of psychosocial interaction. In doing so, we will see that alienation is an affective state whose representation consistently draws the outside world into the text. Alienation is, in other words, a political sensation.

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<sup>30</sup> Quayson, page 33.

## Chapter I

### *I: The Horizon of Impossible Expectations*

In 1975, joining a considerable body of existent literary-critical reactions to *Beautiful Ones*, Chinua Achebe made the haunting remark that the novel was “sick [...] not with the sickness of Ghana, but the sickness of the human condition,” thereby obliterating the world-historical moment of its diegesis, and furthermore called Armah an “alienated native.”<sup>31</sup> Responses of this nature, which spirit away the precise historical and geographic coordinates of the novel, locating its alienated thematic instead in an untethered space outside history, were common in the period 1968 – 1979. Charles Nnolim wrote that the work “refers to no real Africa, but some abstract human condition”, marking its author as a “cosmic pessimist”.<sup>32</sup> Other notable examples of criticism in this vein include that of Shatto Arthur Gakwandi<sup>33</sup>, Leonard Kibera<sup>34</sup>, Ben Obumelu<sup>35</sup> and D. I. Nwoga<sup>36</sup>. A more mature phase of criticism, which takes the historical materials of *Beautiful Ones* as integral to its narrative, is augured around the late 1980s and is certainly present in Neil Lazarus’s *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*<sup>37</sup> (1990), which situates the novel within the intra-Ghanaian political atmosphere (from the 1957 nationalist euphoria, to the 1966 February coup), and the broader phase of post-independence writing, sometimes periodised as “postcolonial disillusionment”.<sup>38</sup>

My own entry-point will seek to redeem the formulation of the “alienated native”, restoring it to its contexts within the work, and argue that this pervasive sense of alienation, rather than being an ahistorical pessimism, is the master-code which deciphers the novel’s complex meditations on epistemic uncertainty and the problematics of selfhood; neo-colonial political failures; commodity fetishism and reification; the alienations of holding onto an isolated ethics which are incomprehensible and incommensurable within antagonistic socio-discursive systems; and finally, the acknowledgement that these are generated through occulted colonial forces, even if these are not marked as such within the text. The present analysis will therefore depart from John Lutz’s enabling work which helpfully locates

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<sup>31</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann Educational, 1975, page 25.

<sup>32</sup> Charles E. Nnolim, “Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah” (1979) in Charles E. Nnolim (ed.), *Approaches to the African Novel: Essays in Analysis*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 2010 (1992), page 79 – 92.

<sup>33</sup> Shatto Arthur Gakwandi, “Freedom as Nightmare: Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Duodo’s *The Gab Boys*” in *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> Leonard Kibera, “Pessimism and the African Novelist: Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*”. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 14:1 (1979) [*Beautiful Ones*, he writes, is “not part of that literature which probes below the obvious at critical moments of history”, page 64].

<sup>35</sup> Ben Obumelu, “Marx, Politics and the African Novel.” *Twentieth Century Studies*, 10 (1973)

<sup>36</sup> D. I. Nwoga, “Alienation in Modern African Fiction.” *Muse*, 5:1 (1973).

<sup>37</sup> Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*. London: Yale University Press, 1990.

<sup>38</sup> Arthur Ravenscroft first observed this recurrent thematisation of despair or disappointment in “Novels of Disillusionment”. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 6 (1969), pages 120 – 137.

the philosophical pessimism of the novel within the causal socio-material nexus of commodity fetishism, but cannot process the subtly-articulated problematic of *race* within this framework.<sup>39</sup>

*Beautiful Ones*<sup>40</sup> is a novel whose narrative formation resembles the Lukácsian phrase, “the adventure of interiority.”<sup>41</sup> Its nameless protagonist, “the man”, undergoes a series of self-discovering quests, a “darkly picaresque pilgrimage” as Joshua Esty writes<sup>42</sup>, through the public and private spaces of Sekondi-Takoradi (commutation, the office, the home, impoverished districts and the lavish residences of the comprador bourgeoisie). He encounters a lifeworld, registered in sensuous depictions, thronged with images of ordure, decay and darkness – the residues of bureaucratic corruption and political-developmental failure, and symptoms of an arrested or frustrated modernisation. Such corruption extends to the realm of social relationships: the man holds onto a vision of regenerative communal ethics, but finds in his interpersonal interactions that selfishness and commodity-acquisition define the social order, and cannot accommodate his search for authentic values.

This system of social relations is well explained by Herbert Marcuse, developing Marx’s inquiries into alienation, who writes of “the perversion of the historical-social world of man into an alien world of money and commodities; a world which confronts him as a hostile power [...]”<sup>43</sup> The inaugural scene of *Beautiful Ones* announces this very perversion in its insistence on money as a (false) proxy for power. The novel begins with an image of a bus, metonymically condensing the Ghanaian (or post-independent) nation, carrying its slumberous cargo of passengers:

The light from the bus moved uncertainly down the road until finally the two vague circles caught some indistinct object on the side of the road [...] The bus had come to a stop. Its confused rattle had given place to an endless spastic shudder, as if its pieces were held together by too much rust to ever fall apart completely. (1)

An implicit critique of the postcolony is enfolded in this language of equivocality. Consider: “uncertainly”, “vague”, “indistinct”, “confused”. Reading this passage for its full national-metaphoric import, we should take seriously even the rust, an aged (superannuated) connective agent which holds

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<sup>39</sup> John Lutz, “Pessimism, Autonomy and Commodity Fetishism in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*”. *Research in African Literatures*. 34:2 (2003), pages 94 – 111.

<sup>40</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. London: Heinemann, 1988 (1968). All in-text quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>41</sup> György Lukács, quoted in Lazarus, page 46.

<sup>42</sup> Joshua Esty, “Excremental Postcolonialism”. *Contemporary Literature*. 40:1 (1999), page 37

<sup>43</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “The Foundation of Historical Materialism”, available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/historical-materialism/> (last accessed 19 September 2014 17:00)

the entity together in a precarious assemblage. This is a nation in the grip of an “endless spastic shudder”, and later metaphors of the man-child (63) and allegories of the Cave (79, 80) provide symbolic materials in furtherance of this historically-grounded critique. In the bus, the paying of the conductor has become ritualised, a fetishistic display of meagre wealth, as those who can offer a gratuity can participate in “the restless happiness of power” (2). The conductor becomes an adjudicator of social value – those without money are “impotent”, and those with money “important” (2), and the homophonic proximity of these words seems playfully to disclose the slippage with which money has become the ultimate social marker. Indeed, when the conductor is alone on the bus, he smells a cedi note, his nostrils processing its “marvellous rottenness”, an “ancient, stale smell” (3). There are two recurrent symbolic strategies at work in this description. Firstly, the *contradiction* or paradox by which rottenness becomes “pleasure” (3), the transformation (or misrecognition) of decay into its affirmative opposite; and secondly, like the decrepit temporal marker of “rust”, a gesture to the ancient, or the pre-existent, or the originary. As we shall see, the text is scaffolded by these references and descriptions.

When we are introduced to the protagonist, he is asleep at the back of the bus, eyes ajar in unseeing slumber, a thread of drool dangling from his open mouth. The eyes of the man frighten the conductor, who believed himself alone to cherish his sexualised counting of coins and the fugitive inhalation of the cedi (as if to draw its power into him through olfaction). He becomes tortured with guilt at the possibility of being *watched*, and considers whether he might bribe the “watcher”, thinking him also “a man of skin and fat, with a stomach and throat which need to be served” (5). In this instinctual response, money is again placed at the forefront of social mediation, and the conductor appeals to the tropes of hunger and necessity. When the conductor discovers his watcher is only asleep, he explodes in “savage indignation” (5), and the man becomes victimised precisely for *not* having participated in the conductor’s cedi-centric paranoid projection, anticipating his (the man’s) later Kafkaesque appellation, “the condemned man” (54); innocence as guilt. It is telling that among the insults hurled at the man, alongside “bloodyfucking sonofabitch” sits “article of no commercial value!” (6) Money deeply informs this society’s discourse of meaning-making.

The opening scene on the bus prefigures more than the Marxian “alien world” in which “the social relation between men themselves [...] assumes, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things”<sup>44</sup> as the encounter between the man and the conductor condenses. The man is asleep but, in the first series of a motif which runs throughout the novel, the other passengers are also depicted as somnambulists or zombies: “soft scraping of sleepy feet” (1), “bodies walking in their sleep” (2),

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I*. London: Penguin Classics, 1976, page 165.



“walking corpse” (2) – and later, to provide only a partial list, “suffering sleepers” (20), “living death” (22), “walking in his sleep” (33), “sleepwalker” (33), “walking dead”(35). Marcuse theorised alienation as “anaesthetisation”, a “deadening of the senses that makes repression and manipulation possible.”<sup>45</sup> The word “anaesthesia” splits apart into its component pieces as follows: the negation “an”, and “aesthesia”, the capacity to experience sensation, to *feel*. The “anaesthetic” effect of alienation may be interpreted, therefore, as the cancellation or denial of *aesthetic* experience (the reduction of experience to the brute, functional, economic). In *Beautiful Ones*, the alienation of the general populace (sleepwalkers, walking dead) is signified through the somatic language of exhaustion, numbness. They are unconscious thralls enacting a routinised, banalised existence.

The alienation of the man poses an interpretative difficulty in that while he is still “asleep”, the opening scene dramatising this quite literally, he differs from the national cohort to the degree that he passively resists his alienated existence and attempts to transform it, unsuccessfully, into an authentic one. A second sense of alienation emerges in this reading: alienation as “a freely chosen act of withdrawal”, representing “a self-conscious bracketing of certain of the practical and theoretical elements of everyday life for achieving a higher and more valuable philosophical distance and perspective.”<sup>46</sup> Alienation is redeemed in this latter formulation, as a diagnostic or moment of self-awareness, wherein the estrangement of the alienated subject enables the possibility of emancipatory praxis, a critical posture opposed to a repressive or dictatorial status quo. The physical symptoms of alienation – anaesthesia expressing itself as fatigue, or anhedonia, or boredom – become ciphers for a political discontent. A dissonance with dominant horizons of expectations expresses itself upon and through the physical body. It is the character “Teacher” who better exemplifies alienation as a radical, self-conscious and politicised *withdrawal* from society (55, 56). The man, by contrast, appears to hang in a conflicted, unresolved negative space between commitment and disengagement.

The man is employed as an administrative clerk at the Railway and Harbour Administration Block and the description of his office-space reveals a domain in which everyday life has become thoroughly industrialised and productivity (labour) is a source of alienation:

The rusty painted fan was turned on, but it travelled with such tired slowness [...] and made the Traffic Control Office uncomfortable in a strange indeterminate way. It was not the heat alone or the inside

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Reitz, “Liberating the Critical in Critical Theory: Transcending Marcuse on Alienation, Art and the Humanities”. Conference paper, available at <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducReit.htm>, last accessed: 23 February 2014 at 18:51.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

wetness alone. And it was not the useless sounds of the fan mixing with the usual rattle of the little Morse machines. It was the combination which created the sense of confusion which it would be impossible to fix and against which it would be merely foolish to protest. [...] Everybody seemed to sweat a lot, not from the exertion of their jobs, but from some kind of inner struggle that was always going on. (20)

The absence of a focalising subjectivity with which to anchor the nightmarish experiential qualities of this scene, give the passage an oppressive sense of objectivity: as though the *experience* of this torpor and hopelessness is inescapably a part of the office's material composition. The language of indeterminacy ("strange", "indeterminate", "confusion", "uncomfortable") mirrors that used in description of the bus/nation in the opening scene ("uncertainly", "vague", "indistinct", "confused"). The office-space is demarcated as a microcosm of national fragmentation, in which that vaster directionless- or purposelessness, is recreated as the necessary experiential horizon of everyday life. The narcoleptic social existence of the "sleepwalkers" transfers via personification, to the fan ("tired slowness"). The discomfort and disorder of this occupational space is "impossible to fix", perceptually unfixed ("confusion"), and the pervasive ambient unease of this scene, of which no final determinant is given, seems to suggest that a full accounting of this confusion is impossible for subjects within the parameters of its experiential matrix, because something crucial is located outside the frame, and conditions it from without.

In the asinine bureaucracy of this employment, the manipulation of Morse machines – with their telegraphic, functional mode of communication; their "rattle" – is essential to the worker's mediatory labour, yet these very instruments of productivity, combined with aural ("useless sounds") and tactile ("heat", "wetness") causes, generate the scene's atmospheric "confusion". This registers a critique of the occupation as alienating in both its piecemeal structure and its tools of accomplishment. Furthermore, the verbal form of "rattle" – to make nervous, uneasy; to "rattle", to be "rattled by" – is allied in its polysemy to the architecture of this scene of nervous conditions and agitations, and strengthens the critique of this form of work as *essentially* alienating or disorienting.

The administrative and ideological transformations of the telegraph, to which the Morse machine is an analogue, is expertly analysed by James Carey, who argues that the emergence of the telegraph, "in conjunction with the railroad, provided the setting in which modern techniques for the management of complex enterprises were first worked out [...]"<sup>47</sup> The consequences of this new form of communication were "changes in the nature of language, of ordinary knowledge, of the very structure of

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<sup>47</sup> James Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph" in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2009, page 156.

awareness” (ibid). The telegraph reconfigured the spatial and temporal relations of the capitalist system – so pervasive was its influence in the development of impersonal (which is to say, not face-to-face) business relations, that it may act as a premier metaphor of modernisation, of the innovations of new bureaucratic administrative systems. The symbol of the Morse machine in *Beautiful Ones* should be read as an integral instrument of modern disaggregation.

If the unique impact of the telegraph (incarnated here as the Morse machine) on spatio-temporal relations metaphorises “all the innovations that ushered in the modern phase of history”<sup>48</sup>, then the man’s employment as a railway administrator places under his partial supervision yet another authoritative metaphor of a globalising capitalist modernity: the railway system<sup>49</sup>. The railway, specifically for the transport of “goods trains” (20), contracts space through connection, transporting materials across vast distances and implicating remote geographies in one another. The man’s function in the Control Office is to manage the nodal points of capitalist extraction (railway stations) – for all his attempts to resist the corruption and commoditisation of social life, he fails to fully appreciate his structural implication in upholding the wealth of a foreign bourgeoisie, in routines of employment which help sustain the very commodified social relations he is trying to transcend. He exhibits an (implicit) awareness of this global chain, when he thinks of a mid-afternoon train which will “bring Tarkwa gold and Aboso manganese to the waiting Greek ships in the harbour” (20, 21), figuring the broader intercontinental transmission enabled by railroads and shipyards, the pulling of raw materials from the West African interior for its destination as European gain (a rendering of how the mere administrations of the Morse machine become an integral component of neo-colonialism). But the *disaggregated* nature of his labour, partial and piecemeal contributions to an unglimped whole, acts as a dissociative force, separating him from the final knowledge that he is a manipulated synapse, an agent of his own subordination.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See Matthew Beaumont (ed.) et al, *The Railway and Modernity: Time, Space and the Machine Ensemble*. Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2007 and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Recalling the Adu Boahen quotation from earlier, that under colonialism African states were turned into “markets for the consumption of manufactured goods of their metropolitan countries”, this occlusion from the man of his participation in neo-colonial extraction takes on a doubly sinister resonance: after being processed in Europe, or the exported industrial sites of Asia, these raw materials will return to Africa in expensive commodity form, as gleaming and desirable products with which to display (illusory) power. Commodity fetishism thoroughly obscures the object’s labour history, and a society which empowers itself through the commodity disguises the radical disempowerment (its own) which brought about the creation of that commodity.

In the description of the office, another physical symptom (other than sleepiness<sup>51</sup>) comes to carry a complex political valence: “Everybody seemed to sweat a lot [...] from some kind of inner struggle that was always going on.” Sweat acts as an excretory sign, designating the essential porousness and instability of the inside/outside bodily divide, and is complemented by the novel’s other recurrent excremental trope: shit. Scatology has a polyvalent, counterdiscursive function in *Beautiful Ones*. Esty argues that “shit acts as a material sign of underdevelopment; as a symbol of excessive consumption; as an image of wasted political energies; and as a mark of the comprador’s residual, alien status.”<sup>52</sup> Shit and sweat challenge the conception of a privileged bourgeois interiority serenely unaffected by the surrounding social ecumene; rather, private inside and social outside mix incessantly and contaminate one another, leading to an affectively heightened, subjectively slanted and grotesque view of the landscape with interchangeable characters entirely bureaucratized and socialized on the inside – as is demonstrated by the description of the office with its almost totalitarian transferral of subjective experience to inherent grotesquerie (similar operations are at work in the novels of Kafka or Nikolai Gogol). Encounters with shit and filth in the novelistic world are often framed within a larger discourse of the impossibility of psychological purity: “Sometimes it is understandable that people spit so much,” the man introspects, “when all around the decaying things push inward and mix all the body’s juices with the taste of rot. Sometimes it is understandable, the doomed attempt to purify the self by adding to the disease outside” (40).

The “inner struggle” symptomatically expressed through sweat delimits a subjective psychological domain which is finally *divided*, in permanent interdependence and interlocution with its outside world. The impossibility of self-purity acts as an autocritique. It frustrates the individualist programme to transcend alienation, by locating such attempts within the dialogic interface of inside/outside, efforts which can only result in “the futile freedom of a thing connected to nothing else” (17). It, therefore, carries a charge of self-implication. The expulsion of shit, sweat and spit exorcise the subject’s waste, only to consolidate external decay and reinforce the alienating lifeworld. This process is a capsule-summary of the man’s internal conflict. Simon Gikandi writes that the novelistic outside is “presented as an aggregate of decay [...] while the man’s mind is a sanctuary, a self-contained entity which he controls.”<sup>53</sup> But the permeability of the mind, the perpetual infection of purity from the outside, designates a dialogic interiority which places this “sanctuary” under threat. An analogous metaphor is to be found when the man encounters a dam of clear water alongside “unconquerable filth”. He asks, of its

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<sup>51</sup> If the “excremental tropes” of shit and sweat serve to designate the porousness of inside and outside, the difficulties of clear distinction or separation, and the implicatedness of seemingly distinct entities, then somnambulism performs a similar function, imbricating the conscious and unconscious, phantasmagoria and waking perception.

<sup>52</sup> Esty, page 34.

<sup>53</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Reading the African Novel*. London: Heinemann, 1987, page 80.

purity, “how long-lasting the clearness?” At the mouth of the sea, he notices “the water already aging into the mud of its beginnings.” (23)

I have analysed only two early scenes thus far, but both are instances of remarkable compression, microscopies from which we may elaborate the novel’s thematic preoccupation as a whole. For further evidence of a corrupt social logic, as is the case with that of the conductor, we may consider the moment when Amankwa the timber contractor tries to bribe the man. Amankwa is described in a satiric metonymy as a “belly swathed in kente cloth”, his mouth is a “wolf shape”, and when he speaks, Armah writes “‘You know me,’ the *teeth* said aggressively [emphasis added] (28, 29).” The character does not register as a human, but is rather disaggregated into his compositional elements – the predatory and lupine mouth, the teeth and the protuberant stomach, all of which again call up the spectral influence of the “politics of the belly”. The political-class “antagonist” Koomson, when he is first introduced, is a “suit” (38), conjoining the ontology of the comprador-bourgeois with material signifiers of status. A metonymic string connects the “belly” to the “suit” to the comprador-class. The man cannot even find a sympathetic interlocutor in his wife, Oyo, who describes his philosophy of ethics amidst corruption as equivalent to that of the chichidodo bird: “The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul,” she says. “But the chichidodo only feeds on maggots, and you know the maggots grow best inside the lavatory. (45)” This proverbial allusion also denotes the impossibility of individual purity beneath the national horizons of filth. Excrement predominates in the narrative, later in the man’s descent to defecate in the Office latrine (105, 106), and forms the centrepiece of the final episode, in which the man literally leads Koomson through a latrine to escape political persecution (166 – 169).

These isolating relationships, and the shit-crust social sphere which encircles them, are helpfully explained by the Marxist process of *reification*. Lutz has already approached *Beautiful Ones* from this vantage, writing of “the process of objectification set in motion by capitalism that transforms human beings and the natural world alike into commodities [...]”<sup>54</sup> Under the thing-centric aegis of a reified society, social relations are “thingified” and express themselves as a relation between lifeless (and tradable) objects. Social value is sensible only through reference to the dominant economic calculus (recall “article of no commercial value!” with which the conductor insults the man). In *Beautiful Ones*, the counterposing trope to excrement is that of the “gleam”, the seduction of the fetishised commodity which drives the social order and awakens within its subjects an “ambiguous disturbing tumult”(23) to acquire. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno famously declared that “all reification is a forgetting”, and in the diegesis of *Beautiful Ones*, the historical contingency – colonial

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<sup>54</sup> Lutz, at page 95.

capitalism - which reified social relations and placed the gleam at the centre of socioexistential organisation has been obscured, ossified into an immutable, eternal and naturalised horizon of expectations.

Under such conditions of reification, historicity is blocked and alternative modes of being and relating appear as absurd digressions or perversions from the natural order. The phrase quoted earlier, depicting the clear pool of water “aging into the *mud of its beginnings* [emphasis added]” (23), which I argued represents the impossibility of individual purity, comes to take on a second resonance: its strange temporal formulation signifies the occultation through which the origins of the present situation become no longer fathomable; by which the (seemingly) ineluctable “present” discursively reproduces itself having exiled the other instruments of interpretation, and having produced a rupture with its own pre-history. In sum, it represents the loss of origins, the concealment of the moment of reification, and is all the more consuming for representing this through reference to actual natural elements (water, mud, the sea). In the reified, commodity-fetishised world of *Beautiful Ones*, the man’s struggle for the recognition of his existential value(s) is socially incomprehensible.

The analyses assembled above have aimed to identify a representative sample of the multiple determiners of alienation within the macrocosm of *Beautiful Ones*. From these, we may distil the phenomena of anaesthetisation and reification, neo-colonialism and disaggregated labour, grotesque material expectations and the sense that the individual cannot meaningfully contribute to society. These coagulate into a national situation which is defined by corruption, meaninglessness, social anomie, immiseration and cyclical repetition. Under such conditions, the man speaks of “the pain of [a] hope perennially doomed to disappointment” (12), and the “strong and ancient thought” that “there was nothing in loneliness but pain [...]” (26). Having also evidenced the operations by which the novel cuts open subjectivity, exposing it to an interlocutory dynamic with the enveloping lifeworld of corruption, I must now make the concluding argument of this section: that to limit “corruption” to the characterological realm, as the expression of a natural human venality and capacity for greed and jealousy, is to fail to register the deeper psychosocial meaning of the thematic of corruption in *Beautiful Ones*.

If we, instead, historicise corruption within the explanatory frameworks of reification and the neo-colonial order, a less concealing interpretation becomes available: corruption as *the alienating enactment of power*, motivated by the contradiction of an *impossible modernisation*. To appreciate this, we must accept the vision of the post-independent African state conceived by Nkrumah and (scholars like) Boahen - and explicitly endorsed in *Beautiful Ones* - as that of a national entity which by virtue of its neo-colonial

architecture and location of disempowerment within the global order of late capitalism, is systemically excluded from following the modernising pathways of its metropolitan ancestors. Thus, when the man thinks of Ghanaian citizens and the “final futility” of their “efforts to break the mean monthly cycle of debt and borrowing, borrowing and debt” (22), he is as much dramatising individual struggles with impoverishment as he is metonymically indexing the economic bondage of the debtor nation.

In *Beautiful Ones*, the corruptive impulse derives from the reified social order, in which the only way to access “the restless happiness of power” (2), the only way for human beings to *mean* or self-signify, is through the medium of commodity-acquisition. Recall that the conductor smells the cedi-note, as though to breathe its inherent power into his sensate being. If the route to power is through the properly fetishised commodity, which in that act takes on the truest talismanic connotations of the “fetish” object, then when individuals are systemically denied access to that power or self-worth through the (ostensibly) honest means of labour for wages, in a society malnourished with scarcity, they will *short-circuit* to power using bribery or violence (77, the fate of Egya Ekon). Teacher says explicitly that “Money was not pieces of paper [...] money was life. (77)” In this epistemological order, corruption is *not* the avaricious logic of the “failed state”, but rather a socially-legitimated and simultaneous disempowering form of existential empowerment. It is the desperate attempt of subjects to behave like those of a modernised state, amongst the signs of their decomposing modernity.<sup>55</sup> And the language of imprecision Armah uses to describe the national and microsocial atmosphere – “uncertain”, “vague”, “indistinct”, “confused”, “strange”, “indeterminate” and “uncomfortable” – expresses precisely this state of hopelessly alienating contradiction.

The generalised account of alienation elaborated above has figured a horizon of expectations which pressures the individual to self-signify, to self-write in the broadest possible sense of manifesting subjecthood, through the (dis)/empowering prism of the commodity. As I have argued, the self is split, and hangs at the dialogic thresholds of inside and outside. On account of the (global) systemic deprivations of the postcolony, the individual can attain his or her confused empowerment only at the

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<sup>55</sup> See Ferguson, pages 176 – 194. Ferguson proposes a model of decomposing modernity which reconceives the two wings of modernity – “cultural modernity” and “societal modernisation” - along two axes: the historical and the hierarchical, respectively. With regard to the second, once “modernity” is decoupled from its teleological developmentalist forward march (that at work in the economic discourse of “convergence theory”), it reveals its spatio-political dimension. As Ferguson writes, “Modernity appears at this historical juncture [de-developmentalised]... as a global status and a political economic condition [...] the key issues here are of membership and rank” (page 187). This refers to the relational “standard of living” available in post-independent African states, as opposed to their neo-colonial metropolises, and the political-economic status in which the former are “simply, unequivocally excluded” (page 189). The “decomposition” of these African modernities, of course, reverberates with the tropes of excrement and putrefaction in *Beautiful Ones*, which symbolise the developmentalist failure and neo-colonial/capitalist contradiction through material images of decay, shit and filth.

expense of others who, belonging to the same interlocutory structure of self-constitution, form a necessary fragment of that individual's selfhood: communal estrangement *is* at the same time the individual estrangement of man from himself. For these reasons, we see a lifeworld architected in *Beautiful Ones* in which unfulfilling labour, deteriorating social relations and corrupted modes of power lead to individuals radically estranged from one another as human beings; the Marxian "inimical" and "alien world" of dissociation, severance and contradiction. But having studied a representative portion of the lexica, stylistic devices and topoi with which these forms of alienation are encoded in the novel, I shall now pursue the specifically epistemic and colonial dimensions of the alienated thematic. For these purposes, Chapter 6 – Teacher's seven-part synoptic account of Ghanaian history – provides an exemplary treatment. As we shall continue to see, alienation in *Beautiful Ones*, rather than thematising the "sickness of the human condition", is anchored in a specific world-historical episode in the ascension of coloniality and neo-colonialism.

## *II: Epistemic Alienation and the Disarranged Chronologies of Modernity*

I wish to frame the following exegesis by reasserting two central analytic categories. The first is a return to the African literary-cultural imagination's theme of an "epistemic impasse", or as Jeyifo explains, the sense that with the violent encounter of colonialism Africa had been "propelled into a historical space which seems to make invalid *all* pre-existing systems, all paradigms for making confounding or traumatic experiences comprehensible or negotiable [original emphasis]."<sup>56</sup> The second is a reaffirmation of the structure of skeptical interlocution and its peculiar effects upon the literary thematic of alienation. Quayson argues that major historical transformations on the African continent have led to *the ambiguation of response to individual and collective history* in African letters. He writes that this ambiguation is discernible on at least two levels:

First is what pertains in the transition from one historical phase to another. The transition often generates epistemological aporia and generates problems of interpretation regarding the pastness of the past and its significance for the present. [...] Second is the ambivalence which comes to bear upon the status of moral judgment and how this relates to action [...] The effect of collective or individual ambivalence with respect to the past is that it either renders the underlying cultural codes no longer entirely relevant or makes them seem subservient to inherently narrow or unrepresentative principles. Other sites and cultural modalities may then appear equally pertinent to moral judgment and heroic action, and the apparent attractiveness of contrasting models of praxes engenders confusion in the minds of those contemplating any form of action.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jeyifo, page 126.

<sup>57</sup> Quayson, page 35.



Placing the synergetic arguments of Jeyifo and Quayson in proximity makes historical sense of my earlier claim that alienation may be registered as an *affective* equivocality carrying an occulted political charge. Alienation is here unthinkable without the cultural upheavals, material expropriations and cognitive untethering which have the epochal transformations of the Atlantic triangular slave-trade and administrative colonialism as their basis. In the office scene, we have already seen one instance of the dominant “sense of confusion” (20) which structures quotidian experience. The collapsing into each other of the commodity and existential value (3 - 5), and the rearrangements of social power resulting from this, evidence other aspects of a world in which an unclouded discernment of truth and falsehood, or the natural and contingent, become impossible for its existential subjects. At the thresholds of his synoptic narration of the Ghanaian independence struggle and its immanent discontents, Teacher extends the parameters of this *confusion* such that it becomes synonymic with the problem of an epistemic alienation unfurling within contexts of the “movement” into the global modern order:

Why do we waste so much time and sorrow with pity for ourselves? It is true now that we are men, but no so long ago we were helpless messes of soft flesh and unformed bone squeezing through bursting motherholes, trailing dung and exhausted blood [...] why does time not stop when we ourselves have come to stations where we would like to rest? It is so like a child to wish all movement to cease. And yet the wondering and the shaking and the vomiting horror is not all from the inward sickness of the individual soul. Here we have had a kind of sickness that should make even good stomachs go sick. What is painful [...] is not the movement itself, but the dizzying speed of it [...] Unnatural, I would have said, had I not stopped myself with asking, unnatural according to what kind of nature? Each movement and each growth, each such thing brings with itself its own nature to frustrate our future judgement. (62)

This passage provides a moment of revealing disruption within the perceptual orderliness of the novel thus far. The pronominal form “we” commands a unity of (historical) experience elsewhere fragmented through a distanced third-person narration. As the chapter develops, narration oscillates both between perspectives (Teacher, the man) and time periods (past, present) – this works to imbricate the “present” in its pre-history, and thus gives us a different vantage on the reified lifeworld. Teacher is, in other words, disestablishing the protocols of interpretation set up by the novel’s carefully orchestrated depiction of reified experience. Gikandi has written of Teacher’s “awareness of his modernity, his consciousness of living in a time and space defined by its sense of dissolution.” He argues furthermore, that “the narrator’s concern with the process of historical continuity and disruption, deprivation and inheritance, is symptomatic of Armah’s modernist temper.”<sup>58</sup> In Teacher’s negotiation with modernity, alienation and philosophical pessimism are not the eventual corollaries of a powerless postcolony, or the

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<sup>58</sup> Gikandi, page 82.

afterlife of a euphoric independence, but are always already carefully enfolded within this particular historical process. Modernity is given a multiform temporality – as both “progressive movement” (62) and “decay” (62), as though the induction into a global history is from its first moment a paradoxical inheritance.

To return to the quoted passage, we may begin by noticing that Teacher’s remarks take their aesthetic charge among a number of corporeal and affective references. In the opening paragraph alone: “vomit”, “horror”, “horrible”, “sickness”, “stomachs”, “painful”, “exhausted blood”, “flesh”, “bone” and even the birthing canal is darkly recoded as a “bursting motherhole”, a formulation which impoverishes positive connotative energies and exalts birth as an explosive, violent and meaningless act. These terms are themselves conceived within an organising superstructure in which organic metaphor – “natural”, “unnatural” and “growth” – provides the interpretative legend. The effect is to connect the epistemic disarticulation Teacher experiences with a vocabulary of somatic torment, a political overdetermination of the novel’s wide-ranging representations of flesh in revolt (sleepwalkers, excrement).

Teacher focalises his ambiguation with respect to the past – the sense that he is surrendered to multiple epistemologies – with his crucial remark: “Unnatural, I would have said, had I not stopped myself with asking, unnatural according to what kind of nature?” (62) The inseparable contamination of the natural and the contingent is a motif persistently recalled in the novel through metaphor: the bannister and its accretions of filth (11), the pool of corruptible water (23), the grander perceptual architecture of reified consciousness. But here, in the hesitation and self-revision (“had I not stopped myself with asking”), the “natural” is no longer a stable category in relation to chaos, an assured ground for the foundation of self-knowledge. Instead, noting that “each movement and each growth [...] brings with itself its own nature to frustrate our future judgment,” Teacher’s acknowledgement becomes a moment for introspective despair at the precarious co-existence of ethical codes and forms of understanding. Both thought and action are confounded (“frustrate our future judgement”) and the subject is cut adrift among a flotsam of interpretations. Teacher encounters an *aporia* beyond which certain judgement is impossible.

Nothing in the novel more explicitly captures the epistemic crisis, and the subject’s consequent failure in the adequate distinction of phenomena, than this nodal remark on the natural and unnatural. It legitimates a world defined by contradiction, one example of which is Teacher’s recollection of the Ghanaian post-war atmosphere as one of a place “messy with destroyed souls and lost bodies” (64). Teacher reaffirms the frustration of ethical judgement in practice by considering whether “victory itself happens to be the identical twin of defeat” (64). Here, from the vantage of the peripheral colony, victory

and defeat take on a contradictory relation with each containing each other. In this moment of defamiliarisation, the “marches of victory” (64) and celebratory ambience of 1945 become depthless reenactments of a post-war triumphalism more authentically *felt* abroad. Indeed, Africa properly registers in this assessment as European modernity’s underside, its men forced to participate as conscripts of war, but unavailable to the genuine sensations of victory, returning instead with “blood and money eating up their minds” (64). Other such episodic contradictions in the novel generate multiply, finally congealing into the reified lifeworld itself, in which all ethical action is subdued to the horizon of grotesque material expectations, and corruption (26, 27) and murder (77) become legitimate acquisitive methods for existential self-assertion.

Teacher figures the sudden absorption of Ghana into a fully-administered world-system as a “movement” possessed of “dizzying speed” (62), an inescapable acceleration of lifeworlds toward new horizons. His critique is not ranged at the change itself, but rather its disorienting momentum (“unnatural, I would have said”), the sense that the organic chronology of an African modernity has become disrupted by the introduction of another *present*, new auto-ossified parameters of modernity and modernisation in which the old cultural codes stand in a degraded teleological relation. The primal contact of this seismic shift in self-definition is recorded in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), while *Beautiful Ones*, set in the industrialised aftermath, imagines a society in which the resultant psychoexistential crisis has reached the apogee of its permeation in all institutions. Hence, Teacher’s description of Ghana is replete with references to madness (Home Boy), suicide (Kofi Billy), social anomie (“the frequency and intensity of [...] violence”, 64) and spiritless labour: “Those who were able picked up the pieces of shattered worlds and selves [...] and came with us along the wharves to search for some humiliating work...” (65)

What is apparent from all this is that the psychoexistential phenomenon of alienation emerges within a specific socio-historical context: that of modernity. In the intra-European narrative, modernity takes such historic moments as the Italian Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution as its constitutive episodes. It also cites large-scale European industrialisation which, if we expand the portal of analysis to its properly global dimension, is unthinkable without the material expropriation enacted in Europe’s colonies and which provided the materials and impetus for rapid late 19<sup>th</sup> century metropolitan modernisation.<sup>59</sup> In Africa, it is with the disintegration of pre-existing modalities of self-

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<sup>59</sup> Authoritative demonstrations of this global dynamic are to be found in, for example, Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600 – 1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; and C. A. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009. For a striking analysis of the (subconscious) registrations of these off-shore imperial projects in European literary

hood and meaning-making, and their radical transformation by, and fraught adjacency to, European models of cognition and social organisation, that the sense of *division* within self and whole comes to distinguish the problematic of alienation. To speak of alienation and its manifold articulations – epistemic, psychosocial; even as the Marxian severance of fruits from labour – in the absence of its organising modernity, is to fail to recognise alienation in its reactive and responsive dimensions. Teacher’s enabling disquisitions on time and movement offer an historical anchor, in which to read the relationship of colonial modernity to its alienating after-effects.

However, the vastness of the signifier “modernity” must be delimited so as to have an analytic value and we may begin by quoting Dilip Gaonkar’s impressionistic snapshot of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century European transformations. Distinguishing two wings of the modern *process*, “societal modernization” and “cultural modernity”, he elaborates the following developments: “the growth of scientific consciousness”, “individualist understandings of self”, “contractualist understandings of society”, “the doctrine of progress”, “the fact/value split”, “the emergence and institutionalisation of market-driven industrial economies” and “bureaucratically administered states”<sup>60</sup>... the most salient consequence of which, for our purposes, is the inauguration of an historically distinct subjectivity, the Cartesian *ego cogito*. The restless accommodation of these phenomena within Africa, transported through colonial projects and transmuted through contact with difference, defines the problematic of modernity in African literature. Alienation comes to exert a spectral presence within much of African discourse. Even when its thematisation is incomplete or repressed, it grants a complex unity to the available motivations of writing and self-writing.

The self-representative logic of European modernity – the same which collided with the various cultural constellations of precolonial Africa – is progressivist and teleological. It is based on the core proposition of gradual subsumption: the reconfiguration of cultural difference into commensurable and comprehensible, finally *manageable*, forms is its endpoint, asymptotic and incomplete (“cultural difference” is in this instance represented through other cognitive systems, lifeworlds and their organic harmony with one another). The widespread existence of alienation, as I have argued earlier, an experiential medium through which epistemic crises are refracted (cf. the perceptual “confusion” of the office scene in *Beautiful Ones*), is thus one marker of an inconsistency within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century logic of

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modernism, see Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism” in Terry Eagleton (et al.), *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Gaonkar, pages 2 – 3.

modernity<sup>61</sup>. Modernity conceives of cultural difference, coded as “tradition”, as an anachronism, a remnant of a prior stage in the development of a universal human consciousness. It denies *coevalness* to such difference, and imagines that it will be eventually obliterated as such difference is “modernised”, rehabilitated in the direction of an accord with the European conception.<sup>62</sup> Epistemic alienation is the irrevocable aftermath of such a collision, as the existential subject is suspended between and among irreconcilable self-conceptions; as Chinua Achebe masterfully phrased it, “no longer at ease”.<sup>63</sup>

I mentioned earlier that *Beautiful Ones* is often periodised as belonging to the era of “postcolonial disillusionment” (sharing this moment with such works as Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1964), Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966), and Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth, My Brother* (1971)). When Teacher speaks of “the knowledge of betrayal and deceit” (62), and says that “the cycle from birth to decay has been short” (63), he ostensibly references the dominant sentiments at work during the historical conjuncture of the novel’s writing. Neil Lazarus has argued that in their registrations of a despair generated by the betrayal of the African bourgeoisie, second-wave postcolonial novelists remain fundamentally “illusioned”. The reigning perception of the postcolony in this period, he argues, is “predicated on a preliminary overestimation of the emancipatory potential of independence”, a conflation between independence (administrative withdrawal) and revolution, or the “messianic” belief that independence augured elemental changes in socio-structural composition.<sup>64</sup>

In a representative critique of African nationalism, the Nigerian historian J. F. Ade Ajayi wrote that its participants were “much clearer about what they wanted to end than about what they wanted to put in its place [...] they had little conception of the society they were striving to build outside of vague concepts of Europeanization and modernization”.<sup>65</sup> The almost nihilistic lifeworld of *Beautiful Ones* – represented from both the perspectives of Teacher and the man – thus acts as an autocritique of the anticolonial struggle’s limitations, where the reductive/negative rhetoric of anticolonialism, and the internalisation of the developmental ideology to catch-up to the metropole, allows a hegemonic order to reconsolidate itself by manipulating the same colonial and capitalist structures left intact at the moment of colonialism’s administrative surrender. The African national bourgeoisie emerges in this reading as an intermediary of metropolitan capitalism, which Frantz Fanon had denounced:

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<sup>61</sup> See Mbembe, pages 245 - 247, writing on the shift in orientation toward the “native”, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century “state-directed colonization of Africa”, in which the native moves from being outside the circle of human nature (as in the works of Hegel and Kant), to, in principle, civilisable.

<sup>62</sup> A fuller of modernity’s self-representative inconsistencies are to be found in George, pages 29 – 77.

<sup>63</sup> Chinua Achebe, *No Longer At Ease*. London: Heinemann, 1960.

<sup>64</sup> Lazarus, page 23.

<sup>65</sup> J. F. Ade Ajayi, quoted in Lazarus, page 7.

It follows the Western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention, stages which are an acquisition of that bourgeoisie whatever the circumstances. In its beginnings, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West. We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact, beginning at the end. It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness or the will to succeed of youth.<sup>66</sup>

Teacher implicitly endorses and replicates this vision, when he recalls a book of “freaks and oddities” which features “something the caption called a manchild”, figured thusly: “It had been born with all the features of a human baby, but within seven years it had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity and old age, and in its seventh year it had died a natural death” (63). The manchild, created through another organicist figuration, metaphorises the nation and the “inorganic” transplantation of its foreign modes of social organisation in Africa. The import of the premature senility is that no natural cycle of birth and maturity – developed through a vital dynamism with its natural surroundings – has correspondingly occurred in Africa and, instead, a “decayed” social organisation, having already reached its zenith and crisis elsewhere, is here present at the moment of birth. Indeed, extending the earlier metaphor, the “victory” of independence glanced awry, is already its own “defeat”, its own resignation to neo-colonialism. Authentic national birth is thus impossible, foreclosed upon by the “bursting motherhole”.

*Beautiful Ones* is, in the most expansive reading of its title, firstly, an acknowledgement through the metaphor of currently impossible birth (“not yet”) that genuine revolution has been misidentified in the merer triumphs of administrative independence, and secondly, that under such conditions, birth itself is fated to a continual reproduction of the colonial and capitalist elements which remain unexorcised from the postcolonial location. Decolonisation is both incomplete and “arrested”.<sup>67</sup> A thematic summa of this crisis is to be found in a remark by Antonio Gramsci, albeit made under different historical pressures: “The crisis is precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum arises a great variety of morbid symptoms.”<sup>68</sup> It is not only the superabundance of the novel’s symptomatic metaphors of waste, decay and darkness which find a productive alliance with this description, but also that the idea of an “interregnum” in which the new cannot be born returns us to

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<sup>66</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1968, page 153.

<sup>67</sup> The term is Jeyifo’s, taken from Jeyifo, “The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory”. *Research in African Literatures*. 21: 1 (1990), pages 33 – 48.

<sup>68</sup> Antonio Gramsci, in Quintin Hoare et al. (ed), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

the epistemic impasse which confronts characters like Teacher (the new that cannot be born is, in this case, the “beautiful ones”, which in that phrase, of idiosyncratic pluralised singularities, signifies precisely the birth of the existential subject which is not subordinate to the alienations of skeptical interlocution, but can find a communal harmony with its constitutive others). In the novel, the epistemological impasse is both continually rehearsed in social relationships, and apotheosised in such moments as Teacher’s question, “and where is my solid ground these days?” (63) There is both a failure and an impossibility to imagine adequate responses to the traumas of the postcolony, or to draw on ethical certitudes to govern action.

The above analysis of Teacher’s reflections has aimed to derive the literary-thematic import of the colonially-established relationship between modernity and temporality, in which the African modern subject is ethnographically and geopolitically conceived of existing in, what Enrique Dussel has called, the condition of a “temporal deficit”.<sup>69</sup> This hierarchisation of time, or the spatial distribution of degrees of present-ness, consigns the African modern subject to an epistemic order in which older cultural codes or systems of comprehensibility are insufficient, and new syntheses are under constant threat of superannuation. It is therefore crucial to recognise that the skeptical interlocutor is composed as much of an existential expectation to participate in commodity fetishism and acquisition, as it is forces the black subject self-negate along the racial axis. The category of alienation thus once again returns us to the problem of an *absent centre*, and connects the problematics of self-writing to a global rearrangement of power which continues to consolidate under the sign of modernity. I argue, therefore, that alienation - represented in *Beautiful Ones* in the forms of reification, commodity fetishism, national corruption, social fragmentation and epistemic uncertainty – possesses an extraordinary explanatory power, grounding and condensing the grander problematics of a global modernity in the existential experience of the individual subject.

However, the exegeses and arguments heretofore have remaindered the problematic of *race*, which as we see shall in the concluding section of this chapter, is an indispensable element of the multidimensional predations on African subjectivity to which the global modern era gave birth. Race is never the avowed subject of *Beautiful Ones*, but rather haunts the text at various disaggregated moments, from which we may marshal a broader understanding of alienation as constituted by an unbanishable spectre of whiteness. I shall argue in the succeeding passages for the final enabling possibility of the dynamic of alienation in *Beautiful Ones*: a closer understanding of the racialised exhortations of skeptical interlocution

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<sup>69</sup> Dussel, et al. (ed), page 8.

which, even in the practical absence of white settlers, exerts its horizon of expectations upon an alienated subject.

### *III: African Subjectivity as the Site of the Colonial Wound*

Part of the reason that the racial thematic emerges obliquely in *Beautiful Ones* is contained in the fact that the historical scenario from which the novel draws its narrative materials is set in the aftermath of state-directed colonisation in Ghana. The object against which anticolonial struggle cohered is thus absent, leading to a psychic disaggregation with regard to the site of continuing trauma. Armah makes the mystification of this territorial absence clear when he writes that “if the old [colonial] stories aroused any anger, there was nowhere for it to go” (10). Instead, the colonial nexus is secreted abroad, its systemic violence re-enacted through the opaque operations of foreign policy and legislature, and superintended at the local horizon by a black comprador bourgeoisie. Armah writes that “the sons of the nation were now in charge” (10) and inserting this within the organisational frame of the novel’s title (“not yet born”), the parturitional or even patrimonial metaphor of “sons of the nation” carries an implicit critique of impossible birth or abortion. Koomson, unsurprisingly, turns out to be the closest manifestation of an actual antagonist in the text, metonymically standing in for a political class of “sons” who have inherited the colonial imperative from their recently-departed white masters. Even in that metonymic construction, Koomson is figured as powerless, a mere (alienated) conduit through which colonialism replicates itself locally (cf. the discussion in section 2 of corruption as the disempowering performance of power).

The historical continuity between a colonial past and a “postcolonial” present<sup>70</sup> appears in the novel’s relationship to the cartographic and architectonic materiality of its lifeworld. At the beginning of the novel, the man’s morning circuit through Sekondi-Takoradi leads him past the G.N.T.C. (Ghana National Trading Corporation) building, which he observes was “regarded as a new thing”, whilst in reality “only the name had changed with independence” (10). The structure is imbricated with a “row of old commercial buildings” themselves proximal to “corrugated iron shelters” (9), displaying the contiguity of wealth and poverty, or the necessary presence of the colonial in quotidian life. Ntone Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse have written of African cities, that the “violent reverberations of colonialism in the processes of city living and building ensures that most urban dwellers are entangled in

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<sup>70</sup> The very term “postcolonial” fell beneath a concentrated critique in the 1990s, as expressing a hope or premature triumphalism rather than actual historical conditions, in such representative texts as Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism”. *Critical Inquiry*, 20: 2, 1994; or Aijaz Ahmad, “Postcolonialism: What’s in a Name?” in Roman de la Campa et al (ed.), *Late Imperial Culture*. London: Verso, 1995, pages 11 – 32; or Frank Schulze, “The Politics of Postcolonial Theory” in Gordon Collier et al (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory and the Emergence of a Global Society*. Frankfurt-am-Main: ACOLIT, 1998, pages 31 – 34.



relationships of movement – as protagonists in migratory journeys or as economic or social funders of the journeys of others.”<sup>71</sup> The man encounters the building as a colonial hangover, an unoccupied remnant of an exploitative history which is irremovably a part of his psychogeographic or phenomenological awareness of the built space enveloping him. Furthermore, even though the name has changed from A.G. Leventis, that of its former “rich Greek” proprietor, to the G.N.T.C. (with its simultaneous evocation of Ghana and international relations of commerce), he still hears “the same old stories of money changing hands and throats getting moistened and palms getting greased” with regard to its internal enterprises. “How completely the new thing took after the old,” (10) he considers.<sup>72</sup>

This episode suggests that colonialism is not simply a left-over memory, but rather an active and shaping principle of Ghanaian daily existence, not only an abstracted horizon of expectations but materially encoded into the lifeworld itself. It is when the man departs from his usual urban travels through degraded neighbourhoods, and enters the bourgeois residential complexes that the racial dimensions of this dynamic are emphasised. At the roadside, he sees the inhabitants’ surnames, “black men with white souls and names trying mightily to be white” (126). Among them, he marks strange compounds like “Attoh-White” and “Kuntu-Blankson”, and even such desperately imitative portmanteaux as “Fentengson” and “Binful”. It is clear that the semiotic domains of prestige and civilisation marked out by whiteness become an aspiration to the black middle-class – and the attempt to purge oneself of all signifiers of “blackness” in the mimicry of colonial grandeur becomes a *sine qua non* of psychoexistential orientation. *Beautiful Ones* represents a complex entanglement of institutional power and race, an organising element of which is an ontological relationship between civilisational status and whiteness, indeed the entailment that an aspiration for the former is at the same time an urging for the other. The novel is replete with such instances: consider Koomson’s accent which is described as “forcing itself into unaccustomed English rhythms” (36), or the office worker who seeks to “adopt an air of importance [...] in the special way in which the efforts of a Ghanaian struggling to talk like some Englishman are irritating” (24); or yet another anonymous “black man” who “was trying to speak like a white man” and reminds the listener “of a constipated man” (125). When Koomson is first introduced, his presence

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<sup>71</sup> Ntone Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse (eds.), *The African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*. South Africa: Chimurenga, 2011, page 5.

<sup>72</sup> This strategy for materialising the thematic unity of past and present is again employed by Armah in his second novel, *Fragments* (1970), when the character Juana gazes into the horizon and discerns the “white form, very small at this distance, of the old slave castle which had now become the proud seat of the new rulers, the blind children of slavery themselves”. Here again, “corruption” is viewed as a physical and epistemic habitation of colonial forms, bound to the violence of its origin, and incidentally, one should note the conspicuous connotative force of “white form”, given that in his fourth novel *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), in which “whiteness” performs a preponderant metaphoric function, we see a similar slave castle being built at Poano, approximately a century earlier, from which the epistemic and genocidal tyrannies of the colonisers are conceived and directed. See Armah, *Fragments*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970, page 44.

announced by the “gleaming” headlamps of his luxurious automobile, a street vendor pathetically implores him, “oh, my white man, come. Come and take my bread. It is all yours my white man, all yours.” (37)

Racial identity is enmeshed within the material correlates of status. In section 2, I argued that the longue durée of colonial degradations against Africans resulted in a self-abnegation, an epistemic alienation. In the epistemic order represented in the novel, economic positions conflate with race: blackness is a sign of impoverishment and indignity, while whiteness associates with richness and splendour. The Atlantic-Caprice, a major symbol of wealth, is described as illuminated in an “insulting white” by its spotlights’ “concentrated gleam” (10). Here, the gleam - which Lazarus describes as an “ordering rationality”, “an ethos of instrumentality” which imposes the aspiration to status<sup>73</sup> - is metaphorically racialised. The novel makes clear the divisions between black and white and their connotative chaining. Kofi Billy is said to “do work too cruel for white men’s hands” (65). Teacher situates the origins of such inferiority in childhood. As a youth on a roguish quest to steal mangoes, he speaks of almonds as “white man’s peanuts” (68). Out on the hills he sees the “white men’s gleaming bungalows” (66). He is caught in a scene which masterfully encodes the colonial personality: “black men” chase him with whips, while the “white” overlord and his “little white boy” watch “calmly from the hill”, with the (seemingly) distant colonial gaze of a universal zero-degrees, literally raised above the violence of their command at impartial altitudes (68).

Writing on the phenomenon of the racial category carrying an economic burden or material overdetermination<sup>74</sup>, Fanon wrote that “if there is an inferiority complex it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic, subsequently the internationalization – or better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority.”<sup>75</sup> Any “effective dis-alienation of the black man”, he contended, “entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities.”<sup>76</sup> *Beautiful Ones* narrates the psychic reality in which black subjects have absorbed de-historied racial explanations as substitutes for an awareness of the *fictions* which create and sustain this negative conception of identity, another form of the multiple reifications we have explored in section 1 (Fanon himself wrote that he felt “woven out of a thousand details,

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<sup>73</sup> Lazarus, page 59.

<sup>74</sup> One commentator has elegantly distilled this process in the following terms: “The colonized [are] seemingly locked into a cycle of oppression, a material condition that catalyzes the psychological complex of self-alienation.” See LaRose T. Parris, “Frantz Fanon: Existentialist, Dialectician and Revolutionary”, page 5. Available at: <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol4no7/4.7-2%20Frantz%20Fanon.pdf> (last accessed: 25 March 2014 at 12:12 PM)

<sup>75</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967 (1952), page 11.

<sup>76</sup> Fanon, page 10.

anecdotes, stories”, in other words determined by the outside of others’ representations<sup>77</sup>). Joining this with Quayson’s schema of skeptical interlocution, we now have an answer to the perplexing emphasis on whiteness in the novel – that even in Ghana’s “postcolonial” absence of white settlers, unlike the examples of Kenya or Southern Africa, whiteness remains a central traeger of power, exerting itself as an interiorised presence in the subject’s dialogic production of selfhood. The desire for whiteness (and all the psychoexistential aspirations this phenotypic category obscures) resigns all black self-conceptions of identity to a condition of unbridgeable *incompleteness*: an identity predicated upon lack and the concomitant wish to pursue wholeness. Becoming white in the ultimate sense is, of course, an impossible enterprise and this makes all the more persuasive Quayson’s thesis: “...the necessary elaboration of the skeptical interlocutor as a horizon of expectations incorporated into the processes of self-fashioning yet *remaining radically unassimilable to self-identity* [...] produces existential alienation” [emphasis added].<sup>78</sup>

In its representation of the porousness and complicity between inside and outside, and the lingering of the order to attain to whiteness - itself interpretable as a sign of the “modern” – *Beautiful Ones* encourages the reader to locate the “forces that generate epidermalization, i.e., dehumanization in the intrapsychic domain through internalization of the point of view of the oppressor.”<sup>79</sup> It offers skeptical interlocution as a dialectic between inner and outer realms, with whiteness internalised and projected outward – even the desirable bungalows are “white with a wounding whiteness” (89) and the office workers possess their “bit of leftover British craziness”, one described as “colonial white white” (109). Armah’s consciousness of existential *be-ing* generated at the interface of the psycho-discursive and the material realms (of socio-economics, for one) discloses his indebtedness to Fanon<sup>80</sup>, who wrote of the elemental “sociogenesis” of alienation. Sociogeny names precisely the assimilative process whereby the colonised subject interiorises the valorisation of whiteness through a complex interaction with prevailing social and discursive structures – in other words, it marks the ways in which the lived experience of the black subject predicates itself upon, as Marilyn Nissim-Sabat writes, “an assimilation of whiteness, a contingent attribute, to the very definition of the human.”<sup>81</sup> She continues:

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<sup>77</sup> Fanon, page 111.

<sup>78</sup> Quayson, at page 32.

<sup>79</sup> Marilyn Nissim-Sabat, “Fanonian Musings: Decolonizing/Philosophy/Psychiatry” in Elizabeth Hoppe et al (ed), *Fanon and the Philosophy of Decolonization*. United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2010, page 43.

<sup>80</sup> Arguing for the power of Fanon’s writings, Armah wrote that if the radical intellectual’s work was not properly regarded, “we’ll never get where we need to go. We may move without him, but only blindly, wasting energy.” See Armah, “Fanon: The Awakener”. *Negro Digest*. 18: 12, 1969, page 5.

<sup>81</sup> Nissim-Sabat, page 45.

This assimilation is irrational: a property that is inherently contingent cannot be essential. [...] The lived incompatibility of these categories – human and non-human – in the context of a genocidal social structure [colonialism] generated an act of self-negation such that colonized blacks internalized white superiority and supremacy. Or, stated succinctly, the epidermalization of black racism and black self-negation is at the same time the internalization of the ontologization of whiteness.” [original emphasis].<sup>82</sup>

We are here naming the intrapsychic process whereby an horizon of expectations – namely, whiteness as a signifier of the human, the civilised, the superior or ultimately the modern – consolidates within the black mind. But “whiteness” should not remain dematerialised here, for as we have seen in *Beautiful Ones*, the category is represented as an expectation which at the same time directs the subject toward commodity-acquisition and behavioural readjustment or imitation; it also provides a semiotic script for the same subject to interpret wealth and power as “white”. Thus, if we are to read *Beautiful Ones* for its transhistorical import, that is to say, to disenthral the novel from its moment of “postcolonial disillusionment”, we must understand its historically seasonable critique of the comprador bourgeoisie as a profound thematic engagement with the (still operative) dynamics of coloniality. In the text the bourgeoisie, I argue, function as the most alienated and antagonistic species of the post-independence order. But the bourgeoisie is depicted as a colonial formation. It is the alienation of this class which best helps us to unsnarl the critique of whiteness carefully implanted in moments which otherwise serve to focalise a diatribe against the comprador class or *vice versa*. It may be worthwhile then to transcribe and reflect upon two representative passages:

After a youth spent fighting the white man, why should not [sic] the president discover as he grows older that his real desire has been to be like the white governor himself, to live above all blackness in the big old slave castle? [...] That is all anyone here ever struggles for: to be nearer the white man. All the shouting against the white men was not hate. It was love. Twisted, but love all the same. (92)

In this passage, the skeptical interlocution of “whiteness” is indispensable to a total critique of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the route to power (institutional, political) sought by this class is itself based on an elemental alienation of the black self – as powerless, degraded – and a pursuit of the full range of connotative energies which attach to whiteness. A superb condensation of the confused praxis which results from this internalisation is found in the president’s late-life urging not only to “be like the white governor himself”, but to install himself in the same slave castle which once signified the coherent object of colonialism. The *power* located in the slave castle, for the bourgeois subject, appears to abjure the site of its violent origin. It becomes cleansed of its history, the same history which alienated the subject and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

itself generated the dissenting impulses of anticolonialism. This loss of history prevents the subject from realising the epistemic construction of the castle: as a site in which colonial power acquired its strength from its legislative and political subjugation of blackness. The decision to move into the castle and exist “above all blackness” demonstrates the depth of the self-negation which constitutes bourgeois politics. In the alienated semiotics of the postcolony, love/hate become indistinguishable from one another, as was the case with Teacher’s victory/defeat binary, and power is attained at the cost of a virtual recolonisation of the country and the mind.

This provides one explanation as to why the issues of cyclicity, repetition and stasis recur in many of the novel’s descriptions. Consciousness in the text *necessarily* reconstructs reality in the inherited terms of colonial discourse and immures itself in the normative dictates of that episteme. Consciousness is represented as so intimately dependent upon the surrounding reified lifeworld as to make disalienation structurally impossible. Surfaces and historical protagonists may change over time, but the structure of alienation is preserved. This process of superficial regeneration masking historicity is captured when the man, considering the irregular replasterings and repaintings of the Railway Administration Block, thinks that “every new coating, then, was received as just another inevitable accretion in a continuing story whose beginnings were now lost and whose end no one was likely to bother about” (11). Real conditions of existence are thoroughly mystified. With the exodus of the colonial administrators and the reifications of commodity fetishism and whiteness left intact, the subtle and invisibilised continuities of the colonial dynamic disappear from the thresholds of perception. It is thus not pessimism but radical awareness which informs this later précis of the anticolonial struggle:

This is what it had come to: not that the whole thing might be overturned and ended, but that a few black men might be pushed closer to their masters, to eat some of the fat into their bellies too. That had been the entire end of it. (126)

Once again, the surreptitious inclusion of “black men” and their “masters” makes inseparable the political failures of the bourgeoisie from the epistemic alienations which engender their enslaved programme of emancipation. It is no longer the coercions of a colonial state which direct these perversions of justice. Instead, the bourgeoisie - and the ordinary peoples of Ghana – have so internalised their skeptical interlocutor as to consider their own self-alienation a natural condition of everyday life. *Disalienation*, which may now be read as an epistemic decolonisation, is thus prophesied as the existential practice which has the power to disrupt and reconfigure these social relationships. Even when a political overthrow unsettles the permanence of these institutions at the end of the novel, the man remains hesitant in his prognostications: “Someday in the long future a new life would maybe

flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as its instruments the same people who had made a habit of killing new flowers. The future goodness may come eventually, but before then where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it?" (159, 160)

Having now arced across a vast range of themes and effects in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* – commodity fetishism, reification, corruption, anaesthetisation, the absent centre, the ambiguation of response to the past, epistemic aporia, the problematic of a dialogic selfhood, the discontents of modernity, the critique of the national bourgeoisie, the spectral presence of whiteness – I may now reiterate the central proposition of this chapter as a gesture toward conclusion: that the category of alienation grants a remarkable unity to the analysis of *Beautiful Ones*, not only through offering an originary-point for and connective tissue between the subjects above, but furthermore, in its exploration of the self as the experiential and fragmentary site of modernity, condensing macro-historical forces into the sensuous, personal register of self-writing. Alienation, moving from the planes of the experiential to the historical, exerting literary-formal impacts upon the text and informing its scenarios and motifs, acts as a master-code and empowering hermeneutic for locating *Beautiful Ones* as a text which exemplifies the abrading contact between African subjectivity and the grander social, political and epistemic dimensions of an African modernity.

Finally, this analysis redeems *Beautiful Ones* from the atomising critiques of Chinua Achebe and others, with which I began Section 1. The charges mounted against Armah result from a misrecognition of the text's self-conscious and reflexive dynamics of alienation. The phrase "alienated native" transforms from a condemnation in the hands of Achebe into the magnum subject of the novel in total: as an exploration of the historical, material, relational and epistemic co-ordinates which generate the native's alienation and which the novel exhumes as the buried and reproductive logic of colonialism/coloniality. Nnolim's suggestion, too, that Armah is a "cosmic pessimist" and that his work "refers to no real Africa, but some abstract human condition" becomes an inadequate surmise. Instead, *Beautiful Ones* continues to be an exemplary engagement with a specifically African modernity and its alienations, indeed, a perfect locus in which to see the demystifying potentials of a literary-critical approach which prioritises the formal and thematic effects of alienation.

#### *Interlude: from Diagnosis to Prognosis*

In *Beautiful Ones*, alienation remains a diagnostic, a signal of colonialism's generative and self-replicative forces. The novel undoes all attempts at disalienation by gesturing to a nexus of structural crises which prevent such disalienation from ever realising itself. It is Armah's fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons*

(1972), which situates alienation upon a longer historical axis, and in doing so figures as a prognostic and programmatic *response to the conditions of alienation* thematised in *Beautiful Ones*. The two texts share a remarkable versatility, the concerns of each refracted in the other. *Two Thousand Seasons* also dramatises “whiteness” explicitly in the matrix of alienation. Thus, to complete this study of alienation, I will now explore the controversial and complex ways in which *Two Thousand Seasons* aims to repair the epistemic damage which gives rise to the alienating lifeworld of Armah’s debut.

## Chapter II

### I: Subversive Mythologies

Although critical reception of Ayi Kwei Armah's fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973)<sup>83</sup>, has ranged across the sympathetic and hostile, its interpreters maintain a general consensus that the text marks a moment of aesthetic rupture within the "phenomenological" registers established by the author's early oeuvre (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 1968; *Fragments*, 1970; *Why Are We So Blest?*, 1972).<sup>84</sup> In the preceding three novels, the reader encounters a distant third-person narration and/or the imbricated subjectivities of the modernist mode, which work together to dramatise reified social landscapes in which alienated protagonists can find no meaningful accommodation within the existing world of ideas and institutions, and are left estranged with the fragments of their personal emancipatory ambitions. The foregoing chapter on *The Beautiful Ones* has already analysed the epistemic aporia this mode of narration creates for Armah's characters, and the sensuous and intimate descriptions he employs to connect their subjective alienation to a materialistic, neo-colonial lifeworld which acts as a generative matrix for that same experience of alienation. My argument is that the particular formal experimentations called into being by *Two Thousand Seasons* should be read as the author's attempt to locate a transcendent narrative agency capable of overcoming the reifications and aporia so meticulously dramatised through the technical modes of the earlier "trilogy". This implies or makes possible the *fulfilment* of the existential quests for unity and integration (in sum, disalienation) denied to Armah's earlier characters and furthermore, this shift may be read as the passage from the diagnostic of alienation, to its prognosis.

It is worth considering the symbolic overlap between *Beautiful Ones* and *Two Thousand Seasons* before examining the new discursive problematics raised by their departures from one another. Both novels are explorations of the causes and effects of colonial alienation. Where the former is set in contemporary Ghana, the latter is a retrospective projection of the colonial-capitalist matrix into precolonial history, a superimposition of the present's anxieties into its nascent moment of articulation – to provide examples, the profit-centric comprador bourgeoisie of 1960s Ghana become rearticulated as an indigenous aristocratic order of hierarchical tyrants seduced by the "commodities" of their foreign conquerors and complicit in their domination; furthermore, the trope of "sleepwalkers" and the living dead – symbolising ultimate alienation and death of consciousness – returns in the form of the "zombi" [sic] askari class, a militarised wing of colonially-enslaved warriors. The decision to set the action upon the *longue durée* of colonial conquest is a conscious one: it makes possible certain interventions which are

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<sup>83</sup> All in-text references to the novel are taken from Ayi Kwei Armah, *Thousand Seasons*. Heinemann: London, 1979.

<sup>84</sup> For example, see critics as diverse in their interpretations as: George Lang, "Text, Identity and Difference in Yambo Ouloguem's *Le Devoir de Violence*" and Ayi Kwei Armah's *"Two Thousand Seasons"*. *Comparative Literature Studies*. 24: 4, 1987, page 394; and Ode Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast*. Ohio University Press: Ohio, 2000, page 95.



foreclosed in the diegesis of *Beautiful Ones*, in which the material-epistemological nexus of colonialism has already calcified into an immutable and natural “horizon of expectations” for post-independent subjects. For example, where in *Beautiful Ones* we encountered a Ghanaian society with a practical absence of white settlers, in which the racial exhortations of the “skeptical interlocutor” existed as a principle of self-doubt in the minds of the colonised, in *Two Thousand Seasons* this white antagonist is a present and focalised force of social and existential disintegration – “whiteness” is made visible.

In order to make the most sense of *Two Thousand Seasons* within the trajectory of Armah’s career (the novel inaugurates new thematic concerns survived by his subsequent work in *The Healers*, 1978; *Osiris Rising*, 1995; and *KMT: In the House of Life*, 2002), one must preserve its continuities with the preoccupations of *Beautiful Ones*. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah aims to hold on to the consequences of the epistemic disorientations of colonialism (cf. *ambiguation with response to the past* explored in the preceding chapter) while at the same time imagining a discursive space in which these disorientations can be prevailed over. It is this careful balancing – that of appreciating the effects of alienation upon the *possibility* to narrate from another (that is to say non-colonial or Afrocentric) epistemological vantage – that places Armah in a volatile creative realm, one which fuses and rearticulates myth, history and legend. It is unsurprising therefore that the more sophisticated critics of his work have detected in the novel’s experimental patterns, elements of the “ambivalent”, “ambiguous”, “satiric” and “subversive”.<sup>85</sup> It is here that I wish to announce the more atmospheric argument of the present chapter: that these integral aspects of ambiguity within the text result from the mediatory idiom of cultural nationalism through which Armah negotiates his reconstructive fusion. Therefore, the ambiguities of the language shall be seen to correlate to the general historical problematic of *underdevelopment* to which the African nationalist discourse of the 1960s/70s responds. This framework, I argue, is the most productive for analysing the limitations and triumphs of *Two Thousand Seasons*, and for returning the pressures of alienation and the world-system to the core of our inquiries into African letters and self-writing.

However, before we move to a critical inquiry into the forms and ideological content of the novel, it is necessary to disavow two structural misapprehensions of the text in the available critical literature. This will free the text from the limitations placed upon it by these dominant misreadings. Furthermore, it will allow us to appreciate the text’s self-conscious divergence from established models of narration as aspects of its subversive and historically-pressured response to the fact of colonial alienation and the superstructure of colonial discourse in which it reproduces itself.

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*; also, see Ato Sekyi-Otu, “Toward Anoa... Not Back to Anoa”. *Research in African Literatures*. 18: 2, 1987, pages 192 – 214.

*Two Thousand Seasons* is a synoptic and ostensibly “epic” narration of the eponymous “two thousand seasons” of suffering visited upon Africa by the imperialism of white “destroyers”. The drama begins, chronologically, with an ensemble of precolonial civilisations riven by internal disorders which are ultimately transcendable: “Disasters there were,” the narrator tells us, “but the land was always larger than any calamity. It absorbed them” (4). It is with the arrival of foreign invaders and their unique systems of exploitation and expropriation, that the ensemble is plunged into an historic impasse: wide-ranging enslavement and brutalisation, and the eclipse of traditional responses for managing trauma. The narrative traces the descent of this people into anguish and alienation, before an exemplary act of resistance upon a slave-ship allows them to revolt against their conquerors and plan a return to their deracinated homelands – an adventure in which they succeed, nominally.

But the narrative drama is paralleled by an important autoexegetical manoeuvre. From the outset, the narrator begins the incantatory summoning of “our way, the way”, delimited as a set of discrete cultural orientations which value the principle of reciprocity, and in doing so, are figured as not only a source of unity for the exilic subjects of colonialism, but is named as the countervailing force to colonial domination *tout court*; the only means through which to oppose alienation. Indeed, the action of the novel in dramatic terms exists in a mutual structure with the community’s adherence to, or divergence from, “the way” – with moments of dramatic crisis functioning to illustrate moments of discontinuity from these nourishing principles of egalitarianism. It is therefore of consequence that in the prologue, the “remembrance of the way” (xv) is quickly reinscribed as “the way of remembrance” (xv). The novel is thus concerned not with a simple recovery of cultural truths pristinely entombed in the prehistory of this civilisation, but rather with the more dynamic project of *how* a people come to remember, or recreate memory and identity, when these very categories have been obliterated as stable sites of meaning-making in the wake of colonialism’s epistemic violence.

*i: The Prelapsarian Consensus*

One can already discern the contours of an emergent tension here, which critics have not failed to observe. The novel appears to create two oppositional ontological categories (the “us” of the black indigenes, versus the “them” of the white destroyers), and indeed premises these identities upon two discrete, irreciprocal epistemological orders - the egalitarian principles of “the way” are distinguished from the avaricious ethics of “the road”, or the “the road to death [...] the white road” (7, 8). This construction seems to commit to a utopian flattening of Africa’s vast and inassimilable cultural diversities into a unified essence, the “we” of narration; on other side, the contingent political

rationalities of colonialism are reduced to a civilisational disposition inherent to, and inseparable from, whiteness. The danger of these possible interpretations is implicit in the portentous lines of the novel's prolegomenon:

Springwater flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration. The desert takes. The desert knows know 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. (xi)

The prologue begins by establishing a metaphorical dualism between two incompatible elemental entities: "springwater" and "desert". As we learn from the many later metaphoric alliances the text establishes between its black protagonists and the unpredictable currents of the river – the narrator speaks of "how many single seasons we have *flowed*" (1), or declares "We are not a people of dead, stagnant waters" (4) – the springwater is taken to represent the shifting dynamism of black identity, while the white sands of the desert, which as Georg Lang writes "soak up the vital currents of the Niger and Volta as they flow north"<sup>86</sup>, symbolise the white destroyers. Consider how the passage admits of no productive relation between these entities, or allows for no theorisation of mutual dependency between them: springwater is "giving", the desert "takes". It is in the "nature" of the desert to return only "destruction". Given that we have seen that these opposing entities derive their alterity from incommensurable epistemic grounds, when the narrator speaks of the springwater which flows to the desert as being met with "extinction", he means to metaphorise the alienation, the spiritual and existential death, that is promised to black people who forsake "the way" and are lured toward, or internalise, the ethics of whiteness – which in the novel is represented as, but not exhausted through, hierarchisation, reification, commodity fetishism, domination and the corruption of social bonds.

The ossifying of these identities into this elemental metaphor performs additional connotative work. Springwater figures blackness as unsteady, multiple and in perpetual motion; the desert sands connect whiteness to arid consumption, to a primordially fixed location in the vast, unchanging stasis of the desert landscape. This figuration echoes, and in fact surreptitiously reconstitutes, the axiological polarities of Négritude – the vigour, motion and rhythm of springwater juxtaposed to the dry, emotionally-insensate fixity of the desert, recasts the diametric essences Léopold Senghor once imagined to constitute the chasm between the African and European *Weltanschauungen*. Many of the instabilities of

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<sup>86</sup> Lang, page 394.

this purported binarism resurface in *Two Thousand Seasons*, albeit in contested form.<sup>87</sup> Still, despite the novel's subversive logic, it would be inadequate to claim that its white antagonists are represented in any terms other than the polemical. From the "shrieking fables" of the white "killers" (2), to the racially-charged depiction of the white settlers – "See their eyes, their noses. Such are the beaks of all the desert's predatory birds" (2) – the text is peopled with white conquerors beyond any measure of redemption. Consider the preponderant adjectival uses of a demonic whiteness sprawled throughout the first chapter alone: "whitest deaths" (2), "white god" (2), "white predators", "white destroyers" (3), "white death" (4), "white people's urge to devastation" (7), "white destroyers" (7), "the white road" (8), "white light" (12) "whiteness of this fire", (13) "white, voracious conflagrations" (15), "whiteness of destruction's slope" (16), "white beggars" (18).

The literary dynamics implied by the black/white opposition bring us to the first interpretative misapprehension in the existing critical literature, one which finds representative expression in Bernth Lindfors's reading:

The villains in this stark melodrama are portrayed as the obverse of the heroes. This may be a dramatic necessity, in as much as one needs very potent Manichean forces to overwhelm *such a super-abundance of virtue as is said to have existed in prehistoric Africa*. But it also assumes that entire races of people can be reduced to the level of primeval forces, that can be characterized as inherently predisposed toward good, another addicted to evil [emphasis added].<sup>88</sup>

Lindfors's interpretation essentially conceives of *Two Thousand Seasons* as a narrative of prelapsarian Pan-Africanist wish-fulfilment, in which the "super-abundance of virtue" common to "prehistoric" (precolonial) Africa is interrupted by its Manichean antithesis, arriving in the form of colonial values. His reading of Armah's Africa as a paradise of "heroes" recalls Ousmane Sembène's nostalgic evocation in *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) of an "age [...] when all of Africa was just a garden for food."<sup>89</sup> This historical fantasy – which would appear to ignore the unequal structures of precolonial social formations – constitutes a recurrent nativist trope, part of the unconscious of the Pan-African imagination, and the critical consensus which views *Two Thousand Seasons* as conforming to this model, is survived in the most recent monograph on Ayi Kwei Armah, Ode Ogede's *Ayi Kwei Armah: Radical Iconoclast* (2000), in which the critic sees the text as demonstrating "the origin of the African race", an African "virile culture", the

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<sup>87</sup> For an engagement with Négritude and the ways in which its rehabilitative project are "logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism," see Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture" in P. Williams et al (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*. London: Longman, 1993 at pages 53 – 65.

<sup>88</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "Armah's Histories". *African Literature Today*. 11, 1980, pages 89 – 90.

<sup>89</sup> Ousmane Sembène. *God's Bits of Wood*. London: Heinemann, 1960, page 32.

“essential moral superiority of Africans”, and marks the quest of the narrator as the “mission to rediscover the African past.”<sup>90</sup> As is perceivable in the last of these quotations (“rediscover the African past”), a particular temporal dynamic of reading is legitimated by these interpretations, for if the novel does indeed present the African past as an Eden of virile indigenes possessed of an “essential moral superiority” – with only the moment of foreign conquest to provide, as Gikandi writes, “the loss of their Eden-like ideal”<sup>91</sup> – then the exegetic drama of “the way” would be reverted from “the way of remembrance” (*how* do a people remember?) back into “the remembrance of the way” (a simple *rediscovery* of old and eternal truths fossilised in recoverable wholeness within African prehistory). The model of prelapsarian bliss has also been pursued by Peter Sabor (1981), and Kirsten Holst Petersen (1976), who claims that “Armah reaches the conclusion that the African is an innocent victim of foreign aggression.”<sup>92</sup>

These readings (Lindfors, Ogede, Sabor, Petersen) are contradicted both by epistemological concerns, and dramatic activity within the novel. Therefore the linear conception of time (returning to the past to rediscover authentic culture) and the superstructure of criticism (charges of racism and historical distortion) proposed by this interpretative consensus must be overcome if we are to approach the far more intriguing *ambiguity* of the text: its denial of these reassuring, nostalgic platitudes of the nativist idiom. Firstly, we must recapitulate the *epistemological* pressures, already explored at length in my analysis of *Beautiful Ones*, entailed by any backward glance at prehistory. This consists in the reality that access to the past is discursively managed by the present and that knowledge of the past is always refracted through the pondering subject’s prism of modern cognition – indeed this is the challenge accepted by the narrator when he shifts the critical gravity of his peoples’ project from “remembrance of the way” to “the way of remembrance”, thus complicating *remembering* as such and promising an altogether different relationship between past and present than the simple model of temporality employed by the prelapsarian consensus. The remainder of the counter-argument may be elaborated from the action of the first chapter.

At the beginning of *Two Thousand Seasons*, we are presented with a series of distinct epochs anterior to colonialism. These precolonial ages are themselves revealed *in media res*, as the narrator admits the impossibility of locating a singular “ultimate origin” of his peoples:

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<sup>90</sup> Ogede, pages 96 – 99.

<sup>91</sup> Gikandi, page 21.

<sup>92</sup> See K. H. Petersen, “The New Way: Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*.” *World Literature Written in English*. 15, 1976, page 331.

How the very first of us lived, of that ultimate origin we have had unnumbered thoughts and more mere fables passed down to us from those gone before, but none of this has any of us been told it was sure knowledge. We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things possible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. (3)

Instead, the narrator denies a coherent locus of first appearance, and traces the beginning of the action to “our clearest remembrances”, which begin “with a home near the desert of the falling sun” (4). The proximity to the desert (whiteness), and to the misfortune romantically implied by the presence of the “falling sun”, establishes this home as both temporally and epistemically prior to the intrusion of colonialism. Yet, the narrativisation of this precolonial world is, in contradistinction to Lindfors, one of a nascent inner disorder, and certainly admits of no “superabundance of virtue in prehistoric Africa”. The reader is introduced to what Ato Sekyi-Otu calls “the alternating ascendancies”<sup>93</sup> of “the time of men” and the “rule of women”, presented as both discrete historical ages and gendered modes of *being* and *relating* to the world. Both periods, by forsaking the “reciprocity” of the way in favour of gender-oriented modes of social organisation, are depicted as radically insufficient. There is no greater resistance to the prelapsarian consensus of superabundant virtue and innocent Africans than that found in the narrator’s opening description of the time of men: “Nothing good has come to us of that first time. The remembrance is of a harsh time, horrid, filled with pains for which no rememberer found a reason, choked with the greed, the laziness, the contempt for justice of men glad to indulge themselves at the expense of their own people”. (9)

The time of men is figured as the subjection of community to the whim of a powerful, profligate class, an era defined by its fragmentation into “seven warring factions”, its “slaughter of honest people”, the “banishment of honest words”, and the “fever of jealous ownership” (9). The narrator stands in a critical relationship to these, understanding them as phenomena resulting from the absence of reciprocity; as a patriarchal order which uses power and violence to reproduce its legitimacy. The time of men ends in an exhausted debris of “masculine carnage” (9), but the succeeding rule of women is equally disastrous. It becomes a matriarchal surrender to a non-reflexive productivity, presuming the plenitude of the present is everlasting. “In its abundance,” the narrator tells us, “generosity became our vice. We lost the quick suspiciousness of the deprived, gained unwisely generous reflexes [...] became accustomed to producing without taking thought of the future depredations of destroyers” (12). It is to the cleavages produced by this wanton creation that the prophetess Anoa addresses her vatic evocation of the way:

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<sup>93</sup> Ato Sekyi-Otu, page 194.

Know this again. The way is not the rule of men. The way is never women ruling men. The way is reciprocity. The way is not barrenness. Nor is the way heedless fecundity. The way is not blind productivity. The way is creation knowing its purpose, wise in the withholding of itself from snares, from destroyers. (17)

Thus although the narrator may speak of a time when “we were not always outcasts from ourselves” (2), the actual narrative suggests that he is speaking of a specific colonial alienation, one which exploits the fractures and schisms *already existent* in the internal chaos of precolonial social relations. In Anoa’s clairvoyant words, reciprocity is marked as the ordering principle of “the way”, and by using the ontological separation of male and female as metonyms for all forms of Manicheanism or absolute dualism, Anoa’s utterance describes the radical inadequacy of binary oppositions for creating a just, reciprocal and relational social order (we are given motive for a later re-examination of the black/white dualism of the prologue). The text resists the reduction of its narrative to a Manichean struggle of inherent good vs. evil, a battle of opposing essences, or African moral virtue counterposed to European egoism. This is added to by the existence of vices like lechery, incest and jealousy, exemplified in the first chapter by the presence of an indigenous delinquent: Brafo’s father, who jealously murders his son and son’s lover, when his sordid infatuation of her proves unreturned (5). When we are at the precipice of colonial arrival, the narrator writes of “an external force” which “would *add its overwhelming weight* to the puny tearing efforts of the ostentatious cripples” (6). The colonial presence is an exacerbation, *not* the original moment of disorder. And as for the “guidance of the way”, the principles are not endogenous and self-contained, but “distant as the bones of the first ancestors” (18). We are once again confronted with the “way of remembrance”, rather than the “remembrance of the way”.

### *ii: The Messianic Triad*

It is crucial to stress the novel’s subversion of a prelapsarian origin, for not only does the prior reading eventuate a structural impoverishment of the text (to a simplistic antagonism of virtue to vice), but it also provides the interpretative foreground for, and thus legitimates, the second major critical misapprehension. This is what Ato Sekyi-Otu refers to as the presumption of a “messianic triad” operative in *Two Thousand Seasons*.<sup>94</sup> In this reading, critics presume that the purported precolonial Eden depicted in the novel corresponds to the “origin” moment of a tripartite narrative schema which goes on to include the moment of “fall”, and finally “redemption”. The novel, on this account, is a teleological story in which an untrammelled native ensemble is presented as coherent and whole (origin); the arrival of foreign conquerors thrusts them into a crisis of alienation and fragmentation (fall); and the

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<sup>94</sup> Ato Sekyi-Otu, page 192.

homecoming journey the oppressed undertake is meant to signify their return to, and reconstitution of, the *status quo ante* (redemption): racial destiny is fulfilled, and the circle is closed. This principle of interpretation extends beyond Lindfors, and variously animates the criticism of Isidore Okpewho, who construes Armah's political vision as effectively reducible to Négritude<sup>95</sup>; Dan Izevbaye, who argues that Armah's vision is consonant with writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in its literalisation of a utopia "modelled on their conception of an African Eden"<sup>96</sup>; Robert Fraser, who argues that the novel offers "a glowing picture of an infinitely receding and glorious myth of a society with an undifferentiated ethnicity working towards a goal that is presented as won"<sup>97</sup>; not to mention Atta Britwum, Eustace Palmer and James Booth.<sup>98</sup>

All of these interpretations are insufficient, insofar as they not only mistake the opening action of the text for the presentation of a romantic, Afrocentric utopia, but they equally mistake the concluding action of the text for the completion of a circuitous journey which closes the circle breached by colonial intrusion. By "sealing" the text and presuming it is book-ended by "origin" and "redemption" episodes, with a long-suffering parade of colonial alienations dramatised in-between, these critics do not comprehend the text's *essential incompleteness* – that this is not a document of "being", but rather a more fraught encounter with contingent "becoming". It is necessary to slough off the circumscriptions of these interpretations, because in grafting the text to this tripartite model of teleological progression, the critics have become beguiled by the formal conventions Armah is *not inhabiting, but subverting*. Consider Sekyi-Otu's rhetorical question: "What does the first chapter's opening satire on the formal and semantic conventions of 'epic logic' signify if not a prefigurative deconstruction of the narrative's fictive presuppositions and allegorical certitudes?"<sup>99</sup> Although the figural structure of the text is closely allied to the epic mode, we must pay attention to the countless ways it subverts received narrative models, and thereby open the text up to a far more complicated inquiry into historical existence than a mere rehearsal of familiar romantic topoi.

In the denial of this interpretative consensus, the many ambiguities of *Two Thousand Seasons* become no longer inconvenient aberrations from a generic narrative structure (epic, historical), but rather constitutive deformations which work to undo the certainties of the same structure. By tracing the

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<sup>95</sup> Isidore Okpewho, "Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*" in E.D. Jones (ed.), *African Literature Today 13: Recent Trends in the Novel*. London: Heinemann, 1983 at pages 1 – 23.

<sup>96</sup> Dan Izevbaye, "Time in the African Novel." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 17: 1 (1982).

<sup>97</sup> Robert Fraser. *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*. London: Heinemann, 1980 at page 19.

<sup>98</sup> See Atta Britwum, "Hero-Worshipping in the African Novel (The Case of Ayi Kwei Armah and Others)." *Asemka 3* (1975), pages 1 – 18; Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*. London: Heinemann, 1979; James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981

<sup>99</sup> Ato, Sekyi-Otu, page 194.



formal shifts which underlie the movement from *Beautiful Ones* to the creation of a radically distinct narrative agency in *Two Thousand Seasons*, we can see how the prognostic treatment of alienation demands literary experimentation and ambiguation.

## *II: The Forms of Disalienation*

The object of the present section is to interpret the formal shift which occurs between *Beautiful Ones* (here acting as a representative of the stylistic and expressive unity of Armah's first three novels) and *Two Thousand Seasons*, and thus locate the latter novel within the ideological trajectory of Armah's literary history. Consider the following lines:

Beware the destroyers. It is their habit to cut off fingers from the hand itself uprooted from the parent body, calling each fallen piece a creature in itself, different from ears, eyes, noses, feet and entrails, other individual creatures of their making. Is it a wonder we have been flung so far from the way? That our people are scattered even into the desert, across the sea, over and away from this land, and we have forgotten how to recognize ourselves? (1, 2)

The tone of the above lines is self-assured. At the thematic level, it identifies a plural antagonist ("the destroyers"), and supplies *reification* as a destructive "habit" among them. This is processed through a corporeal metaphor (fingers, entrails, eyes; the "parent body") and consists not only in the severing of pieces from the whole, individuals from their collectivities, but the presumption that each estranged fragment is, not a metonymic aspect of a central nervous system, but a *thing in itself*; the part *is* the whole. In *Beautiful Ones*, the man pondered the "futile freedom of a thing connected to nothing else" (17); in *Two Thousand Seasons*, the narrator recapitulates this knowledge, telling us that "pieces cut off from their whole are nothing but dead fragments" (1). This separation has at least one other valence: the splitting apart from the parent body, represented here as a psychosocial alienation ("we have forgotten how to recognise ourselves"), is equally appropriate to the geo-spatial divisions of Berlin 1844, standing in as the reification of arbitrary national borders in Africa, a continental fragmentation producing new discrete territories and affiliations.<sup>100</sup> In *Two Thousand Seasons*, the precolonial landscape "was larger than any calamity; it absorbed them" (4). Disasters, whether natural or social, prompted migrations "not for escape, but greater space in an open land" (4). In the mapped and managed spaces of colonial occupation, crises must be confronted under new conditions of claustrophobic pressure.

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<sup>100</sup> Armah has recently written: "I accept the stultifying need to carry travel documents and identity cards when moving from one colonial state in Africa to another, but I would be overjoyed if tomorrow, in an access of common sense, bureaucrats and politicians all over our continent abolished the stupid borders left here by ghosts from Berlin." See Ayi Kwei Armah, "Building the House of Life". *Chimurenga Chronic Books* (18 – 24 May 2008), page 23.

But at a formal level, one does not encounter the same transferability which accompanies *Beautiful Ones'* themes and symbols. At first we have the use of the collective pronoun (“we”), which implies the unity of the represented peoples on whose behalf the narrator speaks. Unlike the confusion and hesitation of ethical judgement which belonged to the man and Teacher, this narrator proceeds from apodictic premises: “That we the black people are one people, we know” (3). The narrator is not, in the novel’s own language, “prey to the sickly anxiety that rises against the will when it is harried between contradictory voices” (150). Equally, where the consciousness of the man was encumbered by the time-space relationships of his moment, and was thoroughly imbricated in the psychosocial matrices of that moment (a reified lifeworld in which the pursuit of profit, represented by “the gleam”, is the ultimate horizon of existential self-assertion), the consciousness of this narrator suffers no such implication. The narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* appears independent, by contrast: it narrates across centuries, across geographical space, and is intergenerational, ungendered and omnipotent. Indeed, throughout the novel, the narrator inhabits and seems to understand the motivations behind a wide range of characters: Azania, Sekela, Nyewele, Nandi (22 – 25); Noliwe and Ningome (54 – 59); Isanusi, Tawia, Dovi, Abena (92 – 95); from the prophetess Anoa, to the profligate class of King Koranche, Prince Bentum and so on. The narrator stands at a critical distance from its “black people” – it is capable of offering moments of critical sympathy (as with Dovi’s forsaking of the way, 183 – 190), as well as offering an acerbic ironising of the aristocratic order: King Koranche and his sycophants are described as “ostentatious cripples” (19-34).

It is clear that we are not dealing with a narrator *per se*, as much as a transcendent narrative agency. This is a utopian voice, an expression of collective will (incarnated in “the way”), which has clearly passed through and overcome alienation, and thus greets us from the future. Robert Fraser has likened this narration to the Senegalese tradition of the griot, the oral narrator who deals “not with a realistic story held tightly in the dimensions of time and space, but with the longer perspectives of myth and legend.”<sup>101</sup> It is crucial to note the text’s borrowing, adaptation and subversion of received narratological models, raised by this simile (myth, legend). When the narrator writes that “the air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins” (1), it means to enter into a counter-representation against the colonial distortions which constitute an abridged and self-negating version of African history. It is generally agreed that *Two Thousand Seasons* contains generic elements of the “historical novel”. As Abioseh Porter notes, drawing on the work of Lukács and Avrom Fleishman, these include “the reconstruction of an age when at least two cultures are in conflict; the introduction of fictional

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<sup>101</sup> Robert Fraser. *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah: A Study in Polemical Fiction*. London: Heinemann, 1980, pages 69 – 70.

personages who participate in actual historical events, and the re-creation of true personages from history.”<sup>102</sup>

The text also injects elements of African mythic and cosmogonic materials into its historical reconstruction. Consider how Anoa’s prophecy and invocation of the way provides a centrifugal (mythic-exegetical) force to the narrative – they parallel the drama with the open questions: what is the value of myth in historical re-telling; how do common myths help anchor identity and provide hermeneutic clues for liberation? Wole Soyinka argued in favour of the “vehemence” of Armah’s portrayal of Arab-European inquisitors, suggesting that this provided a counterbalance to the centuries of “vehement” racist discourse on Africa. The value of this vehemence, and concomitant valorisation of African myth and worldview, is found in, as Biodun Jeyifo glosses, an “iconoclasm against *all* forms alien gods and matrices: the chance to reconstruct what was and is indigenous to Africa as a necessary component of the reconstruction of Africa in the modern world.”<sup>103</sup> Khondlo Mtshali has gone further in attributing the text’s affinities to African myth, arguing that the way/the road binary symbolises Dogon belief systems, which “advance the idea that the godhead is divisible into the instrumental or destructive principle [the road] and the creative or synthetic principle [the way].”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the narrative is divisible into three sections of mythical correspondence: the realm of the godhead, the realm of the ancestors, and the realm of the living.

To this alchemical mixture of forms, we must add those of the pan-national epic. The narrator is a transcendent and transhuman agent, and although its peoples are victim to the existential deformities of colonialism and the human condition, the narrator speaks from a vantage entirely free of these imperfections. The history it tells, although discontinuous and dynamic, takes in multiple eras and includes supernatural forces (Anoa’s ventriloquism of the way, 14 – 18). The style, as Simon Gikandi notes, moves from the “ornate” (parabolic structures, romantic tropes, archaic eloquence, incantatory passages, lyricism) to the “didactic” (known truths, a self-assured interpretation of historical event).<sup>105</sup> And the ideological motive of this retelling is explicit: the dissolution of arbitrary national borders, and the re-membering of the “cut-off” fingers to the “parent body” (2, 3).<sup>106</sup> *Two Thousand Seasons* takes its

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<sup>102</sup> Abioseh Porter, “Beyond Self-Deprecation and Racism: Version of African History in *Bound to Violence* and *Two Thousand Seasons*.” *Journal of Black Studies*. 20: 1 (1989), page 12.

<sup>103</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge University Press: United Kingdom, 2004, page 68.

<sup>104</sup> Khondlo Mtshali, “Gods, Ancestors and Hermeneutics of Liberation in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*.” *Journal of Black Studies*. 40: 2 (2009), page 172.

<sup>105</sup> Gikandi, page 23.

<sup>106</sup> *Remember* here takes on a double signification: both an act of memory, and through the metaphor of the severed fingers and hand, the reattachment of estranged “members” (fingers, digits) to their corporeal wholeness. This theme is

perspective as that of the “black people” and is presented as a civilisational account of inchoate origins, in which a pan-national (which is to say, pan-African) ensemble of flawed heroes undergo a quest of world-historical significance – to adapt the remnants of their ethos to a changed Africa, and re-establish their identity and autonomy as a unified people. Their aid is, of course, an epic moral code utterly distinct from that of their oppressors: “our way, the way”.

It is clear that Armah is searching for the tools through which to narrate African historical experience, and finding the traditional models inadequate to the vastness of this ontological challenge, incapable of capturing the specificity of African being, he distorts and combines received structures into a *bricolage* form which encompasses the epic, the mythic, the historical and the legendary with a scrupulous and materialist analysis of the emergence of class-structures within competing sociopolitical reigns (Armah is as scathing on indigenous hierarchisation as European, speaking of the subordination of African peoples in precolonial times as premised upon “the division between rulers and ruled [...] creators and creatures, our people and their chosen caretakers”, 34). It is in the *distance* between the technical modes of *Beautiful Ones* (third-person narration; fatalistic relationship between narrative consciousness and its environment; epistemic uncertainty refracted through modernist techniques of representing interiority) and *Two Thousand Seasons*, that we can see Armah responding to the diegetic possibilities self-consciously disabled in the first novel, precisely through that novel’s technical construction.

At the end of *Beautiful Ones*, the man has gone through a morbid act of rebirth with Koomson, passing through a latrine (the filth and ordure of which symbolises Koomson’s confrontation with the political discontents of his bourgeois nationalism) to escape an anti-Nkrumahist coup. When they emerge, proletariat alongside bourgeoisie, the man discovers the circularity of this emergent political dispensation: rhetorics of liberation masking the persistence of unequal class structures, and perpetual acts of bribery (182); all the determinants of the prior moment. The fortunes of the two characters are, of course, distinct. The man is fated to the same life he left behind; Koomson will become a political exile and lose his arbitrary privileges of office – even the humble boatman regards him, not as a “master” any longer, but “another man needing his help” (174). The man has yet more affirmation of the self-reproducing alienations of his society, and even while he regards the possibility of rebirth (contained both in the escape through the latrine, and his contemplation of the flower painted on the back of a passing bus), we are given his nihilistic closure: “... suddenly his mind was consumed with thoughts of everything he was going back to – Oyo, the eyes of the children after six o’ clock, the office

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continued in Armah’s latest collection of essays, which refers to Africa, after the effect of colonial cartography, as “The Dismembered Continent” (2010).

and every day, and above all the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his life could offer him” (183). Therefore, I argue that within the formal logic of the novel, disalienation is a formal impossibility. The strict interdependency between consciousness and the reified lifeworld result in a circular and autopoietic system of alienations. The concluding action of the novel fulfils the prophetic implication of the bannister in the first chapter: “But of course in the end it was the rot which imprisoned everything in its effortless embrace [...]. In the natural course of things [...] it would convert all to victorious filth, awaiting yet more polish again and again and again. And the wood was not alone” (12)<sup>107</sup>. The man’s novel-wide project for disalienation is untenable within the diegesis; unreachable within the pervasive reification of the novel’s structure.

This is not a fault of *Beautiful Ones*. The text is designed to offer a diagnosis of alienation – a description of how everyday motions and private sensations are finally sensible in relation to the material and discursive matrices in which they emerge. It is rather to the genius of the text that we may attribute its recreation of reified social systems at the level of self-writing and consciousness; a synthesis of form and theme. These forms of writing stand at a great distance from the transcendent narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons*, who by contrast in the novel’s closing pages is able to remark, with guarded optimism: “...what a vision of creation yet unknown, higher, much more profound than all erstwhile creation!” (206). Thus, the movement from the descriptive to the vocative, the abandonment of the sensuous, phenomenological mode in favour of myth and an epic moral code, should be seen as a response to the anguished existentialism of the first three novels, against which Armah fashions a narrator who can fulfil the frustrated disalienation of his earlier protagonists through the cathartic prognosis of the way: “The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming; our flowing not along any meretricious channel, but along our living way, the way” (xiii).

This reading is further supported by the intertextual decision to set the action upon the *longue durée* of colonial conquest. *Two Thousand Seasons* dramatises the incipient structures of epistemic alienation at its earlier moment of consolidation. As a result of its mapping of the same social anxieties of the present onto nascent historical analogues, the world of *Beautiful Ones* becomes interpretable as a culmination, an historical endpoint of the colonial tendencies (black self-negation, irreciprocity) which begin much earlier in time. *Beautiful Ones* represents the ossification of the world-system into an untranscendable neo-colonial order in which global dynamics of power are cyclically reconstituted at the national horizon and, finally, upon the axis of psychosocial relationships. From the vantage of *Two Thousand Seasons*, this

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<sup>107</sup> The inescapability of this cycle is given a fatalistic recasting in political terms, too, when Teacher asks “whether the rot and weakness were not after all the eternal curse of Africa itself, against which people could do nothing that would last”. Armah, *Beautiful Ones*, page 92.

world is still incomplete. Social life is only *beginning* to turn “into an endless cycle of ever sharper cruelties” (13). And yet, the class structures of *Beautiful Ones* are reimagined in their entirety. The political bourgeoisie of *Beautiful Ones* are figured as an alienated comprador class maintaining colonial hegemonies. They have internalised the principles of whiteness and the reifications of the capitalist social system (“the gleam”, 10), and are presented as mediators of their peoples’ subordination. Consider this parallel description of the colonially-reified aristocratic orders and askari warrior classes in *Two Thousand Seasons*: “Have you not seen the fat ones, the hollow ones now placed above us? These the destroyers have already voided of their spirits [...] Barren, unproductive pillars have been driven into their brains. Then, left to walk the land, they do their zombi work, holding up the edifice of death from falling in vengeance on the killers’ heads” (7). Or we may analyse the novel’s consummate symbol of alienation in the figure of the roaming slave:

We have been handed down a vision of a slave man roaming the desert sand - a perfect image of our hollowed chiefs today. Language he had not, not ours and not his own. it has been voided out of him, his tongue cut from his mouth. He pointed to the gaping cavity. Thinking he had a soul, even mutilated, we imagined he was after sympathy. We were mistaken - he was pointing to the whole with pride. They who had destroyed his tongue, they had put pieces of brass in there to separate the lower from the upper jaw. The slave thought the brass a gift. Its presence made sweet to him the absence of his tongue. (7)

The motif of “hollowness”, representing the absence of a soul, is consistently deployed in *Two Thousand Seasons* to represent alienation: “Into [our] forsaken bodies, alien, fictitious souls were to be poured to do the bidding, do the work of others” (88); Prince Bentum, to provide another example, has had “his soul [...] voided out of him” and an “alien language forced into his throat” (91). In the quoted paragraph, the slave is upheld as “a perfect image of our hollowed chiefs today”. The masters are, in other words, as alienated as slaves. The metaphor of the slave dramatises how the victimised come to exalt their oppressors for the attractive and worthless gifts, in this case brass fillings, they are given as a deceptive recompense for their more primordial loss – of a voice (“they who had destroyed his tongue”) and language; the capacity to master themselves or reply to their antagonists. The slave is a mirrored image of the “ostentatious cripples” who are seduced by the “shiny things” (81) their colonial conquerors offer them as a distraction from their expropriated powers; or indeed the bourgeoisie of *Beautiful Ones*, who gorge themselves on a newfound access to “cars”, “bungalows” and “young juicy vaginas” (89), while the same neo-colonial foreign policy which grants them this access, reproduces their alienation and structural dependency.

The chronoscape of *Two Thousand Seasons* makes one final response to *Beautiful Ones* possible. Part of the widespread alienation of *Beautiful Ones*, as I have been arguing, consists in its limited historical optic. In that novel, “whiteness” is rarely found in the physical incarnation of white settlers, but is rather thematised as a principle of self-doubt in the mind of black characters – a skeptical interlocutor which naturalises the supremacy of white behaviour and ethics, or connects existential self-assertion to racial self-negation. As a result, all praxis is disaggregated after the withdrawal of administrative colonialism, as this matrix of whiteness is not survived in explicit acts of racism, but rather in the psychosocial or epistemic viewpoint of the oppressed. Racism is made diffuse and decentred. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, the narrator is able to give a centrifugal force to its white destroyers, who are still present, and thereby offer a coagulated and materialised object of critique. Where in *Beautiful Ones*, the world is habitual, familiar, unassailably naturalised and self-reproducing, in *Two Thousand Seasons* – by focussing upon exaggerated and caricatural depictions of white antagonists and their destructive rationalities – the novel is able to radically *defamiliarise* what in *Beautiful Ones* is assumed (by most of its characters) as a natural “horizon of expectations”. The most literal correspondence between alienation and whiteness is found near the end of the novel, in these lines spoken by a white priest:

Our coming here is a high favour unto you, o heathen people. We bring you whiteness which is godliness itself. We bring you the miracle of belief to save you from the damnation that is doubt. How could you have known before our coming unto you that a god invisible, unheard, but still known to us the whites, created this universe? [...] Come and be saved. Come to church, come into whiteness, come into purity. Throw your names to oblivion. Take white names, and denounce those who would fight against the whiteness of our new road. (200)

Lang writes that alienation within *Two Thousand Seasons* “is a function of white usurpation of black primal force or alternatively, [in my opinion, a more productive reading] of black internalization of the principles of whiteness: hierarchy, reification, destruction, and the severing of bonds which relate human to human and humans to the world.”<sup>108</sup> These are the same principles, as I argued in Chapter 1, which are pushed to their maximal realisation in *Beautiful Ones* and exist at the reproductive interface between alienated subjectivities and their alienating social order. It is in the preservation of this theme and its reappearance within a distinct formal shift, that we can conclude that *Two Thousand Seasons* is, in spite of its historical appearance, very much a novel of its contemporary moment. Armah has pioneered an adaptive and synthetic narratological medium, not unlike the dynamic discursive project of the way. However, this creative project of disalienation is not undertaken voluntarily, but rather found to be

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<sup>108</sup> Lang, page 394.

occasioned under unique conditions of historical pressure. It to this facet of the novel that I direct the remainder of this chapter.

### *III: At the Thresholds of Past and Future*

The ambiguous discourse of origins, which begins in the first pages of *Two Thousand Seasons*, is most sensible in relation to the convulsions of nationalism at the time of the novel's writing (early 1970s). In *Beautiful Ones*, we encountered a metonymic critique – with Ghana standing in as representative for the political and economic direction of the African continent in total – of the anticolonial nationalisms which had, by the mid-60s, degenerated into a neo-colonial comprador political class, overseeing the uneven integration of the peripheral nation-state into the world-system of late capitalism.<sup>109</sup> Nationalism, as Tom Nairn writes, “denotes the new and heightened significance accorded to factors of nationality, ethnic inheritance, customs and speech from the early nineteenth century onward”.<sup>110</sup> Nationalism was exported throughout the imperial territories, and indeed acting through one of colonialism's dialectical contradictions, mobilised anticolonial struggle along one of the only sensible axes available in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: the nation-state had become the minimal unit of geopolitical signification. Nationalism “supplies peoples and persons with an important commodity,” namely, “identity”.<sup>111</sup> It is through articulating nationalism to the material arrangements of the world-system that we can observe some of the inherent tensions of the project and how the imaginative deployment of nationalist discourse in *Two Thousand Seasons* supplies the novel with its formal ambivalences and subversions. Nairn summarises nationalism as a process of accessing modernity within the problematic of underdevelopment<sup>112</sup>:

The subjectivity of nationalism is an important fact about it; but it is a fact which, in itself, merely reposes the question of origins. The real origins are elsewhere. They are located not in the folk, nor in the individual's repressed passion for some sort of wholeness or identity, but in the machinery of world political economy. [...] It is a mechanism of adjustment and compensation, a way of living with the reality of those forms of historical development we label “nationalism”.<sup>113</sup>

Underdevelopment here refers to the international division of labour, the splitting of the world into core and periphery territories, the necessary corollary of which are nation-states which lack the social and

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<sup>109</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pages 67 – 69.

<sup>110</sup> Tom Nairn, “The Modern Janus” in *New Left Review*. 94, 1975, page 6.

<sup>111</sup> Nairn, page 7.

<sup>112</sup> Odhiambo Ojwan'g argues, overstating the case somewhat in my opinion, that while Armah critiqued the nationalist bourgeoisie in *Beautiful Ones*, he adopted “the monolithic precepts of their brand of nationalism” in *Two Thousand Seasons*. See Ojwan'g, “Of Essence and Excrescence: History, Race and Identity in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*” in *English in Africa*. 42: 2 (1997), page 115.

<sup>113</sup> Nairn, pages 7 and 8.



economic institutions of modernity functioning in the metropolitan countries.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, the peripheral elites aimed to enter into modernity through the development of coherent national identities and formations – what Olakunle George calls the “catch-up” ideology of modernity - yet found this process to be one undertaken from a position of structural disadvantage. “Unable to literally ‘copy’ the advanced lands (which would have entailed repeating the stages of slow growth that led to the breakthrough), the backward regions were forced to take what they wanted and cobble it on to their own native inheritance of social forms,” Nairn writes.<sup>115</sup> It is in the denial of gradual development, a luxury available to the ancestral forms of European nationalism, that the African nation-state must mobilise its societies for an “historical short-cut” into modernity. “Thus,” writes Nairn, “does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity, for human society. As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of ‘development’”.<sup>116</sup> We have already seen in *Beautiful Ones*, that alienation is not simply a function of corrupted institutions (failed modernisation), but also a concomitant of the absence of psychic resources for assuring communal identity.

Biodun Jeyifo has identified two recurrent themes in African literature and criticism which act as imaginative correlates to the process outlined above. Both are forms of reification; ironic given Armah’s trenchant critique of the same in both of the novels discussed here. Jeyifo names the first theme *radical alterity* and *hegemony*, and argues that it entails two interdependent ideas. On the one side is the idea that under “the global order of late capitalism, very powerful, almost insuperable forces are ranged against Africa and African peoples and societies”; on the other, the idea that that these “foreign interests and forces are so alien to our cultures and societies as to constitute, compositely, a difference that is *radically incommensurable* to Africa” [original emphasis].<sup>117</sup> He continues:

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<sup>114</sup> Ramon Grosfoguel has written of how, for precolonial indigenous cultures, modernity marked the arrival and establishment, “simultaneously in time and space” of “several entangled global hierarchies”. These do not consist only in the articulation of race and labour in the colonies (peripheralisation), and the creation of an “interstate system of politico-military organizations controlled by European males”, but equally in the subordination of local systems of knowledge and social organisation within a European hierarchy: normative whiteness; heteronormativity; European patriarchy; spiritual, epistemic and cosmological and linguistic hierarchies. See Ramón Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality: Decolonizing Political Economy and Postcolonial Studies” (2008) available at *Eurozine*, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-07-04-grosfoguel-en.html> (last accessed, 04 April 2014 at 20:54).

<sup>115</sup> Nairn, page 11.

<sup>116</sup> Nairn, page 18.

<sup>117</sup> Jeyifo, page 127.

In the deeper articulations of this theme in African literature and critical discourse, the putative difference between the cultural and civilizational ensembles of Africa and the West are reified in the form of a difference made so incommensurable as to be endlessly inimical and threatening.<sup>118</sup>

The second theme, he calls *culturalism*. A dialectical derivation, indeed sublation, of the theme above, culturalism results from the viewpoint that “culture” is the “target of a massive Western onslaught; however, culture is at the same time seen not only as the most resistant ‘front’, but as the very ground of all resistance on all other ‘fronts’, economic political, military, ideological.”<sup>119</sup> It is thus in the presumed absolute difference between West and Africa, both reified into civilisational dispositions, that Africa can locate the unassimilable resources of communalism necessary to abjure itself of its colonial fate. *Two Thousand Seasons* appears to answer to both of these themes. The reification of an endlessly inimical West is presaged by the figuration of the white desert which “knows no giving” and returns only destruction (xi). The culturalist element of the text is to be found in its exaltation of the way as a cultural ethos: “...all will be victims till the way is found again, till the return to our way, the way.” (18)

It should be clear that both of these themes are *responsive* – compensatory reactions to a global system which thoroughly impoverishes Africa, not only in material terms, but also through the self-negating aftereffects of colonial discourse (in a Fanonian shorthand, we may refer to these as psychic “inferiority complexes”). The consequence of this is that the nationalist idiom – and its affines of nationhood, citizenship, the presumption of a coherent origin of a “peoples” etc. – is not voluntarily accepted by Armah’s narrator, but is rather inherited as the terms of engagement through which a people can express their historical existence. Consider the opening lines of the first chapter:

We are not a people of yesterday. *Do they ask* how many single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now? We shall point them to the proper beginning of their counting. On a clear night when the light of the moon has blighted the ancient woman and her seven children [...] have them count the first one, then the seven, and after the seven all the other stars visible to their eyes alone. [...] And after they have reached the end of that counting we shall not ask them to number the raindrops in the ocean, but with the wisdom of the aftermath have them ask us again how many seasons have flowed by *since our people were unborn*. (1) [emphasis added]

These lines give us access to an important aspect of the novel’s *raison d’être*. In the rhetorical question, “do they ask how many single seasons have flowed from our beginnings till now”, we are afforded a

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<sup>118</sup> Jeyifo, page 127.

<sup>119</sup> Jeyifo, page 128.

glimpse of the skeptical interlocutor, not as an intratextual function of self-alienation as in *Beautiful Ones*, but rather as a present discourse of skepticism which calls into doubt the duration (“how many seasons”) and origin (“beginnings”) of the African peoples. In other words the pressure of positing an origin, which is to say the presumption that a primal event is required to found the coherent totality of a civilisation, greets us from outside (“do they ask?”). We should thus take very seriously the narrative’s subversion of the origin story. First, the narrator makes clear the impossibility of the challenge through its articulation of civilisational time to ageless natural elements (the romantic rendering of the stars and planets as “the ancient woman and her seven children”). Then, the narrator refuses to answer the question, turning it in on itself, transforming into its verbal opposite, by asking instead “how many seasons have flowed by since our people were unborn?” The narrative of racial history becomes one of deformity rather than wholeness.

In this act, Armah chooses to adopt the discourse of origins native to all nationalisms, but simultaneously subverts its language. Sekyi-Otu writes that *Two Thousand Seasons* “appropriates a traditional and traditionalist proverb of moral and political discourse for an idiosyncratic and profoundly revolutionary purpose.” He continues:

For revolutionary discourse requires an internal semantic subversion of ordinary language, appropriating the latter’s metaphysics and idioms with a feigned acquiescence and provisional empathy, only to set them to work for the project of a “higher connectedness” in a different and reordered world.<sup>120</sup>

In light of this, it is interesting to note the disclaimed and guarded way in which Anoa’s invocation of the way, the epic moral code or cultural orientation which promises the possibility of disalienation, is phrased:

Know this again. The way is not the rule of men. The way is never women ruling men. The way is reciprocity. The way is not barrenness. Nor is the way heedless fecundity. The way is not blind productivity. The way is creation knowing its purpose, wise in the withholding of itself from snares, from destroyers. (17)

The anaphoric rhythms of this declaration denote the way not as some organised set of cultural tenets, but rather, through alternating negations and normative announcements, as “creation knowing its purpose”, a form of collective action that moves with perfect sensitivity to its prehistory and its future. When Anoa contrasts the way against the disconnected thought of the “white road”, she again stresses

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<sup>120</sup> Sekyi-Otu, pages 198 – 199.

the relationship between time and being, and the way as an incarnation of a past- and future-oriented form of consciousness:

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected sight, the fractured vision that sees only the immediate present, that follows only present gain and separates the present from the past, the present from the future, shutting each passing day in its own hustling greed.

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected hearing, the shattered hearing that listens only to today's brazen cacophony, takes direction from alone and stays deaf to the whispers of those gone before, deaf to the soft voices of those yet unborn.

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected thinking, the broken reason that thinks only of immediate paths to the moment's release, that takes no care to connect the present with past events, the present with future necessity. (8)

The way distinguishes itself from the "white road" through its rejection of *reification* – a culture attuned to the way refuses to live in the disconnected space of reification, in which all consciousness (seeing, hearing, thinking) is enslaved to the present moment and does not comprehend whence it comes and to where it is driven. In the drama of the narrative, the captives aboard the slave ship are able to revolt in a splendid moment of rebellion which allows them to breach the psychic enclosures of colonial subjection and "to reach again the larger circle" (8), in other words a form of reciprocal consciousness. But unlike Robert Fraser, who argues that this moment exemplifies a "vestigial unity of spirit, a survival from the lost 'reciprocity' that the worst effects of the traders cannot destroy"<sup>121</sup>, the language and form of the novel, so replete with the disordering of received certainties (consider especially its distortion of the messianic triad), suggests quite the opposite: that the novel inherits the epic form of this narrative, only to strategically pervert it, inhabit and transform it, and give an open-ended and radical account of an African being freed from the limitations of colonial interpellation.

Armah thus inherits the originary discourse of nationalism, but shifting his locus to African experience of modernity, is able to give a revolutionary account of African history which denies a coherent point of origin, a stable and fossilised precolonial culture and a preordained destiny. *Two Thousand Seasons* thus superbly preserves the theme of alienation within a new and altered form of representation, and breaking with the phenomenological traditions of *The Beautiful Ones*, offers for the first time in Armah's literary career, the possibility of a prognostic engagement with disalienation.

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<sup>121</sup> Fraser, page 77.



*Conclusion:*

The principal ambition of this thesis has been to explore the socio-cognitive category of modernity as represented through the thematisation of existential alienation in the literature of Ayi Kwei Armah. In *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), the thematisation of alienation or alienated selves demanded, at one level, certain innovations of technique (aporia, ambiguation of response to the past, totalitarian images of decay, a particular dynamic of porous inside/outside in the diegesis, subjective experiences translating into the objective fact of a nightmarish lifeworld), and at another, an awareness that alienation as a phenomenological or bodily experience, can only be fully accounted for once its historical and political dimensions are restored. As such, I argued that alienation was a political sensation, a diagnostic which revealed the felt contradictions of modernity in everyday post-independent life. The experience of alienation in *The Beautiful Ones* seems to draw the outside world into individual characters – their hopes and despairs and corporeal discontents are only fully sensible in relation to their utter immersion in the social system or the continuum of history. Alienation, then, becomes a heuristic: its representation shows the intimate depth at which the concentric circles of the social, the political and the historical invade personal feeling. Therefore, I aimed to dispute Achebe's notorious critique that the novel was an ahistorical narration of an alienation common to all humanity. Instead, I argued that alienation is here an experiential conduit into the dissonance of specifically African-centred view of modernity; that the neo-colonial situation of the world-system compels us to reconstitute the estrangement of the African nation-state upon the axis of psycho-social interaction.

The unremitting despair of *The Beautiful Ones* becomes, in this reading, a signal of its technical genius. Alienation cannot be overcome as a singular or individual project, and in the text, the possibilities of communal praxis are foreclosed through the tight, formal construction of consciousness existing at the interface of a reified landscape and lifeworld. The text's dominant themes – corruption, reification, neo-colonial economics, commodity fetishism, dystopian visions of social fragmentation, the political valence of waste – are all shown to be interconnected aspects of a cyclically-reconstituting alienation.

If *The Beautiful Ones* offers us a diagnostic of alienation, then *Two Thousand Seasons* is concerned with a prognostic appraisal. As I argued, the novel inaugurates the moment of several formal shifts within Armah's early oeuvre, while preserving many of his thematic preoccupations. I read this set of changes (transcendental narration, epic and mythic elements, subversive engagements with fables of origin, apodictic premises whose truth is established beyond the time-space encumbrances of ordinary, reified consciousness) as a deliberate *response* to the impossibility of prognosis in the earlier novel. I argued that Armah had fashioned a volatile bricolage of forms to find a space of narration in which overcoming

alienation was possible. My argument was that *Two Thousand Seasons* was a specifically “incomplete” text and that its departures from *The Beautiful Ones* (the roughly 500-year historical arc of the narrative, for example) were designed for the purposes of a reconstructive or utopian vision. I argued furthermore that these deliberate ambiguities or ambivalences in the text could be articulated to the general condition of material underdevelopment to which the discourse of nationalism provides psychic clues.

The study of the particular formal effects of alienation on the attempt to write the African self offers a diagnostic of the effects of colonial modernity on consciousness, perception, sensation and epistemology. I hope to have adequately demonstrated that in the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah, a close understanding of this historical alienation is indispensable to understanding the formation of the text.

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