

# Overcoming the Gleam of Empire and the Excremental State in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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## Abstract

The process of decolonization had most of the time been tumultuous for all African states as they tried to rise from the debris of European empires. Mass uprisings, enigmatic leaders, grand narratives of a hopeful future have shaped their individual paths to autonomy. But all those paths have ended up misdirecting the people. The promises made by revolutionary leaders, fighting in the liberation wars, fell too short in providing a new start for the citizens of the postcolonial states. One reason for this failure has been a misconstrued idea of nation and nationalism. Ayi Kwei Armah in his 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* sheds light on the pitfalls of nationalism. In the novel, the Ghana of great promises, the nation that fought against the Empire for its independence – a fight against inequality, indignity, and injustice – faces the same hypocrisy and corruption, prevalent during the regime of the colonizers. The author narrates the predicament of an unnamed protagonist who deals with the atmosphere of mistrust and betrayal around him. His conflicted state of mind, mistrust of social morality, and deep-rooted anger in witnessing a decadent nation on its way to becoming a materialistic wasteland, are significant issues in the novel. The appeal of what the narrator calls “the gleam” on one hand and a conscious effort to steer clear of the path of vice on the other is shown in the narrator’s stream of consciousness. This paper aims to look at the postcolonial state Ghana immersed in the degraded morality of its people. The nation and the individual both face the same hopelessness but in Armah’s novel a glimpse of hope can be found. The narrator called for a better Ghanaian society that would reject blind imitations of materialistic Europe.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Moral Degradation, Gleam of Empire, Excrement

The novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) begins with a narrator, an unnamed man who works in the Ghanaian railway department, describing the rusty body of a public bus which can be considered a metaphor for the postcolonial state Ghana that Ayi Kwei Armah has taken as his subject. In postcolonial studies there is significant discussion about how freedom from the colonizers can often lead to totalitarianism, which worries many thinkers. In the above mentioned novel, the issue of what independence truly means is highlighted by the narrator. Anti-colonial resistance in most colonies was forged as the colonized people believed themselves to be part of a “coherent imagined communities, bonded by common qualities and attitudes,” thus constructing a path to a new and independent nation (McLeod 97). For many postcolonial scholars, the concepts of nation and nationalism endow colonized natives with necessary properties to challenge the “ideological, material, and cultural apparatus of European colonialism” (McLeod 98). One such scholar Benita Parry asserts that, “disenchantment with post-independence regimes” should not:

[B]lind critics to the import of liberation struggles conducted in the name of nationalism, an ideology and practice which prominent participants in the postcolonial discussion denigrate in the interest of valorizing hybrid, deterritorialized and diasporic forms of consciousness that are apparently uninflected and untroubled by ethnicity or class. (10)

Parry here indicates that nationalism is vital in achieving liberation from the colonizers while many scholars consider nation and nationalism to be restricting and parochial, and thus inadequate in providing the promised liberty to the people. According to Tamara Sivanandan, the ideals which were responsible for bringing about independence can, arguably, be erroneous in many cases. Sivanandan points out how, even after many years of liberation in numerous postcolonial societies, the nationalist forces were still struggling to make meaning of the freedom they fought so hard to achieve, giving way to corruption and injustice in all spheres of public and private lives. She rather finds, “increasing division and oppression on the basis of class, ethnicity, religion, and gender; the failure of the economy to provide even basic necessities, never mind prosperity, for the mass of the people” (42). There can also be found “a lack of democratic participation by the masses in the political sphere; and the continued – often increasing – structural dependence, economically, politically, and ideologically, on Western imperial powers” in the postcolonial states (42). From this argument it is apparent that the postcolonial nation remains nothing more than a hollow ground where the anti-colonial movements seem like a myth to be retold mainly in political events. The social condition of *The Beautiful Ones* highlights the uneven development inside the nation, where a portion of the people have amassed wealth, leaving the rest to make do with scraps.

In the novel, the unnamed narrator, often referred to as “the man,” deliberates on his disillusionments about national liberation and the subsequent moral decay in people. Previously he saw a promise which surpassed all the suffering, death, and sacrifice, “The promise was so beautiful. Even those who were too young to understand it all knew that at last something good was being born. It was there. We were not deceived about that” (85). It is disquieting that the reality is far from the idealistic pledge that initiated the anticolonial movement in the first place. The unnamed narrator has witnessed the betrayal of the nationalistic ideals by the former rebel leaders; for him there is no purpose in working for what he considers an “excremental” society. The narrator talks about his own cynicism by bringing out the hypocrisy of the leaders: “We were ready for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs” (81). The novel criticizes the men who “were to lead” the Ghanaians out of despair but now embody the same qualities of a white colonialist. After Ghana’s independence, anglophilia arguably grew in a striking manner while the black man started to see himself as the successor of a great empire that had the mastery to enslave millions of people. In Armah’s novel the hunger for power and material wealth blinded the men in power. Armah has repeatedly voiced his concerns and criticisms of the nationalist forces in a postcolonial country – a pattern that can be spotted in the narratorial voice of the novel. The narrator in *The Beautiful Ones* is “the man,” who is a witness to how the society is becoming a toxic one due to the lack of responsibility of the common citizen as well as the elite class in power. In this case, the elite can be termed as one of the major setbacks for building of a nation after liberation is secured. So, a previously colonized country not only faces economic impediments towards development in the decolonizing stages but is also held back by the corruption of bureaucracy in the postcolonial phase.

It is important to mention revolutionary writer Frantz Fanon, a major influence on Armah’s work, while discussing the pitfalls of national consciousness in a postcolonial state. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses how there are only two ways a postcolonial nation can operate – either the colonized is condemned to blindly ape the colonizer or he has to engage in an active struggle to be free from the master. He writes:

The national bourgeoisie, since it is stung up to defend its immediate interests, and sees no farther than the end of its nose, reveals itself incapable of simply bringing national unity into being or of building up the nation on a stable and productive basis. The national front which has forced colonialism to withdraw cracks up and wastes the victory it has gained. (128)

Fanon's analysis of the emergence of a bourgeois elite class points towards its apparent inclination to mimic the colonial masters and in turn strangle the revolutionary spirit of equality and harmony in society, which can be found in *The Beautiful Ones*. In Armah's novel, both the narrator and Joseph Koomson, a classmate of the narrator's, were driven by the Nkrumahist party and its fiery ideals of revolution. But after independence, men like Koomson became engrossed in material possessions and started climbing the social ladder in dubious ways. Their questionable morals are embodiments of what the narrator believes is wrong with the upper-classes in the postcolonial nations. The Nkrumahist party which once stood for equality, honesty, and freedom later stood for corruption and self-serving bureaucracy. The narrator voices disgust and dejection at the current condition of the nation: "There is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days" (81). The misery and vulnerability of the common man ring true in the proclamations of the narrator:

There is no difference then. No difference at all between the white men and their apes, the lawyers and the merchants, and now the apes of the apes, our Party men. And after their reign is over, there will be no difference ever. All new men will be like the old. (89)

This statement in the novel can be supported by the words of historian and Africanist Basil Davidson, as he probes into the minds of postcolonial bureaucrats and elites in power, "Such men desired Ghana's independence, but if it could be independence 'in the British way,' shaped on British enjoying British approval, and therefore, by the logic of this attitude, fulfilling Britain's interests" (27-28). This may direct the reader's attention towards the fact that the regime change from a colonial to a postcolonial one does not necessarily mean a complete transformation in the formerly colonized people's minds; they might remain enslaved instead of becoming free even after independence.

The question of true freedom of the masses from the colonial masters is a complicated one for the postcolonial state to answer and postcolonial scholar Neil Lazarus sheds light on this issue. He believes that the people fought with their blood to gain independence, and just at the moment when it seemed within their reach, the neocolonial powers seized it, reinstating the old, slavish ways of the colonized days. He writes, "Finally, adding insult to injury, this humiliation is compounded by the official rhetoric which celebratorily proclaims Africa's independence. In independence, according to *The Beautiful Ones*, the masses are still unfree" (146). This analysis is relevant in the discussion of Armah's novel since there is a status quo which dictates the standard to settle for nothing less than a materialistic European lifestyle. Ironically, the independence has created materialistic slaves in Ghana, furthering the West's agenda. This life is something that everyone dreams of but only a handful of corrupt and powerful people can revel in. People are depicted as moving away from everything "black" or "African," and aspiring to be "white" or "European."

Looking at history, it can be argued that even after the colonizers leave, there remains a longing to stick to the cultures or practices established by the outgoing rulers. One can simply blame the psychological effects of anglophilia for causing such longing to cling to the ways of the colonizer. But a closer look might reveal that arguably the preference for the White culture is the result of a long-drawn systematic destruction of the native cultures of all the colonized countries. After all, the colonized are left with no option to revert to their roots when most of their core cultural rituals have been erased from their collective memory. In this regard, an apt picture of postcolonial African nations is painted by Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as he analyzes the imperialist’s strategy of overpowering the subjects by the process of, “destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the languages of the coloniser” (16). This happens because political or economic dominance cannot be fully accomplished without psychological control. Thiong’o then goes on to discuss the colonial alienation that occurs in the minds of the colonized subjects as a result of the cultural hegemony and the subjects engage in, “an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one’s environment. ... On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies” (28). In Armah’s novel, people like Koomson symbolize these hollow men who denounce their roots and don the capes of their colonial masters.

Armah censures the nationalist leaders for their covetousness and hunger for power. He writes that the African leaders are “caught between two contradictory social forces to both of which they are compelled to speak in the same breath: for the contemptuous erstwhile masters, they ... exhibit their prowess in the international competition of conspicuous consumption; for their less fortunate brothers, they must provide at least an illusion of community, of shared suffering and shared hopes” (28). To quench their thirst for all material wealth and to achieve esteem in the European’s eyes, the African leader shows “an arrestingly vulgar, premature decadence,” but to keep up the façade of a true patriot they conjure up, “a thunderous stream of revolutionary-sounding words” (28).

Façade or not, the chase after the “gleam” of Europe is a never-ending unappeasable desire in the minds of many national leaders of postcolonial nations; in this case it is the unnamed narrator’s Ghana. Armah has used quite a few symbols in the novel and “the gleam” is a significant one. The luxurious life or the gleam, as the novel terms it, complicates the protagonist’s moral ideals and his wish to fulfil the needs of his family. The allure of exotic and luxurious things imported from the former masters or the Empire seduce most Ghanaians. The gleam is hence a major part of the system of corruption and exploitation prevalent in a materialistic Ghana. In the beginning of *The Beautiful Ones* the gleam is introduced by “the man” while he walks to his work near the hill on top of which the glamorous Atlantic-Caprice hotel is placed. He then examines his inner dilemma of whether to shun or move towards the gleam:

The gleam, in moments of honesty, had a power to produce a disturbing ambiguity within. It would be good to say that the gleam never did attract. It would be good, but it would be far from the truth. ... It was getting harder and harder to tell whether the gleam repelled more than it attracted, attracted more than it repelled, or just did both at once in one disgustingly confused feeling all the time these heavy days. (10)

The shine of materialistic pleasure poses a glaring contrast to the “feeling of entrapment, dislocation, and marginalisation within a decadent environment” (Ogede 26) throughout the novel. In his novel Armah portrays the condition of his protagonist trapped in an infected environment, looking for a way out.

Along with the symbol of the gleam, Armah also uses symbols of filth, excrement, and human feces in the text to illustrate the toxicity of the protagonist’s social setting. The novel has an unusual number of detailed images of waste, excrement, and bodily fluids, and the readers find vivid descriptions of these when the protagonist looks at the decay of the walls of buildings in government offices. “The man” portrays the mindless incivility of his fellow citizens while recoiling when his hand touches the handrail of the office stairs:

Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip from the lavatory downstairs to the offices above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The calloused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. (13)

Here, Armah gives a thorough depiction of flawed human nature and indecency in the public space to show the protagonist’s frustration in his social environment. The tendency to show disregard for public property is not very unusual for developing nations such as Ghana, especially because of the lack of accountability and observance of civic rules. Perhaps that is why it is appropriate to state that, “many will find nothing essentially wrong with such a picture of the modern elite in Africa” (Nkosi 67). Armah aims to explore humanity in all its forms – be it beauty or excreta.

Many critics have dismissed the symbolism in *The Beautiful Ones* to be evocative of only “decay and rot, what with the frequent mentioning of ooze, dirt, excreta which obviously represent the mess and disillusionment of the modern Ghanaian society” (Rao 44), and their opinion is that the recurrent use of those motifs delineates the anguish, torment and estrangement of a person. Armah’s intention in writing *The Beautiful Ones* has been widely criticized. It may seem that the novel paints a picture of despair in the grim Ghana which can be described as insufferably pessimistic. To many readers, the images of dirt, filth, and rust may seem a deliberate condescension on the part of a snobbish author. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, while praising Armah’s style of writing, criticizes the novel as a “sick book” in which “the hero, pale and passive and nameless a creation in the best manner of existential writing, wanders through the story in an anguished sleep, neck deep in despair and human excrement of which we see rather a lot in the book” (624). Achebe’s prejudice does not stand alone as literary critic Eldred Jones also denounces the work stating, “Armah has taken the predicament of Africa in general, Ghana in particular, and distilled its despair and its hopelessness in a very powerful, harsh, deliberately *unbeautiful* novel” (56). The reality is unapologetically harsh in the narration, but Armah’s version is the protagonist’s reality. Perhaps it may be said that, “In postcolonial writing, shit can redress a history of debasement by displaying the failure of development and the contradictions of colonial development and, moreover, by disrupting inherited associations of excrement with colonized or non-Western populations” (Esty 25-26).

The readers of *The Beautiful Ones* can be misled into thinking the text as an exclusively negative depiction of humanity. However, a closer evaluation may indicate Armah's intent of presenting the anguish and wretchedness of a narrator who "seems like an existential everyman" (Goldie 94). The novel calls for a contrasting outlook to analyze the inherent beauty even in the slowly degenerating social sphere. The novel explores the possibility of something pleasant trying to grow from both literal and metaphorical filth. The force of seduction of the railway man's home is no less powerful than the one outside. At one point in the novel, "the man" meets Koomson, an old acquaintance of the protagonist from school who is now a government minister, and invites him over. Koomson's wife Estella has such an impact on the narrator's wife Oyo that she seeks a high status in society, just as Estella enjoys. Oyo chides her husband for not taking bribes and amassing illegal wealth like the corrupt government officials, as she says, "maybe you like the crawling that we do, but I am tired of it. ... Everybody is swimming toward what he wants. Who wants to remain on the beach asking the wind, "How...How...How?" (44). This repetition in the narration hints towards the frustration of a wife whose husband is standing on the side-lines of what she believes is progress, while others are advancing in the rat race. The nice and clean existence that Oyo desires comes at the price of decaying of a person's soul. Oyo compares her husband to a Chichidodo, a bird that contradictorily eats maggots, but hates excrement from which the maggot grows. In her mind his naiveté is also cowardice. The narrator wants to provide his family with a better life yet simultaneously refuses to play the dirty game of politics and deception, which is apparently the only way to gain a higher standing in their society. "The man" seems to be sympathetic towards Oyo's complexes, unfulfilled desires, and her passion for a better, clean life not different from the vision her husband has. The narrator resents the feeling that he is alone in upholding the values of liberation and societal development because he has not joined the blind masses. The author's choice of frequently using contrasting images of decay and cleanliness stems from all the agonizing social experiences. The harsh satire of the novel is directed towards everyone who disregards the possible better future of the nation by chasing after material wealth. In the novel this condition of the postcolonial state is the "harsh reality" which stands in the way of "the emergence of the world of the 'beautiful ones'" (Lazarus 139). One of the most forceful parts of the novel is the hope of a new beginning at the hands of the titular "not yet born" as it gives an alternative vision of what the current condition is. Neil Lazarus writes:

In *The Beautiful Ones* what could be exists as a fundamental threat to what is. The social environment of "the man" is profoundly unrevolutionary, but the specter of revolution figures in its margins nevertheless. In fact, it is present there as nothing less than a promise. (139)

The unnamed narrator's refusal to take part in the practice of moral decadence in itself is a symbol of optimism in the story. Resisting the gleam, in other words the lure of wealth, the narrator also has to silently accept his family's accusations. The narrator sees through the clean and immaculate appearances of the Koomsons and the corrupt bureaucrats, and considers them to be diseased. At one point "the man" speaks his mind to Oyo, "Some of that kind of cleanliness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump" (44). The narrator realizes that the immediate scenario might not change soon, but he has faith in his actions and in the future which might bring light in the darkness. The contrast between the dumpsters, filth, excreta, and the whiteness of wealthy neighborhoods needs to be emphasized, which can be termed as a "purgative

exposure” (Aidoo 18). This exposure might be painful to witness but is “absolutely necessary” (Aidoo 18).

A significant success for Armah’s narrator is seen when his abstinence is praised by Oyo. She sees the consequence of Koomson’s corrupt nature that ends in humiliation and finally realizes the worth of living an honest life. The wife is relieved and grateful as she tells her husband, “I am glad you never became like him” (165). The hope for a better nation is renewed in “the man” after hearing his wife’s confession. He feels a form of freedom in making someone understand that the Chichidodo is not necessarily a problem, but an answer. A heightened sense of morality in the narratorial voice may be seen as a positive note towards the end of the novel. Looking at the intrinsic optimism, arguments can be raised against Chinua Achebe’s disregard of the novel. In one of his interviews, Achebe himself talks about the responsibility of the author in portraying the problems infesting the world and his attempt at bringing about a solution:

If things were perfect, there would be no need for writers to write their novels. But it is because they see a vision of the world which is better than what exists, it is because they see the possibilities of man rising higher than he has risen at the moment that they write. So, whatever they write, if they are true practitioners of their art, would be in essence a protest against what exists, what is. (4-5)

From this point of view, Ayi Kwei Armah’s intention to write about Ghana and its immersion in delinquency is in no way snobbishness of a novelist, but an attempted wake-up call for his fellow humans. Armah examines the filth of moral and social degradation only to search for purity and decency. An image of a policeman taking bribe from a bus driver is a commonplace incident that is mentioned at the beginning of the novel and repeated towards the end. This is a symbol of corruption spreading from the minister’s house to the bus driver’s. But two incidents are striking towards the end of the novel – one is that on the rear of the bus there is an inscription which reads, “THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN,” painted with a flower that is “solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful,” and the other one appears when “the man” hears a bird singing and diving into a latrine. The repeated symbols of solitude, mystery, beauty, latrines, excreta, and the flower indicate a possibility that beauty can be born and persist in squalor. There is no apparent reason to believe that a morally bankrupt Ghanaian society will suddenly undergo dramatic change; on the contrary, like a hydra’s head, in the place of one Koomson, two others may rise. The never-ending cycle will go on at the expense of the honest individuals. Yet, amidst all the unpleasantness of the corrupt city, the narrator still searches for a better world. The positive tone of the novel is celebrated by Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo: “Perhaps the beautiful ones, when they are born and let’s pray it will be soon, will take care of everything and everybody once and for all time. The least we can do is wait” (18). The novel offers a promise that all that man can do now is hope for the filth to bear flowers and wait because they may not bloom today, not even tomorrow, but someday they will.

The moral decadence, complicated familial relationships, social norms, and an attempt by the protagonist to resist the lure of the glamorous materialistic former empire is what makes the novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* a stringent satire of the postcolonial state of modern

Ghana. The novelist's flowing and forceful criticism of the hypocritical nationalist leaders, with their blatant violations of the ideals that once drove a nation to fight for freedom from colonial power, drives a message home. This message says that achieving freedom from a white master is not enough because there will always be a threat coming from another group of people with minds like the colonizers, who desperately want to establish themselves in positions of power. History is a witness to how neo-colonialists have oppressed the people like the old colonial masters did – putting their own selfish personal agenda before that of the nation in making decisions, and creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust to keep the masses under their expensive and oppressive boots. The colonial past can never be denied or forgotten, but there is a necessity to learn from its scars, to take the side of the suffering ordinary public, not to bow down before the colonizers by mirroring them. Amidst the grim realities of life – the filth-ridden streets of the country, and the decadent bureaucracy – lies a hidden promise in the narrative. The glimmer of hope in the story is a search for truth, honesty, and innocence in the people by Armah's protagonist. No matter how disillusioned "the man" is about the degradation of his fellow human beings, no matter how conflicted his psyche is in addressing the gleam, the narrator's faith in humanity still persists; he sees beauty, even in waste. The optimism in the novel's ending may appear rushed, but it would not seem so if the unfolding of events throughout the novel is considered. The storyteller seeks to remind his readers that the immoral leaders with their petty agenda and sham discourse of nationalism will try to hinder progress, liberty, and equality in the nation, but the people have to fight back for their own sake.

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