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Abstract

Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the most powerful psychological novelists writing in Africa today. He is also one of the the most controversial, not only because of his aggressively one-sided view of colonialism, but also because his depiction of human relations, including sexual ones, is a challenge to complacency.

‘The Loved Ones’. Racial and Sexual Relations in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Why are we so Blest?*

Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the most powerful psychological novelists writing in Africa today. He is also one of the the most controversial, not only because of his aggressively one-sided view of colonialism, but also because his depiction of human relations, including sexual ones, is a challenge to complacency.

Armah’s novels are novels of quest: For authenticity or for the true African identity which constantly slips away — eluding all attempts to be pinned down. Characteristically it is in his *historical* novel *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) that he gets closest to establishing this identity as a force which is socially adequate. ‘The way’, he calls it in that novel. Modern African states, which provide the settings for Armah’s first three novels, do not offer social relations which encourage people who are in search of ‘the way’.

His novels are stories of the forces they are up against: first and foremost colonialism and neo-colonialism which brutally kill, abduct and destroy, and in more direct ways undermine culture and identity.

But there is another principle and historical fact which frustrates the heroes in their quest: The female principle and women as a changing force in history. Whereas the theme constituted by the opposition between colonizer and colonized is fairly obvious in the three early novels by Armah, the more fundamental opposition between man and woman does not emerge in the same open manner. It generates imagery and surfaces in abrupt ways as if it has to fight its way through authorial censorship, but the opposition nevertheless structures the novels, particularly *Why are we so Blest?*

The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born (1968) is an indictment of a newly independent African country in which all moral standards have been eroded by the powerful attractions of easy wealth and western goods. The

novel is remarkable for its consistent use of one metaphorical complex: Society and the individual are seen in terms of the human digestive system. As in Armah's later novels women are, in the main, agents of corruption. The protagonist's wife and extended family, especially the mother-in-law, urge 'the man' to disregard standards of decency and honesty and jump on the merry-go-round fuelled by corruption and lust for power. These women are 'the loved ones' in the novel.

We find a similar pattern in *Fragments* (1969). Baako returns to Ghana after five years of study in America. He is very critical of that particular society, but at the same time he has become deeply influenced by it. He cannot and will not live up to the high expectations with which his family receive him. To them, and especially to the women, he represents the good life: By staying in America he has been touched and transformed by a magic wand and they want to be part of that transformation. Baako does not fit into modern Ghana which he finds dominated by the values he came to dislike while in America, and his family will not let him lead the modest but uncorrupted life which he knows is his only option if he wishes to stay sane. In this novel the hero is helped by a woman which indicates a theme which is to be developed in Armah's later novels: Women are capable of spanning the whole range of moral choices, they can be utterly corrupt or saintly.

Juana is a psychiatrist, a healer from Latin America, an intermediary like himself after his stay in the West. She is neither white nor black, but brown. She may have found 'the way', her moral integrity, but her salvation does not transcend the personal level. The anomaly of her position as a highly educated, foreign and single woman in a context where women are defined by their position within the family, and are usually not highly educated, excludes the possibility of her having any impact on her surroundings. She is of assistance to Baako, but her support aggravates his isolation from his family and the rest of the community.

Both Juana and Baako are products of a global structural dislocation brought about by colonialism. The dislocation can be traced back to differences in economic and military power which in the course of history have assigned nations and peoples their roles within a system of dominance and subservience. Ultimately this dislocation becomes a disturbance in the individual psychological constitution. Both the powerful and the powerless have been warped and made one-sided by the unequal distribution of power.

The central preoccupation of *Why are we so Blest?* (1972) is the psychology of colonialism as experienced by three characters, two Africans,

one American, displaced within the global system of power and knowledge, always closely related to power. In passages the lessons of dependence are spelt out in the language of a treatise:

This loneliness is an inevitable part of the assimilationist African's life within the imperial structure. Because of the way information is distributed in the total structure — high information in the centre, low information on the peripheries — overall clarity is potentially possible only from the central heights. The structures in the peripheral areas are meant to dispose low, negative or mystificatory information.¹

The ensuing existential deadlock is set out in an equally lucid way: The displaced person, i.e. the colonized individual, must either sacrifice access to knowledge and power in favour of a sense of belonging, or sacrifice belonging at the cost of 'the constant necessity to adjust to what is alien, eccentric to the self'.²

These ideas are clearly influenced by Frantz Fanon's writings on the psychological influence of colonialism on subject peoples. The colonized male comes to reject himself and all his values, comes to envy and depend on the colonizer and lust for everything white, including the wife of the master.

Other writers, contemporary with Fanon, have applied similar kinds of psychological analysis to the relationship between colonizer and colonized. *Psychologie de la colonisation* by the psychoanalyst and philosopher Octave Mannoni is an analysis of racial relations in Madagascar in the 1940s, based on prolonged field work.³ In his work, which was known to Fanon, Mannoni utilized case studies and psychoanalytical techniques, including interpretation of dreams.⁴

In 1957 appeared *Portrait du Colonisé précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur* by Albert Memmi. His political and psychological thinking is based on his own experience as a non-Moslem Tunisian, an intermediary: Of his own ethnic group, the Jews in Tunisia, he writes, 'they live in painful and constant ambiguity.'⁵ Like Mannoni and to some extent Fanon, Memmi wants to understand the extra-economic benefits reaped by the colonizer — the pleasures of superiority. An American edition of Memmi's work was published in 1965, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and dedicated to 'the American Negro, also colonized'.⁶

The same year saw the publication in the United States of *Sex and Racism in America* by Calvin Hernton, a black American poet and sociologist.⁷ His insights into racial relations provide the closest parallel to those of Armah in *Why are we so Blest?*² Hernton did his doctorate in sociology at Columbia University, one of the places of study which

Armah frequented during his stay in America in the 1960s. Hernton's preoccupations are similar to those of his predecessors, but his work is an important innovation in that it focusses on changing sexual relations and explores their explanatory value in making sense of racial relations in the United States of the 1960s.

Hernton's small but compact book is a survey of the sexual politics of American racial relations. His observations are based on qualitative research and interviews with black and white women and men. According to his findings sexual relations not only between blacks and whites, but also inside the two groups have become perverted because of the way in which 'sex', 'race' and 'power' are historically interconnected in America.

Hernton situates the origin of the distortions in the slave society of the American South. This inhuman and exploitative social system needed a justification in defense of existing racial relations, and fostered the mythology of the pure white woman to whom everything was due: 'Sacred white womanhood emerged in the South as an immaculate mythology to glorify an otherwise indecent society.'⁸

The manipulations which were necessary in order to place this ideal as an ideological and emotional centre of Southern society meant the misdirection of sexual energies of both whites and blacks, and also that the sexual drives became closely linked to aggression: Straightforward aggression against white dominance in the case of the black male, inversion of guilt and the invention of the black man as a threat from which the white woman had to be protected, in the case of the white male. The white woman in her enforced chastity was secretly attracted to black men and punished them rather than herself as representatives of her tabooed sexuality. At the same time she strongly resented black women's sexual hold on white men. A situation arose in which she 'did not actually lynch and castrate Negroes herself, but she permitted her men to do so in her name'.⁹

As we shall see this paradigm for sexual relations is very close to the one we find in *Why are we so Blest?*¹⁰

Sexual and racial relations at the level of individual psychology form a strong undercurrent in Armah's novel. The main flow of the narrative, however, can be understood in relation to a different set of ideas, worked out in the writings of Frantz Fanon, those dealing with the politics of power and liberation.

According to Fanon genuine liberation from colonialism must be based on the collective will and efforts of the masses. The petty bourgeois intellectual must sever all ties to the corrupt national bourgeoisie, puppets of

international capital, and become part of the masses. This can only happen when the liberation struggle is in its highest phase, which makes possible the fruition of the national culture. In this situation the intellectual can be admitted to the traditional culture of the people and may take his place within the leadership of the liberation movement. The harmony between the intellectual and the people is the third stage of his development. Before reaching that magic moment he must pass two tests: He must get beyond the stage dominated by his wish to imitate and coalesce with the colonizer, and the one in which he desires to throw himself into the most stagnant and hidebound customs of the people, into the exotic.¹¹

In Armah's early novels the possibilities of personal salvation through the struggle are explored, whereas the emphasis in Fanon's political writing is on the necessity of the collective endeavour. In these novels about modern Africa Armah is concerned precisely with the relationship between the colonizer, the intellectual and the national bourgeoisie and disregards the role of the masses. The three protagonists of *Why are we so Blest?* are motivated by their desire for participation and perhaps leadership in the struggle, but they are hopelessly isolated, cut off from 'home'.

The novel has the form of extracts from the notebooks of the three main characters. Solo is one of them. After having been touched by the magic wand of western civilization as a student in Portugal he becomes a freedom fighter in one of the Portuguese colonies. He fails in that line of action and now finds himself in Laccryville, the capital of a newly independent African country which is obviously Algeria.

He makes his living as a translator and occasional journalist and keeps up a life style which is wholly out of tune with his surroundings. He drifts from café to bookshop in search of intellectual stimulus, drowns himself in foreign film magazines and American novels. But he also keeps up a half-hearted contact with the local office of the People's Union of Congheria, Congheria being the name of the Portuguese colony where he grew up. His self-hatred is as deep as his need to find an uncorrupted person to love and hero-worship.

Modin, the second narrator, appears in Laccryville to fill that love. He is a Ghanaian who has dropped out of a Harvard scholarship, feeling that the logic of power implies that access to privilege and knowledge for the élite is granted only at the expense of the masses. Co-option of a cadre of leadership is a pre-condition for a smooth relationship between ex-colonizers and ex-colonized.

Modin is in Laccryville to join the Liberation Movement of Congheria. He has brought with him a white American woman, Aimée

— another ‘loved one’. She is the third keeper of notebooks. She is also a university dropout in search of adventure and the exotic. She is one of several ‘Africanists’ Modin got to know in America, Modin being one himself. He is doing work on the Tanganyikan Maji Maji wars in the early years of the century in order to draw the lesson for modern African resistance to colonialism. Aimée is pretending to study the Mau Mau revolt, in reality using her interest in Kenyan history and politics to sleep with as many prominent nationalist leaders as possible.

Modin has moved from the centre of power and knowledge with a woman who apparently shares his insights into the structural dislocation brought about by colonialism. Her understanding of the destructive results of colonialism in Kenya parallels his own of the consequences for Tanganyika. They both agree that by limiting their activities to the *study* of colonialism they take their places within the privileged sections of the neo-colonial system, and they decide to fight colonialism where it is still a fact. What becomes increasingly clear is that they are both powerless pawns in a game whose structure places her on the side of the oppressors, him on the side of the oppressed.

The recognition of this fact is one and the same thing as Modin’s disillusionment. Aimée betrays their joint cause and sides with the oppressors in the way she conducts her sexual life, the way she constitutes her sexuality. According to the novel sexual relations is the one form of human communication in which there is no room for dissimulation. Aimée’s intellectual understanding and her wish for equality with Modin is undermined by her sexuality. Like Mrs Jefferson, the wife of Modin’s professor whom he has an affair with while staying in America, Aimée is interested in Africa and Africans for perverted sexual reasons. The two white women are equally destructive. Mrs Jefferson is a nymphomaniac, Aimée is frigid. Another instance of the range of possibilities over which women are able to span. They both seduce Modin, ultimately in order to punish their own white men and make them punish and destroy the black man.

If we follow Hernton’s analysis: The core of the racial problem is the problem white women have with their sexuality, and the key emotion is frustration. White men have to be punished as potential or actual deserters, black men as projections of the women’s unfulfilled and guilty sexual needs.

Mrs Jefferson acts out the seduction — destruction sequence in *reality*: She tells her husband about her affair with Modin, he catches them while they are making love and stabs Modin while she is watching.

Aimée uses Modin as a figure in a sexual *phantasy* in which she

imagines herself as the wife of a German settler in Tanganyika, Kapitän Reitsch, a historical figure and relative of herself whose existence she has unearthed in her research. In her phantasy she pictures Modin as her black, handsome servant, Mwangi, whom she seduces while her husband is out, hunting for rebels in the forest. The peak of this experience which frees Aimée from her frigidity is the moment her uniformed captain/husband strides into the bedroom.

With her conscious mind Aimée regards Modin as her equal, but in order to be fulfilled as a woman she needs phantasies in which she is superior and Modin her servant — an inferior human being whose sexuality is at her beck and call. Power as a historical fact and category has subsumed white sexuality, according to the novel. White women are expert users of their sexuality as an instrument of power, perhaps because it is their only weapon in an economic system in which they tend to have less power than men.

Aimée is an unusually unpleasant specimen of the category of women classified by Hernton as the 'misfit white woman'. They generally come from middle class backgrounds, are well educated, and, according to Hernton (and Armah), 'become associated with liberal activities for but one purpose: to fraternize with black men'. Hernton diagnoses: 'Deep in the psyche of the young, misfit white woman there is a need *not* for a Negro but for a nigger. For the nigger is a monster, a wish-fulfilling creation of the white woman's own deformities.'¹² Once again Armah illustrates the point in his fiction.

In Modin's notebook entries towards the end of the novel the image of Aimée has merged with that of another American woman he has read about, who cut off her lover's testicles with her nail scissors. So the outcome of the love affair for Modin is the persistent phantasy of a vagina dentata. The image anticipates Modin's horrible death by castration by a group of French counter-revolutionaries he and Aimée meet in the desert outside Laccryville.

Solo is in Laccryville to observe Modin's 'long free slide along slippery paths', i.e. his relationship to white women in another vaginal nightmare vision (p. 158). Solo's impulse when he sees Aimée with another American woman after Modin's death is to compare the relation between white women and black men to that between beasts of prey and carrion. This simile is made authoritative by the prediction made by Naita, the black American woman, who is the heroine and soothsayer of the novel. She is talking to Modin whom she has met shortly after his arrival in America, and gives him the first of many warnings against white women: 'Their men box you in so you feel all tight and lonely. Then their women

move in to pick you clean and you too dumb to know it's got nothing to do with love and sincerity' (p. 134).

Naita is the perfect sexual partner for Modin. Their union is 'entirely natural' (p. 123). Her status as the moral yardstick by which the other characters are measured is stressed by Modin's search for her after he has understood how right she was.

Her voice in the novel, which we only hear in direct speech, is very different from the soul-searching, intellectual prose of the three narrators. Her words are few and to the point: 'White folks got you surrounded', 'White folks gon mess with you', and 'You talk some silly stuff' (pp. 123, 122). But she is only a fleeting presence in the novel and disappears when Modin persists in his pursuit of education and white values.

The preoccupations and voices of the two black male narrators are very similar. It is tempting to see Solo and Modin as representing two stages of what in the novel is called 'the fate of the *évolué*' (p. 84). The American sections of Modin's notebooks record the kinds of experience which Solo must have been through while staying in Portugal. Solo made the same decision as Modin makes, to participate in the liberation of one of the still colonized African nations. Modin's fatal mistake is to believe that a white person, and a woman at that, can be equally serious and dedicated to that cause. Solo's Portuguese girl friend was pressured to let him down by her Portuguese friends, and *he* therefore returned to Africa alone.

Even so both his and Modin's plans of taking part in the struggle are thwarted, not by external obstacles, but by the psychological effects of the structural dislocation resulting from colonialism. The oppression caused by that system constantly calls for liberation, but at the same time secretly undermines its possibility by its effect on the personality. The outcome is a double-bind situation which transforms a political problematic into an existentialist problematic, and this predicament is the source of the restless energy which permeates Armah's text, and also of its cyclical nature.

When the novel ends Solo is still alive, although a helpless victim of the structural dislocation. He is a lonely existence in the periphery, the immobile recipient and interpreter of information from Aimée and Modin, whose notebooks he has got hold of, living on that and on scraps from the white man's table. His very profession as a translator points to his alienation, and his ambition to become a writer in his own right comes to nothing because he does not belong: 'Even before my death I have become a ghost, wandering about the face of the earth, moving with a freedom I have not chosen, something whose unsettling abundance I

am impotent to use' (p. 11). These are the opening words of the novel, spoken by Solo, but they might as well have been the closing words.

One of Aimée's final words is 'Nigger', which she screams at Solo with 'that American intensity', when he refuses to let her have Modin's notebooks (p. 270). So she has ended her experiment with liberalism and come back full circle to her white, Southern, American sisters. The ultimate indictment of Europe, the United States, the white world in general comes out in the indictment of Aimée, the white woman. Her sexuality and the uses she makes of it epitomize the exploitation of the third world by the first. She seduces Modin by being different, makes him dependent on her, even makes him love her, only to turn her real nature against him, to lay him open to castration the moment he is roused. Aimée does not literally kill Modin, but the female principle in its particular white variant does.

Why are we so Blest? is a highly complex novel which deals with dislocation at many levels. Apparently the main imbalance is the one between white and black, between the first and the third world. But the text articulates another dislocation whose impact is even stronger and which structures the novel at the basic level: The one between man and woman which has affected the balance between the sexes and put an end to the belief in natural male superiority.

In Ayi Kwei Armah's historical novels which follow *Why are we so Blest?* there are no women who attempt to step out of line. The women in *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons* are patient, heroic, closely linked with nature, in short, the salt of the earth, and none of them are white. Naita, the black American woman, represents 'the way' in *Why are we so Blest?*, and the women in the historical novels are also more clear-sighted than the men. The source of their vision and understanding is their close kinship with nature.¹³ In black women nature is still natural, in white women the social principle has taken over in the same measure as they have moved into the territory of men. The real enemy in the novel is the free, western woman, and the fact that the novel's main focus apparently lies elsewhere does not make the warning against following or accepting her 'way' less effective.

It is not difficult to agree with this warning against the individualistic and self-seeking values of the West, but the eloquence and passion of the warning points to the absence of a counter force to these values in modern African societies, as depicted in the novel. Considering the hidden agenda of *Why are we so Blest?*, criticism of contemporary sexual relations, I think it lies near at hand to suggest that the absent centre of the novel might well be the modern African woman.

Armah grapples with the problem of the role and place of women in African societies, and he does set up possible ideals. But they are distant, either in space (Juana in *Fragments* and Naita in *Why are we so Blest?*), or in time (Araba Jesiwa in *The Healers* and Abena in *Two Thousand Seasons*). It seems to me that Armah needs to come to terms with a new role for women in Africa, a social role which is not backward looking and idealized. If he does, his contribution to the development of modern African literature is going to be even greater in the future.

NOTES

1. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Why are we so Blest?* 1972 (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974), p. 33. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Octave Mannoni, *Psychologie de la Colonisation* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1950).
4. For Fanon's use and criticism of Mannoni, see Jock McCulloch, *Black Soul White Artefact. Fanon's Clinical Psychology and Social Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), Chapter 1 and Appendix 1.
5. The edition used here is: Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: The Orion Press, 1965), p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, p. V.
7. The edition used here is: Calvin Hernton, *Sex and Racism* (London: André Deutsch, 1969).
8. Hernton, p. 24.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
10. Some of the episodes in Armah's novel have an almost uncanny similarity to episodes recounted by Hernton's African informants. The seduction of Modin by Mrs Jefferson in her car is very close to a story told to Hernton by an African student of sociology, also about a car ride with a white married couple during which the woman makes open sexual advances to him. (Hernton, p. 45.)
11. This is a very simplified rendering of some of the ideas in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, especially the chapter 'On National Culture'. Fanon's ideas and theories about the colonized individual are pioneer contributions, not only to the study of the sociology and psychology of colonized people, but also to the study of culture. Fanon reads culture in a way which anticipates later semiological analyses of culture. See, for example, his essay about the significance of 'the veil' during the Algerian struggle for liberation: 'L'Algérie se dévoile' in Frantz Fanon, *Sociologie d'une révolution* 1959 (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1972).
12. Hernton, pp. 49, 51, and 48-49.
13. For remarks on this aspect of female characters in Armah's novels, see Kirsten Holst Petersen, 'First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature' and Sara Chetin, 'Armah's Women', both in *Kunapipi*, Vol. VI, No. 3, 1984.