

## Signs and Social Meaning in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*

Maledo, Erhuvwu Anita

### Abstract

This paper is a study of the use of signs in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*. It is a known fact that Armah's novels are replete with signs. However, existing studies have focused essentially on the literary interpretations of these signs at the detriment of their semiotic implications. In the light of the above, this study undertakes a semiotic analysis of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments* with a view to showing how the semiotic system of the novels can be interpreted against the background of codes that may be different from those intended by the author. The study adopts Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory as analytical framework and argues that language is a process of signs and that the signification system presents a clear view of communication of meaning in texts. Findings indicate that the use of semiotic signs in the novels underscores not only the themes of corruption, materialism and negation of African traditional values in post-independence Ghanaian society but also how human struggles for existence in a society that tends to submerge values and morals result in the isolation of the major characters in the two novels. The study also reveals that both verbal and non-verbal signs contribute a great deal to the explication of meanings inherent in the novels and that Armah, through the use of semiotic signs, encodes significant meanings that cannot be decoded from a mere surface reading of the novels.

**Keywords:** Semiotic system, signs, novels, Ghana, corruption, materialism

### Introduction

Among the ills that have befallen post-independence African countries are corruption, excessive materialism, unbridled quest for foreign goods and total disregard for African traditional and cultural ways of life. Sociologists, political scientists and ethnomethodologists have studied these problems in post-independence Africa. Literary artists have also found them worthy of representation in their literary works. In fact, these post-independence ills are the subjects of the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah, in his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1970). In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (henceforth *The Beautiful Ones*), Armah dovetails the excessive corruption that took over Ghana after the deposition of Kwame Nkrumah's regime via a military coup. The novel is an x-ray of the social, political, economic and moral decay and decadence in Ghana after independence. *Fragments*, on the other

hand, is devoted to excessive materialism and total neglect for Ghanaian traditional and cultural values. This in effect has a devastating effect on the central character Baako.

Armah's novels, in general, have attracted much critical attentions. Griffiths (1992) studies images and metaphor as structuring devices in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*. The study makes a major contribution towards the understanding of the structure of the novel given its complex nature. Ogungbesan (1973) dwells on the significance of symbols and meanings in *The Beautiful Ones*. He asserts that the use of symbols in the novel is so dense that no one has succeeded in laying bare its total meaning. However, he did not see the use of symbols in the novel as semiotic signs. Thus, this study attempts to contribute towards the meaning of symbols in the novel from a semiotic perspective. Awito (2014) is based on the aesthetics of decay in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*. The focus of the study is on the use of literary devices to achieve the aesthetic in the novels. Though Emike (2014) is a stylistic analysis of language use in *The Beautiful Ones*, the paper is more discourse oriented than linguistics as it dwells more on the cohesive features of the novel than on the stylistic features. Shanta (2015) is based on layered language in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*. However, the paper did not present a clear linguistic analysis to show how the language of the text is layered. Ogbeide (2011) examines materialistic visage of neocolonialism in Armah's *Fragments*. The paper argues that neocolonialism in Africa is not only through the leaders acting as stooges to the former colonial powers but also through the masses' unbridled quest for materialism and enslaving things of Europe and America. From the feminist perspective, Busia (1992) undertakes a study of the use of women in Armah's novels in general. The paper presents two pictures of women in Armah's novels: women as parasites and women as liberating prophets. These two categories of women are seen in the man's wife and her mother in *The Beautiful Ones* and Naana in *Fragments* respectively. Adopting Marxist feminist criticism and feminist literary criticism, Ampofo *et al* (2020) focus on a female character, Naana, in *Fragments*. The study dovetails Naana's roles in the narrative and thematic developments of the story and how she is used as a tool to bring about the success of the novel. The paper fails to see the semiotic role of Nanaa in the African cyclic worldview which Armah recreates in the novel. This cyclic worldview has earlier been discussed by Colemer (1992) as he makes a distinction between the material world and the spiritual one in his discussions of the human and the divine in Armah's *Fragments*. The paper asserts that much of the meaning of the novel rest on the appreciation of the cyclic relationship. This, as seen in the novel, is revealed by Naana. However, the place of Naana as a semiotic sign in the novel is not discussed.

The above has shown the extent of some studies on Ayi kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments*. Furthermore, it has also been observed that Armah makes use of symbols and images in his novels as noted by Ogunbesan (1993), Griffiths (1992) and Collins (1992). However, these studies fail to approach the symbols from the semiotic perspective. What can be gleaned from the above is that most of the studies on both novels are from the perspective of literary criticism. Thus, this study engages the use of signs from the point of view of semiotics in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*.

### **Theoretical Background**

Humans make use of different signs in everyday conversation. The ability to create signs that mediate between humans and their environment is one special feature that distinguishes human beings from animals. Kramsch states that a sign is the relation between the word itself and the object it refers to (15). To Finegan (7), signs are "indicators of something else". Signs are studied under semiotics which is a branch of the study of meaning that investigates the kinds of relationships that exists between a sign and the object it represents, between a signifier and the signified. Saeed (3) asserts that this process of signification studied within the scope of semiotics is wider than than language itself. This point is valid since language itself is regarded as a sign system in semiotic studies.

Semiotics can be simply defined as the study of the meaning of signs. Though not widely institutionalized as an academic discipline in most institutions, it is a significant area in the study of meaning. Divergent schools of thought have emerged in an attempt to appropriately pin down the specific meaning of the term. According to Eco (cited in Amoussou 208), "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign". Chandler (2) is of the view that "semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech but of anything which stands for something else". He further states that signs take the form of words, sounds and images in a semiotic sense. Signs are studied by contemporary semioticians as part of semiotic sign system, as a unified whole and not in isolation.

The study of semiotics can be traced to the renowned Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. To Saussure, semiotics is concerned with how signs mean. He has a dyadic view of the sign as he describes it from the angle of the signifier and the signified. He argues that the signifier is not necessarily the object and that the signifier and the signified are unrelated. He tries to deconstruct the sign by stating that there is no material representation for the signifier and the signified. In the opinion of

Peirce, semiotics involves not only of what is ordinarily known as signs, but also of anything that is used to stand for something else (Amoussou 209). He proposes a triadic or three-model view of the sign often known as the semiotic triangle. According to Chandler, Peirce's model consists of the *representamen* which is the form the sign takes (not necessarily material, though often interpreted as such), and *interpretant* - the sense made of the sign and the object, which is something beyond the sign to which it refers (29). He goes further to state that all the three elements are essential or mandatory for something to qualify as a sign. The sign, he says is a unity of what is represented (the object), and how it is interpreted (the interpretant). Though Saussure did not distinguish signs into types, Peirce distinguished types of signs and the three modes he distinguished are presented by Chandler as symbol, icon and index.

The symbolic sign is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional. The relation of a symbol to its object is not based on similarity or contiguity (Johansen 29). "Symbolic signs are established by the fact that they are used to indicate given objects or states of affairs in the outer or inner world" (Johansen 39). To Leeuwen, "in the symbol, the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, wholly conventional..." (49). Symbolic signs can be present even when the signified is absent. They can be changed due to their conventionality. Kramsch (21) asserts that as time passes by, signs easily become not only naturalized, but conventionalized as well. When taken out of their original social and historical context, linguistic signs can be void of the fullness of their meaning and used as symbolic shorthand. In iconic signs the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified. Citing Peirce, Johansen (31) states that iconic signs are signs of possibility, and that they are possible signs of what possesses the same properties because they are related to their objects by similarity. Indexical signs on the other are signifying modes in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some ways to the signified. In fact, "an indexical sign is a sign of actual relationship" (Johansen 35). Though distinguished as above, there is some difficulty in telling the differences between a symbol, an icon and an index. To Peirce (1958), every picture is an icon while to Langer (1951) every picture is a symbol. To Hawkes (1977), the three modes co-exist in the form of a hierarchy in which one of them will dominate the others. This may depend on the context. However, their classification in texts depends on the reader. A sign may be interpreted as an icon by one reader, as a symbol by another reader as an index by a third reader (see Amoussou 209).

Semiotic study of literary texts requires close and effective reading because the reader is expected to see the text from his/her own point of view and derive meaning from it since s/he is not a passive character who must accept whatever s/he is given. In such studies, a text is interpreted against the

background of codes that may be different from those employed by the author. So, to get to the deeper level of meaning, the effort or skill required is a challenging one which requires great intellectual awareness of the cultural background of the literary text. Thus, Eco (cited in Chandler, 8) states that semiotics studies all cultural processes as processes of communication. Symbol, index and icon show the relationship between the signifier and signified and this is what is adopted as tool for our data analysis in this study.

In adopting the above tripartition system of signs by Peirce, the polysemic nature of signs should be noted. This implies that a sign may have different meanings depending on the culture and context. Therefore, the analysis follows Peirce's triadic relation of signs in semiotics namely representamen, Object, and Interpretant. Representamen refers to the sign or signifying element while the object determines the sign. The interpretant is that which makes us to understand the sign's object. Thus, a very close reading of the text is undertaken with a view to identifying the sign system of the texts and the objects they signify in the context of the texts to enhance our understanding of them.

## Discussion

Ayi Kwei Armah's philosophical and complex novels, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1970) are rich in signs. Symbols, indexes and icons are Semiotic signs dominantly used in the novels. In the discussions that follow, the three signs are taken one after the other and discussed in the two texts.

### Symbolic signs

To project the messages in his novels, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, Armah makes extensive use of symbols. The first symbolic attractions are the titles of both texts. The spelling, "Beautiful", in the title of *The Beautiful Ones* is a symbolic corruption of the spelling "Beautiful". This gives the reader an insight into the overriding theme of corruption in the message and content of the novel. "Fragments" as the title of *Fragments* indicates symbolically the individual as imperfect, a fragment of the whole and the total fragmentation of the modern Ghana society. It underscores Baako's loneliness and isolation as a fragment from the society. And Juana describes it as going against the general current in the novel. This theme of isolation leads us to the symbolic use of personal names by Armah in both novels. The central character in *The Beautiful Ones* is simply identified as "the man". This is symbolic. In the opening pages of the novel, he is referred to as "the watcher" and "a sleeper". His mother-in-law says of him as a dead man, a ghost as she tells her children "you must know you

have nobody, you are an orphan, a complete orphan” (123). In *Fragments*, the man now renamed Baako Onipa (meaning lonely man in Akan language) is also symbolic. He finds himself in isolation but unlike the man, he is more conscious of his non-being. As symbols, both are soul-searchers, craving for the things of the mind and spirit

rather than things of the flesh (Izevbaye 37). He suffers an extreme case of isolation and identity crises, not knowing what he actually wants as he states: “...I do not know whether it is envy that makes me hate what I see. I am not even sure that I hate it” (92). While the hero in *The Beautiful Ones* finds friendship in the naked man also called teacher and makes him a confidant, Baako also finds friendship in Juana and also makes her a confidant. This is symbolic in both narratives. Through this, Armah kicks against isolation and loneliness as both heroes who are lonely figures in both novels sometimes find solace in their friends. Furthermore, Brempong (meaning an important person in Akan Language) is Koomson, the minister renamed. Both are symbols of the newly emerged African socialist. While Brempong is a symbol of the newly emerged “been tos” who are seen as conveyor belts for cargo, Koomson is a symbolic representation of the government official during the Nkrumah regime that extorts the nation with greed and avarice and love for anything foreign. He is a black-whiteman; he wears a new white suit and rides a Mercedes. Thus, the seller addresses him thus: “My own lord, my master oh, my white man, come. Come and take my bread”. The naked man (teacher) stands for purity in contrast to the man. Thus, the man wonders “how a man like him could see so clearly through the rot and yet finds the strength to live in it”. The purity of the naked man is further underscored in his statement thus: “The things people want, I do not have to give. And no one wants what I happen to have” (79). In *Fragments*, Naana the blind and impotent seer does not see with her physical eyes but comprehends more than those that see with their physical eyes (Busia, 55). She is used to express Armah’s view of the African belief in the cyclic view of life and the existence of ancestors. In fact, Nanaa is the singular form of Nanaanom, meaning the community of ancestors living underground in Akan language. Thus, she signifies true spirituality as she is the only one who sees and understands with Baako in the family. Her true spirituality is underscored in the expression: “And what is in an old woman but the pregnancy that will make another Ghost” (7).

The social and spiritual fragmentations which are endemic in *Fragments* have semiotic presentations. The “Malenisian Cargo Cult” is a sign of materialism. Through this, Armah presents the Ghanaian returnees from abroad (been tos) as equivalent of spirits who were supposed to bring goods from abroad. Araba’s son born premature represents the death of dreams in the modern African society which finds expression in the central character of the novel. Baako’s

mother's half-built mansion is also a representation of unfulfilled dreams. These two symbolic signs find expression in the unfulfilled expectations of Baako's family and his deterioration into madness. The fan which Araba values so much and which is responsible for the death of the child is a feature of excessive value for western materialism and its destructive effect. The non-keeping to the timing of the naming ceremony and ignoring libation during the ceremony is of semiotic significance. The former signifies the excessive quest for materialism as the child becomes a money-making object while the latter stands for the rejection of African tradition and culture and the embrace of foreign culture. At Brempong's arrival, instead of washing his feet with water, the sister "pours champagne over his shoes". This is also a significant sign of social perversion in the Ghanaian society which Armah re-creates.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, the social decay in the Ghanaian society is represented through the use of semiotic signs. In the first few pages of the novel, the Ghanaian society is presented microscopically through the bus. In the first paragraph we are told of "its confused rattle", "[...] its pieces were held together by rust ever to fall completely apart". In this microscopic presentation, the driver of the bus is a representation of the Ghanaian president, the bus conductor signifies the Koomsons who in connivance with the president extort and take bribe as we see the conductor short-change the man and offer to bribe him with a stick of cigarette. The ordinary passengers are the common people who denote the ordinary Ghanaian citizens who are watchers, sleepers and sleep-walkers while the condition of the bus is the sick condition of Ghana due to corrupt practices. The "Passion Week" in the text is another significant symbolic motif portraying time of hardship. It is a religious token from the passion of Christ. Another significant semiotic sign in the novel is that of Aboriga the frog. This is an old man-child that developed from babyhood to infancy, to youth, and to maturity within the period of seven years. This is an explicit symbol of Ghana's growth and rapid decline due to corruption. The Chichidodo bird and Rama Krishna significantly depict the overt rejection of corruption and promises of better tomorrow but, in practice, corruption persists. The Chichidodo bird hates excrement but feeds on maggots emanating from human shit. Similarly, Krishna rejects anything that will corrupt him physically and spiritually, yet, he dies of internal rotteness. These two signs aptly describe the central character of the novel, the man. The myth of the Plato's cave is also of semiotic significant. This myth tells readers semiotically that the darkness in Ghana is corruption and they see freedom from corruption as "an unwanted light" (79). The continuous polishing of the banister of the railway building is of semiotic representation. This polishing is an exercise in futility because the rot they are trying to get rid of continues to surface. This, Armah describes as the "victorious filth which trails the banister despite the

constant polishing of the banister” (12). As a symbolic sign, this indicates that any effort to rid Ghana of corruption is an exercise in futility. This is seen at the end of the novel as the police who are part of the coup are seen taking bribe at the checkpoint.

Furthermore, the image of the sea is of symbolic significance in both novels. In *Fragments*, the sea represents peace, freedom, and happiness. Baako’s moments of freedom is when he spends time around the sea. We see him smiling when he holds out his hand to Juana by the sea (122). When Baako and Juana make love in the sea, we are told that “Baako was still laughing a laugh...” (124). When Baako asks Juana if she had ever made love in the sea, she responds “no...but I like it now. I feel like going on and on” (125). The only real moment of peace Baako has in the novel is the time spent in the sea. Also, in *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah uses the sea as a symbol of purification and freedom. The man observes a totally clear current that seems to have no source. He associates it with a gleam of light. After helping Koomson to escape through the sea, “the man jumped out and went down into the blackness of the water. It was not cold. The man let himself drop deep down into the water...He began to enjoy the almost exploding inward feeling”. Even the movement in the seas was slow and comfortable, and the “feeling gave him a vague freedom, like the untroubled loneliness he had come to like these days...” (179).

Colours as used also acquire semiotic value in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments*. In *The Beautiful Ones*, the symbolic use of colour sets the gloomy mood of corruption as we can see in the following examples in first few pages: “humid orange glow” (1), “yellow flame sputtered briefly” (1), “darkness of the dawn”(1), “dark sheen”(2), “grey baft lining” (8), “dim light”(7) and “brief brightness” (7). Also, the colour “yellow” is a notable sign in both novels. In *Fragments*, “she threw the stone away and, straightening up, she saw just along the path a single flower on a stalk that stood up slender almost like vine. It was yellow”, “...the woman stopped to pick a yellowish leaf, freshly fallen” (36). “Beside them, a girl with a very high, bright yellow miniskirt stood talking, and whatever she was saying made the soldiers laugh incessantly and hold out their arms to her, inviting her to come and fill their patrol boat” (49). “...he saw an old man, his hair white and his remaining teeth yellow and brown with age and tobacco...” (51) “The oasis had long since disappeared, and where it was still possible to see the desert its brown expanse was showing fewer and fewer splashes of yellow non” (53). In *The Beautiful Ones*, the use of the colour “yellow” is very conspicuous. “After the third try a yellow flame sputtered briefly”, “for years and years the building had been plastered at irregular intervals with paint and distemper, mostly of an official murk-yellow color” (11) “...the fan continued its languid turning and the light began again to weaken into an orange yellow color and then swell into whiteness in long, slow waves of time...” “...the teeth that



once were white would certainly grow to be encrusted with green and *yellow muck...*” Yellow as used in these novels has negative connotations. It is suggestive of pessimism, decay, and moral decadence with a ray of hope.

### **Indexical signs**

An index is more indirect, unlike the icon; there is no obvious resemblance between the signifier and the signified. According to Peirce, an index indicates something. Chandler (citing Peirce 298) submits that a genuine relationship exists between the sign and the object which does not purely or totally depend on the interpreting mind. The object is existent. The index, he says, is “connected to its object as a matter of fact.” Indexical focuses the attention to their objects by blind compulsion (Peirce 1992).

Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments* are replete with indexicals. In the opening pages of *The Beautiful Ones*, the reader is inundated with non-synthetic odours which are indexes of the decay and corruption in the novel and by extension the Ghanaian society which the author mirrors. For example, on page three the reader is inundated with smell as an indexical sign as we can see in *vague but persistent odor, He had to smell it again, the smell was not his mistake, unexpected smell for something so new, ...a very old smell, very strong, and so very rotten that the stench itself, ...and yet not really know their smell, his nostrils lost the smell of the cedi’s marvelous rottenness and smelly shit*. The smell in the above instances is an index of corrupt wealth. The smell emanates from the cedi note which Armah describes as “most unexpected smell for something so new to have ..., a very old smell, very strong and so very rotten that the stench itself of it came with a curious satisfying pleasure”. Here Ghana is seen as a new nation that just emerged from independence and the high level of corruption and social decay indexically represented by the cedi note is unprecedented and unacceptable. However, this smell has a “satisfying pleasure”. This is because the corrupt Ghanaian government officials derive pleasure from the proceeds of corruption here represented by the cedi. To describe the cedi as “marvelous rottenness” indicates Armah’s condemnation of corruption and ill-gotten wealth. On page five, the man’s spittle is described as *Oozing freely*. This is an indication that no one is free of corruption in Ghana, not even the man who has refused to join the likes of Koomson. The central rubbish heap whose *smells hit the senses like a strong wall* (40) and the *Hot smell of caked shit* (40) are indications of the degree of corruption and rottenness of the entire Ghana. Armah uses smell coming from Koomson as an indexical sign to show his repulsion and outrightly condemn the political class in this novel. This is seen in such expressions as *the rich stench of rotten menstrual blood* (163), *the Party man’s fart filling the room* (163), *an inner fart of personal...*(163), *a stench came up behind him* (135), *powerful smell...particles of shit, doing a wild mixed dance with drops of stale urine*, (166) and *the smell of shit which have*

*not really left him* (177) among others. Apart from condemning the corrupt political class in particular, the above are also signs of the decay and the corrupt state of Ghana immediately after independence. Thus Armah is shocked at this rate of corruption as he says that it is an *unexpected smell for something so new* (3).

Light as an index is also used to reflect the gloomy and dark state of Ghana in this novel. This can be seen in such examples as *dimness of the morning* on page fourteen. This indicates the sudden relapse of Ghana shortly after independence. Furthermore, in the expressions *light came dully* (14), *easy darkness* (14), *darkness of the place* (24), *waning light* (35), *weak lamps* (35), *shine disappears* (35), *darkness and gleaming light* (36) and *a strange pattern of pale light* (37) are indexical cues to the bleakness and lack of appropriate vision by the present crop of corrupt politicians who took over power from Nkrumah. In *the night was a dark tunnel, the weak dusk light* (150), *the light was not strong*, and *the receding town with its weak lights* (175), Armah sees dim hope for the future of Ghana. Other indexes of societal decay and corruption that dominate the message and the atmosphere of the novel include *stale sweat from fat crotches, rusty bits of iron mixed up with filings in the sand; rusty painted fan. Sweat* from the above stands for weakness while *rusty* as used stands for almost dead. Thus, the writer sees the Ghanaian economy as weak, rusty and inactive except for the corrupt politicians. This is also indicated in the ceiling fan which *traveled with such tired slowness that it made more noise than air*; in the *Old water that has stopped flowing and confused itself with decaying oil from broken down boilers* and in *the bus, its confused rattle had given place to an endless spastic shudder* (1).

The description of Amankwa, the timber contractor, is achieved through indexical signs. First, we are made to see his indexical features before he is named thus *a belly swathed in 'kente' cloth* (27), *the feet beneath the belly dragged* (27), *the mass above in little arcs...of heavy cloth* (27), *Sandals made of thick leathers...too many tufts and useless knobs* (27), *mouth was a wolf shape* (27), *Nephews, they call these teeth* (27), *the lip flesh, though abundant, proved insufficient and hung around the generation of teeth, vainly straining to meet over them* (27). The above indexical features show that Amankwa is wealthy, over bloated and ugly. His wealth ensues from the proceeds of corruption. The *kente* cloth, his belly and the sandals are cues of wealth. In a similar manner, the emptiness of Koomson is presented through indicative clues. Instances of these are seen in *The voice of the suited man* (26), *My lord... my big lord* (37), *My own lord, my master, oh, my white man* (37), *the suited man emerges and strides slowly* (37), *the suit stops in front of the seller* (27), *The suited man pays* (37), *The suited man looks around* (37), *The suited man spins* (38), *the suit cuts in* (38). The above are semiotic indicators ironically showing the emptiness and the nothingness of Koomson. This stems from the fact that his personality is neither identified by his name nor his position but by his clothes. Thus, as a sign, the suit is more significant than the wearer. Furthermore, there are clues of

Koomson's corrupt-gotten wealth in the novel as we can see in expressions such as *the back seat of the limousine a man dressed in a black suit comes out* (36), *Big man* (36), *inside the big car...complaining of fridge too full to contain anything more and of too much bread already bought* (37), *Have you seen a big man without girls? Even the old ones* (37), *she holds out a hand and something glitters in the night light ... moist like lubricated flesh* (38), *he caught the scent of perfume still on his hands. I shook hands with his wife and I can smell her still* (42). All the above descriptions are indicative of excessive opulence and corrupt ill-gotten wealth from Koomsoon and his likes in Ghana.

Furthermore, Armah also presents indicators of stolen wealth in his description of the furnishings in Koomson's house. Some examples include *two shining things: a silver box and a small toy-like pistol* (146), *marble tops of the little side tables* (146), *a row of glass covered shelves with multitude of polished dishes and glasses* (146), *intricate objects that must have come from foreign lands* (146), *the radio set...amazingly large* (146) and *five deep, soft chairs, all with red cushions and a carpet on the noiseless floor* (146). Also, the description of drinks in Koomson's house is symptomatic of corruption and excessive materialism. The list consists of only foreign drinks such as *White Horse, Black and White, Seagram's, and Gilbey's Dry Gin* (147). Such choice of drinks in the house of a government official is symptomatic of corrupt African politicians with their high sense of avarice and excessive quest for foreign goods. This is what Armah decries. Other indexes of the above include *rice in the packet with Afro-American Uncle Ben smiling on it, the New Zealand Butter, the white Horse Whiskey, and the Vat 69* (115). They are also significant cues of the presence of the colonial masters and their exploitative agencies.

Also, "sweat" as used in *Everybody seems to sweat a lot* (20) is symptomatic. It is an indicator of the inner struggle that was always going on within the people. Thus, it is a clue to mental and spiritual exertion. Others include *Audible rumble from somewhere inside him* (150), *the growl of his stomach* (101), *the mess of some traveller's vomit* (103), *a terrible pulling pain in his stomach* (105), and *long intestinal wrangles leading to protracted anal blast* (135). The above are evidences of eating the forbidden food – corruption.

As mentioned earlier, an apt index that relates to the title, *Fragments* is Juana's expression: *You're going against a general current...it takes a lot of strength*. This gave rise to the tragic end of Baako. He goes against the general current in the modern day Ghana society, thus a fragment of it. His strength could not carry it and he ran mad. The first indexical sign in the opening of the novel is the dreams. This is seen as *some dreams abroad* (2), *dreams before returns, as before goings* (2), *a human mother should not have such dreams against the coming of her own flesh and her loved one's soul* (2), *I too have had my dreams of his return* (3). Dreams as used

above has two indexical meanings: the first is the dream of *heavy earth* that will load Baako's spirit down and make him never fly again (2). This is the dream *filled with things to give rest to tired flesh, heavy things, things of heavy earth* (3). The second is the dream of richness and greatness for Baako if in *this slippery place* (corrupt Ghana society) he finds firm standing for his tired soul (3). The former is Efua and Araba's dreams while the latter is Naana's dream. It is the former that controls the mood of the novel and it led to the tragic end of Baako. Titles such as *Doctor, Senior Nurses, Senior Assistant Nurses, Junior Nurses and Little Nurses in Training* (13) which Juana abhors are signs of the "heavy earth", "heavy things" and "external things" which the modern Ghana society prefers at the expense of "some kind of sense of inner worth" (13).

Juana also finds "a certain love for being out on the *road*" (14). To Juana, road is an index of happiness and hope as she feels there is "some meaning waiting for her at the end of a long and aimless drive" (14). Armah also uses *there* and *here* as indexes of abroad and home respectively in "what is *there* that ... people go *there* and do not want to return" and "Things *here* he is afraid to come back to" (35). Indexical signs of "the new Africans" are in the description of the proper been-to, Mr. Brempong, as is seen in *the generous mass of a wig, a shiny black in the grey white light, blackness of its coat sleeve by a lucent white cuff* (41), *The black man in the wool suit, the man in the dark wool suit* (42), *the coat and waistcoat, the man in the suit held out the packet, Cigarettes, and Henry Robert Hudson Brempong* (43). Brempong's complimentary card is an index of wealth: *The leather was green, embroidered with a gold leaf pattern* (58). The limousine car with registration number GV 109 which takes Brempong from the airport is indexical too. It signifies worship of wealth and the misplacement of priorities as it depicts Ghanavision to be visionless – it refused to see the talents in Baako and the likes of him.

Indexes of Baako's madness are first observed in the aeroplane from Paris to Accra in the following indexical description:

orange dusk sunlight flashed directly into Baako's eyes, then vanished ... Baako let his head lean against the window, but immediately jerked away from the cold contact ... rested his head upon it, turned out the overhead light and deliberately closed his eyes; but still he felt uncomfortable ... his head and body falling back...deepening darkness inside his head...he lost awareness of the movement of the machine he was in" (53).

The description above tells readers that Baako is becoming mentally disturbed. Thus, readers are not too surprised when he finally relapsed into madness as the clue into his madness has been earlier presented. Such indexes are further seen

in the unnecessary repetition of words in Baako's ears as we have in the expressions such as:

In Baako's ears the words did not come to an end: they flowed on and picked up leftover sounds from yesterday. Nothing really, something, something, nothing something, something, something" (169),

And

his head like frames carrying an unchanging accusation: right, right, they're right, right, right . . . . They were right, right, right about this willingness . . . . That was perverse and they were *right* again, *right, right* . . . . Right right right (175).

"Avenida Hotel" (63), Baako's first hotel room in Ghana, is indexical of the failed country he has returned to. As nothing works in the hotel room, nothing also works in the entire Ghana. Thus he "went straight along an *unlit corridor*...stopped before an *unmarked door*", "looking at the *bare ceiling*", "*muffled sound* of a motor passing along the road", "air inside *smelled humid and stale*", "An *air-conditional* was fixed...but it was *not working*", "He *opened the window*... he did *not feel any immediate inrush of air*", "Instead the *howling noise made by the dog rose*", "inside the bathroom the *light socket had no bulb*" (64). The above is symptomatic of the entire Ghana. The unlit corridor depicts Ghana's darkness; the unmarked door, bare ceiling, muffled sound and the humid and stale smell indicate hopelessness and staleness of Ghana, the so-called home which he has returned to. To Araba, her genital organ is a tool or a weapon of control over her husband Kwesi. This is seen in the expressions "I have *my secret weapon*", "Araba pointed in the direction of *her genitals*", "Let *him starve a bit*", "He's told me the only *sweet food he knows grows between my thighs*" (89). With this, she is able to threaten Kwesi to have the naming ceremony done before the appropriate day. There are also indexes of frivolous celebrations and waste of time and resources in the Ghanavision. This is seen in *Founders Day, Liberation Day, the Freedom Festival of Youth, Independence Day* (150) and the taking of pictures of elders who freed the nation such as *Gariba, Aryeetey, Samoah, Crabbe, Easilfie, Baiden, Ashong, Van der Puije Mensa, Kofie* (150). Ghanavision will be busy with all these and so cannot run Baako's script.

Furthermore, *Fragments* is replete with signposts and pointers as indexicals. Some of these are hotels which are indicative of wasteful social life in Ghana. They include DUNIA, the REGAL, the ORBIT (18), KALIFONIA MOONBEAM CAFÉ (20) the *National Times* (23), OBRA YE KO, the Star, Ambassador Hotel, Akosombo (25). Then, we also have indicators to

government offices such as Psychiatric Laboratory (25), Korle Bu Hospital, Kaneshie to Korle Bu Link Road (36), West Ring Road intersection (37). Such centres are not maintained and they are inefficient in operation. NTREE - IN, AIR AFRIQUE (38), POINT DE RECONTRE RENDEZVOUS POINT (39), LES TROIS SOLEILS (40), DEPARTURES signs, gates 38-45, *Concorde* airliner (41) and NO SMOKING. FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS (42) are all indicators of foreign travels. They also show the link between Ghana and the outside world, especially Europe and America. Ministry expatriates, General Police Sergeant (55), VIP CAR PARK NO ENTRY (59) are indicative of societal segregation in Ghana while Big Bontoss (90) and Kaneshie, Accra. Date, Dear Personal Officer, (154) are signs of Baako's resignation letter from Ghanavision.

### Iconic signs

An icon is where there is similarity between a sign and what it represents, e.g., between a photograph and the real person in it (Saeed, 5). An iconic sign is similar to and possesses some of the qualities of its signified. It is a sign that looks like its object to a large extent. Usually, icons are not arbitrary as they are globally recognized. Cook, cited in Chandler (170), states that "for a sign to be truly iconic, it would have to be transparent to someone who had never seen it before and it seems unlikely that this is as much the case as is sometimes supposed we see the resemblance when we already know the meaning". Thus, the signifier is not so distant from the signified. Examples of icons include sound track in films, photographs, feeling, realistic sounds in programme music, imitative gestures, images etc. Depending on the situation, the meaning of icons may change.

Ayi kwei Armah also makes use of iconic signs in the novels. In *The Beautiful Ones*, a significant instance of the use of iconic sign is in the statement that shows the picture of the Railway Harbour Administrative block thus: *the picture made by the walls of the Block was much less pleasant* (11). Prior to this, Armah tells us of the beauty of the railway administrative building. But the picture we see in the expression above is no longer of that beautiful building. Therefore, the picture is an index of the decayed new Ghana. The picture of the log book presented denotes negativity and corruption. We are told that *the night clerk had not written the date, but everything else was carefully written down in a neat hand* (17). This shows that the night clerk is a cheat. Other components of the log book stand for the comatose state of the railway harbour and by extension, the entire Ghana. For instance, the telephone lines are broken down in three stations, no trains tomorrow, goods train cancelled, no power, no guard and there are accident cases (see pages 17-18). These show that the picture of the log book is a reflection of the dead state of the railway station which is the economic hub of

Ghana. The *monthly cycle of debt and borrowing, borrowing and debt* (22) shows how the ordinary Ghanaians live from debt and borrowing from the beginning of a new month to the end. The whistling of the steam engine which is described as *wailing whistle* (23) is symptomatic of carelessness and lack of maintainance. The picture of the open wagon with *cracked board* and *with rusty plates and rivets* (25) indicate lack of maintenance occasioned by corruption. The expression, *I have seen your picture somewhere* (37) is indicative of the life stlye of African politicians who flood everywhere with their pictures and posters on bill boards during elections as if they were commodities to be bought. The expression, *On-ward Chris-tian Sooodier!* (43), is used by the man's wife on the account of his refusal to accept bribe. As used, it is a sign of mockery. The Congo music in *The Beautiful Ones* as we have in *sweet sadness of Congo music* (50) and *sounds from the Congo* (103) is also symptomatic. It reminds the man and the naked man of the sweet old past and the reality of the present corrupt situation in Ghana. Furthermore, the *ordinary highlife* (51) song from the naked man's radio has semiotic relevance too. It *zis* a satiric implication of showing the social divide between those who are powerful (the Koomsons) and the ordinary Ghanaian represented in this context by the man and the naked man. Armah also makes use of images of *drawing of sex in an impossible Indian position* (106) with the following graffitties: VAGINA SWEET ...MONEY SWEET PASS ALL, WHO BORN FOOL SOCIALISM CHOP MAKE I CHOP, CONTREY BROKE, YOU BROKE NOT SO? PRAY FOR DETENTION JAILMAN CHOP FREE (106). All the above are signs of social decay and frustration suffered by the ordinary citizen who see such acts as a source of momentary pleasure. The news that emanates from the radio stations in Ghana has lost its relevance and what comes out is just empty noise. This is seen as the listens to news on his radio and all he hears is *Osagyefo the President bla bla. Osagyefo the President bla bla bla bla* (127) This is an indictment on the president as it describes his statements as meaningless. Also, the image of Koomson *imitating the man on the billboards* (132) as he drinks his glass of star is an outright condemnation of everything African by the corrupt politicians in preference of foreign things.

The dominant iconic representation in *Fragments* is Baako's film scripts as presented in Chapter 8: Nsu. The first is *The Root* while the second is *The Brand*. Both are iconic representation of African slavery and the quest for survival in the present post-independence African state respectively. The photo of the dead child as presented in the newspaper is an iconic representation as we see in: low to recognize *the photo of the child ... , then the sight of the fan in the background*' (189). The images of the child and the fan in the above signify the subjugation of indigenous culture by foreign ways. The images of the ship in *the tall reeds parted and revealed not only the sea but a ship on it* and that of the flower in *just along the path a single flower on a stalk that stood up slender almost like a vine* are

iconic representation of Juana's loneliness (27). "Jesus! Oh Jesus" (23) denotes salvation. The name *Rambler* is a musical icon in Ghana as used in *the new Rambler's song* (32). Another identifiable icon is the *T-shirts with cartoons* (23). Though the images and words on the cartoon were not given, one can infer from the context that they are inciting as the editorial affirms that the images and the words were meant to trouble the peaceful mind of hardworking citizens to subvert the nation. Also, *the little books of street maps and transport line diagrams* (48) which Baako has with him on arrival in Paris is iconic. It is a tour guide which represents the part of the city he was in. Another significant iconic representation in *Fragments* is the picture of the little boy and little girl advertising the nursery school (69). Armah says there was *an accompanying picture...in clear colors, of a little boy and a girl, both African but very light-skinned* (69). This is a clear indication of the rejection of Africa and Africans and an embrace of western ways, if not, why should African children advertising a school in Ghana be "very light-skinned"? Another instance of this aping of European ways is seen in the picture on the calendar advertising the AMBI-EXTRA skin lightening cream. Armah tells us that the center of the calendar foregrounds a couple of Africans with successfully bleached skins looking a forced yellow brown while other darker African stood around them in admiration (87). The semiotic implication of this picture is an absolute rejection of black Africa and total acceptance of westernization. This, the novelist disapproves of.

## Conclusion

This study has shown the extent to which the semiotic system of a novel helps to explicate meanings against the background of codes that are different from those employed by the author in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*. The extra-textual explications of the semiotic implications of the symbolic, indexical and iconic elements in the novels have extended the semantic scope and interpretations of the use of signs in Armah's novels. This paper has shown that meanings can be made by relating both verbal and non-verbal sign systems inherent in a text to the social, political and cultural contexts of the texts. Essentially, the meaning ascribed to the signs in both novels are not fixed but are negotiated between the texts and the context of the texts. Thus, relating the semiotic systems of the two Armahs novels to the social, political, and cultural contexts of post-independence Ghana society has revealed not only corruption, social and political decay and cultural aberration, but also the conditions of individuals versus the society in post-independence Ghana in particular and Africa in general.

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