ENGLISH LITERATURE

ALIENATION IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN AND FRAGMENTS

Fredericka A. Dadson
B.A. (Legon), M.A. (Alberta)
Department of Languages,
University of Science & Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

ABSTRACT

For some time now, Africa has experienced a process of change from the traditional African social, political and economic patterns and values towards an increasing assimilation of foreign culture and its values. Nevertheless, the African traditional values have remained resilient throughout this process of change and have exerted considerable influence on the more aesthetically and culturally sensitive members of the society. These people have been, and still are, determined, in the face of overwhelming international obstacles, to express, through various media, some of the major adverse effects which have emerged as a result of this process of change in relation to the society and its members. This paper attempts to examine Ayi Kwei Armah's concern about a significantly negative derivative of this process of change in post-independence Ghanaian society - the alienation of individuals and groups from family and community with its attendant sense of discontinuity or of disconnection - which he perceives as an experience with tragic possibilities for both the individual and the society.

Keywords: alienation, family, community, betrayal, fragmentation, traditional values.

INTRODUCTION

The pessimism and the deep sense of betrayal and loss which pervade a large number of African writings are usually rooted directly in the devastation of traditional political, cultural and economic systems made by the "whiteman's civilization." In Armah's novels, the impact of colonial rule on Ghana and on the Ghanaian mind is an integral part of the historical perspective. It is also essential in his aesthetic dissection and examination of a corrupt society which rejects its own members who do not conform to the new order of moral decay. Nevertheless, his main focus is not on western civilisation's destruction of traditional society, but on the neo-colonial motivations which exist in the colonised minds of the Ghanaian people, and which encourage self-destruction with tragic consequences. He rejects patriotic complacency in his mission of communicating 'truths' in favour of an uncompromising exposure of self-betrayal in the corrupt Ghanaian society of his novels.

Armah's first two novels, The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Fragments, are set in Ghana immediately before the 1966 coup d'etat. Obviously, the desolation of those days had left a marked impression on his sensibility. The characters in both novels, with the exception of their alienated protagonists, enact the characteristic order of the day - a maddening rush for material possessions. As the Prologue of his other novel, Two Thousand Seasons, describes them, "(they) are a people rushing deathward, grown contemptuous in (their) ignorance of (their) source, prejudiced against (their) own survival." In The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, the "man's" family, for example, are so desperate to compete in this race for material wealth that they are oblivious to the moral consideration which inhibits him from accepting bribes from the timber contractor, and from collaborating in Koomson's boat-buying scheme. Efua's desire for the legacy of "The gleam" of the colonisers, in Fragments, prevents her from appreciating her son's artistic dedication to the larger community outside the family unit. It is this lust for wealth, specifically seen as a kind of dehumanizing dependence on the capitalist west, which undermines the solidarity of the people and their aspirations for wholesome independence and national dignity, and their faith in their all-embracing traditional values, and leads to the alienation of the individual within the family and the larger community as well as a deep sense of betrayal and loss. This alienation is presented in these novels as the kind which subverts both the individual and the larger community. These novels may in a sense, therefore, be seen as sociological, psychological, philosophical and artistic documents that reflect the concerns of post-independence Ghana, in particular, and Africa in general.

CULTURAL UGLINESS

Although Armah, in his first two novels, is not overly concerned with a historical analysis of Ghana's material dependence on Europe, one cannot turn a blind eye to the implications of his subtle hints about Ghana's colonial ties with Europe even after her independence. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the phenomenal success of cocoa as an export crop produced by small farmers encouraged the rapid development of a money economy throughout the Gold Coast. More people from the northern regions of the country moved southwards, attracted by the wages to be gained as labourers on cocoa farms in the Brong-Ahafo and Ashanti regions, or in the many other economic activities derived to a great extent from the success of the cocoa trade.

Consequently, throughout the country, particularly in the southern half, the power of money began to erode the traditional patterns of society and the cultural ties which held men together. The movement southwards to the relatively urbanised areas resulted in a disorientation of traditional moral values. The desire to improve oneself lead to a mad scramble for economic power on all levels of society, leaving behind the sense of mutual responsibility and the oneness of vision which are essential to any struggle for group survival, even material survival. The opening section of The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born presents us with a confused mass of individuals labouring under the symptoms of a national disease - bribery and corruption. In their scramble up the social ladder, it is fashionable to dismiss everything local in favour of foreign values. This is the implication of Armah's elaborate tongue-in-cheek description of the man in the Control Office's ridiculous attempts to talk like an Englishman. Estella, Koomson's wife, voices her dislike of locally manufactured alcoholic drink in no uncertain terms, for the simple reason that it is not made in Europe. The same preference afflicts all aspects of the nation's lifestyle. Even more ludicrous is the Senior Civil Servants modification of their names to make them sound more European. In the residential areas,

> *(there) were very black names of black men, but the plates by the road-side had enough names of black men with white souls and names trying mightily to be white. In the forest of white men's names, there were signs that said almost aloud: "here lives a black imitator."*
>
> *MILLS-HAYFORD....PLANGE-BANNERMAN....*
>
> *ATTOH-WHITE....KUNTU-BLANKSON.*
>
> *Others that must have been keeping the white neighbours laughing even harder in their homes....GRANTSON....more and more incredible they were getting. There was someone calling himself FENTENGSON in this wide world, and also a man called BINFUL.*

This brief survey which signifies the cultural degradation which has gripped the nouveaux riches also hints at the spiritual and the psychological depth of this degradation. Furthermore, the allure of all things foreign is metaphorically suggested throughout the novel by references to "the gleam", a phenomenon which recurs with symbolic consistency to denote the kind of luxury which is not only beyond the reach of most Ghanaians but is also indicative of the paucity of the people's knowledge of their real peculiar situation in relation to their new aspirations. The instances cited above and the weighty significance of the symbolic "gleam" reveal the degree of the people's alienation from patterns of society with which they are more familiar, and which are more suitably adapted to life in Ghana. Of course, one cannot ignore the inevitability of the spread and the inter-connectedness of world cultures, but Armah's criticism concerns tragic alienation from one's own culture, and the blind imitation of a foreign one which breaks cultural continuity and leads to chaos in the life of the individual and in the society as a whole.

The "man", a name which is suggestive of social obscurity and facelessness, is an appropriate designation for a man singled out for his stubborn refusal to compromise on basic principles, an integrity of intention which exposes him to the ridicule of his clients and the contempt of his family. Of all the characters in the novel, he is virtually alone in his decision to put into practice the official party ideals of hardwork and honesty. His job, which appears to be a sensitive part of the national economy at the time, confronts him with the opportunities to improve his lot by accepting bribes. His almost reluctant rejection of a bribe offer from a timber contractor underlines the enormity of this temptation in the face of the starvation of his loved ones. The man is very much aware of his responsibility to his wife and children as head of the family, but he is also aware of the maintenance of the discipline necessary for the proper operation of a larger society. In the society in which he lives, his sense of responsibility can only be maintained by flouting this disciplinary order, and by indulging in and condoning the process of political, cultural and economic betrayal. Reluctantly, the man takes the risk of maintaining his spiritual responsibility at the cost of the material needs of his family. In thus opting for the proper moral order, the man, paradoxically, becomes the outcast.

The man's withdrawal from the corrupt order of the day is made more difficult by constant exposure to other people who choose to strive towards the attainment of

"the gleam." Koomson, the man's old school friend and the epitome of this moral and spiritual sterility, has attained "the gleam", a superficial cover for his decadence. In the eyes of the larger society he is a living reproach for what the man's wife interprets as her husband's lack of initiative. Koomson's morally impotent mind is perennially occupied with money-making schemes, and is a microcosmic focus for Armah's criticism of the materialistic craving of the whole nation. Thus he, rather than the man, epitomizes the moral outlook of the nation, for his propensities are shared by characters from all levels of society. There is the cheating bus conductor, the allocations clerk who eventually accepts the contractor's bribe which the man had, earlier, rejected, and the policeman who, after the coup d'etat, hurries a lorry through his checkpoint for a consideration. The man glaringly does not fit into their world of compromised cultural and moral standards.

However, he shares his existence on the periphery of society with another outcast, his friend Teacher, who shares a common viewpoint with the man but reacts against society's moral laxity in an austere form of alienation which is unrealistic. He, unlike the man, has stripped himself of all parental, familial and communal obligation and responsibilities through fear of contamination. He is unmarried and therefore free from the demands of the "loved ones". The man admires him. But the Teacher also reveals in his conversation with the man, that he, despite his apparent freedom from responsibilities, is as bewildered as the man; and the Teacher is of very little comfort to the man.

Ultimately, the man realizes that he faces his dilemma alone. He can expect no consolation from Kofi Billy and Maanan, since their alienation takes the confusing form of oscillation between false hopes, drugs and despair for reconciliation. They are finally engulfed and crushed by the acuteness of their vision of society's decay. Kofi Billy hides himself and commits suicide.Maanan's hopes in the dawn of a new day to be conjured up by the young politicians are destroyed and in her madness she is acutely aware of an alien world:

"(they) have mixed everything. And how can I find it when they have mixed it all with so many other things."

Perhaps, the man's most redeeming quality is his ability, despite temptations, to endure the burden of squalor and decadence in society and maintain his elemental sense of integrity. Although his acute sense of alienation from the rest of society renders him impotent in his attempts to find solutions to his problems, he strives to maintain his sense of responsibility to society's smaller unit - the family. And perhaps the most positive note at the end of the novel is the earned admiration in Oyo's eyes for her husband on the day of the coup. However, the coup brings no new hopes. The man knows "(there will) be nothing different in that," and that there will "only be a continuation of the Ghanaian way of life." But his final thoughts are about his wife and children, and the thoughts of the return to the same hopeless existence are softened by the very existence of his family. He walks slowly, almost hesitantly, but his steps are directed towards home. Does this aesthetically symbolic expression of the return home signify Armah's hope for a reconciliation and a reunion under more morally and politically attractive circumstances? The man has been so persistently cut off not only from the nation and the community but even from friends and family that in theses hopeful circumstances reconciliation seems remote. It is worth noting, however, that his circumstances at the end of the novel save him from alienation from self in the form of madness.

ALIENATION, FRAGMENTATION AND BETRAYAL

In The Beautyful One Are Not Yet Born, Armah focuses on the alienation of individuals in a larger social unit, namely the nation, through political and social betrayal and its repercussion on the smaller family unit which must be seen as the foundation for the stronghold of national unity. In Fragments, the focus is more microcosmic. It draws attention to the Ghanaian family unit and relationships therein, and the family's betrayal of one of its members within a similar social context to that of The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born. In traditional society, the group, based essentially on community of kin - the family, the clan, the tribal state or the nation - was, and still is, more significant than the individual. Land, property and wealth were held by the group and were used for the benefit of tthe group as a whole, rather than by and for the benefit of individuals. In Fragments, this aspect of traditional society is very much evident in Brempong's response to his family's demands and in the expectations of Baako's family from their 'been-to' son. However, these responses and expectations are enacted not within traditional social patterns but in a "westernized" Ghanaian society, and therein lies the problem. The political and social setting of Fragments is characterised by situations in which the individual and his possessions are priority, relegating group concerns to the background. The separation from traditional practices has clearly resulted in the tendency to look to the examples provided by Europe and its education for new schemes of organization such as political parties and trade unions. In such an environment, the privileged class, mainly those who have stepped comfortably into the shoes of their colonial master, is "only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it ..... and imperceptibly it becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature." It would be fallacious to suppose,

however, that the Ghana of Armah's novels is a country in which individualistic concepts of society have totally eclipsed the old order of communal groups. The old and the new order exist side by side in Armah's novels because that is how it is in contemporary Ghanaian society and because they are both essential to his new purpose.

In Fragments, the importance of the family unit as a central factor of social organisation is very much emphasised by Naana, Baako's maternal grandmother. Naana's vision of life, which forms the framework of the novel, revolves around the established patterns of society. Her vision of continuity evolves from the traditional rites of passage - birth, puberty, marriage and death - and the ceremonies which accompany these rites to ensure the continuity and solidarity of the community

> *Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns around. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return.*

This elemental wisdom asserts Naana's faith in the energy-conserving nature of traditional life. She still believes in this vision of life which seems to be ignored by everyone else within her family - her family is her whole world. Blind and ignored, she is unable to communicate her concept of wholesome life to the deluded members of the family. Perhaps as she wishfully surmises, Baako's return may provide a medium for the communication of these truths if his mind and his outlook have not already experienced the "white death" that awaits the young African intellectual in Europe and in America.

Baako's departure for America had almost been marred by the greed of his uncle Foli who had performed the ritual for his safe journey and sojourn abroad. Alarmed at its ominous repercussions on the safety of her grandson, Naana reverses the almost sacrilegious act with her own generous libation. This seemingly innocuous act, juxtaposed to Naana's vision of life, heightens the family's betrayal of its own members and anticipates Naana and Baako's sense of alienation.

But before this, America clashes with Africa in Baako's mind and leaves him at the point of insanity with a mass of confusing details about who he is and how he is going to fit into society on his return. Back in Ghana, the connotations of his name are emphasised in the various situations within which he finds himself. His strong desire to spend the first few hours *alone* away from family and friends is sharply juxtaposed to the tumultuous welcome that Brempong receives from his family and friends. The latter have succumbed to "the gleam" and are completely oblivious of their sterile existence. Baako's desire to be alone - which has been metaphorically anticipated by his name - is indicative of the disconnection that has already been effected by his sojourn abroad. He already feels estranged partly because he is living within a mass of cultural contradictions and also because he appreciates better than anybody else Naana's vision of life. Thus the almost sacred bond exists between them, and gives rise to Naana's constant allusion to the more positive connotation of his grandson's name - Baako Onipa - as a man set apart, almost a saviour of his people. Gradually, he realises that he has no life of his own, that his isolation must necessarily exist only in the mind because he cannot physically tear himself away from the familial bonds - strengthened by time-tested traditions - that bind him to the small social unit. His decision to write television scripts rather than work alone on novels underlines the finality of the choice which had almost cost him his sanity, and marks, paradoxically, the beginning of his final disillusion and alienation:

> *Film gets to everyone....In many ways, I've thought the chance of doing film scripts for an illiterate audience would be superior to writing, just as an artistic opportunity. It would be a matter of images, not words. Nothing necessarily foreign in images, not like English words.*

This is a choice which suggests an effective medium of communication between the "artist" and his audience who are culturally and morally inert. But do the custodians of that medium appreciate the value of this asset in the upliftment of society from its inertia? And Baako himself, how successful has he been in fulfilling Naana's vision of providing a sense of continuity for his fragmented family, and what are his chances of extending this mission into the larger society?

That his choice is doomed to fail is first intimated by Ocran, his old art teacher in whom he discovers a friendship based on a oneness of vision:

> *I understand (he says)....I understand and what you say is true. But there is something I would like to tell you. I know you'll think I'm crazy or worse....If you want to do any work here, you have to decide quite soon that you'll work alone.*

Ocran is right. After frustrating verbal battles at Ghanavision - a seemingly impressive name which nevertheless underlines the blindness of the vision of the society it serves - he becomes fully aware that no one is interested in his screen plays, his so-called "peculiar concerns". The new tapes, some of which he requires for his work, are needed for filming Founder's Day, Liberation Day, Freedom Festival of Youth, and

Independence Day; furthermore, even more importantly - as his boss impresses upon him, to cut short his "pointless" argument - "....we'll be taking pictures of your elders who freed this nation." With this ironic twist, Armah exposes the depth of the misguided mentality which has desecrated the dignity and the sanctity of these "days". Baako resigns to ponder this failure in isolation and silence. In his seclusion, he attempts to rationalise the source of Ghana's affliction, and he sees a glimpse of it in the lust for material gain.

To his family, however, this seclusion is construed as a sign of lunacy - this failure to fulfil his mission as a "been-to" and thus identify himself with his people's aspirations - and he is committed to a lunatic asylum. Like the "man" and Teacher and Maanan in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Baako is rendered impotent in his struggle to balance his loyalty between the requirements of his family and the larger community, to effect a sense of continuity with his family which would have bridged the cultural and spiritual gap that had been created by his sensitivity to the realities of his society.

Even Baako's aesthetic capabilities are unable to provide this link. His commitment to creativity is doomed from the start since Armah presents us with the picture of a sterile society which has been nurtured to imitate and which, therefore, abhors initiative and creativity. The workshop session at Accra's Drama Studio is a vivid illustration of this sterility. The workshop is diverted from its real task, encouraging talented young men and women, to something else, fund-raising for the American Ford Foundation. These social and cultural weaknesses reach their climax in the death of Araba's child which is symbolically representative of this alienation. As Naana explains,

(the) child is only a traveller between the world of spirits and this one of heavy flesh. His birth can be a good beginning, and he may find his body and this world around it a home where he wants to stay. But for this he must be protected. Or he will run screaming back, fleeing the horrors prepared for him up here.

But the protection is inadequate. Wrapped in heavy kente cloth and lying in the heat of the sun and in the draught of the new electric fan, the baby is slowly smothered while its relations are busy coercing their guests at the outdooring ceremony into contributing more "generously" to the collection. This tragedy reveals the extent of the confusion that the cultural alienation has left in its wake, and its significance, once again, is not lost on Naana:

They have lost all belief in the wisdom of those gone before ,but what new power had made them forget that a child too soon exposed is bound to die?.....the baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that began the same long destruction of our people when the elders first - may their souls never find forgiveness on this head - split their own seed and raised half against half, part selling part to hard-eyed buyers from beyond the horizon, breaking, buying, selling, gaining, spending.

Baako and others like him who attempt to create, to forge links that will heal the split seed, are ignored or rejected. Implicit in Naana's words is the historic analysis of the potentially tragic consequence of alienation - betrayal. In the face of moral, spiritual, cultural and even artistic impotence, the only alternative for survival is constant betrayal of one another. And so back home, Baako is betrayed by his own family. The physical and psychological separation from members of his family results in their bewilderment at his seclusion and his artistic methods of trying to unravel the puzzles that he encounters in his relationship with other members of the society.

CONCLUSION

The urge to escape, to shut oneself off from everyone else, is always a tempting alternative to Armah's protagonists and the few others who, to varying degrees, share the protagonists' insights. But Armah never presents these alternatives as admirable. Naana fulfils her sense of unity and continuity and togetherness, but only in her preperation for death. The ethereal beauty that marks the poetry of her final words is as elusive as the alternatives:

My spirit is straining for another beginning in a place where there will be new eyes and where the farewells that will return unsaid here will turn into a glad welcome and my ghost will find the beginning that will be known here as my end.

The tragedy is that the alienation is of the soul because social forces, whether creative or destructive, are realities which can never be ignored, and therefore the sense of defeat that they bring in their wake is crushing. It takes a coup d'etat to gain respect from his wife, but the "man" in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born accepts his place in society and walks back home. In Fragments, it is with Naana and Juana, Baako's Puerto Rican doctor friend, that the protagonist experience moments of shared vision. Naana's inadequate balm for Baako's broken spirit has already been noted, and Juana, can barely offer friendship since she has also suffered a defeat and loneliness of spirit and is unable to find peace.

....watching and listening, moving and learning what

that life was all about in this place, she had understood that what she had thought she would find was not here at all. None of the struggle, none of the fire of defiance; just the living defeat of whole peoples - the familiar fabric of her life. After such an understanding, peace should perhaps have come, but that was also impossible, with so many reminders around of the impotence and of the blindness of those who had risen to guide them.

Having experienced this social, political and cultural sterility and an alienation of a people from their roots, she finds herself incapable of helping Baako to overcome his sense of defeat and alienation.

Perhaps with these relationships, Armah expresses a hope, in spite of their weaknesses, that the alienated individual could be nurtured back to a healthy social confidence. This is especially applicable to the artist, whose sensitivity affords him an extraordinary insight into society's ills, and endows him with the capability of providing the factor for the elimination of self-distrust and the slavish imitation of foreign influences. Perhaps the strength with which to preserve one's sanity may be gathered from the warning in the Prologue to Armah's fifth novel, Two Thousand Seasons:

You who yearn to be hearers, you who would see, you the utterers of the future, this is not the season for contempt. Look upon those in whose nature it is to wait upon death to create in them a need to know life. Look upon them, but in this season do not look too steeply.

It would be begging the question to ask whether Armah intends to place this alternative within the domain of the artist - the "...hearers, seers, imaginers, thinkers, remembers....prophets...." - to explore the possibility of its fruition. Nevertheless, this cinematographic expression of the sense of alienation and betrayal within familial and societal relationships is Armah's aesthetic contribution to his society, to help "....regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement...." which have driven his people asunder.