

Reading Ayi Kwei Armah's *Why are We so Blest?*

Albert A. Sackey

*Professor, Department of English,
University of Ghana, Legon*

Abstract

This paper is a revised version of a 1974 essay I wrote on the novel when it was first published in the early 1970s. The changes I have made for the present publication are not substantial and in the main the original impression remains undisturbed, the primary objective of the current exercises, now as then, being to guide the reader in a generic reading of the novel. An amazing novel steeped in a complex maze of philosophies, ideologies and ideas, *Why are we so blest?* presents a perplexing mix of literature, history, and myth, and part of my undertaking in this article is to attempt a mining of the novel's treasures for the benefit of the ardent reader. The focus of this paper is thematic but the approach is mainly semic; hence most of my investigation revolves round character study and the relevance of character in the semantic vision of Armah.

Keywords: Utopia, love, race, violence, African liberation

Why are we so blest? carries out its thematic mission through a systematic and systemic study of the personality and psyche of characters. There are three major characters in this novel: Solo Nkonam, Modin Dofu, and Aimée Reitsch. In addition, there are eight minor characters, presented essentially as types, whose relevance in the novel is not diminished by their subordinate roles: Naita, Mrs. Jefferson, Sylvia, Miss Molly Jefferson, Prof. Jefferson, Mr (and Mrs.) Richmond Oppenhardt, Jorge Manuel, and Esteban Ngulo.

Solo the site through which the narrative passes on to the reader is the Tiresias of the novel, albeit an inadequate one. His name Solomon (shortened into Solo) means the wise person. He is wise because he is the one character in the novel who seems to understand the hidden meaning behind appearances and whose comments on the action throw immense light into our understanding of the novel. But his name also means the lone figure, the lonely one, and this underlines his impotence as a helper. He is weak and powerless in the face of powerful forces whose destructive potential he acknowledges but against which he is impotent. He is one of the many dead in life in the world of the novel,

a ghost, a heap of emptiness whose brilliant and far-reaching wisdom is paralysed by his inability to act. He is consumed by physical and spiritual vapidness and has come to the end of the road. He has seen his people abused and the intelligent ones among them brainwashed into gaping slaves. He, like Modin, has refused the agony of privileged slavery but has found his future impotent and without direction. Unlike Modin, however, he realized early that an awareness of his perplexing condition as an African was not a necessary tool for his salvation. He has seen the rape of Africa, but because of his impotence he withdraws into his loneliness and becomes a mere observer of life.

In a way he is like the Teacher in *The beautiful ones are not yet born*, Kofi Ocran and Naana in *Fragments*, and the wise Ndola and elder Isanusi in *Two thousand seasons*. And yet, he is so unlike all of them. The Teacher survives on indifference to the general filth of independent Ghana; he no longer cares about what happens to the “Loved Ones” or his country, and though in dreams he suffers the pain of his impotence, he is content to suffer in the silence of his nakedness. Kofi Ocran, in spite of his earlier impotence, is able to rise to the challenge in the end and save his old student Baako and help him regain his hope in himself and life. Naana, after years of humiliation and emptiness, finally joins her ancestors in the confidence that her grandson, Baako has “strong spirits looking after him” and “something hidden that will reveal itself with time”. Ndola suffers humiliation and loneliness for speaking the truth and is rendered impotent; but “she had spent her life after that waiting in the grove for the arrival of another soul who could see the truth and act on it.” That soul arrives in the person of Isanusi to whom she reveals the truth before she dies and has the consolation of being buried in peace by this new “soul.” Elder Isanusi, banished from Anoa for speaking the truth, follows Ndola to the fifth grove and learns the secrets of the truth from her before her death. Nevertheless, he undergoes long periods of agonizing emptiness and inactive impotence, his words of warning unheeded by those in whom he puts his confidence, until hope arrives with the nineteen, and together with them he fights and wins the war of First Liberation from “the White Destroyers”.

Solo, therefore, is a unique character in Ayi Kwei Armah; he alone suffers humiliation and defeat to the very end; he alone finds it difficult to mitigate his suffering in the end. To the very end, he remains a “ghost” among the victims of the “blest”, impotent to act, and suffering in his impotence. The first time we meet him in the novel he overwhelms us with the sheer force of his isolation and ineptitude: “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” (1974, p. 11).

When finally, he realizes that in his emasculation he has failed to save Modin, he blames himself and withdraws into the desolation of his insulated self:

My impotence stimulates omnipotence. Often, what seems a reasonable arrangement I know is false. It is not understanding I am reaching for,

I have time to kill an infinity ahead of me, and these notes are reduced to something to help a defeated man survive empty time. I arrange them, rearrange them. Out of all this destruction my aim is no longer to search for sense. My goal is littleness itself: to fill time, to survive emptiness (1974, p. 232).

For the time, let us leave good old Solo to wallow in his self-pitying loneliness and turn to a more pitiful figure of tragic confusion, Modin Dofu. His first name Modin is the Ga word (Ghanaian vernacular) for Blackman. He is the average black man with enough intelligence to go through the colonial system we call formal education. He leaves his native Ghana full of ambition and hope of improving upon his education in far-away America. He has completed his secondary education at Achimota School, Accra, Ghana, and won a special scholarship to read for his first degree at Harvard. On his arrival in America he is full of excitement about the immense possibilities opened before him; he grasps at the opportunities with naive fanaticism and refuses the advice of the one person who could have saved him at the very beginning. But gradually, very gradually and painfully, the truth dawns on him that his native ingenuity is being undermined by America. America has a special way of rendering the average African intellectually impotent. First, he is made to feel special; to feel different from other Africans, to believe he has been brought to America to perfect that rare potential in him, uncommon in the African. He is being prepared to enter the privileged heaven of the “Blest” and take his rightful place on Mount Olympus. Meanwhile he must look down on the depths from which he has been raised by the generosity of America and be grateful to his benefactress. Unlike many of his people Modin rejects this Olympian heaven of concealed slavery. He would not accept this “crudest form of manipulation, mystification, planned ignorance.” Instead he would “shift from the periphery to the centre” and “escape some of these cruder forms of manipulation”. But he must be prepared to pay the price of this escape. The price is “loneliness, separation from home, the constant necessity to adjust to what is alien, eccentric to the self”.

But America has an answer also for such a rebellion. America is aware of the “all-pervading” loneliness that accompanies the “shift from the periphery to the centre”. America will capitalize on this loneliness of the rebellious African, America would use sex. America has several types of sex agents, usually the female, to use as antidote against rebellion. The less potent are the likes of Carol who would like to be “screwed” by the aggressive African whose sexual exploits have become legendary; or the likes of the working-class housewife Mrs. Quinn who is ever ready to jump into a man’s bed anytime she is asked. These are powerless sexual objects whose rejection by the lonely African student is never problematic. Indeed, this type is not really meant for the African who has “shifted from the periphery to the centre”. She is intended for the pleasurable enslavement

of the African who accepts the periphery and whose loss of freedom is maintained by this process.

The real test for Modin, the rebellious African student, now a lonely figure, comes with the second type of sex agent, the upper-middle class American housewife, frustrated with her husband's inability to satisfy her ever-increasing sexual demands. If the rebel is lucky, he will go through this test in one piece; if he is not, his end will be swift, painful, and shameful; his destruction, at the hands of the enraged husband who in the eyes of America is justified in slaughtering the nigger who seduced his wife. Modin is lucky, he goes through this test in one piece. The final test is America's ace; it is the one test the rebel cannot possibly pass: death that comes in the name of love and uses unnatural sex as a means to destruction. This time there is no escape for the rebel, for, in spite of his better knowledge, he will accept death as love and embrace it with all his soul. He would not accept the truth dictated by his rational self even if the hypocrisy of the love-death is apparent. He will continue to call death love and his impotence will increase until finally he finds no escape from this death which comes in the name of love. In the end, when he is destroyed, his only epitaph is the emptiness he leaves behind and the frustration of those who see in him the tragedy of unfulfilled promise.

Such is the fate of Modin in this novel. His meeting with Aimée is prophetic in its tragic inevitability, for although Modin would have nothing more to do with white women whose only aim is destruction to the black man, fate drags him unwillingly towards this girl:

I did not go searching for her, Naita. I have stopped doing that. I did not even go where she might have found me if she was one of those out looking for someone like me. The idea itself of lonely white women moving from knot to little knot of talkers at parties wanting to find the African of their unconfessed desires nauseates me these days. The need to work out new way of containing loneliness has pressed as heavily on my mind, but the wandering days are behind me. I will not slip back into those old ways, not after everything that has happened (1974, p. 167).

And yet:

I've had to find new ways to survive. The jobs I found after the break with Oppenhardt are now too strenuous. The last time I tried scrubbing a floor the neck wound burst open and I had to go back to the hospital. Standing in the service line exhausts me, so I can't work in the dining hall either. A library job gives me pocket money. When I need more money I sign on as a subject for experimenting graduate students mainly in the Psycho Lab. That is where I met Aimée (1974, p.168).

After this initial connection gradual involvement is inevitable:

I did not feel lonely anymore. We can't help serious involvement, Naita, I did no want to. I tried your normalising outlets. They almost killed me. I don't feel dissipated anymore. It is so difficult to explain real things across distances, Naita, But that is not my fault (1974, p. 181).

Involvement is followed by naive surrender:

Last night a frightening thing happened, Naita. You will blame me and call me a fool for not ending the friendship when it happened, but let me tell you everything. Something still tells me Aimée is not the same, not like the others I have known here, not a destructive person (1974. p. 193).

And finally the prophetic vision:

Other sounds, calmer sounds far beyond hers, with a meaning I chose to close my ears to them. The voice of the smiling Afro-American who gave no name, the sight of him sitting motionless here in this room, looking with his direct stare at Aimée. He talked not to her but about her, as if she were a body without life. He talked to me, calling me brother. "Sure go ahead. I can't stop you. We don't use force, not even on brothers losing themselves. Go ahead, take blue eyes here for your soul sister... I'm not fighting you, brother. We don't fight the lost. But hear me. Blue eyes here love you. Sure. Only way blue eyes ever know to love. Like a blue-eye baby love a chock-lit candy bar. Blue eyes gon eat you brother. Blue eyes gon eat you for soul food. That's all she's looking for, food. Things her people threw and wouldn't eat. Blue eyes is greedier than all her people. Blue eyes had all them special things her people set aside for their own selves. Blue eyes still not satisfied. Blue eyes greedier than the greediest white folks. Now she ready for them hog maws and chit'lins too. That's you for her. Soul food, that's you. Blue eyes gon eat you, brother, blue eyes gon eat you dead" (1974, p. 200).

In a way, Modin is like the Man in *The beautiful ones are not yet born* and Baako in *Fragments* and yet so unlike them many ways. The Man can take consolation in the fact that his abstinence from the gleam is finally rewarded by the coup d'état and he is vindicated in the end. Nevertheless, his rejection of corruption and filth is circumscribed

by his impotence to fight against it. And therein lies the parallel with Modin whose rejection of Olympus becomes meaningless in the face of his impotence to act against it. The similarity with Baako is more pronounced. Faced with the same problem of loneliness as a result of their refusal to embrace the periphery and their rejection of the “Cargo Cult Mentality”, Baako seeks solace in a withdrawal into himself and is saved from insanity in the end with a little help from his friends, Kofi Ocran, and his Puerto Rican girl-friend, Juana.

Not so with Modin; Solo cannot save him because he (Solo) lacks the down-to-earth practicality of Ocran which makes easy communication with others possible. Nor can Naita who lacks the patience of Juana to accept the tragic flaw in the character of her friend and help him overcome it. One is abandoned by impatient and impotent friends, the other saved by the patient and practical potency of his friends.

It is now time to turn to Aimée of whom so much has already been said in connection with the tragic hero of this novel. “Aimée” is French for loved one, the female object of love. The name itself is European and represents European values. The irony here is that Aimée Reitsch, with her typical European-settler surname, has nothing loving or lovable about her. Hers is a negative love, a destructive death-force clothed in the hypocrisy of love. Her role in the novel (consciously or unconsciously on her part) is to lead Modin gradually to his destined doom. In a way her name is appropriate, the loved one, not the lover. She is loved with a tragic passion by Modin. She, in turn, sees Modin as a means to an end, a tool to be used, to be enjoyed like the “chock-lit candy bar” and be discarded when his utility value diminishes. She is indifferent to Modin’s feelings so long as her perverse desires are satisfied. The first time we meet her, she is bored with the routine vapidness of her academic and social life:

I can’t stand this place. Second year was supposed to feel better, but everything’s been pallid, boring, lifeless. My transcript says I’m doing fine. That’s a lie. The whole thing is childish. First week of term, find out what a Prof’s idiosyncrasies are. Second week, flip through the library getting note cards together. After that sit through boring lectures filling in gaps in my notes with the prof’s favourite quotes. Then wait for the inevitable term papers, the exams, the inevitable A (1974, p. 143).

Ironically, it is this restlessness, this sense of mental waste, this frustration, this loneliness, which is her link to Modin and which drags him towards her. And yet, there is distinction. Aimée’s reasons for frustration are private and selfish. “There is no fire around here,” she says. She wants action, anything which can make her feel life in her. She is not interested in changing the pallid routine in which she finds herself; what she wants is a temporary escape from it. In contrast, Modin desires change, change that will cater for the empowerment of the African spirit and free his people from mental slavery

and physical deprivation. For solution, Aimée goes to the project center “looking for something to do, come summer”. She finds “Operation African Junction” (Operation Crossroads, Africa?) She has a choice between ten African countries “all relatively tame”, in her own words. She chooses Kansa (Kenya?) because with the Moja, Moja (Mau, Mau?) rebellion still active, there must be “fire” there. In Kansa, the reader comes face to face with the full force of her perverse sexuality. She enters into casual sexual relations with at least three men within a short period: a doctor of philosophy, a government minister, and the Head of State, Bombo Pakansa (Jomo Kenyatta?). In all these relations, her preference is sex rather than love, sex without the satisfaction that accompanies it. According to her, “life is so dull”; “I don’t feel anything.” She confesses she “got one good interview, but that was with a woman,” but on the whole, the trip turns dull and she decides to return home. The transcript of the “one good interview” arranged by one of her lovers, Agenda Ochiena, is given on page 37 with the heading “Transcript. Tape 12. Date. May 3.” The cold detached title of the transcript and her entire attitude to the political struggle of the people of Kansa show a marked academic detachment from the suffering of the people she claims to have gone to study. For her, both the struggle and the interview are good material for the preparation of her thesis. The transcript, however, illustrates the agonies of an oppressed people whose leader has sold himself to the oppressors.

On her return to America, she meets Modin and enters into the lethal liaison that ends so tragically for the black man. Aimée’s perception of the “unnatural” relationship is best articulated in her own words: “If I was stupid I’d be in love. Modin almost has me convinced. It’s not impossible.” (1974, p.185). Her sexual fantasies—from her fantasy of her perverse sexual orgy with Professor Kaufmann in the classroom to imagining herself the wife of a white settler somewhere in Africa whose erectile dysfunction forces her into sexual indulgence with the houseboy, Mwangi (who like Modin “could grow into a fine specimen”) these reveries feed on the idea of violence and death, death to the African. At the end of her sexual fantasy with Professor Kaufmann, there is an allusion to genocidal ethnic cleansing:

He’s got his prick tied down to his thigh but it comes up anyway, red and knotty. His nose stops twitching and he drops his chalk. Instead of writing he shoots his juice up on the board, writing figures like a bloody YPSL Poster. MAJI MAJI: 100,000 AFRICANS KILLED

He shakes all over when he’s finished (1974, p. 185)

Again, in one of her wild chimeras around the imaginary houseboy Mwangi, violence becomes a necessary agent to sexual climax:

I’ve kept Mwangi, and I’m not tired. I’m sure I’ll get there if only something would happen, but what?

I'm looking over Mwangi's head. He's been silent a long time, moving in me. The KapitanReitsch is coming back, along the path. He's very big. His face is red. Mwangi knows nothing. His head is turned away from the window. My husband has no shirt on. He still has his gun. I am forced to look at the gun. From the distance he's aiming it into the room, at Mwangi's head.

I say nothing to Mwangi. He feels so good in me. He has a smile. He moves silently. I have a happy feeling rising.

Goddam. The whole scene disappeared again. If only I could find a way of holding Mwangi in my mind. Goddamn. Goddamn. Goddamn. (1974, pp. 188-189).

Aimée, as the imaginary Kapitan's wife, equates erotic fulfillment with vicious images of death and devastation only reachable when clothed in the imagery of a bored housewife seducing her naive houseboy in the expectation of her jealous husband's sudden appearance. The whole extract with its short sentences and quick movements depicts the excitement of each moment as the woman makes her gradual climb towards her unreachable sexual climax. It is this imaginary Mwangi who is identified with Modin in the malevolent imagination of Aimée during one of their unnatural sexual experiments. The equation of pleasure and violence, consumer and commodity is now complete. Mwangi and Modin are the commodities to be consumed in violence; Aimée is the consumer for whose gratification the commodity has been purchased.

The role of Modin in the sick profusion of Aimée's warped cognition is now clear to us; to serve as an instrument of carnal pandering by suppressing his own sincere natural emotions in fidelity to the erotic sensitivities of insatiate concupiscence. We may illustrate this condition with pertinent extracts from pages 198 to page 199 where the lovers are playing love games with Aimée desperately vying with her impaired sexuality for supremacy:

“A lot of the time...I seem to do O.K. if I can imagine myself into a different scene. It's worked for other things.” (Aimée talking to Modin)

“Wait. Now! Don't talk. Keep moving. Yes” (Aimée to Modin)

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yeeesssooh, Mwangi, Yeeesss” (Aimée in “mad, happy energy” to Modin)

“Move, Mwangi! Don't stop!” (Aimée with “an imperative frenzy” in her voice to Modin)

“Don’t stop! I found the scene. Help me.” (Aimée with “a tight, impatient smile” to Modin)

“Kansa. The rebellion, my period. My husband is coming home. He’s a settler. I don’t know when. It’s dangerous, you’re the boy.”(Aimée to Modin)

“And Mwangi is my name” (Modin to Aimée)

“Yes, yes, yes, yes doon’t stop! Yes!” (Aimée to Modin)

“All I need was your help,” (Aimée with “anger” to Modin)

In this sexual game the black boy is the guinea pig, the sacrificial lamb wilfully led to the slaughter on the altar of Caucasian hegemony. Protest or nonconformity on the part of the inferior race is frowned upon as simply unnatural and against reason:

Modin has a simplistic approach to everything, As if I could tell myself I want to get rid of bad ideas, and I’d come clean immediately.

He even got me feeling guilty about fantasizing with him making love to me. Everybody fantasizes, so what the hell is wrong with that? It’s just a game. I don’t see why he has to get all serious about it.

Modin is just conservative. Strait-laced. He can be helpful, though, and I’ve never been bored talking to him. His mind is sharper than anyone’s around here.

I wish he wasn’t so set in his ways. That was a foolish thing I did, going all guilty and making a confession to him. Goddamn, I didn’t do anything wrong, (p. 203)

Despite this open display of unfeeling racism and bigoted intolerance, Modin, like the blinking devotee, can only acquiesce:

Something still tells me Aimée is not the same, not like the others I have known here, not a person.

Her attitude to their relationship is one of detached involvement, detached enough not to get involved too deeply and involved enough to gain all the benefits of the union. To put it bluntly, Aimée has come to believe that it is only Modin with his aggressive maleness who can help restore life and feelings in her dead limbs and help her achieve orgasm.

These are her words when she is proved right and “it worked:”

We were just playing. I wasn't even aware Modin had decided to make love. He just played with me. I wasn't trying or anything. We were simply having fun. It took a long time. He went in me, moving slowly, stopping, moving.

It was like a weakness in my waist when it began. It's not at all the way I imagined it would be. It made my body get all tense before it relaxed. God, now I know I never had a relaxed feeling in my body before. The world is different, I'm not frigid. I'm not frigid. Hey, hey, I am not frigid. Aimée is not frigid. (1974, p.217)

The careless confession of an amoral trollop whose sense of morality is degraded by an unnatural perception of the self completely sealed in a vicious cycle of narcissism and condescension. From her patronizing high ground, Modin can only have one utility value: “to help loosen her frigidity and make her feel” like a woman in the area of her sexuality.

Finally, let us turn to the tragic sequence in the desert, fatal for the black boy, ecstatic for the white girl: the one experience which finally removes the scale from Modin's eyes and makes him realize though too late, the deadly nature of the relationship he has nurtured so intensely. On their way, they meet white French soldiers in the desert whose eyes on Modin “contained death they couldn't let out right there and then, and the frustrated violence gave them a wild, would-be predatory look.” The sight of the soldiers with a frustrated urge to kill, at once reminds Modin of the “the Boston girl who cut off her man-friend's testicles with a nail clipper.” This image of the Boston girl in turn evokes the ominous vision of Aimée with her mouth taking his penis in her teeth to caress. For the first time his relationship with Aimée frightens him. At the police station, “the only open place” in the desert that night, the friendly policeman tries to caution him but Aimée as usual, has her way:

“You want to go there, in the desert?”

“Yes”, Aimée said.

“You have something important to do there?”

Aimée laughed. The man appeared to have accepted that for an answer. For me the question has begun to seem extremely important. I wish I were not so tired (1974, p.278)

As they continue their journey through the desert, the young black man continues to experience downcast feelings of inertia and lethargy. The Citroen arrives: the white driver whose “single pair carried as much of the hostile force as all the massed pairs of eyes” of the French soldiers, will not stop for Modin but stops for Aimée. Modin refuses to join Aimée in the car with the white man, so Aimée, in frustration, gets down and the driver speeds off. The following dialogue ensues:

“What does it matter if he doesn’t want to see you?”

“It doesn’t matter to you. You’re white. He sees you. You’re just like him, you know.” I felt too tired to say anything else.

“Modin, you’re a racist.”

I didn’t answer her. I could think of only one thing: the Frenchman driving off in his anger had looked like a man cheated, a creature deprived of something that should have been his birthright (1974, p.280)

A gloomy admission of separation and an acknowledgement of the essential dissimilarity in both physiognomy and disposition, a manifestation of crucial racial difference that belies the forced twinship which shocks Solo on his first impression of the pair:

I got up and walked over to the two. At first sight I had noticed the contrast they made – one black, the other white. What struck me now, as I went closer, was how similar they had tried to make themselves. I looked harder. It was true.

From top to bottom the two wore identical clothes: coarse – woven blue shirts in the American style with their collars held down by small buttons, light – coloured cowboy jeans with nothing to hold them up, thick white socks with thick soles and a blue line over each toe cap. Two people, so different, yet so wilfully assimilated. The thought came to me: here was an acute case of love. Or ... A smile threatened to force itself to the surface. I was able to surpass it. Their clothes were not the only identical things they had. There were also burdens on their backs: soldiers camping knapsacks made from green cloth over an aluminium frame (1974, p. 56).

Completely convinced now of the binary dichotomy that marks their relationship, Modin resolves to return to Laccryville for a boat back to America, but he is too sick and

weak to do anything. Aimée is however full of vigor and energy and is determined to have her way irrespective of her partner's feelings and condition. She would never take "a boat back home. What would I look like telling people I didn't cross the Sahara after all" (1974, p. 283).

A matter of survival for one, of prestige for the other. It is now time to make individual decisions. First Modin's: "I told Aimée I would go back to Laccryville, I don't know how many times, how many different ways she called me a coward" (1974, p. 280). And Aimée's "I never thought Modin would also start using the black and white thing as an excuse. He has deteriorated a lot. I'll have to find ways of making my own way soon as the crossing is over. He's lost his drive" (1974, p.283)

Tragic partition of an artificial union which should never have been contracted in the first place or at the least, should never have been taken to this depth of involvement. In the end, it is a fatal orgy of decadent sexual behavior and aberration fully embraced by the white girl and masterminded by her own white race that brings Modin back to the reality of his final doom:

Modin started bleeding. The blood curved out in a little stream that jerked outward about every second. I reached him and without thinking of what I was doing I kissed him. His blood filled my mouth. I swallowed it. I wanted him to speak to me. He had groaned a little when I took him and kissed him, but he said nothing (1974, p.288)

An obscene scene of sacrificial ritual of sex and blood; and it is Aimée who is narrating the experience. What Aimée is kissing, which gushes blood every second, is Modin's snapped penis. Even in Modin's terminal throes of death, Aimée does not fail to grasp at her final share of the sex-violence complex, a source of pain for the one, of pleasure for the other. We are reminded of all the imaginary scenes of sexual violence which have plagued the sick mind of this obnoxious white girl as she struggles for unnatural sexual gratification with the black boy as her instrument of sexual liberation in violence.

I have dealt at length with the important role of Aimée in our understanding of Ayi Kwei Armah's intentions in this novel: let us now turn to other characters less important but very relevant if our understanding of the novel is to be complete. To fully appreciate the thematic role of these minor characters we must probe the very depths of the author's intentions in this novel. What is Ayi Kwei Armah trying to say? What is the underlying theme of the novel? Are there any moral lessons for us? The title, *Why are we so blest?*, is our first indicator (pp. 89-103). White America considers itself "blest" (note the unusual biblical form of the participle) for all the good things God has bestowed on the American commonwealth, especially in fulfilment of the "Great American Dream".

For this reason, every year on the day of “Thanksgiving” America gives praise to God for all the blessings the American people enjoy in life.

In the view of Armah, this so-called state of “blessedness” is based on several myths:

The American dream was a realization of the Utopian ideal. It was built by men who while bringing with them “the whole deep matrix of European civilization, were careful enough to reject the all-too human flaws of feudal Europe;” men who refused to participate in the European “crimes against humanity”

What these men and women have built is therefore a new paradise, a paradise that allows no ordinary humanity into its heaven; a paradise of “grace”, grace which affirms and maintains “the distance that separates the holy from the merely human;” a paradise that separates and protects “the sacred from the profane”: a paradise that upholds the privileged class of the “blest” whites and separates them from “the remnant of the world”.

In this Eden, some are more “blest” than others. Into this privileged heaven (which is a blend of the Olympian and Christian paradise) the vulgar among men, in spite of their lack of vision, are sometimes admitted, but at their own level. This state of blessedness “can’t exist without its opposite” – “the underprivileged” , made up of the last remnants of the exterminated Indians, the African or Negroes, the great mass of the suffering peoples of the world. (Flood in Thailand, miners’ strike in Chile, the war in Vietnam, government changes in Laos, etc.). In spite of this interdependence of the two opposite poles, indeed, because of it, it is not the duty of “the blest” to help “the underprivileged” out of their depths of poverty.

The philosophy of the two opposite poles is Graeco-Christian in origin, and presupposes an Olympus, below which are “the plains of mediocrity”, and far below the plains, the hell of Tartarus. The only hope for the “underprivileged” (The foreign students – African, Asian, or Latin) is for each to struggle from their heritage of “communal dirt”, and rise to the heights of the “blest”. This is not an easy task and only few of “the underprivileged” succeed, and even then, he/she can only be one of the vulgar among “the blest.” This is called a crossover, an achievement which makes him/her a human among gods. In rare cases, however, very rare cases, a unique specimen among “the underprivileged” achieves the crossover without effort. Such a rarity rises “from the plains to live on Olympus. A hero. Part man, part god;” but still not fully god.

Sometimes, accidents happen; but they are “unique,” “idiotic”: “the promethean factor” sets in, and there is a “reverse crossover” --first the heroic crossover of the rare specimen, then an unexpected promethean crossing of the god-man. But this is not

“practical”; it is “Quixotic” and few of the crossovers ever think of it. Such reverse crossovers “can’t happen as long as there’s justice in the arrangement.”

The title, *Why are we so blest*, therefore introduces us to the philosophy of inequality, of separate development, each race according to its merits; the master-race occupying a unique heaven of their own, the slave-race barely surviving below. The American commonwealth is the epitome of the capabilities and achievements of the master-race. The biblical spelling of the past participle of *blest* is pertinent in this regard. It highlights the underlying divinity of the arrangement, something akin to the feudal concept of the divine rights of kings and divine sanction of societal stratification. Into this commonwealth the foreign student is introduced, the student who has shown by dint of hard work and innate ability his capacity for Olympian values, which he has demonstrated through “the educational process”:

Elementary School. First gate, the million already eliminated, leaving thousands. No justification. Just the way things are. The way things have been made.

Secondary School. Second gate. The thousands dropped, leaving hundreds. The justification: the exams. A lucky few get in because their relatives push them through in spite of everything.

Sixth Form. The hundreds forgotten. A dozen here, twenty there, small groups getting absorbed deeper into European ways. The justification: a higher quality.

University. Single survivors in the last reaches of alienation. The justification: “You are the only one”; “You are not like the others”; “You are the first” (1974, p.224).

In the Olympus of the American Commonwealth where he takes his university education, the foreign student is exposed to knowledge:

Knowledge about the world we live in is the property of the alien because the alien has conquered us. The thirst for knowledge therefore becomes perverted into the desire for getting close to the alien, getting out of the self. Result: loneliness as a way of life.

This loneliness is an inevitable part of the assimilationist African’s life within the imperial structure (1974, pp. 32-33).

There are two choices left to the assimilated African – to stay at the periphery and be no longer lonely, or to shift to the centre and embrace an “all-pervading loneliness.” Modin chooses to shift to the center, a unique choice, and pays the ordained price with his life. We may now turn to the minor characters and the various roles they play in this polarized world of opposite poles. First, we shall examine Mrs. Jefferson, wife of Prof. Jefferson, Modin’s “mentor.” Mrs. Jefferson is one of “blest among the blest”. Her life has all the abundance of material fulfilment. Yet she is a tragic figure, like many American women among “the blest” whose life consists of a tedious monotone of affectation and frustration. She has problems like “everybody! Can’t get feelings where she lives.” She suffers the same “epidemic” that has hit all the “blest” among her race – from Carol who took off her panties at the party after smoking hashish and wanted to be “screwed” by Modin, through the fatal Aimée, to Mrs. Jefferson herself. Each suffers the same predicament - inability to feel, to experience emotional fulfilment in their life of atrophy, their world of death-life-olympus-hell. It is a problem which “bothers more girls than most people think,” “reconciles you to the world”, “a personal solution” in “sex, the great co-opter.” “It changes everything,” sex or the fantasy of sex (1974, p. 94).

Mrs. Jefferson, like Aimée, is a symbol of domineering and aggressive sexual behaviour and abuse. Indeed, she is like Aimée in many ways: Aimée as the Kapitan’s wife is like Mrs. Jefferson, the professor’s wife. Both are frustrated wives whose “husbands can’t screw them so they come to black men to get some.” It is wishful thinking and fatal for the black boy to think that such “a white bitch gon be his friend.” The similarities go further. Professor Jefferson, like K. Kapitan Reitsch, cannot satisfy his wife. The Kapitan Reitsch has an African houseboy, named Mwangi; Professor Jefferson has an African student, named Modin. The Kapitan’s wife in her frustration turns to Mwangi for sexual satisfaction; the professor’s wife in her frustration turns to Modin for sexual satisfaction. Both boys are seduced by the women, Mwangi by threats, Modin by an appearance of friendship. The first sexual intercourse between each pair has a kind of “friendly frenzy” about it, the woman in each case, experiencing a kind of joy mixed with “the motions of agony.” The desire of either woman is carnal rather than emotional. In each case the relationship between the white wife and the black boy possesses a kind of sex - violence duality. We recall the “hot” excitement of Mrs. Jefferson when Modin puts his fingers in the juice of her cunt at the back seat of her husband’s car while the husband and the daughter sit in front, the one concentrating on his driving, the other on her reading. In this scene the risk in their intercourse enhances Mrs. Jefferson’s sexual excitement. This episode, together with the last near-fatal sexual encounter between Mrs. Jefferson and Modin, may be referentially set against the last of Aimée’s imaginary sexual fantasies as the Kapitan’s wife with Mwangi when the Kapitan aims his gun at the head of the unsuspecting Mwangi while he enters into her. On both occasions, the white women are conscious of the impending danger which seems to increase their erotic arousal. In both

instances, the scenes are planned in advance with a perverse precision by the white women. In the case of Aimée, everything takes place in her callous imagination (1974, pp.188 – 189).

On the part of Mrs. Jefferson, she first arouses her husband's jealousy by willfully confessing her adultery with Modin; then, on the night of the incident she wears a scent pleasing to Modin; then finally while her husband is upstairs nursing his depression from her confession, she deliberately lures Modin outside. It is the one night she is most ready for sex, as if the possibilities of sex-violence excite her more. Here is Modin's own account of the incident: "Make love to me, Modin, please. I've been waiting all night."

At the climax of this prostitution of love, when the noise from inside the house, of glass breaking and metal dropping, gives clear indication of what impends, Mrs. Jefferson holds Modin tighter and whispers: "Don't spoil it Modin. Someone a bit drunk, that's all." (156) What follows is a frenzy of hate and viciousness. Mrs. Jefferson stands by while her husband stabs her victim repeatedly "till the other dancers came and pulled him away." This bacchanalia of gory sensuality is what is repeated in the desert when Modin meets his destined doom under the seductive spell of Aimée's fascinating charisma.

To summarize, the role of Mrs. Jefferson, like that of Aimée, in the novel is to demonstrate that there is only one kind of relationship that can exist between a black man and a white woman. It is not the one between slave and mistress but the more sinister one of "carrion fastened to a beast of prey." Both white females present negative images of lust and violence moulded in wild promiscuity and malignant vampirism and using open seduction as instrument of sexual oppression with potential and capacity to transform isolation into slavery with death as the final destination.

Juxtaposed against this sex-violence affiliation with the white women is the free, natural bond (which even distance cannot obliterate) between Modin and Naita, the Afro-American girl. Naita is not one of "the blest", she is one of the "vulgar" in the midst of the blest; hence is denied their stale abundance. Because of this, she is different from Aimée and Mrs. Jefferson and does not suffer from the frustration of stale eroticism, the epidemic of the escape-in-sex, the lack of feeling and the general waste of sex-violence emotions. Consequently when she meets Modin, her own blood brother, an "underprivileged" like herself, their relationship is unforced, their sex life natural and their feelings mutual in a free kind of way. From the beginning, she tries to save him from the destruction that surrounds him. She tries, without success, to warn him of their "their propaganda," to point out that most of them are "crooks," mere "crackers" who want him "feeling all special on account of being with them." In the end, she gives up and resolves to abandon him because "white folks got him surrounded." She is not going to waste herself away, waiting for him to learn. She only leaves him a prophetic warning:

Why you talk so dumb all of a sudden? You need sex, take it. But this talk about love and sincerity is just foolishness. I thought you were smart enough so white folks couldn't get you sick, but you ain't. That's just too bad. 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 that it's got nothing to do with love and sincerity. You gon stay that dumb, just stay away from me till you grow up, hear? (1974, p. 134).

For Naita, the confession of love is “silly stuff,” “the white Hollywood way of making speeches about it, but the words don't go deep.” The only way to confess love is “you just be the way you want to be with me. I'll know.” This outlook of Naita is contrasted sharply with the free confession of love by the two white women. Ironically, it is when the black victim is at the edge of the sex-violence abyss that such professions of love become profuse. Listen to Mrs. Jefferson by Modin's bed at the hospital after the assault by her husband: “She looked at her watch. ‘I must go,’ she said. ‘Harry is crazily suspicious these days.’ She wiped her eyes dry. Then she asked: ‘Modin, do you love me? Modin, say you love me. Say it please. Modin, please. Modin... (1974, p.154). And here is Aimée in her sing-song voice at the end of the perverse sexual circus in the desert:

I ask him “Do you love me?”

He didn't answer me.

“Say you love me, Modin, please.” He wouldn't say a word to me (1974, p.288).

The dichotomy between Naita and the two white women is further demonstrated in Modin's first sexual experience with each of them. First with Mrs. Jefferson:

I had seen her, looked at her, found her attractive in that special, almost-too-ripe way. I had not thought she would come to me like this. I too needed someone like her. I wished she were Naita.

She was not. Her love-making made it hard for me to think she was a woman, a mature one. I saw her face. She meant well and her body had some shape, but the way she made love, it was a friendly frenzy, and I could not help it if a part of me stood outside of us, watching her joy that had the motions of agony. She cried as she began reaching her end, and then at the end itself the crying was mixed with real laughter, laughter of a sort I did not know existed within her. Her end was multiple: she seemed to hang there on top of her feeling, to start

dropping and then to rise again as often as I renewed my motion in her. When I also reached my end her laughter ended, she came down from the top, and her tears continued to flow (1974, p. 130).

Expressions like “hurt”, “groped”, “good”, “legs spread apart under the blanket”, “thick juice”, “mound”, “minute pouty lips”, “lubricated spaces”, “cavities”, “unreachable”, “roamed at will inside her”, “hot”, “pulled me directly on top of her”, “wettest”, “slipped in”, “subdued”, “low”, “moaning”, “loud”, etc., mark the language and passage of their love-making.

Modin’s first sexual affair with Aimée is depicted in similar vocabulary:

In other areas we were already becoming friends. So this day I touched her instead of holding the attraction down. I hugged her, and she responded. Her arms felt unnaturally strong as though they were unused to the gentleness of embraces. I wanted to feel her directly. She did not resist me when I began taking off her clothes. She did not help me either. The moment I started removing her clothes she seemed to situate herself somewhere outside what was happening.

Because we had spent such a long time hugging each other, I expected to find her wet when my hand reached her cunt. It was completely dry. I looked at her face. Her eyes had none of that defiant confidence I had at first thought was her natural look. Quickly I looked away. I touched a nipple, playing with it (1974, pp.178-179).

The expressions to note here are: “get out”, “frightened”, “dead”, “dead tissue”, “exciting”, “dormant”, “forced smile”, “wanted to feel”, “come when you feel satisfied”, “clitoris”, “bad”, “smell”, “stink”, “dead sperm”, “awful”, “greedy”, “*poro*”, “mad”, “happy energy”, “move”, “don’t stop”, “help me”, “dangerous”, “tight”, “crazy with desire”, etc. These words present like echoes and ripples from the experience with Mrs. Jefferson. By way of contrast let us return to Modin’s first sexual encounter with Naita:

In the beginning I thought the feeling came from every part of my body; but I looked at Naita, and she was not touching me. The focus of that feeling was my penis, her vagina was contracting around my penis and then letting go, slowly, easily. No hands could ever imitate that gentleness of feeling. The sweetness filled my body, my head. What was most beautiful. I knew she felt something of my exhilaration with every contraction. We were quiet like that, now how long I cannot

remember, then just when there was nothing I could do to keep myself from moving she said to me.

‘Move in me, Modin, yes.’

I could not have done otherwise no matter how hard I might have wanted to. The motion of my body then was something entirely natural, the unavoidable result of everything Naita had done. We moved together. Each motion told me she felt what I felt. Our end was unforced, natural. She said nothing. I just felt every motion, knew everything.

I cannot feel lonely any more (1974, p.123).

Expressions like “naked”, “perfect”, “natural”, “wonderful”, “two people...together so freely, so easily”, “relax”, etc., illustrate the richness and freedom of their relationship. Naita therefore represents love, hope and life for Modin; Mrs. Jefferson and Aimée represent hate, doubt and death. Unfortunately, Modin chooses death in place of life.

There are two other women among the “blest” with crucial thematic roles. First is Sylvia, the Portuguese girlfriend of Solo. In the extract below Solo compares her (Sylvia) with Aimée:

The American girl for some reason I could not precisely grasp just then, had reminded me sharply of Sylvia. And yet thinking of her, I realized she was not at all like Sylvia. Sylvia was very feminine, somewhat small, with her virginal face and short dark hair. I had known her, I thought as deeply as she had ever let anyone know her. But whenever I saw her in my mind, her picture had something of a hidden quality about it. She was very gentle, very soft. The American girl looked the opposite of all this. She was big in a tall, bony way. In the Bureau she had moved as if control was something alien to her nature, and her behaviour, her words and her gestures as she talked- all gave a strong impression of a destructive wildness, of a lack of self-control. She seemed the kind of person it would be impossible to share a small space with. Wide, endless expanses, dotted with lifeless things, hard and unbreakable – that would have been the perfect environment for her. And yet she had brought memories of Sylvia so sharply to me (1974, p. 62).

Indeed, Sylvia and Aimée share a common heritage: both are products of Mount Olympus, the blest paradise of the whites. But that is all the similarity; the rest is distinction. While Sylvia embodies the good and human side of Mount Olympus, Aimée

epitomizes the odious and obnoxious side. Sylvia is a respectable member of the white society and cannot be permitted “to throw herself away” on a black man. Aimée is one of the ever-increasing casualties in the system and is best left alone to herself. She is incapable of love, so her sexual escapades are best overlooked. On the other hand, Sylvia’s humanity is evident in her genuine expression of love, and her people would not allow a black man to tamper with her affection. It will be “very foolish” and a “sickness” in Sylvia to believe that she can ever be in love with a black stranger. She is a model of the ideal on Olympus, and she is guarded and guided with careful jealousy and patronage. Her people would not tolerate waywardness on her part. Her relationship with Solo is therefore ruthlessly suppressed, and in the end she jilts Solo and returns to her people. Solo is lucky to have had a Sylvia rather than an Aimée to love, hence when finally the illusion of love wears off, he is left with no bitterness:

It did not come to me as a shocking thing, her going away, when I was able to come out of the vagueness that was everywhere after her departure. Then it seemed such a natural event, that I was amazed at myself – that I could have thought anything else possible (1974, p. 67).

Now a brief look at the bookish Miss Molly Jefferson, one of the “blest” among the blest. She is the very opposite of the sex-starved mother. “She’s serious about her PhD... goes to scholarly conferences with her father. Otherwise she remains on campus.” “She doesn’t seem to notice” or care that her mother looks “so much more attractive” than herself. One of her favourite books which “she doesn’t read for pleasure” is *Coming of Age among the Wamakonde*. In her state of “blessedness” she looks down on all things of the flesh and studies with cold detachment “the coming of age” of primitive peoples. She has a serious attitude to life, and her only ambition is to achieve that unique vision which alone makes the existence of Eden possible. She is indifferent to the abundance of Olympus; the existence of Olympus is enough for her. On the whole, she is a pathetic victim of the system she is so proud of; she is neither woman nor man but a pitiful automaton – a casualty of the philosophy of the two opposite poles.

Sharply contrasted with the two black men (Solo and Modin) are the white guardians of the Olympian commonwealth, such as Prof. Harry Jefferson and Mr. Richmond Oppenhardt. The pathetic Prof. Jefferson is the brain which makes the system possible, and yet he is another of its victims; without the system’s money his knowledge is impotent and useless. It is a matter of survival, therefore, for him to play the gaping sycophant of those whose money keeps the system going. His heartbreaking affectation is clearly visible in his shameless display of sycophancy at Modin’s first meeting with The Committee:

But the one who smiled consistently was one of the six old men. His shape was different. He was thin, and tall. In everything he said to the others, there was a desire to please. Whenever Mr. Oppenhardt spoke to him, his answer began with a “Sir”. Once Mr. Oppenhardt called him Professor. Otherwise he called him Harry (1974, p. 119).

The tragedy of Professor Jefferson’s situation is that it is the same system which starves him so emotionally that drives his wife into the arms of other men. He and Mr. Oppenhardt are two sides of a single coin. Mr. and Mrs. Richmond Oppenhardt are rich (notice the pun on his first name) and “open-hearted”. Mr. Oppenhardt is a “big hearted man, a very big man”. “People like the Oppenhardts can have a home wherever they want”. It is their money which makes the system work and they are conspicuously conscious of this. The result of this awareness is an inbuilt vanity, a sense of superiority and supremacy. Sometimes their vanity manifests in extreme behavior, almost bordering on the absurd. They affect deep understanding of everything that goes on around them and even believe they know more about the foreign student and his country than the student himself. Their so-called generosity is a demonstration of vanity rather than charity. In their twisted mind, a student from the “underprivileged” world who makes it to America is “unusually intelligent”, and only one of a very few rare specimens. At the first meeting of The Committee, Mr. Oppenhardt advises Modin:

It’s because of your unusual intelligence that you’re here... Don’t ever apologize for that. You have earned everything you’ve got. I hope you’ll continue to earn even more, by recognizing the special intelligence that has set you apart, and never hesitating to use it. (1974, p.120).

The likes of Oppenhardt expect gratitude for their generosity. Ingratitude is rebellion which should not be countenanced. And yet underneath this perceptible power and omnipotence is a disarming impotence. Modin recognizes this emptiness on their first encounter:

I tried to see the old men as highly intelligent beings, but it was impossible. I could only imagine they were powerful, and even that sense was destroyed whenever I looked closely at them. They did not look powerful in themselves. They looked tired, like people who were looking for something to do (1974, pp.120-121).

Ayi Kwei Armah’s verdict on white society is unequivocal. It is a culture saturated with pretensions masquerading as munificence, a people in inertia masked in

vibrancy, a community of inequality parading as privilege. The survival of such a predatory fraternity is sustained in the servility of other races. Indeed the very nature of American civilization betrays this inhuman agenda. Such a caste at the least should be pitied rather than admired. But Armah's pitiless lash does not fall only on the white race, nor does he blame the Caucasian for every misfortune of the less "privileged". Armah's critical censure descends similarly on his black brothers and sisters. In their mad rush to imitate, Blacks cultivate the destructive spirit of competition in which the objective is the color of whiteness with the victor pushing to be as white as possible in attitude and behaviour. The educational process has made it impossible for the average black person to accept African values as worthy of cultivation. Their one ambition is to set themselves as far apart from their own people as possible. If the black person happens to be a half-caste, the better for this process of alienation. For illustration Armah takes us through the world of African freedom fighters with a glimpse of their interpersonal relations. Our example is the relationship between Jorge Manuel (the half-caste) and Esteban Ngulo (the darker African) two revolutionaries who have sworn death to everything white until their country is liberated:

There has always been, to me, something sad in the relationship between Jorge Manuel and Esteban Ngulo, the mulatto and the dark, silent African. Perhaps at first I had not wanted to think of it directly, choosing instead to see them as brothers co-operating in the long fight for our country's freedom. But how long would it have been possible not to see that the light brother drank spirits upstairs with suave, travellers, while down below the black one licked the tasteless backs of stamps? So the awareness would not bury itself, that here, too, was a division that would exist even when the last of the Portuguese had left Congheria, the ambiguous freedom of Esteban Ngulo to serve while Jorge Manuel consumed the credit and the sweetness. Man and his shadow, I began to call them in my mind. At times I just sat and thought of them, and all the slogans and the dreams of equality and justice dissolved in my imagination into an endless procession of masters and servants, men who would remain managers and workers even in moments when they were engaged in fighting some third oppressor (1974, pp. 51-52).

Manuel, the revolutionary, keeps a "white-haired American woman" as white and "predatory" as Aimée. Ngulo performs his revolution behind an office desk with envelopes and stamps, while the fighters die everyday on the field. Therefore, in spite of the distinction, the two armchair revolutionaries have more in common with each other than with the fighting men in the field. They stay alive to the very end to enjoy the fruits of freedom, but not "those who offer themselves up to be killed, to be maimed and driven

insane, those who go beyond what is even possible for other human beings in their pursuit of the revolution” (1974, p. 26) In the course of the revolution “all the best ones died.” And many of those left are “cripples, worse off.” The militants who give their lives on the field do not gain in the end. “The militants are the essence ... that also means they are the fuel for the revolution. And the nature of fuel ...something pure, light, even spiritual, which consumes itself to push forward something heavier, far more gross than itself” (1974, p. 27).

The nature of the African Revolution is symbolized by the diagram of “a vehicle moving up a steep incline from one level stretch to another.” Solo himself explains this symbol:

The truck represents society. Any society. Heavy. With the corrupt ones, the opportunists, the drugged, the old, the young, everybody in it. And then there are the militants, pushing the whole massive thing from the lower to the higher level. But they themselves are destroyed in the process (1974, p. 27).

By the end of the revolution, the militants, the real “essence” of the revolution have been destroyed. What is left is a waste land of the crippled, the drugged, the sick, the young, and the old. The corrupt ones, the opportunists, like Manuel and Ngulo, capitalize on this general waste and step in the shoes of the white masters. Neither the militants nor the people gain. Freedom from white domination means power and affluence for the few, disease, poverty and want for the many. An example of such “freedom” is the sad independence of Laccryville.

Witness these two extracts from the daily life of independent Laccryville:

There are the children. Every morning, even before I am up, they are there waiting for me to open my window, waiting to receive anything I may care to give them. I have never been sure about the right way to treat them. At first only one or two came every morning to wake me up with their shrill voices. I gave them money and biscuits, and since then, they have been bringing their brothers and sisters, so that at times I find about a dozen faces smiling expectantly at me when I go to open my window. Money makes them very happy there is no doubt at all about that. I have made a few attempts to find out who they are, but they do not say much. When asked about their families they talk about their mothers. About their fathers they all give the same answer:

“Mon père? Il est mort.” (1974, p.15).

There are the real beggars, the grown-up ones. I do not know, and I do not think anyone knows, how many there are in all. There must be at least one for every block, and there are thicker concentrations of them in front of the larger shops and around busy places like the underpass beneath the large square near the university. It is impossible to tell who among these were beggars before the revolution, and who were beggared by the haemorrhage itself... I see in their eyes a deeper knowledge of what it is that is happening to them and a resentment of the fact that they are reduced to begging whilst someone else is elevated to the position of bountiful giver (1974, pp. 16-17).

The name Laccryville from its Latin root (*lacrima* – tears; *villa* – country house) means a place of sorrow, tears, and misery. Laccryville is a nation of fatherless children (whose fathers have been killed in the war of independence) and beggars (who have been reduced to their state of penury by the war in which they participated as militants). The sense of shame which overwhelms Solo whenever he is confronted by these children and beggars demonstrates an awareness of a futile independence in which only the opportunists enjoy any freedom in any real sense. The children and beggars are aware of this unfair state of affairs and they resent the demeaning role they are being forced to play (1974, pp. 15-19).

In Solo's mind, there is no difference between the present revolution of his country men and women to bring independence to his country, Congheria, and the completed revolution of Laccryville. Men like Manuel and Ngulo are the opportunists of the Congherian revolution. Congheria (echoing Congo and all its political and historical implications?) is currently undergoing a revolutionary process which Laccryville has already experienced in the immediate past during the independence struggle. It is the way of all revolutions in Africa: freedom is won after a long and bloody struggle; but with independence comes the real enslavement of the ordinary people whose toil and selfless sacrifice help to win independence. Wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the few opportunists; the rest of the population live in abject poverty and filth.

This is the message of the early novels of Ayi Kwei Armah: *The beautiful ones are not yet born*, *Fragments*, *Why are we so blest*, and *Two thousand seasons*. In *The beautiful ones are not yet born*, independence for Ghana means a mad rush for plunder, a life and death struggle to achieve the "gleam." In *Fragments*, in our "great haste to consume things we have taken neither care nor trouble to produce", we cultivate the "Cargo Cult Mentality" which in turn hastens our insane rush towards mental and spiritual colonialism. The new God of the African is "much like the one that began the same long destruction of our people when the elders first ... 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 till the last of our men sells the last woman to any passing white buyer and himself waits to be destroyed by this great haste to consume things we have taken no care nor trouble to produce".

In *Two thousand seasons*, Armah's fourth novel, he gives a cosmic picture of his worldview. In this novel, Armah reveals to us why the beautiful ones are not yet born, why the present-day life of the African is in fragments and why the white man is so blest. According to Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*, the condition of the African – the colonial experience and the present state of division and confusion – had long been prophesied by the prophetess, the “far-listening Anoa”. In “her vatic utterance”, (*Two thousand seasons*, 3), “Anoa spoke her prophecy of a thousand seasons and another thousand seasons: a thousand seasons wasted wondering and amazed along alien roads, another thousand spent finding paths to the living way” (1973, p. xv). This living way is the way of “Reciprocity. Not merely taking, not merely offering. Giving, but only to those from whom we receive in equal measure. Receiving, but only from those to whom we give in reciprocal measure” (1973, p. 27).

Again,

Receiving and giving are twins; any attempt at separation is instant death, for “whatever cannot give, whatever is ignorant even of receiving, knowing only taking, that thing is past its own mere death. It is a carrier of death. Woe to the giver on the road to such a taker, for then the victim has found victorious death (1973, p. xi).

The full impact of the message of *Why are we so blest* is better appreciated in the context of Armah's vision in his fourth novel, *Two thousand seasons*. The two thousand seasons prophesied by Anoa have been long and tragic. The first colonialists were the white “predators” from the desert (the Arabs) who came as beggars, but gradually with the aid of “the ostentatious cripples” among the natives and those they turned into *askaris* and zombies, they took the land from the natives. After several hundred seasons of enslavement under these “predators”, the native women rebelled and threw off the Arab yoke. But even with the Arab defeat, the Africans were still far from their way and after a series of upheavals the majority of the natives who did not want the Arabs back decided to migrate further south to find new land. The trek down south was long and hazardous, with treachery and betrayal as constant companions. But being conscious of their “living way”, the natives marched on undaunted till they finally reached the new land, the fertile land near the sea. Here would have been an ideal paradise for the practice of the way of reciprocity. But Anoa's prophecy had not yet fully matured. The natives had not long settled by the fertile land near the sea when the most ambitious and greedy among the people brought forward the idea of kingship. These were “the ostentatious cripples” who “turned the honoured position of caretakers into plumage for their infirm selves”, and “in the course of generation imposed themselves on a people too weary of strife to think of halting them.” In the course of time, these “ostentatious cripples”, now turned kings, sold

their people to “destruction’s whiteness” and gave the fertile land to the “white destroyers” from the sea, all to satisfy their insane greed for the white man’s “things”.

The result is the slave trade and European colonialism. Nor has the wave of African political independence ushered in a return to the lost way. The two thousand seasons of sufferings and search for the lost way, are not yet over. The final return to the way will not be easy; the road to the way must be learnt and understood before the natives can “destroy the destroyers”; for

Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness. Our way knows no oppression. The way destroys oppression. Our way is hospitable to guests. The way repels destroyers. Our way produces before it consumes. The way produces far more than it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction (1973, p. 62).

The African way is unity and amity rather than division and hostility:

Ours is a companionship of the mind willing to find our way again against the luring softness of immediate situations made garish by the white destroyers, the better to blind unwary lookers; ours is a companionship of the spirit willing to use its energy to survive the immediate hardness of efforts to find liberating paths to our way, the way” (1973, pp. 283-284).

Of course there are setbacks caused by the Africans themselves: “Anxiety there is: always there are those spirits forever hypnotized, eternally trapped to work for the white destroyers, their wills a plaything in alien hands. Always they will be thrown against us” (1973, p. 299). But in the end, Ayi Kwei Armah’s final message is a prophecy of hope and inevitable fulfilment:

Against this what a vision of creation yet unknown, higher, much more profound than all erstwhile creation! What a hearing of the confluence of all the waters of life flowing to overwhelm the ashen desert’s blight! What an utterance of the coming together of all the people of our way, the coming together of all the people of the way (1973, p. 321).

In his first four novels Ayi Kwei Armah chronicles the history of his people in a cosmic vision. In this vision, past, present, and future are juxtaposed in the prism of vatic utterance: before the Whites arrived, Africans had their own “way”, their own culture, institutions, etc. The white people came to destroy all that and replaced them with their own alien values. The only survival of the black people therefore is to reject these alien

values and return to their own way. This is a difficult thing since “there are those spirits” among the Africans that are forever “hypnotized, eternally trapped” by “the luring softness” of the white man’s “things.” The final triumph of the way is, however, inevitable. It will surely come at the end of *Two thousand seasons*.

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