

AN EXAMINATION OF THE DYNAMICS OF POWER IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S

*THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN AND THE HEALERS*

by

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ABSTRACT

After closely reading the works of Ayi Kwei Armah questions about the dynamics of power arose. What are the different conceptions of power? How does Armah use power in his fiction? I closely analyzed two of Armah's works: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *The Healers* (1978). Along with scholarly research, and contextualization I concluded the following: Armah must be understood within the context of his personal experiences, political affiliations, and the historical climate. Armah presented social power dynamics through a scientific, Marxist analysis. He combined social science with an understanding of culture. Finally he used the power of literary aesthetics in the hopes inducing social change.

INDEX WORDS: Power, Power dynamics, Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *The Healers*, Post colonial, Neo colonial, Europeans.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Power and their social dynamics is one of the most basic features of human societies.

The concept of power can be defined in a myriad of different ways but will best function in this work with the following definition by Edward Cartwright: “Social power has traditionally been defined on the basis of the demonstrated ability of one individual to exert influence over others and to defend against the power of others” (quoted by Lee Chai, Bargh et al. 2001:116). One of the foremost learned aspirations among human beings is the attainment of power (control, strength, authority etc), the ability to influence or control circumstances or individuals and thus defend oneself against being controlled, influenced, or exploited. Over time there have been many historical examples the way that power has corrupted governments, kings, queens, organizations, individuals etc. Within the scope of West African literature I found myself, after having read such authors as Amadou Kouroma, Ngugi wa’ Th’iongo, Sembene Ousmane, and finally Ayi Kwei Armah, wanting to understand the dynamics of power and its social psychology. I became interested in how power can be used in literature as an aesthetic device and a socio-political tool designed to bring about awareness and perhaps induce social change. The majority of Ayi Kwei Armah’s fiction shows a very basic understanding of power, and a resistance to certain kinds of social power and authority. Many of Armah’s novels deal with social and individual power dynamics on both an indirect and a direct level. Armah writes his stories with a constant awareness of the way in which power can be used, and abused. He writes about power, the perceptions of power, and the way perception is manifested into behavior. He also makes very important statements about

why and how human beings can be caught up in the competition for power, wealth, and prestige.

Armah wrote *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, his first book, in 1968 and *The Healers*, his fifth, in 1978. Ten years separates the two novels. With close study of the two works reveals the progression of his thoughts and his intellectual growth. How has his treatment of the question of power evolved? Does he treat the power dynamic differently in the two works or has his understanding of power only grown? These works serve as excellent representations of Armah's work and should prove to be good case studies of his personal growth and development as a writer. I hypothesized that with close textual analysis of the two works I could begin to garner a complete understanding of social power, the power of literature, and individual power dynamics. What will a detailed study of Armah's use of language, imagery, and tone reveal about his intended use of the power dynamic in his work? And with those revelations how will the textual analysis force us to delve more deeply into Armah's intended meaning? Will an intimate textual reading be enough and is it ever? Clearly, as with most gifted and prolific authors, in order to fully appreciate Armah, his purpose, and his fiction I will have to go beyond textual analysis.

For this work to illustrate the complexity of Armah's exploitation of the power dynamic further sociological comprehension of Armah and his creative productions is necessary. We will need both contextualization and conceptualization. We must understand not only Armah's political sympathies which ultimately will color his work but also to delve into the context of his work. Firstly, I will contextualize Armah's writing in a variety of ways. I will examine the literary accomplishments of the two

novels within the context of place, time, and the circumstances surrounding Armah's own intellectual growth. Secondly, his work has to be contextualized according to the first successes of the Pan Africanist movement (Ghana's Independence) and the "Third World" consciousness that began with the Bandoeng Conference in 1955. Additionally, we must also take into account the African American civil rights/black consciousness movement which was at its peak in the United States while Armah studied at Harvard University. What role did these events play in Armah's development as an activist? How did they influence his writing as he began his literary career? How would Armah, who was committed to liberation from imperialism and colonialism, use his creative ability to make a contribution to the liberation movement? And finally, what was Armah's intellectual relationship with Martinican psychologist Frantz Fanon? Armah and Fanon both lived and worked in Algeria during the revolution for Algerian independence from France. How familiar was Armah with Fanon's sociological studies of colonized countries? Did he allow his own work to be influenced by Fanon's examination of the physical and psychological damage done to the African native by colonial powers? My work will conceptualize and to contextualize Armah's work as compliments to the literary analysis

Additionally, we must be aware of Armah's approach to socio-realism approach in the creation of his novels. Initially, we could think that Armah is trying to set up a dichotomy between the races. However, I will try to ensure that we stay away from such a simplistic reading. Armah is more interested in the oppressions and exploitations that occur across class lines rather than racial analysis. Armah's decision to write in a simple direct style however, does present questions in regard to the socio-political issues that he



tackles. It is, at least, partly correct to say that Armah tries to conceptualize his understanding of society from a very scientific, perhaps slightly Marxist point of view. However, how does a purely Marxist analysis of Armah's work limit our own appreciation of his message? What role does culture and Armah's own cultural (the Akan of Ghana) oral tradition play in his work? Why does Armah use a very simple origin myth in *The Healers*? What is his ultimate intention as he tries to link the scientific Marxist approach with the more cultural, mythic approach to literature?

In the analysis of *The Healers* (1978) I will, in the first section, take a closer look at Armah's "myth of origin" which is closely reminiscent of the biblical story of Adam and Eve and their being thrown out of Paradise. The exploration of this myth, written according to his own Akan oral tradition within the context of his own personal experiences, reveals Armah's intention in his creation of the story. This chapter will further explore the intentions behind the use of culture and the oral tradition in his work. Additionally, we will analyze the way in which the circumstances of Armah's own intellectual development affected his work and explore the extent of the Pan Africanist influence on Armah and his novels.

The second section will focus on an analysis of both works within the context of history and his relationship with Fanon. Armah spends a great deal of time exploring the effect of colonization on both the social systems in Ghana as well as on the psyche of the African individual. We will look intimately at Armah's more fictional comments about the effects of colonization and compare them with Fanon's sociological study in *The Wretched of The Earth*. From this comparison I hope to provide a better insight into the

possible influence that Fanon may have had on Armah, as well as the way in which the socio-political climate may have shaped Armah's use of language, and imagery.

The third section will closely study individual power relationships through close textual and psychological analysis. By looking at the interactions between each character we will be able to see the way in which Armah understands not only power but human nature. The study of individual power relationships in chapter three will continue to look into Armah's scientific approach. It will delve further into the mix of scientific and cultural approach and will continue into section four.

This last section will continue to show Armah's condemnation of the newly structured social systems in Africa. Looking closely at one character and his use of power in society will help to further this analysis. I will conclude having presented a complete examination of Armah's use of the power dynamic in his work from both an aesthetic and a social perspective.

## CHAPTER TWO: POWER VS. AUTHORITY

The concept of power is polysemic; dictionaries contain several definitions. The Random House Dictionary of 1966 defines power as follows: “1)ability to do or act; capability of doing or accomplishing something; 2) particular facilities or capabilities of body or mind: creative powers: the power of speech; 3)strength; might; force; 4) political or national strength; or 5) delegated authority”. The initial definition of the word speaks of an individual type of power where there is strength of body or mind. However, the definitions listed also include descriptions of social power. Definition four and five are especially significant within the context of this work. They express that power is frequently equated with political or social authority. However, Armah asserts that there are two very different kinds of power. There is power that is accepted and supported by society. This kind of legitimate power is usually called authority. On the other hand, there exists another kind of power that is not accepted by society. Thus, it has no social base or legitimacy. In Armah’s texts, characters such as Koomson (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*) and Ababio (*The Healers* 1978) represent the latter type of power.

This section will first examine the socio-political issues that Armah addresses in *The Beautiful Ones*. We will combine basic historical and biographical facts concerning Armah and Ghana to compliment the textual analysis that will ensue. Following the presentation of factual information we will explore the character of Koomson, Armah’s fictive representation of the new social power. Within this exploration, we will provide an in depth analysis of Armah’s aesthetic purpose as well as his use of power in literature.

Further, we will examine Armah's deconstruction of the neo-colonial conception of power.

The last part of our analysis of the *The Beautiful Ones* will consist of contrasting two scenes and depicting Koomson in two different functions. The second half of the chapter will deal with Armah's understanding of the power dynamic in *The Beautiful Ones* and in *The Healers*. This section of the chapter will try to capture Armah's intellectual growth and the progression of purpose. In so doing, we will examine Armah's use of myth and oral tradition to frame the novel. Armah's use of myth will be contextualized by relating it to his own Pan-African consciousness. Finally this section will present a complete illustration of Armah's aesthetic and social usage of the concept of power.

The theme of material wealth or the pull of "the gleam" (Armah 1968: 113) appears in Armah's first novel. In an article discussing "The Roots of Corruption in Ghana" Herbert H. Werlin examines the effects of colonialism on Africans and their increased wishes to acquire material wealth. He writes of Ghanaian elite with foreign training:

Those with professional qualifications or foreign training are especially desirous of having the same standard of living as their Western counterparts. Consequently, I.K. Gyasi points out, they feel it necessary to acquire a big car, television set, a stereo, and 'a bevy of fawning women'. 'We need all of them, and our pay is not enough' (Werlin 1972: 255).

Werlin cites I.K. Gyasi who speaks specifically about these materialistic tendencies as a contemporary Ghanaian. Werlin points out the need for the big car, television set, and a stereo. These are all luxury items that represent for many Ghanaians not only monetary wealth but a closeness to Western society. Having grown up during a very important time in Africa's history, Armah saw first hand the sort of cultural neurosis of which Werlin

speaks. Further, Armah attended Achimota College between 1952 and 1958. This school is important not only for its prestige, but also because it was also attended by Ghana's first Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah. Armah graduated from Achimota two years before Ghana obtained its independence. Therefore, he truly came to adulthood during a very politically charged time in Ghana's history. This time was also crucial to Africa's history due to the fact that Ghana was the first country in Africa to gain its independence from colonial powers.

We can suppose that Armah, perhaps even more so than most Ghanaians, looked to Nkrumah and the new independent government to bring about great social and economic changes for the betterment of the country. He would have also looked for the new government to serve as an example to the continent. However, the reality was very different from the hopes of Armah and the people. Unfortunately, over time Nkrumah's government became corrupted by power, and the elite members of society seemed to be the only benefactors of independence. One of the results of the corruption that ensued during Nkrumah's time in power was the need for the elite to acquire material things, usually at the expense of the working class. This reality was extremely disappointing for Armah and other Ghanaians who believed in Nkrumah's leadership ability.

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a novel that is a story exclaiming Armah's disappointment with Ghana's/Africa's so called "Independence". He dedicates a good portion of the novel to criticizing the new government's corruption through the use of a filth or excrement metaphor. Armah's story asserts that the filth of corruption pervades the country coating almost every socio-economic aspect of society. The story chronicles a short time in the life of an anonymous character who represents Ghana's

working class. The protagonist, “the man”, in *The Beautiful Ones* is one of the few characters in the novel that tries to stay cleansed of the filth of corruption and decay in neo colonial Ghana. His decision to remain “clean” is constantly challenged by the pressure of his family and society to join the corruptive forces that continue to exist around him. “The man’s” counterpart and classmate Koomson is Armah’s representation of the corrupt elite. Koomson is the quintessential bourgeois politician who aspires to wealth and prestige. The problem is that he has no intention of working for that power, and instead, he relies on empty accolades and stolen money. The contrast between the two characters is highlighted by their occasional interaction with one another. The novel culminates with an ironic reversal of position in which, after a military coup, Koomson needs “the man” to save him from imprisonment or worse.

“The man” is repulsed by corruption and the single- minded efforts of his loved ones to attain money and material things. However, in rare moments of introspective clarity the man admits to himself that it is not the actual “gleam” (material wealth) that repels him but the corruption that seems to be required to acquire the gleam. In actuality he, like most human beings, could understand the desire for beautiful things. At a time when his wife is about to engage in an act of corruption with Koomson, “the man” sits in Koomson’s lavishly expensive home and contemplates the pull of material wealth. He thinks of his wife longing for upward mobility,

He could not blame her in the least. There were things here for a human being to spend a whole lifetime desiring. There were things here to attract the beholding eye and make it accept the power sign. It was impossible not to notice the ashtrays, for instance, since they were not just things to be used, but also things with a beauty of their own that forced the admiration of even the unwilling (Armah 1968: 170).

Armah is making two important points in this passage. He acknowledges that wishing for beautiful things is understandable, a very human desire in fact. His use of strong language such as “forced admiration” and “even unwilling” make the point that there is greatness in beauty in itself. Beauty, on its own, insists on being recognized and admired. Neil Lazarus in his discussion of the man’s attraction to the gleam states,

the man’ appreciates that the repulsion he feels toward expensive commodities that constitute the external manifestations of the gleam derives from his prior recognition that in an underdeveloped society it is only either the dishonest or those prepared to manipulate others who can hope to acquire them. In themselves diamond earrings and imported bone china tea sets are things of great beauty and innocent (Wright ed. 1992:167).

Lazarus’s comment reinforces the idea that “the man” also cannot help but feel a natural attraction and, as stated, in the text “admiration” for the ‘manifestations of the gleam’.

Armah also acknowledges that there is power in beauty that can be harnessed and used. This acknowledgement is important in that it is dealing with power on two different levels. Because the passage of the novel is dealing with the materials that have been acquired by a corrupt individual, there is an implied criticism and rejection of Koomson’s own sense of power. Armah rejects such a conception of power because Koomson obtained these material goods through dishonest means, and they are just symbols of false power rather than true power. Koomson needs these false validations, like a beautiful ashtray, because the power that he tries to claim does not originate from his society. Thus, he does not have any legitimate authority within the cultural context. Moreover, his material wealth represents the type of power that corrupts and exploits. Armah asserts through language that he, as a writer, can use the power of the beauty in

his own work to challenge his readers to recognize the social problems that Koomson represents in *The Beautiful Ones*.

Armah's decision to use the power of beauty to plead for social change is the fundamental reason for his decision to write. Armah initially wanted to physically fight in various freedom movements. He is first an activist and strong advocate for the liberation of third world countries from imperialism. True to the "Third World" consciousness that became popular after the Bandoeng Conference in 1955, Armah also exhibits Pan Africanist leanings. In the early 1960's Armah made a valiant attempt to fight in the liberation movements in southern Africa. He was unable to carry out the project because of a nervous breakdown. He thus continued to witness the dehumanization of native peoples in third world countries. Finally, accepting the fact that he wasn't going physically able to contribute to the movements he returned to Ghana in June of 1964, deciding that he could use his creative ability to contribute to the ongoing struggle.<sup>1</sup> Four years later, Armah publishes *The Beautiful Ones* in which several short passages, like the one previously quoted, tell us what the writer's intentions were: to use literature as an emancipatory tool.

The political commentary that ensues throughout the novel is full of despair, disappointment, and disillusionment. Armah condemns the government of Nkrumah for the corruption that seems to consume it. Moreover, he censures the leaders of society that refuse to work for their people by claiming all the benefits of their position at the

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<sup>1</sup> All of Armah's biographical information is obtained from: Ogede, Ode. Ayi Kwei Armah: Radical Iconoclast. Athens, Ohio University Press. 2000. p6



same time. In the following passage “the man’s” friend and mentor, the anonymous “Teacher”, ruminates with “the man” about the contemporary government:

There were men dying from the loss of hope, and others were finding gaudy ways to enjoy power they did not have. We were ready here for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs. These men who were to lead us out of despair, they came like men already grown fat and cynical with the eating of centuries of power they had never struggled for (Armah 1968:94).

Armah’s mouthpiece, “The Teacher,” laments over the actions of greedy and lazy leaders that destroyed most of the hope that Africa had for its future. According to “the teacher” it was lost when leaders needed their own validation thanks to material wealth and prestige. The passage speaks of leaders who wanted social power without working for it. It laments over political leaders that were willing to exploit the working class in order to obtain social power. Armah’s anguish is almost palpable, as through this character he describes men spiritually and physically “dying from loss of hope”, and men that are greedy enough to consume power gained from the former masters. The food analogy creates an image of fat, greedy, politician who is so busy gobbling all the money and power, he can consume with no regard for those from whom their “food” is taken away. That image literally reduces the power of these corrupt leaders to a primitive concern, a gregary instinct. Therefore, because of his despair and disappointment Armah asserts, through “the Teacher”, his determination to resist this new conception of power which states that authority is obtained through material wealth and gaudy adornments. He takes representations of social power, like these political leaders, and presents them in very parodic images, thus using literature to criticize and resist their authority.

Armah’s aesthetic resistance continues with Koomson’s story. Let us compare and contrast two very symbolic scenes framing this character. We will look at our initial

encounter with Koomson and one of our last meetings with him at the end of the novel. The first time the reader meets Koomson, he is pulling up in a luxury car, getting ready to buy bread from a street vendor. As he is about to leave another vendor, understanding that this is a man of material wealth, the vendor tries to persuade him to also buy her bread. She says, “‘My lord’, comes the woman again, ‘my big lord, this bread is real bread’” (Armah 1968: 43). With his hesitation “the seller sweetens her tones” and goes even further to acknowledge and ‘play up to’ Koomson’s status within the society by giving him the most prestigious title of respect, “My own lord, my master, oh my *white man*, come. Come and take my bread. It is all yours, my white man, all yours” (Armah 1968: 43 emphasis mine). The seller can obviously see at of the luxury car and the suit that Koomson is a rich man who holds a very prestigious place in Ghanaian society. The seller gives Koomson the highest respect by naming him “white man” which reflects her own understanding of his wealth, of his position in the new society that she has to suffer. Again, this passage is a powerful symbol of the difference between illegitimate power and authority. Koomson’s suit and his luxury car signify power in the new Ghana. However, there is no true basis for him holding any authority. Armah rejects this conception of power as false and through “the man’s” resistance and the teacher’s thoughts points out its weakness.

In complete contrast to this first scene with Koomson, the end of the novel presents Koomson having to literally crawl headfirst into a latrine full of feces and urine in order to escape his military pursuers:

The disgust left Koomson’s face, and the resignation returned. With a small shudder he lowered his head till it was just above the hole, then in a rapid sinking action he thrust it through...Quietly now, he climbed onto the seat, held Koomson’s legs and rammed them down. He could hear Koomson strain like a

man excreting, then there was a long sound as if he were vomiting down there. But the man pushed some more, and in a moment a rush of foul air coming up told him the Pary man's head was out (Armah 1968: 197-198).

Armah symbolically confiscates Koomson's power by forcing him to go head first into a toilet full of excrement. Since the excrement and filth represents corruption in the novel, Koomson's character has to face himself and his corrupt behavior. Furthermore, the Koomson's humiliation is complete as he climbs through this toilet and emerges covered in, metaphorically, his own filth. The scene completely takes away any power that he represented in our initial encounter with his character. As the major figure of corruption in the text, this is clearly the ultimate moment of aesthetic resistance and condemnation in the novel. However, what is important is that the filth, as a natural element of humanity, also serves as a redemptive ritual. As Koomson passes through the latrine he is symbolically returning to the people and will be cleansed of his prior corruption.

This redemptive ritual is a strategy that is used elsewhere as a tool of African oral literature. In Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*, the protagonist must accept the saliva that is spit upon him by the society in order to cure him of a disease brought about by his own corruption. For Armah, this is not just a rejection of illegitimate power, it is a scene that implies hope for the future. Therefore, Armah successfully makes several assertions about power by using the concept aesthetically. He literally fights for liberation from exploitation and subjugation with his creative ability. Ten years after his first novel, Armah's fifth work of fiction exhibits a great deal of creative and intellectual growth but still shows the same commitment to liberation.

*The Healers* (1978) is a fairy tale-like story about the fall of the Ashanti kingdom. The novel is reminiscent of the various origin myths that most societies contain. The

opening of the novel, in fact, reads very much like the biblical fall from paradise. The novel starts off with the story of a people, who began as a whole united community but eventually allow migration and division to create individualistic communities that instead of working together war against one another and compete for power over land and wealth. Within the larger tale, there is the story of a group of knowledgeable men and women known as Healers who are working to restore the initial wholeness to individuals as well as to groups. Central to the story is Densu, a young man who is disgusted by this new divided society. His character is complimented by Damfo, his wise, older teacher who shows him the things that are wrong about the current society and how Healers can help. In opposition to Damfo and Densu is Ababio, like Koomson in *The Beautiful Ones*; he is the symbol of greed, corruption, and social power. The story starts in the small kingdom of Esuano where Densu will be falsely accused of the murder of prince Appia, the heir to the throne in Esuano. His escape will result in his traveling throughout Ghana and participating in a number of adventures, which is similar to many heroes in the West African oral tradition. Densu will spy on the English, fight in the Ashanti army and eventually return to Esuano to face the corrupt Ababio and bring justice to the prince.

Armah's treatment of the concept of power has not deviated very much from his first novel. We still see an understanding of the difference between legitimate power or authority and illegitimate power. Armah creates characters that clearly have no legitimate authority within the society, but find ways to accumulate power despite the lack of social acceptance. Ababio is one example of such a character. Another interesting example of this sort of phenomenon is seen in the European characters who represent colonial power. The colonial masters are almost always understood to be the ultimate wielders of

military, financial, and political power. However, Armah uses his writing ability to depict European characters who need similar false validations of their authority as Koomson.

Glover, a European character in the text, is described by a healer as a vain commander who needs to constantly hear about his own greatness.

‘I don’t know this Glover,’ Duodu said. ‘But everybody talks about him. From what I hear, his greatest quality is vanity. The fool thinks we black people cannot resist loving him. That we’ll do anything for him. He likes to be called the Great White Father of the blacks, the protector, the friend (Armah 1978: 289). Glover is very similar to Koomson. He does not truly have the support, love, and

acceptance of all black people. However, in order to convince himself that his power is legitimate Glover desire empty praise names that will temporarily attest to his power.

Glover, is a European character depicted during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however he still is a good symbol of contemporary Ghanaian members of the political party. He and contemporary leaders resemble each other because they both need empty accolades to assure them of their power in the society. Again, Armah uses language to depict resistance to entities that supposedly possess great amounts of power. His resistance of European power or authority is important because of the psychological effect that colonialism has had on African natives. Armah shows a desire to combat these psychological consequences in this text. This desire exemplifies Armah’s creative progression between these two texts. In *The Healers* Armah presents a story that has a different focus. In *The Healers* the emphasis is not on the deconstruction of contemporary conceptions of power; it rather stresses cultural affirmation and ancestry. Armah begins this affirmation with the creation of the mythical story that opens the novel.

The origin myth from the start of the novel reflects a great deal of Armah's purpose. A very simplistic reading would lead us to believe that we should take this work at face value and it would open Armah to criticism for the lack of historical fact and very simplistic understanding of black history. However, we must examine the context within which he writes. Firstly, as we saw in his first novel, Armah, uses a very scientific approach to the statements he makes about power and authority. However, Armah seems to be aware that science will not completely resolve all of the issues faced by independent Africa. While science will deal with the socio-economic problems that many countries face it will not alleviate cultural confusion and inferiority complexes. Armah has chosen to rely on the traditions of his Akan culture to try to bring about the "mental liberation" of African people. Hence, he writes the mythological tale, *The Healers*.

The oral tradition that shapes this novel is evident from the opening of the story. Armah takes on the voice of an oral storyteller, much like a *jeli*, a griot, from the Mande culture. Armah creates a voice that not only remembers such a social institution but he adds the other voices of those who are supposed to aid the storyteller. For example, in the beginning of the novel one passage reads as if the storyteller, not the reader, is being addressed:

Let the listener know when. Let the listener know where. Then, Anona tongue, born for eloquence, continue your telling. And in the joy of your eloquence keep faith with the mind's remembrance, lest the teller's forgetfulness spoil the listener's joy (Armah 1978:9).

The verbal quality of the passage is the first evidence of the oral aspect of the text.

Secondly the language has a very musical, poetic sound which reminds us of the musical aspect of oral literature. We are also shown some of the requirements of a good oral storyteller: good memory, organization, eloquence, and beauty. The storyteller must be

able to accurately tell the story and (s)he must be able to capture the attention of the listener. Ultimately the storyteller must be able to give pleasure or “joy” to her/his listeners. Armah not only inserts this passage as an indicator of the oral aspect of the novel, he also calls our attention to the beauty contained in this aspect of West African culture.

Armah’s decision to adapt the oral tradition from his culture is the result of his own experiences as a young adult. As a witness to the inferiority complexes that ensued after colonial domination Armah had a personal interest in re-validating the culture that so many Africans rejected for the allegedly “more civilized” European culture. His intention is not to demonize the European culture but to assert African culture. Further, Armah’s studies in the United States probably enabled him to have a plethora of influential experiences. In 1959 Armah traveled to Massachusetts to study at Groton School for one year. Following his time there he attended Harvard University until 1963 but could not complete his degree because of his response to white racism in the states(Ogede 2000:6) Armah lived in the States during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. Militants such as Malcolm X, who called for black pride and the acceptance of African roots, traveled the country making fiery speeches and elevating the consciousness of African Americans. Armah must have been strongly affected by the political climate in the United States and felt his own desire to “mentally liberate” his people reinforced. Further, to see so many black people relying on their own “origin myth” of black greatness in their African ancestry must have incited Armah to try to instill the same pride in his fellow Africans. *The Healers* is quite possibly the manifestation of this influence. Thus, Armah’s intention in this text proves to be a

completely different use of the power dynamic. In *The Healers* Armah's intention is to use beauty or aesthetics for the purposes of empowerment and affirmation.

Empowerment which can be defined as; "to equip with ability, or to enable"(Random House Dictionary 1966). This definition is not as rooted in society as the other and speaks of an internal power rather than an external. The desire to empower Africans simultaneously deconstructs the power perceived in the colonial masters and affirms African or black culture. Further, Armah empowers through practical suggestions for social change.

The story of *The Healers* begins with a description of a physical and social division of a great unit of black people, the idea being that it was the division of African peoples, division brought about by migration that created different nations, tribes, and communities. The storyteller remembers:

The truth was plain: among the wandering people some had chosen homes. Deeper in the heart of the land, and settled in the forests there. This was Division. Some had pushed their way eastward till they came to a great fertile river and settled along its banks (Armah 1978: 11).

According to the storyteller, as people divided into factions, original societal cultures began to be lost and because of the larger external division, internal division also began. People gradually set up their own societies and the original "oneness" of African people was lost. Slowly division brought about individualism, competition and social hierarchies:

This was division...Yes, for a while each Fraction continued in some form the ceremonies meant to remind a scattered people of our common origin. But in some places the ceremonies died with time. In all places the ceremonies changed. Their intended meaning had been wholeness. But the circumstances under which they had been played out had been circumstances of division, circumstances of fragmentation (Armah 1978: 11, 12)



The mythical characteristic of the prose is revealed in the general language, the lack of temporal placement in the description of events, and the universal references. This is not a specific ethnic group, or nation being described by the storyteller. This is an origin myth describing a united race of people which strives for a universal quality. However, the author, through the storyteller, presents this mythical past for a very pragmatic purpose. Armah's prose focuses on the words "division" and "wholeness" indicating that he is interested in the elimination of division and the restoration of unity.

The political climate during Armah's intellectual growth and his own life choices indicate that Armah was clearly a Pan Africanist. He was attending the Achimota College during the Bandoeng Conference of 1955. At that conference the "third world" consciousness took a definite shape. Further, the belief in a unified African continent was adopted by African leaders pioneered by the Ghanaian hero, Kwame Nkrumah. A different sort of Pan Africanism had become a popular school of thought in the United States as well. This consciousness began in the early 1900's and was greatly orchestrated by American sociologist W.E.B. Dubois.<sup>2</sup> It advocated the unification of black people of the Diaspora in order to find a solution to the oppression and exploitation of all black people. All of these factors combined with Armah's own desire to participate in the liberation movements in Algeria, and southern Africa indicate that Armah is very much a believer in the Pan Africanist philosophy. Under the assumption that Armah is a Pan Africanist, we can see his myth in a new light. Instead of a simplistic and idyllic

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<sup>2</sup> Dubois died in Nkrumah's Ghana. He is buried in Accra, in the compound of the Villa given to him by Nkrumah.

representation of Africa's past, Armah is actually proposing viable solutions for Africa's future. He obviously is trying through this myth to assert that African countries must politically unite in order to further the continent's socio-economic development.

As the story progresses Armah illustrates a series of ritual games that exemplify the actual geographic as well as the social division within this society. More importantly, Armah points out the adverse psychological affects that these games can have on the youth as they move through the process of growth and development. The young men participating will carry the social lessons learned from the games as they grow into contributing adult members of that society. Densu, one of the youth who is moving toward a healer's vocation, is the figure of resistance to the individualistic lessons that the games teach. Densu instinctively steps out of the games or intentionally loses when he understands the larger effect that the competition will have socially and politically. Critic Wright comments:

Densu, who is opposed to the competitive spirit of the games, prefers to keep out of the violent wrestling match; his friend Appia refuses to press his advantage against Kojo Djan because of the brutality this would entail. For both boys, the price of victory is too high in social and human terms; the very idea of competition enhances social divisions by setting one individual apart from the rest (Wright 1992:316).

Densu decides internally that he is opposed to these social divisions. He wonders to himself: "But at the end of the ceremonies of wholeness a single individual was held up to be glorified by the whole community. Where was the root of wholeness in such a strange ritual of separation?" (Armah 1978: 14) Conveniently converting to an omniscient narrator, Armah conveys Densu's thoughts regarding the games. Through Densu, he uses language that purposely exaggerates the detrimental effects that result

from these competitive games. He uses words of exaggeration in order to emphasize his point about the consequences of disunity and an elitist culture.

Armah's first and fifth works both constitute an extremely significant contribution to the literary treatment of power. In his first work Armah uses the beauty or the power of language to reject neo-colonial conceptions of power in a dominated society. Further, he illustrates the fact that material wealth and titles are not legitimate representations of power. He rejects the power of corrupt political leaders, such as Koomson, who do not have the acceptance of society. However, in his rejection of Koomson's power Armah provides a way for him to be redeemed. Thus, the contrast between Koomson's entrance into the novel and his exit only highlight the symbolism and the purification ritual taking place rather than setting up a dichotomic view of the character. Armah's fifth novel similarly points out the difference between legitimate power and false validations of power through characters such as Glover. In this novel Armah dedicates some time to the rejection of perceived European colonial power. This rejection marks the evolution of Armah's intentions as he continues his creative work. With the use of oral literature, myth, and Pan Africanist assertions Armah attempts to empower African people by displaying the symbolic power of their literary tradition. We conclude that Armah's literary production is much more complex than a rudimentary sociological reading that can simply point to a bold social realism. More so, we will see that many passages of Armah's fiction are reminiscent of Fanonian theory.

### CHAPTER THREE: ARMAH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FRANTZ FANON AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF EUROPEAN DOMINATION

Within his two works *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *The Healers* (1978), Armah criticizes the African elite and their tendency to be corrupted by political strength. In *The Healer,s* he depicts the initial English invasion and African kings' aspirations to maintain their positions of authority despite English domination. *The Beautiful Ones* depicts the contemporary Ghanaian elite's desire for the small scraps of power left behind by the English after independence. Armah, through his characters, also criticizes the fact these very elite have not worked to obtain that power and therefore are not legitimized by the society. Martinican theorist Frantz Fanon asserts in his sociological work, *The Wretched of The Earth* (1963), that the African native has suffered multiple psychological problems because of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. Fanon's work, a post-colonial theory, uses the Algerian revolution as the main source of his analysis. Fanon was sent by France to work as a psychiatrist in a hospital in Algeria, and later he joined the Algerian Nationalist Movement. He died in Ghana in 1961 shortly after completing *The Wretched of The Earth*. The degree to which Armah has been influenced by Fanon's theories is a source of continued speculation and debate. We do know that Armah, too, worked in Algeria in 1963 as a translator for a magazine called *Revolution Africaine*. We assume that, Armah at least harbors an intellectual affiliation with Fanon.

In our continued discussion of the dynamic of power and authority this section will observe the European manipulation of the conception of power. Along with that successful manipulation the colonial institution was then able to abuse the power and authority that was taken as well as given. Through the study of both works we will examine Armah's characters as they serve as representations of that manipulation and abuse of power. Also an analysis of Armah's work will reveal a great deal of his understanding of the psychological consequences of colonialism in Africa. Thus, this essay will presume that Armah was familiar with Fanon's theories and will examine in what way his theories are manifested in Armah's fiction. We will also contemplate the implications of those manifestations for Armah's aesthetic and social projects.

Armah's predilection is to ground his tales on historical narratives. So is the strategy in *2000 Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978). What such a strategy implies is the relevance of historical consciousness for individual and group; however, history does not mean an "accurate account" of events but a more general conceptualization of traditional culture for the community. Only "historical knowledge" enables us to fully appreciate Armah's suggestions for the present. Within *The Healers*, Armah creates characters like Ababio, who is the representative of the corrupt elite. Ababio clearly has selfish aspirations to power, prestige and wealth. His actions throughout the text speak of not only a greedy and corrupt leader but also of one who is willing to commit the most heinous crimes in order to get what he wants. Ababio's orchestration of Prince Appia's murder is sufficient evidence of his nature. Ababio is a reflection of the crimes of African nobility before the colonial era. Ababio justifies his crimes before he commits them as he tries to convince Densu of the importance of power: "I showed you the way to

the most important thing in a man's life, the thing every man who is a man works for. That thing is power. In life there is nothing else worth aiming for, Densu" (Armah 1978: 58). Ababio's cynical philosophy and his actions illustrate his resemblance to Koomson's character in *The Beautiful Ones*. He miscalculates the importance of obtaining power through the acceptance of society and therefore commits an act that society would completely reject. Further, Ababio's attitude helps us to make the important distinction between the kinds of power to which he refers. He desires the power to control, power held by force or fear, which is very different from power given or delegated by a community's institutions.

Ababio, who is clearly only interested in his own personal ascension to power, is still intelligent enough to recognize the changes that are coming to the continent with the large influx of English finances and military. The issue, however, is that he does not see them as an alien force that he should be working against but only as a means to the political power that he does not currently have: "Look, the first of them came to the coast four centuries ago. Now all power comes from them" (Armah 1978:39). Further Ababio argues,

The whites are going to control this land, as surely as your father is dead. But they cannot control the land without help from people they trust. Power comes from work, a lot of work. There will be fighting. War. We shall have to help the whites by finding men to fight for them, here and every where. We'll have to find carriers for the things the fighters need, and for the white officers...Don't you see? Once we agree to work for the whites, we put ourselves on the road to power. It is a road without end" (Armah 1978: 40).

With this character, Armah illustrates the fulfillment of the European goal to convince Africans of their omniscient power. Ababio's language is filled with complete certainty and faith in European power. He compares their certain domination of African land with the certainty of death. He temporarily takes on the role of a prophet who is able to foresee the struggle for power that will soon ensue. Additionally, he asserts his own intention to latch onto the victors of this struggle regardless of ethical or moral concerns. However, Armah does not use Ababio's voice only to illustrate his reprehensible character. He clearly uses Ababio to make a point about European power. Ababio says that Europeans cannot gain full power without the help from Africans. Through his voice Armah then argues that the Europeans need more than just military might and financial wealth to successfully conquer the African continent. They need to be given assistance locals who already possessed social power or were longing for it. Further, in his earlier statement Ababio mentions briefly that the Europeans have been around for four centuries. That acknowledgement further emphasizes the faults in a character like Ababio who doesn't want to expel the same energy or effort.

Ababio also sees that he as an individual could be exploited and subjugated under European rule. He says, "And if we are such fools as to stand against the whites, they will grind us until we become less than impotent, less than grains of bad snuff tossing in a storm"(Armah1978: 40). His observations emphasize another aspect of colonialism. Where there were individuals or kingdoms that refused to accept European authority it was taken by force. Ababio describes in very powerful imagery the way in which Africans will be exploited and dehumanized over the years. Again with the voice of a prophet, a cynical one, Ababio speaks of grains of snuff being tossed about in a storm,

painting a picture of individuals who will have no control over their own lives, no agency, and no sense of empowerment. The image grains and snuff speaks to impotence from a masculinist perspective, which is a common metaphor in modern African literature. It is not this form of impotence that should concern us. Instead, we will look at the psychological consequences of such a humiliating condition.

Indeed, Armah treats the question of impotence in his very first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. This novel concentrates on the psychological and sociological effects of the complicity with colonial rulers in the depictions of a variety of socially powerless, marginal characters in the text. For instance, the text describes men who have just come back from fighting for England in WWII. These men want the same rights and privileges that they see overseas but instead they return to a country in which these rights are still denied. As a result, they are full of anger which they direct at each other because they cannot direct it at their oppressors. “The teacher,” in his conversations with “the man” says: “The anger came out, but it was all victim anger that had to find even weaker victims, and it was never satisfied, always adding shame to itself” (Armah 1968: 80). Armah describes their anger as “victim anger,” placing them in the category of one who is victimized because they are powerless to resist their oppressor. Their impotence causes them to lash out at those weaker than themselves in order to find some kind of release from their frustration and a sense of empowerment.

The impotence that Armah depicts in both of the fictional works is almost the exact literary manifestation of Frantz Fanon’s theories. He articulates this same psychosis in his text, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), where colonized Africans find a variety of alternative ways to express the hostility they feel toward their oppressors.



Fanon interprets not only the conscious behavior but also the subconscious reactions to European rule.

This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning...The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people. This is the period when the niggers beat each other up (Fanon 1963:52).

Fanon describes a very dangerous and disturbing phenomenon in which people turn on each other during a time when they need to be the most unified. The startling agreement between Fanon's theory and Armah's fiction implies more than just a familiarity with Fanon's work. Obviously, Armah must have relied on Fanon to help him comprehend the mental damage done to his country-men. He may have also read Fanon in an attempt to gain a better understanding of himself and his own psychological issues. It is a well-documented fact that Armah was unable to fight in southern Africa due to a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized in 1964. Perhaps Armah was able to identify his own psychosis through his reading of Fanon's theories.

Moreover, as we look forward into the post-independence era Fanon's theories argue that African elite were mentally affected by colonial domination in a variety of other ways. The subjugation of the African elite also occurred in the classrooms and in their closer contact with Europeans. Through the European educational system, Africans

were taught that their native culture, language, their very society, was uncivilized. They were taught European languages and European culture, and they eventually began to believe in the superiority of the white colonizer. Gradually, Africans began to do their very best to emulate or imitate the European. Simultaneously, even as they hated the European who was their oppressors, they loved the same European who was believed to be intellectually and culturally superior to themselves. After Independence as the Ghanaian bourgeoisie began to step into the offices and political positions left open by English colonialists they attempted to adopt the same outward appearances of wealth and prestige.

Fanon explains the behavior of the “national middle class” with his understanding of the faulty thinking of the mentally colonized native: “During the period of unrest that precedes independence, certain native elements, intellectuals, and traders, who live in the midst of that imported bourgeoisie, try to identify themselves with it. A permanent wish for identification with the bourgeois representatives of the mother-country is to be found among the native intellectuals and merchants” (Fanon 1968: 178). Fanon illustrates the native desire to step into the same shoes of material wealth and political power which is a fundamental and impossible enterprise to validate oneself and attain self-respect by moving closer to whiteness. The problem, again, is the African’s false belief in their inferiority.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, a good example of this desire to imitate white culture is expressed by The Teacher. The Teacher explains to “the man”: “And if the little men around the big men send their children to new international schools, why not? That is all anyone here ever struggles for: to be nearer the white man. All the shouting against the

white men was not hate. It was love. Twisted, but love all the same” (Armah 1968:109).

Again, Armah’s prose through “the teacher’s” voice describes the very same psychosis that Fanon theorizes in his text. This idea of a “twisted love” proposes an interesting understanding of the African elite who insist on speaking European languages and wearing European clothes. However, it also reflects Armah’s own experiences. “The teacher” specifically mentions leaving the country in order to obtain education and this clearly was a recognition of Armah’s own education at Groton School, Harvard, and Columbia. Armah shows an interesting willingness to criticize himself and his own culpability in the cultural confusion that results from European domination. Armah’s condemnation of this phenomenon is reiterated over and over again in the text as “the Teacher” laments,

There is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days. Men who had risen to lead the hungry came in clothes they might have been hoping to use at Governors’ Balls on the birthday of the white people’s queen, carrying cuff links that shone insultingly in the faces of men who had stolen pennies from their friends. They came late and spoke to their servants in the legal English they spent their lives struggling to imitate... (Armah 1968: 95).

Armah points out all of the manifestations of an inferiority complex that has developed within so many African people. Africans not only have begun to reject indigenous cultural practices and customs, and they have begun to reject their language, which is the main corner of one’s culture. Further, the initial imagery speaks of the extent to which this cultural confusion is a problem. “The teacher” says that the black

man is trying to be the “dark ghost” of the European. This implies a sort of cultural death because of the rejection of the things that make up one’s identity. This cultural death seems to pervade much of colonized Africa, and Armah, through this character’s voice, calls for a cultural rebirth or awakening. Again, we see Armah using the aesthetics of imagery and language as tools with which he reduces the mental power that European domination has had over the African.

Other authors have pointed out this cultural rejection in their attempts to empower their African and/or African American readers. Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960) depicts N’Deye Touti, a character who, due to her French education, completely rejects her West African culture, refusing to speak Wolof or to immerse herself in the community. It is only at the end of the novel that she learns to value her culture and therefore her own identity as an African woman. Toni Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, which is a whole novel dedicated to pointing out the mental damage done to a little girl who rejects her blackness and wishes for the blue eyes and straight hair of the white girls that she sees in the society around her.

The African imitation of the attitude of the colonizers by valuing material things is another aspect of the psychological damage done to Africans during the colonial period. Materialism, or the desire for “the gleam” (Armah 1968:12), a term coined by Armah in *The Beautiful Ones* has completely pervaded African culture and taken over any lasting remembrances of a prior society of communalism. One of the roots of this new materialism is a false sense of inferiority that has been ingrained into the African during the years of European domination. As a result of this new materialist aspect of African society, African elite further wanted the power to buy European items that they

thought were reflections of their social success. Ode Ogede asserts that the materialism inherited from European domination, accompanied by the transfer of power to African elite, opened the door for leaders to exploit the working class. He states:

As the African leaders who took over from the European masters simply slipped on the robes of their predecessors and then marched in their footprints, they emerged as the new colonialists...infected by European materialism, the leaders became wild in their drive to acquire the luxury goods of Europe, such as cars, refrigerators, and European style houses and liquor (Ogede 2000:24).

Ode's words describe individuals like Koomson. He is the quintessential image of the African elite brainwashed and trying to buy into European culture. Koomson has a European house. His wife wears wigs and only drinks European liquor. He drives only European cars. Consider Armah's words about Koomson along with other "apes of white men":

Is that then the whole truth? Bungalows, white with a wounding whiteness. Cars, long and heavy, with drivers in white men's uniforms waiting ages in the sun. Women so horribly young, fucked and changed like pants, asking only for blouses and perfume from diplomatic bags and wigs of human hair scraped from which decayed white woman's corpse? Whiskey smuggled in specially for the men who make the laws. Cigarettes to make those who have never traveled cry with shame. How can Koomson return to us? (Armah 1968: 105).

According to Armah, who again uses "the teacher's" voice, Koomson and others like him do their very best to imitate the whites, buy the same possessions and imitate the culture of white society as they have seen it. They have even tried to imitate the

debauchery of the Westerners by having mistresses, consuming alcohol, and partying often. These men are so brainwashed by years of European domination and western propaganda about African inferiority that they neither see the moral degradation nor the spiritual emptiness of their power, wealth and prestige. Armah's harsh tone and usage of expletives works to aesthetically reflect that same spiritual emptiness and the harsh reality of the postcolonial situation.

Looking at postcolonial Ghana many theorists and critics discuss the neo-colonial situation that has erupted due to the corruption of the contemporary leaders and the elite members of the ruling political party. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is an intense indictment of the corrupt leaders of the newly-independent Ghana, including independent Ghana's first Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah. Critic Eustace Palmer describes the look of contemporary Ghana as follows:

The novel as a whole reveals the contemporary condition of Ghana, and parallels that of many independent African countries, where independence has propelled a new set of masters, black this time, into the seats that the colonial bosses used to occupy. These new masters have acquired the same status symbols, and behave with the same arrogance and condescension as the old bosses (Palmer 1972:136).

Palmer's observations emphasize an especially significant point. He writes that the new masters look at the working class with the same condescension as the old bosses. He speaks of another aspect of contemporary Ghana which is reflected in Armah's first novel. After independence, the class divisions that were intensified so harshly by colonial domination are not alleviated, in fact, they are maintained in order for the new elite to be able to acquire the same symbols of status and power. Armah, again using

Fanonian theory, is interested in analyzing contemporary Ghana from this scientific point of view.

Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon writes extensively on the corruption of independent rulers and the “national bourgeoisie” who make up the neo-colonial elite in countries such as Ghana and Algeria (about which he writes specifically) in his famous text *The Wretched of The Earth*. Fanon asserts: “for them, nationalization does not mean governing the state with regard to the new social relations whose growth it has been decided to encourage. To them nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (Fanon 1963:152). Fanon’s understanding of unfair advantages is equivalent to the economic and political power described in both *The Healers* and *The Beautiful Ones*.

Armah looks closely at another representative of corruption and social power in the character of “His Excellency Joseph Koomson, Minister Plenipotentiary Member of the Presidential Commission, Hero of socialist labor” (Armah 1968:66). The title fully stated by the Teacher in the text is of course given facetiously in reference to how much Koomson does *not* deserve the accolades his title represents. Additionally, the title represents the empty accolades that elite politicians required to reflect their closeness to European politicians. The title is meant to compensate their lack of social legitimacy which had not been earned or accepted by society. Koomson is an example of the black bourgeois politician that attempts to imitate the former white master:

“He lives in a way that is far more painful to see than the way the white men have always lived here. Is it true then, that after all the talk that is possible, this is the only thing men are looking for? There is no difference then. No difference at all between the white men

and their apes, the lawyers and the merchants, and now the apes of the apes, our Party men (Armah 1968:104).

Koomson not only needs the empty accolades mentioned earlier but he also lives so lavishly that it is “painful” for others to see. “The Tacher’s” sad question belies Armah’s disappointment in Nkrumah’s regime as he sees that nothing has changed and that the new leaders have only decided to step into the shoes of the old. Fanon’s theories were proven as true in Ghana as they were in Algeria. Armah as well as Fanon are of the opinion that the problems within the neo-colonial society are to be understood as resulting from the class system already in place. However, they also see that the psychological damage done to the African plays a large part in the way in which power is abused and misconceived in contemporary Ghana or Algeria.

Another important aspect of Armah’s writing is his mastery of imagery which further dramatizes the neo-colonial situation in Ghana. The images, especially in *The Beautiful Ones*, serve as stark illustrations of the effect that European domination has had on the mentality of the native Africans. It is necessary to consider his description of not only the filth he condemns in *The Beautiful Ones*, as most critics do, but also the images of whiteness, purity, and power. In the beginning of the novel, Armah describes a building, The Atlantic Caprice, that sits right next to his railway building.

On top of the hill, commanding it just as it commanded the scene below, its sheer, flat, multistoried side an insulting white in the concentrated gleam of the hotel’s spotlights, towered the useless structure of the Atlantic-Caprice. Sometimes it seemed as if the huge building had been put there for a purpose, like that of attracting to itself all the massive anger of a people in pain. But then, if there were any angry ones at all these days, they



were most certainly feeling the loneliness of mourners at a festival of crazy joy. Perhaps then the purpose of this white thing was to draw onto itself the love of a people hungry for something such as this (Armah 1968:12).

The picture of a tall imposing white building presents a stark and very powerful image of the financial exploitation of the working class. The building stands as an insult to all of the people who work extremely hard but can never partake of the luxury of the hotel. However, Armah points out that instead of being angered by the ostentation of this building, they hunger for the wealth and prestige that it represents. The working class look past the corruption that it symbolizes and only see the “gleam” that they also desire. Fanon’s ideas regarding the pull of material wealth amongst the African elite are clearly represented in the passage quoted above. He asserts that material wealth and “the gleam” are closely associated with whiteness or the westerner which the African elite are hoping to reproduce in their own society. Additionally, Armah uses this imagery to associate whiteness with social, oppressive power. Fanon writes:

In colonial countries, the spirit of indulgence is dominant at the core of the bourgeoisie; and this is because the national bourgeoisie identifies itself with the Western bourgeoisie, from whom it has learnt its lessons. It follows the Western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention, stages which are an acquisition of the Western bourgeoisie whatever the circumstances (Fanon 1963: 153).

The indulgence and luxury that Fanon writes about is clearly crafted into one image by Armah. Moreover, Fanon makes the connection between the African bourgeoisie’s wish to associate themselves with Europeans. He also speaks of the desire

to attain that image without having worked for it. Ababio's character clearly reflected this wish. Armah's passage is designed to make an identical argument. Note that the building Armah describes is white and shiny. The white color is clearly a symbol not only wealth and opulence; an association with the European "race". However, it would be a mistake to simply think that Armah is making the association in this image because he agrees with it. The image must be a form of resistance to these very false perceptions. Derek Wright writes about Armah's text and the way in which his use of imagery and metaphor to try to subvert these associations. Wright states:

These metaphors proclaim their own proprietorship of reality in a methodical counter attack which, in its respective methods and aims, both reflects and refutes psycho-linguistic constructs inherited from colonialism, particularly those that polarize colours and images to promote white racist supremacy. In this novel the gleam of material power and success is obsessively linked with whiteness: white hotels, bungalows, fences, and uniforms (Wright 1985:25).

Fanon, Armah, and Wright clearly are participating in a discourse about the same phenomenon. Fanon analyzes the incorrect practice of associating success, power, respect, and wealth with whiteness. Armah clearly this practice illustrates in his text both with the description of the Atlantic Caprice buildings and other images of success and power which use language that associates those images with whiteness. However, with each of these images Armah gives them a negative connotation, providing evidence for Wright's assertion that Armah is trying to deconstruct and reverse racist ideas of white superiority that pervade even vocabulary and speech patterns

From our comparison of Armah's fiction and Fanon's sociological essays, we can conclude that Armah was highly influenced by Frantz Fanon. Through our initial analysis of Ababio and his misconceptions about power, we were able to see the way in which Armah continues to "manipulate" the power dynamic. His understanding of power and authority comes through in his use of language, tone and imagery which reflects his attempts to metaphorically reduce European power. These attempts are not meant as tools of revenge or demonization but rather to increase the internal power of Africans. Further, as we began to look into Ababio's character, we saw through his voice, the prediction of a coming phenomenon that was clearly illustrated in Armah's first book. Fanon's theories speak of this phenomenon in which the native is impotent to express his frustration and anger within the colonial system. Fanon's theories continue to explain the neo-colonial problems in Africa as does the fictional manifestation of those theories in Armah's work. Armah uses Fanon's theories to illustrate the neo-colonial situation, the psychological effect of colonialism and perhaps his own mental problems predominantly through "The teacher's" voice in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Armah's uses of Fanon's theories imply not only his agreement with the theory but also his observation of the neo-colonial realities. However, Armah does not present these theories in order to only resist the new false conception of power. He also attempts to empower Africans by calling for a rebirth of African culture and re-affirmation of African identity. Finally, we see Armah's use of the power in literary aesthetics creating beautiful images and language in order to reinforce an already strong position.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INDIVIDUAL POWER DYNAMICS IN AYI KWEI

### ARMAH'S FICTION

In this chapter an examination of the dynamics of individual power relationships will lead us into a greater understanding of the social power relationships and the root of the desire that so many of us, as human beings, have for power. In both *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *The Healers* there is ample material to explore individual power relationships. For the purposes of this text we will look specifically at manipulative tactics between the two protagonists, Densu and “the man”, and those to whom they are closely connected, namely Ababio and “the man’s” wife Oyo. However, there are other pertinent examples of individual power dynamics that will also further our understanding. In addition to recognizing how our characters use manipulation as a power tactic, we will also explore how manipulation affects the psyche of both the manipulator and the person being manipulated. Lastly, by looking specifically at the manipulators in both texts we can begin to understand the connection between self perception of power and the desire for, use, and abuse of power.

From the beginning of the novel, *The Healers* makes a clear distinction between inspiration and manipulation and describes the connotations of each type of interaction.

Damfo, Densu’s teacher and the major positive figure in the text explains:

If I’m not spiritually blind, I see your spirit. I speak to it if I want to invite you to do something with me. If your spirit agrees it moves your body and your body acts. That’s inspiration. But if I’m blind to your spirit I see only your body. Then if I want you to do

something for me I force or trick your body into doing it even against your spirit's direction. That's manipulation. Manipulation steals a person's body from his spirit, cuts the body off from its own spirit's direction (Armah 1978:96-97).

Damfo describes manipulation as an action that disconnects the spirit and the body firstly and secondly something that involves force or trickery. This description defines manipulation as something that is inherently negative. Additionally, Damfo describes, through his account, the individuals that he classifies as manipulators. Clearly, he sees manipulators as tricksters, tyrants, those that trick and force society into doing what they want. On a larger scale society's leaders or manipulators do not take into consideration the "spirit" or the wants and needs of their society; they only see what they want the society to do in order to further their own personal goals and ambitions. Individuals that need to manipulate are the very same individuals that need the false validations of power described in the earlier chapters. His description is a harsh image but a reflection of the corruption that he asserts, in *The Beautiful Ones*, pervades post colonial Ghana.

One of Armah's objectives in *The Healers* is to call his readers' attention to what he considers the manipulators in Ghana. Not only does he identify the types of people whom he considers manipulators but he presents an ideology and a plan for the eventual elimination of large scale manipulation from society. Ode S. Ogede writes of what he sees as Armah's call to violence for the purposes of liberation:

Although violence is a central motif in *The Healers* the destruction of "manipulators" Armah's euphemism for the self serving and rapacious indigenous military and political rulers and their foreign collaborators who have dominated African politics since the colonial era, and from whom the writer seeks to save society (Ogede 1993: 47).

Armah's "manipulators" are those individuals that want others to perceive that they have social power in both pre-colonial and post colonial African society. With this understanding of the word "manipulators" it is possible to move forward in our exploration of the dynamics of manipulation.

Although an appreciation of the larger social issue is important, the quoted passage refers more directly to the topic of this chapter; individual interaction. Manipulation, described by Armah, is one of the worst ethical crimes that a human being can commit. Damfo is quoted as saying that: "the most damaging poison was manipulation. 'That is the most potent poison. It destroys people, plants, everything'" (Armah 1978: 37). By analogizing it to a poison Damfo presents manipulation that is destructive. It may cause disease even death. It is in many ways the basis of the filth that Armah condemns in *The Beautiful Ones*. Armah further illustrates the damage done by the "manipulators" with the way that the characters in both texts develop. In both *The Healers* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* the manipulators in the text use trickery, force, or abuse their position of power and authority in individual relationships.

In order to fully understand the way manipulation works in *The Beautiful One* the power relationship must be fully understood. In the case of this first novel we have a husband and wife dynamic between "the man" and Oyo in which there is supposed to be an equal power relationship. Theorists Felicia Pratto and Angela Walker provide a good insight into individual relationships and describe the way in which a power dynamic can form. They assert that in each relationship a dynamic can arise based on the benefits and

costs to each member of the relationship.<sup>3</sup> In a relationship between married people, the costs and benefits would be the intangible, as in the relationship between “the man” and Oyo. Pratto and Walker state that: “theories of interpersonal relations have emphasized economic analyses to examine power, but have considered how individuals value not just capital but also respect, affection, and harmony” (Lee Chai, Bargh 2001:97). In other words, humans, who are in relationships, such as marriage, desire love, affection, harmony, respect etc. These are the things that make one happy with their loved one. However, according Pratto and Walker these intangible benefits can be given or taken away at will. They can be wielded as weapons of power thus creating a power dynamic between a husband and wife. Or in other words, these commodities can be used as tools of manipulation.

Considering the relationship between “the man” and his wife Oyo we can see this sort of dynamic occurring. From the first time that we are introduced to Oyo she is presented as a woman that resents her husband’s lack of professional success and the man subsequently feels guilty because he cannot provide for his family. And it is true that because the eyes are there the air is filled with accusation, but for even that the man feels a certain tired gratitude; he is thankful there are no words to lance the tension of the silence. The children begin to come out of the room within. It seems their

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<sup>3</sup> Pratto and Walker set up the “benefits and costs relationship” in order to examine parentalistic relationships in which one person claims responsibility for another’s well being and what kind power dynamic that sets up. p93

eyes also are learning this flat look that is a defense against hope, as if their mother's message needs their confirmation (Armah 1968:49).

This passage describes the scene as the man returns home from work; the first thing he encounters is the accusatory silence of his wife and children. The passage implies a familiarity that "the man" feels with the scene he is coming home to and a certain gratitude that at least for that night the accusation in the eyes will not turn into words.

While according to the narrator the words will "lance" the silence or cut it, lancing also implies cutting for the purposes of healing the wound. However, the wife, through her body language, shows that she is not interested in healing her resentment. It is also evident that the harmony Pratto and Walker described are not present in the man's household. Additionally, as we read further we are informed of the wife's reason for her coldness towards her husband. She is upset with his lack of success as compared to his classmate Koomson. The conversation that ensues reveals her sarcasm and her dissatisfaction.

'Mmmmmmm' The sound she makes should mean approval or at the least acceptance, but it does not. Now it is a low cry full of resentment and disappointment. 'Then she has married well...' The man wishes he had learned to bear the weight of the silence before, but now going back is impossible (Armah 1968: 49)

Oyo's dissatisfaction with her life and her husband is evident both to "the man" and to the reader. The manipulation occurs with her "flat eyes" and her sarcasm which again takes away not only the harmony from the household but also the affection and the respect. By saying that Koomson's wife has married "well" she is then implying that she has not because she does not have the same luxuries as Koomson's wife.



Oyo's words, body language, and action are classic examples of manipulation. David Kipnis writes of different forms of persuasion within individual interaction. Kipnis explains that there are different forms of behavioral technologies designed to "produce behaviors that are predictable and controllable from the point of the view of the influencing agent" (Lee Chai, Bargh 2001:4). He describes the **central techniques** of influence as the use of logic and reason to persuade and **peripheral techniques** as the use of "flimflam, deception, or coercion" (Lee Chai, Bargh 2001:4)<sup>4</sup> Kipnis argues that many times the influencing agent uses peripheral techniques to persuade in a situation in which they believe the use of logic and reason or the central technique is inefficient. This is reflective of what we see Oyo doing in the beginning of the text. Because she does not believe that she can persuade the man to become corrupt she chooses to try other means of persuasion. Oyo tries peripheral means such as denying him peace, harmony, and affection in his household or making remarks designed especially to affect him but that don't address the central issue. In the first scene between "the man" and Oyo she tries to convince him to participate in an illegal venture involving Koomson and a boat however, when she cannot use reason, she resorts to ridiculing his refusal to be corrupt. The man, following the conversation about Koomson, relates that a man tried to bribe him at work that day and Oyo's reply states, "And like an Onward Christian Soldier you refused?" (Armah 1968: 51). Her sarcasm is evidently designed to get some sort of reaction from

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<sup>4</sup> The term "peripheral techniques" was coined by Theorists Petty and Cacioppo. Kipnis points out that thinking and free choice are limited by peripheral techniques because it reduces the amount of information available to the target person.

the man. “The man” doesn’t let his wife see how he feels about her sarcasm and the contempt she displays for his honesty, although he later admits to feeling guilty.

From the start of the scene, Oyo’s behavior belittles the man and pushes him towards that guilt, which is clearly the desired outcome, so that he can act like most Ghanaians, accepting bribes and corruption. Moreover, Oyo has the power to make the man feel guilty and belittled, as seen in “the man’s” comment: “‘What I don’t understand’, he said, ‘is my own feeling about it. I know I have done nothing wrong. I could even get angry with Oyo about this. And yet, and yet I am the one who feels strange...Yes I feel like a criminal’” (Armah 1968:63). Not only does “the man” feel “strange” or guilty but he feels as if he has committed some crime by not allowing himself to succumb to the corruption prevalent in Ghana. Oyo uses her power within the relationship to make the man feel guilty. She obviously tries to achieve her own ambitions without regard to the man’s “spirit” as defined in *The Healers*. Another insight into the man’s guilt is presented by Neil Lazarus as he simply states with regards to the man’s feelings about his wife and his more stable position after the coup due to his honesty,

It seems to me, however, that Fraser has drastically underestimated the extent to which “the man” looks to Oyo for love and approval and feels himself bereft when he can no longer reach her... ‘The man’s’ perseverance not only wins him back his wife’s respect, it also prompts the re-emergence of his own self esteem (Wright 1992:182-3).

Lazarus’s insight reinforces the idea that Oyo has a certain kind of power over the man in that she can use these manipulative tactics in order to not only make the man regret the

loss of a closeness with her but to also make him feel like less of a “man” because he has not provided her with material goods.

The depletion of the man’s self esteem is the final stage of Oyo’s manipulation; her power has extended into influencing the man’s sense of self and his sense of his own use to his family as a husband, father, and provider. ““They are using this boat thing, Teacher,’ he said. ‘They are using it to hit me on the head every terrible day, to make me feel so useless. And the bad thing is I know they have succeeded’” (Armah 1968:66). Not only have Oyo (and her mother) found ways to manipulate the man by trying to make him feel guilty for their lack of material success but they have also been able to find something specific to use as a manipulative tool. Further, Oyo specifically has the power to make the man feel useless and to doubt his own moral values. “I am asking myself what is wrong with me? Do I have some part missing” (Armah 1968:66).

Tommie L. Jackson, author of *The Existentialist Fiction of Ayi Kwei Armah, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre*, speaks of the role that Oyo plays in exacerbating the man’s internal conflict. “Similarly, in both *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments*, the man, Teacher, and Baako Onipa are victims of *les salauds*, since their respective guilt, despair, and insanity are directly linked to the collective attempt of family and society to force them to honor a corrupt system of values” (Jackson 1997:55). Understanding “the man” as a victim implies that he is subject to his family and society abusing their power over him. The man is portrayed by Armah as nothing more than a tool with which his family and society can further their own ambitions. Armah’s novel examines this dynamic between the man and his wife in order to reveal a larger social issue. Armah asserts that the neo-colonial society in Ghana as well as in other countries in Africa the

places too much value on individual advancement. He censures the new individualistic culture which has turned from its own cultural practices. Traditional African cultures place value upon the individual only to the extent that individual advancement can benefit the larger community. The new society values places value on personal ambition and advancement at the cost to the larger community. Armah, points this out through the behavior of his characters whom only exhibit concern for their personal benefit.

The dynamics in “the man’s” relationship with Oyo is played out similarly in *The Healers* in a different sort of relationship but one in which again an individual power relationship is abused. In this case the interaction occurs between the protagonist Densu and Ababio, the novel’s symbol of manipulation and social power. In this case Ababio is supposed to be Densu’s guardian and mentor but he feels a repulsed by Ababio because he senses Ababio’s tendency for manipulation.

He had, for instance, never known Ababio to leave anyone free to make a choice.

Always, the man used force when he was in a position to Otherwise he used trickery.

Then afterwards he talked endlessly about how clever each new successful trick of his had been, and how wise he was in not trying to persuade people into doing what he wanted them to do (Armah 1978:36).

Densu’s thoughts reflect the exact description that Kipnis gives of “peripheral techniques” of persuasion. Ababio uses force or trickery and then is satisfied that he did not need to have to use the “central techniques” by trying to actually persuade his targets to do what he wanted them to do. He seems to metaphorically imprison those individuals he manipulates by not “leaving anyone free” to make decisions. Ababio shows no concern for the individuals that he tricks or coerces. He exhibits the exact individualistic

tendencies that Armah disparages which are embodied in Densu's description of manipulators. Thus, Ababio is the classic manipulator according to Kipnis's theories.

Within their relationship Ababio tries to manipulate Densu into joining him in a covert effort to cheat the prince Appia out of his rightful ascension to the throne. Ababio uses one of Kipnis's basic forms of manipulation in that he does not give Densu all of the information needed to make an informed decision. Instead he gives Densu pieces of information in order to try to trick him into doing what he wants. He says to Densu, "I'm talking to you about the present. It is necessary to put someone else in Appia's place. The position is more important than any one person", Ababio paused. Again he drew breath, so intensely he sounded like a man in pain. Then he repeated the sentence: "It is necessary to put someone else in Appia's place. The decision has been taken" (Armah 1978:41).

Ababio does not tell Densu that he wants to kill Appia. Nor does he inform him that he really wants someone that he can control and that the person that he puts in power will really be powerless at the hands of the rest of the royal court. Additionally, Ababio's language implies that all that he proposes is already done and Densu's succession to power is inevitable. "The decision has been taken," he says implying that Densu himself doesn't even have a choice in the course of events that will occur in the near future. Moreover, Ababio directly states that the individual human being is of no importance and that it is the position or the power and authority it represents which are significant.

Once Ababio sees that his normal tactics do not work he resorts to more blatant forms of manipulation. He hints at the possibility of consequences if Densu does not accept his offer of power.

‘Oh but you are, Densu,’ Ababio said. His voice sounded gentle, kind. ‘You are involved. Very much involved. And it won’t help you to seek to deny it at this point. You cannot, Densu, you cannot just walk away from people after they have bared their souls to you, and revealed their secrets to you. There is a bond between you and anyone who so reveals himself to you. The bond is one of mutual protection. You must protect him, and he will protect you. If not, you walk away from a man knowing what has revealed to you about his naked soul, about his ambitions. And the knowledge you have is like a knife in your hands, don’t you see?’ (Armah 1978:48)

Ababio does not directly threaten Densu in this passage but there is the implication that the situation could transform into something slightly uglier than it had been. By telling Densu that he is now bound to Ababio because of these dangerous secrets and that they now are involved in a relationship of mutual protection implies that Ababio is protecting Densu. As an authority figure in Esuano he could remove that protection at any time.

This is where the “peripheral techniques” move from trickery to coercion or force.

Ababio further tries to convince Densu that he is a potential threat to Ababio by equating the information that he has shared with Densu to a lethal weapon. Later in the text, Ababio comes very close to directly threatening Densu, “A man who offers you his secrets puts a knife in your hand and bares his neck to you. He is offering you a choice. Friendship until death. Or enmity. Also until death” (Armah 1978:59). This sort of threat of violence is not seen in Armah’s first work; however the same phenomenon is occurring in which one person is abusing the potential power they have over another. The abuse or manipulation consists of threatening to remove the “benefits” as described earlier by Pratto and Walker. In Ababio’s case, he is removing physical safety and

security within the society, in fact, as seen later in the text; he tries to take Densu's life. Blinded by his own personal ambition, Ababio's actions do not take into account Densu's "spirit", his needs, or the effect his actions will have on the society as a whole.

In his criticism of the adaptation of an individualistic culture Armah reveals his tendency towards idealism. Especially in *The Healers*, Armah spends a great deal of time calling for wholeness or unity. Through characters such as Damfo and Densu, Armah argues that the power of inspiration rather than manipulation will foster positive social change in the neo-colonial societies in Africa. Further, he argues for a return to the "African way" in which the individual was valued for his ability to contribute to society. The individual was viewed as a sort of hero, similar to the West African oral epic *Sundiata*, when the success of one individual eventually benefited the society. While Armah's arguments evoke emotional or perhaps even nostalgic support, a return to older values and ideals may not be practical. The kind of cultural and social change that would be necessary in order to bring his vision is perhaps too idealistic for contemporary African society which has mixed so thoroughly with Western culture.

In his research on power, Kipnis takes his study one step further by evaluating the implications of the differences between perceived power vs. real power. For example, in both cases in *The Beautiful Ones* and *The Healers* we have been discussing Oyo and Ababio and attributing power to them vs. the individuals they are trying to manipulate. However, an interesting endeavor would be to examine the concept that Ababio and Oyo actually feel **powerless** in these relationships and that it is their powerlessness that enforces their need to use manipulative tactics. Kipnis states,

Taken together, the findings of O'Neal, Kipnis, and Craig, and of Stahelski indicate that the door in the face and the foot in the door techniques are seen as techniques used by people with little power to persuade the more powerful. Presumably when the balance of power favors the target person, people assume that personal powers of persuasion, such as use of reason, or even threats, are not likely to gain compliance. Rather more deceptive and indirect tactics are preferred (Lee Chai, Bargh 2001:7).

This sort of situation is clearly seen in both texts. In *The Beautiful Ones* the dynamic between "the man" and Oyo is clearly ambiguous; however, this theory would explain why Oyo feels that she cannot use her powers of reasoning because in truth "the man" is the breadwinner in the household. Her position as a woman in a patriarchal society further depletes her power in their relationship. Ababio's psyche may be slightly harder to explain.

However, at the end of the text Ababio provides Densu with a clue as to why he is so fixated on power. For the reader, his revelation also provides us with some insight. At the end of the novel he reveals to Densu, "My family has been a part of this-at first the lower part, the slave part" (Armah 1978:372). His ancestry consists of slaves, one of the most powerless members of a society. He explains further that his grandfather used trickery and flattery to rise to a more powerful position with the King in Esuano. This explanation allows us to see the possibility that Ababio may internally perceive himself to be the powerless person in the relationship. Therefore, he must resort to manipulation and trickery to get what he wants.

The theorist cited Daphne Blunt Bugental and another theorist Eta K. Lin reinforce this idea about self perceived power.



At other times, these same individuals become tyrants. For example, Raven and Kruglanski (1970) demonstrated that those who lack confidence in their individual power are more likely to make use of coercive tactics when placed in a position of authority. Kipnis (1976) pointed out that coercive tactics can be used to shore up the individual's sense of worth or control (Lee Chai, Bargh 2001:119)

In *The Beautiful Ones* there is another short interaction that is indicative of the phenomenon that Kipnis describes. If we look back at the interaction between the conductor of the bus and “the man” at the beginning of the novel we can find a clear case of one person fearing that have entered into a powerless domain and out of that residual fear of the loss of power in his relationship to the “man”, he then quickly takes on the role of a tyrant spitting unnecessary insults at the man. In the scene the conductor, believing that the man has witnessed him enjoying the fruits of corruption, believes that he has lost power. He thinks that because he has been discovered and will be exposed he must approach the man with a bribe. Once he discovers that “the man” was just sleeping he insults him. “ ‘Well,’ he shouted over the death rattle of the bus, ‘get out!’” (Armah 1968:7). As the man is leaving he shouts an additional insult, “‘Or were you waiting to shit on the bus’” (Armah 1968:7). The bus driver's harsh reactions results from uncertainty not from certainty of his own authority.

Ababio is also an excellent example of a similar phenomenon. Ababio's actions reflect a perpetual feeling of powerlessness. His tyrannical acts such as murder and deception stem from his belief that the only way that he will achieve social power is to behave in this manner. His answer to Densu's “Why did you kill Appia?” (Armah 1978:340). Is a long explanation

Let me describe it for your benefit. This is a new day in the land. The whites are in control. They recognize those who have helped them. They recognize me, Ababio, as king of Esuano. Whoever goes against me will have to take on the whites. They protect me. They look after me. Whatever I want from them, I can ask for it, and I'll get it (Armah 1978:340).

Here Ababio communicates the information that he left out in the beginning of the story. The reason that he has killed Ababio was in order to foster his own personal ascension to power. His perception of his social status indicated that he didn't truly possess any social power or authority. Therefore, he took on the role of a tyrant in order to obtain the power that he saw himself lacking. However, Ababio's words illustrate his own misconception of power and authority. He believes that he now has power when in actuality his ability to control and/or defend is limited to what the Europeans choose to allow him. His power is limited to the whims of another greater power. In order to obtain things he must ask "the whites" for it.

Clearly, individual power dynamics directly reflect the issues and consequences associated with social and political power struggles. We have seen the way in which manipulation was used in both of these texts in individual relationships in order to try to further individual rather than societal ambitions. Through the theories of Pratto and Walker and Kipnis we have been able to fully appreciate the ways in which manipulation works and how its function has a direct correlation to the way that power can be used even on an individual level. This correlation appeared through Oyo's treatment of "the man" and her use of her power in an interpersonal relationship to make him feel belittled. It also was reflected through Ababio's attempted management of Densu as he tried to use

his authority within the kingdom and in Densu's life to get him to accept the power he offered.

Additionally, we were able to examine Armah's own tendency toward an idealistic outlook. His criticism of the new individualistic culture and was indeed on target. However, his call for a return to African ideals proved an unrealistic solution to the socio-economic problems faced on the continent today. Nevertheless, Armah has a clear insight into the power dynamic shown by his presentation of the differences between power, authority, and perceived power. His treatment of the individual relationships within the text reinforces the arguments made from the larger social perspective. Armah's use of language plays an important role in our understanding of each character and their own conceptualization of power and further leads us, as readers, to an insight into Armah's ideology.

## CHAPTER: FIVE POWER AND SOCIETY

In order to conclude our exploration of Ayi Kwei Armah's understanding of power and the power dynamics within modern day Africa it is necessary to expand our gaze from the individual to social power. The examination of individual relationships provided a great deal of insight with regards to power. However, the individual is also the key element within a society. Therefore, the power relationship between an individual and society is at the crux of the social power dynamic. While we have touched on this relationship briefly, it is necessary to explore this final aspect of power thoroughly.

Ayi Kwei Armah has chosen to conceptualize and analyze power within the context of class and culture. This conceptualization ties together the importance of the individual in society and the power relationship between society and the individual. We will first look at Armah's first novel in order to better understand the kind of society that he constructs in the text. This section will then dedicate some text to exploring Kwame Nkrumah's relationship to the Ghanaian community. Further, through a detailed assessment of Ababio's character in *The Healers* we will be able to see the connection between Nkrumah and Ababio. After establishing this connection we will be able to close fully comprehending both Nkrumah and Ababio's relationship to society.

His first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), presents a microcosm of society through the beginning bus scene. The bus symbolizes a corrupt society. The bus driver represents the corrupt social power and the passengers the

powerless masses.<sup>5</sup> However, what is more interesting is that within this metaphor a visible dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless is clearly established. The powerless are described in their nightmares in the following manner: “dwarfs unable to run away and little insects caught in endless pools” (Armah 1968:2). This imagery suggests someone trapped in life with no control, no agency, and no means through which to escape. The conductor, the symbol of social power, on the other hand, appears as a moderately corrupt individual concerned about how much extra money he has been able to gain from the poor individuals. He has a lot more control and agency in his life and, in fact, takes advantage of the passengers’ lack of agency. Further, he is a patronizing witness to the monotony of their lives:

Collecting was always easier around Passion Week. Not many passengers needed change, it was enough of a struggle looking round corners and the bottoms of boxes to find small coins somehow overlooked. So mostly people held out the exact fare and tried not to look into the receiver’s face with its knowledge of their impotence (Armah 1968:2).

The difference between the two entities at first glance is very definite, however, the class difference between the conductor and those that ride the bus is very slight considering the overall societal class hierarchy. This is not truly a dichotomy because in this society there is always someone is of a higher class, who therefore has more power. Armah’s intention is actually not to point out a dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless. Instead,

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<sup>5</sup> This explanation of the bus metaphor is given by a variety of critics but most clearly in the following: Wright, Derek, ed., Critical Perspectives on Ayi Kwei Armah (Three Continents Press, 1992) 126.

he seeks to show that most people have a class consciousness and therefore look to project power where they can. Nevertheless, Armah demonstrates that these people live in a very Darwinist world. If you act as one of the powerless then you will be taken advantage of by the powerful.

Gareth Griffiths comments on this scene in his article “Structure and Image in Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*”. Griffiths states: “In this world, to sleep is a crime. Men must be awake all the time, awake to a world that watches, ready to punish. Only in the cozy and secure relationship of briber and bribed can ‘brotherhood’ exist; at all other times man is either destroyer or destroyed” (Wright 1992: 76). This Darwinist conception of the world is the mindset of most of the characters that represent social power, manipulation, and corruption. The idea that one is either the destroyer or destroyed reinforces the argument that these characters desire power because they choose not to be destroyed. Also, they realize that power will cause them to ascend the class “ladder” and move up within the society. Armah’s criticism of this mentality reveals itself most clearly in his references to Kwame Nkrumah.

Armah spends a considerable amount of time discussing former Prime Minister Nkrumah in his first text. While Koomson is fictional representation of social power, Nkrumah is the actual political figure that Armah harshly criticizes in the text. Armah asks the question, “How long will Africa be cursed with its leaders?” (Armah 1968:94), lamenting the corrupt practices of leaders like Nkrumah who turned the masses’ dreams of social, political, and financial freedom into a corrupt state. Armah alludes to Nkrumah through the Teacher, the symbol of both knowledge and escapism in the text, who lived through Ghanaian independence. Armah portrays Nkrumah as initially saying all of the

right things to the people, gaining him the support of the working class. They believed him to be different than the other leaders who just wanted to ape the white masters. “I stood staring like a believer at the man, and when he stopped I was ashamed and looked around to see if anybody had been watching me. They were all listening” (Armah 1968:101). However, the teacher laments that, too soon, even this figure of hope became corrupted by power. “It is possible that it is only power itself, any kind of power, that cannot speak to the powerless. It is so simple. He was good when he had to speak to us, and liked to be with us. When that ended everything was gone” (Armah 1968:101). “The teacher’s” words exemplify the class consciousness perfectly. He says that when Nkrumah liked to be “with them” he was good. In other words, when Nkrumah still identified himself within the larger “working class” of the Ghanaian society he was able to sympathize with and work for them. As a result, he gained their trust and support. However, over time he realized that his power and authority pushed him to another, higher, more prestigious class within the society. He then ceased to identify with the working class.

However, Armah points out through this text that Nkrumah forgot the inherent connection between the individual, his/her power, and the society. The larger society pushes for the success of one individual so that the whole society may benefit. The only way that someone like Nkrumah could obtain and maintain power is through the larger society. “The teacher” says:

How were these leaders to know that while they were climbing up to shit in their people’s faces, their people had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter. We

knew then, and we know now, that the only real power a black man can have will come from black people (Armah 1968: 95-96)

Armah reference to excrement again reminds us of the corruption that seems to infect politicians after they ascend to power. Additionally, he reminds politicians that although the people that they are exploiting are of a lower class they are still intelligent enough to distinguish the selfish individuals from the ones that intend on benefiting the whole community. Lastly, in this passage, he makes the point that the working class is the one that truly decides to give power and authority to political leaders. The same phenomenon occurs with Ababio's character in *The Healers*. However, at the end of the novel Ababio is actually forced to learn this lesson about power himself.

In our first introduction to Ababio, Armah provides us, through his physical description, a glimpse into Ababio's inner character.

Yet something in the intruder's face, seen close up, contradicted the impression of round contentment. That something was in the eyes. The intruder's eyes were extremely active, in a quick, nervous way. These were not the eyes of a contented man...set as they were in this round face, above this rotund, satisfied body, the eyes hinted at something obscene. They suggested someone already stuffed to bursting after having consumed everything his reach, but so uncontrollably greedy that in spite of satiation he was still anxiously searching for more things to consume (Armah 1978:21).

Ababio's physical appearance embodies a man that is never going to be satisfied in life. He will always look for more things to consume because he does not have internal peace. Not only does Armah's portrayal speak of a lack of contentment and inner peace; it also speaks of something more sinister. Ababio looks for things to consume, to eat, in other



words to destroy and to take on something for himself as he does with food. Armah also uses the food metaphor to describe an individual that is selfish and has no concern for the nourishment of the community.

Ababio goes to great lengths to try to manipulate Densu (the protagonist) into joining him and the other royals in their endeavor to eliminate the prince Appia who is the rightful heir to the throne at Esuano. Ababio tells Densu: "I showed you the way to the most important thing in a man's life, the thing every man who is a man works for. That thing is power" (Armah 1978:58). Again, Ababio's statement reminds us that he is only concerned with the individual rather than the community.

Ababio orchestrates the murder of the heir to the Esuano throne. He convinces the giant Buntui to kill prince Appia, who has stood in Ababio's way to this ultimate position of power. He reveals his desires to Densu almost from the very beginning of the text. He tells Densu of the change, the beginning of white rule that is coming very quickly to the land. Ababio informs Densu that in order to remain in power in Esuano the kingdom must be on the side of the whites who will soon control everything. Ababio however, is frustrated because he cannot convince the prince of the necessity of fighting on the side of the whites.

'The prince is out of his mind, I tell you!' Ababio shouted the words, then belatedly hushed himself up. 'The boy is utterly mad.' 'But what was his answer?' 'He refused!' said Ababio indignantly. As he talked now, it seemed the memory of his talk with Appia came back strong, and his anger rose. 'He refused, just like that. Like a big fool he refused' (Armah 1978: 40, 41).

Ababio's anger at not being able to manipulate the prince into doing what he wants is the first indication that he is passionate enough to do a great deal in order to obtain influence; "I cannot persuade Appia against his own stubborn foolishness. All I see now is that he wants to stand against a force too powerful for him. He is asking to be destroyed, Densu" (Armah 1978:41). For the reader, this is the confirmation that Ababio is responsible for prince Appia's death. Ababio clearly says that Appia is asking to be "destroyed". The murder of prince Appia, beyond the fact that it is an evil and reprehensible act, means that Ababio has acted outside of the societal norms; he has disrupted the normal flow of authority. Ababio has decided that his individual desires supercede the authority structure within the community.

"In Mande cosmology", writes John William Johnson, "power is not perceived as a process, but rather as an entity to be stockpiled until enough is gained to enable the possessor to exercise social and political control over others" (Johnson 1999:10). While Johnson's discusses the Mande culture rather than the Akan, the concepts are still quite relevant to our understanding of Ababio and his actions. Further, in explanation of the Mande, Johnson explains these actions:

Violating social norms, especially those controlled by the traditional authority structure, provides a means for the individual to become a *faama* or *mogo-tigi*, a powerful person. Cosmologically, the act of violating norms is seen to release into the atmosphere vast amounts of occult power lying dormant toward *ba-denya* axis. If the hero is strong enough, he will gain control over the released power and thus increase his stockpile of power and become that much stronger (Johnson 1999:16).

Clearly Ababio is not the hero in this text but the process described here can apply in a very extreme fashion, to his actions. He cannot continue toward supremacy unless he violates the social norms and completely destroys the authority structure in place in the kingdom of Esuano. This process is similar to Nkrumah's historical role as the individual that violates and replaces the English colonial structure in Ghana. Nkrumah's actions, however, were initially for the good of the whole country. Ababio, on the other hand, acts out of personal ambition. This is the reason that he cannot stay in power

At the end of the novel, Densu returns to Esuano after having spent a great deal of time away in order to find the reason for the senseless death of both the prince and Densu's friend Anan. He goes straight to Ababio and asks why he killed prince Appia. Densu also asks Ababio if the power he has attained was worth killing a relative. It is at this point that Ababio reveals his belief that one can not change the class system but only one's place within it. Ababio states:

'If you didn't know it before, know it now. Every royal family is also a slave family. The two go together. You don't get kings without slaves. You don't get slaves without kings. My family has been a part of this-at first the lower part, the slave part...My grandfather was a slave in Kumase (Armah 1978:341).

This simple revelation tells the reader a great deal about Ababio. Here we see that Ababio's history includes a family member that held the lowest class position in society. This position clearly meant that Ababio's grandfather clearly had no power within the society however, his grandfather learned that he could change his position in the class system.

‘Do I still need to tell you I know everything there is to know about roads to power? The knowledge is in the spirit of my grandfather passed down mixed with the blood of our mothers. I can show you the quickest roads to power: blind loyalty to those who already have the greatest power. ‘My grandfather began the long climb from powerlessness to power. Look at me now and tell me. Have I betrayed his dreams? Or have I been a worthy successor to him? Who now ever thinks of calling Ababio a slave? Ababio is royal. Ababio is king’ (Armah: 1978:342).

Therefore, Ababio learned the art of manipulation from his father who learned it from his grandfather. More importantly, from his own history, he became socialized to believe that the individual is more important than society. He believed that the manipulation of power, people, and the system in place would push him toward the highest position.

Despite the reasons, his explanation becomes pathetic. He has entered a state in which he places no value on the community and, as a result, will eventually be ousted from power by the community. Like Nkrumah, Ababio no longer identifies with the lower class and has forgotten the importance of their support. Ababio, then, may have temporarily had power but he had no true authority. His violation of the authority structure was in accordance with the culture of the society but it brought no benefit to the community. Armah, in the one of the final scenes in the text, creates a scenario in which the whole community witnesses the revelation of Ababio’s crime. In what was supposed to be Densu’s trial for Appia’s murder the mother of the prince exonerates Densu and implicates Ababio in the crime. “ ‘I know who killed my son and almost killed me: Buntui. I know who sent Buntui to do the killing: Ababio.’ The white judge, quite

unable to contain his excitement, turned to look at Ababio, the new king. Ababio had become a shrinking sweating figure.”(Armah 1978: 348). Ababio is taught an important lesson about acting out of personal ambition. Armah uses the witness of the community as a symbol of the forgotten connection between the individual and the community. The trial ends with the community offering Densu the kingship. He refuses the royal position and thus rejects the feudal class system in place.

In this last section we were able to complete our understanding of power within society. Armah, through both *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *The Healers* asserts firstly that the most societies in Ghana are based on a class system. Within this class system there are different levels of power. He shows through his comprehension of the class system and his own culture that the new leaders have begun to abuse the system. According to the text, they have forgotten that their attainment of authority primarily depends on the support of the society and secondarily on the usage of their authority to benefit that society. Over the ten year span between the novels, Armah points out the same faults in Nkrumah and Ababio. Nkrumah and Ababio both ceased to identify with the class they initially came from and as a result eventually acted outside of the interests of the same class. Because Ababio is a fictional character Armah was able to use his creation to make his point. Through his use of symbolism, metaphor, and imagery we can further understand the role that power plays within the social system. According to Armah, it is no more than a tool within a society that is highly focused on class and individualism. His consistent concern with the class consciousness of Ghana’s leadership and selfish ambition reflects his desire to use his literary talent to engage social change.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION**

Ayi Kwei Armah indeed understands power, society and the relationship between the two. Through our examination of Ayi Kwei Armah we have been able through analysis of the text and a sociological study to gain a comprehensive picture of this subject.

Armah exhibits, not only in his literature but in his life experiences as well, a passionate desire to understand the problems that pervade African society. His apparent compassion for oppressed people on an international level initially found him in Algeria, America, and southern Africa. These travels not only reflected his passion for liberation but also his Pan Africanist political affiliations. Armah's time spent in the U.S. clearly imbibed him with a deep sympathy for the African American struggle and a desire to reaffirm his own culture.

Armah's education and sociological understanding of his own continent prepared him for his career as a writer. Using his creative talent, his abilities as a social scientist, and his love of his own African culture Armah created stories that sparked emotion and intellectual thought. The influence of Frantz Fanon is exemplified in Armah's very scientific understanding of society from a largely Marxist perspective. However, he attempts to argue through his work that an understanding based on class differences will not provide a true picture of Africa nor give viable solutions to the neo-colonial situations.

Through his fiction, Armah's discourse on power, reveals a clever, thoughtful insight into human nature and the strength of a social system. Power according to Armah's literature is something that is part of not only a post-colonial but a feudal class

system. This system naturally sets up power dynamics that will be adhered to. He shows that power is clearly seen in individual relationships but his understanding of the individual clearly relates back to the understanding of the society. According to Armah, an individual's ascension to power or authority. However, more importantly Armah argues in his texts that there is an important difference between power and authority. He clearly shows that in order to obtain legitimate power or authority political leaders must have the support of the larger community. Without that support the supposed power is nonexistent. Fanon's influence shines through as Armah points out in his work that when individual's do not have the support of the society they need superficial external validations with which to claim their power. Individuals that need material things and empty titles obviously lack true power or authority. Armah's criticizes the new political leaders in Ghana and Africa as a whole for stepping into the shoes of their former colonial masters without being willing to work for their authority. He sees that these new politicians again are there for selfish purposes and have no desire to truly serve the society.

Nonetheless, Armah does show a great deal of sympathy for all individuals that are the products of colonial domination. He spends a great deal of time examining the psychological affects of colonialism. One can even argue that his own experiences with psychosis have played a part in gaining his sympathy for the Ghanaian elite. Again Fanon's influence is evident in this aspect of Armah's work. His understanding of the mental damage done further explains his passion for reaffirming his culture. Armah's use of myth and oral literature in his fifth book truly exemplify his desire to combat some of



the ideas of cultural inferiority brought about by the European imperialists. Further, his mythological work also belies his Pan Africanist political position.

Especially in *The Healers*, Armah uses his oral tone to call for a unity within the continent. His condemnation of division and individualism and his celebration of unity and wholeness exemplify the Pan Africanist philosophy. Not only does Armah exhibit the international philosophy of unifying the continent his work also reflects the Diasporic philosophy as well. Armah's cultural affirmation and his Pan Africanism indicate another aspect of Armah's understanding of the power dynamic. Within these contexts we can begin to appreciate the fact that Armah believes in the empowerment of his people rather than power over people.

The influence that Armah's experiences have had on his writing speak of a very universal and very interesting phenomenon within literature. No writer is completely objective. Clearly, almost all of the imagery, metaphor, language, and tone within Armah's prose could be linked back to a personal experience, a cultural conviction, or a political affiliation. Armah's work opens the door to further enquiries into his life and the way that it has influenced his work. How did Armah's later experiences in Tanzania and Senegal influence the writing of *The Healers* or *Osiris Rising*? How has his continued passion for the liberation of all exploited and dominated peoples perpetually influenced his writing? Has Armah incorporated understanding of other cultures within different African communities into his work. How does he further use his Pan Africanist beliefs in his work? Will he continue to use his talent as a tool for the "struggle"?

The last question brings up what to me is the most beautiful thing about Armah's understanding of power. Armah sees power in beauty. He knows that there is extreme

beauty in literature and has the ability to create it. He could write about anything. Yet he chooses to use the power of literary beauty to try to bring awareness to the problems around him. The aesthetic success of his work make his criticisms sharper yet more palatable. Armah's impeccable use of language produces clear, stark images for the one's imagination and elicits an emotional response before the intellectual. Armah tries to live his assertions about the individual and society. He attempts to use the power of his creative ability and his position as a success within this society in order to liberate that very same society. His idealism, while a bit unrealistic, is refreshing and perhaps will prove to motivate others to work for change as he has for over 40 years.

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