

Ayi Kwei Armah

Ayi Kwei Armah (1939?) was born into a Fante family in Takoradi. The port city was then under the control of the British Crown Colony of the Gold Coast but has been part of Ghana since 1957. After attending a colonial boarding school in the future capital of Accra, Armah studied in the US and achieved a degree in Sociology from Harvard University in 1963. He later travelled between Ghana, Algeria, and France, often working as an editor or translator for various Francophone publications, including *Jeune Afrique*. It was during this time that he read the anti-colonial works of Frantz Fanon who became a significant source of inspiration to Armah's future writing. Following his successful completion of a degree in Creative Writing at Columbia University in 1970, Armah began teaching across Tanzania, Lesotho, and the US.

Armah published several short pieces of writing for various international magazines, before releasing his first novel in 1968: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Initially published by Houghton Mifflin in Boston, the novel was re-released the following year as part of Heinemann's African Writers Series, a collection which went on to publish most of Armah's subsequent novels. The text is often bleak and cynical, following an unnamed everyperson, The Man, who attempts to resist the corruption which surrounds him in the months leading up to the deposition of Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana.

The novel uses a fictional medium to relate some of Fanon's concerns about political corruption which had been articulated in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). It also manifests what Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests of the so-called second generation of postcolonial novelists: 'Far from being a celebration of the nation, then, the novels of the second, postcolonial stage are novels of delegitimation?', rejecting both British imperialism and 'the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie' sometimes through calls for an 'ethical universal'.

The novel gained some pushback for this veering towards universality. Chinua Achebe [1], a forerunner of the first-generation of postcolonial novelists, was worried that the abstract style and setting of Armah's 'existentialist writing' was 'foreign and unusable' to an extent that Armah's representation of 'Ghana is unrecognizable'. The disillusionment which runs through the work was often too severe, too universalising, or too alienating for Achebe's vision of what a novel ought to achieve. In contrast, however, many other writers and critics have lauded *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and use it to cement Armah's reputation both as 'Ghana's premier novelist' (to quote Eileen Julien) and as one of the leading writers of the past century.

His following two novels, *Fragments* (1970) and *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), reveal echoes of Armah's lived experiences as he represents focal characters born in Ghana and studying in the US (including Harvard in the latter). He explores questions of diasporic identity and how it intersects with education and class across the world, with racism in North America, and with family responsibilities in Ghana. Attempting to contextualise many of these issues, Armah began composing historicist fiction, releasing *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1979) which look backwards and attempt to represent centuries of

transatlantic enslavement and the history of the Ashanti Empire, respectively.

Armah has spent his literary career confronting numerous political forces. He wanted to resist the imperial education of his youth which (in his words) sought to forcibly impose 'a European consciousness, a European vision of the world' upon him. He spent much time thinking through the complex impact of Nkrumah and the weight of corruption in 1960s and 1970s Ghana while also reflecting on his experiences of racism in the US. These factors all contribute to the disillusionment of his writing. As an antidote, Armah increasingly embraced pan-Africanism and, in 1995, he published *Osiris Rising: A Novel of Africa Past, Present and Future*. Published by a Senegalese press (rather than Heinemann or even a Ghanaian publishing house), the novel invokes 'Africa's oldest narrative, the Isis-Osiris myth cycle'. The continent's pre-colonial literary past is used by Armah to offer some respite from 'or, at least, commentary on ' the colonial and national problems of the present.

Despite not being bestowed with numerous accolades, Armah's writing has achieved a significant legacy and the praise of his peers. Armah's career has sometimes gone unappreciated. Still, his impact on the modern novel form is significant and should be more widely recognised.

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