

# Deconstructing Political Corruption in Post-Colonial Africa: A Literary Investigation into Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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**Abstract:** The advent of Post-colonial Africa filled people with hope of a better life for all in terms development in different sectors such as education, health and welfare, social justice, governance and general economic stimulation. Capacity building initiatives would also be established to reconstruct and rebuild the continent. However, corruption has eroded and reversed all the gains made by many African countries during the fight for emancipation from colonial regimes. The attainment of independence meant the new beginning which was full of glorious promises for Africa. However, *uhuru* became a nightmare, courtesy of corruption. This paper seeks to deconstruct the effects of political corruption in Africa with special focus on Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). It is a qualitative study which is underscored by Post-colonial, Afrocentric theory for a better understanding of the harsh conditions under which Africans live in the post-independence period as a result of corruption as reflected in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Textual analysis was employed as a research design to help gain a detailed understanding and deconstruction of political corruption in a free Africa. Purposive sampling was used to select Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. As primary data of the study, the novel was thematically examined. The study concludes that because corruption results from moral bankruptcy, it can, therefore, be eradicated through moral regeneration undergirded by the *ubuntu* philosophy (African humanism) lest it spirals out of control.

**Keywords:** African development, Afrocentricity, Corruption, Moral regeneration, Post-colonial theory, *Ubuntu*

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## 1. Introduction

Post-independence Africa was supposed have ushered an era of prosperity through redeveloping and redressing the imbalances of the colonial period. According to Mbaku (2010a:x), political corruption has robbed Africa of this promising prospect by stunting growth and development on the continent. After independence from colonialism, Africans celebrated their liberation after struggling for countless years. Europeans treated Africans deplorably. As a result, most African states lost their traditions and cultures imperialism (Asante, 2018). People's belief that *uhuru* would change their living conditions for the better dwindled. This is due to the prevalence of corruption meted out against them by, ironically, by people who were supposed to be custodians of justice, comrades who sacrificially led the struggle for independence. To these friends in struggle, freedom meant pay-back time and self-reward for their fight against the unjust system while to the *hoi polloi* of African people, it turned out to be a blood-curdling ordeal. People felt betrayed into disillusionment by

their leaders. Small wonder Soyinka (1973) named this period *Seasons of Anomy*. Mbaku (2010b:1) observes:

*Shortly after independence, Africans faced two important choices. The Europeans were no longer in control but the Africans had to choose a political system and a development model. To choose economic and political institutions that were locally focused and hence reflected the relevant stakeholder's values, culture and custom, as well as aspiration, the African countries should have engaged in democratic constitution making. Unfortunately, the leaders of many African states engaged in opportunistic institutional reform that provided laws and institutions that were not geared towards maximising the public interest (i.e. the collective well-being of the citizens) but offered the new state custodians opportunities and the wherewithal to maximise their personal interest.*

There was a bitter exchange of roles in the post-independence Africa where the oppressed became

the oppressor, a point which legitimised protests (Tunca, 2018:112). It was disheartening because it was black-on-black, African-on-African type of injustice. This was a queer new form of colonialism (neo-colonialism) which pushed people down the precipice of despair. Draconian laws were promulgated by the new bosses to feed their greed. These authoritarian governments of unprecedented proportions led, in some parts of Africa, to civil wars which could have otherwise been eschewed. Most African states became worse than they were during colonialism.

Heidenheimer and Johnston (2002:67) define corruption as "a behaviour which deviates from normal duties of a public role because of private regarding (family, close clique), pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private regarding influence". This includes bribery (use of rewards to pervert the judgement of a person in a position of trust); nepotism (bestowal of patronage by reason of inscriptive of relationship rather than merit); and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private regarding use). Mazaruse (2010) contends that corruption has developed as a new form of colonisation and this can be seen by its capacity to destabilise the ethical morals of nations and put economies at risk. It is an unpleasant neo-colonial phenomenon which is reflected through progressive fragmentation of the national morale and failure in the economic wellbeing of the society. This paper seeks to deconstruct the effects of political corruption in Africa with special focus on Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968).

## **2. The Effects of Corruption on African Development**

According to Nduku and Tenamwenye (2014), corruption is presently one of the scourges that threaten human existence. It has actually become a global pandemic that gradually eats up the moral fabric of every society. In other words, it is not peculiar to Africa in that it is a universal plague. As the world population grows, corruption is also globalised. Vito (1998) claims that it is a criminal phenomenon which benefits few people at the expense of the majority. In Africa, corruption has seen many states degenerating. Amadi and Ekwewe (2014) posit that it is a new foe of the people in that it breeds hunger and starvation. The new institutional arrangements were not Afrocentric in that they did not promote

indigenous entrepreneurship or enhance bringing peace and quality life to the majority of the suffering Africans. Instead, they provided incentives which encouraged people to participate in rental opportunities, dishonesty and improper benefit.

Every nation needs good models and strategies for development so that its citizens can get a better quality of life. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Development is the act or process of growing or causing something to grow or become larger or more advanced". Lawal (2007:1) adds that:

*Development is seen as the process by which a type of (social) change is introduced into a system in order to produce a better production method and improved social arrangement. It involves a structural transformation of the economy, society, polity and culture of a country. The level and rate of development of any particular society is influenced by so many vulnerable aspects such as the political culture, leadership, and corruption. In Africa corruption has been at the centre of development and impediment of true and real development in the society. Corruption has ravaged the entire African system, causing the continent to be the most corrupt in the world. If Africa is to be saved from this infection, the endemic presence of corruption must be dealt with.*

To Africa, corruption is a challenge that directly interferes with development. The flagrant violation of people's rights and the brazen disrespect of constitutions by some leaders are continually robbing Africa of its opportunities to flourish. Bamindele (2013) concedes that corruption is the main constraint that frustrates sustainable growth on the continent. The quality of life of the people has dismally deteriorated because of mismanagement of resources. There are no or few infrastructural facilities built by new governments in the post-independence Africa. Only the old, dilapidated colonial infrastructural vestiges, which are also poorly maintained, are visible in many states.

## **3. The Role of Theory in the Study**

This paper seeks to deconstruct the effects of political corruption in Africa through Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). Post-colonial Theory with its Afrocentric strand have been employed as lenses to examine how the novelist attempts to deconstruct corruption in the post-independence Africa.

### 3.1 Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory is a way of responding to emerging realities" (Etim, 2019:1). It covers "all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (Aschcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989:2). These cultures were denigrated and eroded during the imperial era to date. It deals with the previously oppressed people's quest for identity on the basis of history, language, race, and culture. The application of this theory on the African continent is called Afrocentricity (Asante, 1999) while in continents such as Asia, it is called Orientalism (Said, 1978).

#### 3.1.1 Afrocentricity

Asante (1999:1-2,4) defines Afrocentricity "as a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans" by "re-centering African minds". In other words, Afrocentricity is aimed at correcting the damage the Europeans inflicted against the Africans through Afrocentric means. Karenga (1988:404) defines Afrocentricity as "essentially a quality of perspective or approach rooted in the cultural image and human interest of the African people". This means that it is a state of being centred on Africa, which is to say that in Afrocentricity, everything revolves around the African continent, her people, their customs, knowledge (including scientific and technological), art forms, morals, habits, ideologies and politics, cultures, and traditions (Asante, 1999:4). Africa is used as a centre of discourse, a context for whatever content there is to pronounce on. In this way, Africa becomes a subject of analysis, a point of focus and concentration, the axis. One of the salient tenets of Afrocentricity is *ubuntu*, "which is the collective solidarity of the poor on survival issues" (Mbigi & Maree, 2005: vii). The overriding phrase embraced in *ubuntu* is sacrifice for the benefit of others. In other words, one should overstretch oneself in an attempt to help others. This is the theoretical framework on which this study is undergirded.

### 4. Method and Materials

The paper has employed a qualitative approach to endeavour to deconstruct the effects of political corruption in Africa with special focus on Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Qualitative approach deals with "material practices incorporating an interpretive, naturalistic approach [and], explores how social experience is constructed and given meaning" (Landers, 2005:17). The article is further

underpinned by textual analysis which "describes the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts" (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 1999:1). Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* was used as primary data while secondary data was collected from critical essays, journal articles, television talks and newsletters. Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* was purposively sampled for the purposes of this study because of its relevance to this article on the issue dismantling corruption in the post-independence Africa. Purposive sampling is "when elements selected for the sample are chosen by the judgment of the researcher" (Black, 2010:15). Collected data from the sampled text was analysed by breaking it into themes in order to crystallise the problem. Thematic analysis seeks to "identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017:353).

### 5. Depiction of Political Corruption in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a literary text that depicts corruption which happened in Ghana, Armah's home country, shortly after its independence. Ghana is used as a fictional representation of the corrupt practices experienced by many African states after the attainment of independence. In other words, Ghana is used as a microcosm of Africa in this regard. In the text, Armah attempts to conscientise people about the corrupt activities which are taking place around them. Charef (2015a:9) corroborates that "Armah's novels are considered to be novels of historical reconstruction, which are meant to fight what Armah considers to be injustice, prejudices and atrocities that existed over the years by foreigners and also by Africans on Africans". Analysis of this novel is thematised into two *motifs*:

#### 5.1 Bribery

Bribery is one of the most salient corrupt practices that Armah is trying to delineate in the novel. Powerful people use bribery for a plethora of untoward reasons in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. One of those reasons is to acquire tenders and lucrative deals for self-aggrandisement. Many senior government officials are the beneficiaries of this atrocious phenomenon in the novel. People

who refuse to join the gravy train are normally victimised by either being falsely accused of fabricated wrongdoing and removing them from their positions or murdering them if it comes to a crunch. The following conversation between The Man and the Messenger (characters in the novel) serves as evidence that bribery infests almost every organisation in Ghana:

*The messenger said '... and everybody says the Ghana lottery is more Ghanaian than Ghana' The Man replied 'You are afraid you won't get your money?' the messenger continued to say 'I know people who won more than five cedis last but they still haven't got their money' The Man asked 'Have they been to the police? The messenger asked a question and he immediately answered The Man 'For what? To help them get their money, you are joking. It cost you more when you go to the police, that's all'. The Man asked the messenger 'What will you do?' the messenger stated that 'I hope some official at lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as a bribe and allow me to have the rest (p.19).*

The above conversation serves as a manifestation that every organisation in Ghana ends up polluted by corruption. People in high offices want to be bribed before they can serve their countrymen and women. The Messenger won lottery money, which is something to be elated about, instead he wonders if he will ever receive it. The Man suggests that he goes to the police and the Messenger replies by saying that the police will demand more money in bribe. The Messenger ultimately opts for bribing an official from the lottery office than the police officer because he (the lottery officer) will demand less bribe and this will enable him (messenger) to have the rest for himself. It '*costs you more when you go to the police*' (p.19), the messenger discloses.

The Man and the Messenger's talk indicates how deep-seated bribery is in the hearts and minds of people in the novel. It is portrayed as an easy way out for most people in African countries. For those with businesses and who could not get deals, they went to the officials in the public offices to bribe their deals through. Should the people in offices be adamant, the individuals in need will promise them an irresistible half of the profit or offer them gifts that most of them could not say no to. It became a common practice that for every kind of assistance that a person needs, there must be a bribe attached to it. The Man converses with Amankwa:

*When the arm emerged it was clutching a dark brown leather wallet. The wallet was not fat. The Man looked steadily at the visitor. The visitor's gaze was bent, his eyes looking in the wallet while thick fingers fumbled inside. Then the fingers brought out two carefully held-out notes, two green tens (p.30).*

Amah tries to show readers how corruption, described through bribery, contaminated the beautiful land of Ghana. The Man had a visitor by the name of Amankwa, the timber merchant, at his work place who came to beg for assistance with his timbers. After a long battle with The Man, Amankwa, tired of this toing and froing, thought of giving The Man something that he thought would soften him up. He offered him and the other administrator in the office some money in order for them to see the deal through. The Man still refused to assist him. Amankwa then promised to double the offer of which The Man acknowledged as good money but still, he turns it down. The Man puts his upright character on display that even though other people may be accepting bribes, he courageously wants nothing to do with corruption. Even though The Man refuses to take the bribe which signals that there are still good people out there, his colleagues accept it. This has a strange twist to it as those who are not corrupt are seen as weak by their fellow morally tainted workers. Those who could not take bribe, like The Man, were mocked, stigmatised and regarded as cowards who are afraid of being rich. Amankwa "... shouted at him, '*You. You are a very wicked man. You will never prosper*'" (p.107). This is sadly how things are in Ghana and other African states in the post-colonial era. Those who cannot join the morally compromised people are regarded as aberrations. Most of those who are involved in these unsavoury activities would scapegoat it by stating that everyone does it. Through The Man, Armah seeks to expose and deconstruct the myth of corruption. He shows that through moral integrity, Africa can defeat this scourge and prosper. The Man is a classic example of ethical conduct which deserves to be emulated.

In the novel, bribery is rampantly committed by the law enforcers who are supposed to ensure the safety and welfare of the citizens. They unashamedly accept illegal payments from people who flout the law with impunity. Some of these corrupt officials receive wads of notes and gifts such as food and jewellery to reduce long sentences of murders, fraudsters and human trafficking criminals. Unroadworthy vehicles are allowed to brazenly roam the streets of Accra as

law enforcers do not have moral consciences anymore. The following scene between the bus driver and the police official offers evidence:

*...the driver understood. Without waiting to be asked for it, he took out his licence folder from his shirt pocket, brought out a cedi note from the same place, and stuck it in the folder. Then with his back turned to the people waiting in the bus, the driver gave his folder together with the bribe in it to the police man. (p.182)*

In Armah's fictional Ghana, the above citation is a common practice. Corruption is a cancer that is fast corroding and eroding the moral rectitude of the Ghanaian society. No one could be trusted because of the toxic nature of the environment. Nation builders are now nation destroyers. The friends of the people are now the treacherous and worst enemies of the people. Citizens feel failed and betrayed by their morally decayed leaders who are exemplified by the conduct of government workers from different Departments.

## 5.2 Embezzlement of State Funds

Siphoning off government funds is one of the main avenues associated with corruption. This is committed out of greed for self-enrichment. Charef (2015b:33) observes that "Armah reveals to his readers the social life of Ghanaians whereby government leaders like Koomson, Zacharia Legos and Abedenego Yamoah who enjoy a lavish life surrounded by expensive possessions. This is a result of embezzling their country's funds".

Koomson, who was employed at the railway factory, was parachuted into a ministerial position through unscrupulous means. He immediately began to massively steal from the people by using their money to fund his lavish life-style. In the post-independence Africa, it is a new normal that people in higher positions are mostly the ones who get involved in embezzlement activities. Armah states the following about the bus conductor: "He began walking slowly as calmly as he could to the back of the bus. 'You see, we can share' he said as he came up to The Man (p.5)". These are the words of the bus conductor who stole the money that the bus passengers gave as bus fare. The conductor was unaware that there was someone staring at him. When he realised that someone was staring at him, he had no choice but to go and try to convince the

person otherwise. The act of stealing that the conductor was caught in, indicates that it is part of his everyday life. He attempted to calmly make everyone unsuspecting of his shady deeds going to The Man and tried to sweet-talk him into believing that it was not what it looked like. He promised him that they could share what he stole. The Man, whom he was attempting to win over, did not even see what he did because he was asleep. Armah mentions that "the watcher was no watcher after all, only a sleeper (p.5)". The corrupt bus conductor saw this as a relief but, ironically, he was not impressed. This is the reason why he became very angry and started shouting and insulting the sleeper: "*You bloody fucking sonofabitch! Article of no commercial value! You think this bus belongs to your grandfather?*" The Man is morally awake but physically asleep. He does not act against the prevalent corruption in the community because of his passive demeanour. He is a symbol of the community which is ethically alert but is so disillusioned by the pervasive injustice to the extent that it is paralysed and sleepy. The bus conductor's anger is an endeavour to wake the community, epitomised by The Man, up from its inactivity while the country is going down the steep slope of destruction. That is why the bus conductor exudes mixed feelings about The Man's sleepy conduct.

Government allocates large sums of money to fund projects. These projects either happen or they do not happen at all, and if they happen they are not finished or they are not of good quality. Money is embezzled by those who are in power. Innovative ideas are brought forward to improve the living conditions of the people of Ghana but those who hold the levers of government, divert them for their own selfish means. The community is aware of this wicked behaviour but they are debilitated by fear of victimisation by those powerful and corrupt government officials. They are alert to this unpalatable event but are afraid to organise protest marches and pickets against them. The Socialist Party (Party in power) is numb, blind and deaf to the people's needs as they continue to embezzle state funds:

*It was at the durbar that the little boxes were launched. In the words of the principal secretary, they would be placed at strategic points all over the city, and they would serve, not just as containers for waste matter, but as shining examples. In the end not many boxes were put out, though there was a lot said about the large amount of money paid for them (p.8).*

The foregoing quote reflects how easy it was to promise people things and do less about the promise in the end. There was a 'large amount' allocated to purchase the little boxes for decontaminating the city. Political pests, in the form of the enemies of development, resisted the disinfectants by keeping much of the money to themselves at the expense of development. In most cases, government officials or those in power succeed in these immoral ventures by fronting their friends and at times, even family members. Koomson used Oyo's name to get his boat business running so that the inspectors and auditors do not uncover him. He does all these things with the support of his wife, Estella, who encourages him: "*Do you know, they themselves, the ones who shout, own things, lots of things* (p.137)". Estella tries to justify to The Man, his wife and mother in law that what Koomson is doing is what is precisely done by other senior government officials. Koomson and his cronies have even gained weight from the money that they steal from their own people. The Man laments:

...these are the socialists of Africa, fat, perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who had sold their people and are happy celestially happy with the fruits of the trade (p.131).

The Man lethargically expresses frustration at how the country is governed and how post-independence leaders are continuing to betray their own people through large scale theft of resources. Instead of this annoyance to jolt him into mobilising people against the mismanagement of the country, The Man, just like The Teacher, resigns himself to fate, which makes him an accomplice to this heinous wrongdoing. Armah wants enlightened people such as The Man and The Teacher to rise up against this moral bankruptcy raising peoples' awareness about it. It takes one man to destroy what appears to be invincible, in this instance it is the prevalent corruption in the fictional Ghana.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sought to deconstruct the effects of political corruption in Africa with special focus on Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. In the novel, Armah satirises African governments after their attainment of emancipation from the colonial powers. He, like Achebe (1988) and Ngugi (1986), uses Ghana as an example of what is actually occurring in other African States. African former freedom fighters are now depicted as villains who betray the

struggle by defrauding their people. Armah, not only poignantly exposes this political wickedness to ridicule, but he also suggests solutions to this cancer. He advises that those who are awake to corruption and injustice, such as The Man and The Teacher in the novel, must be proactively courageous and fight it. Inactivity can only worsen it as the cancer will continue to spread unabated. Armah further highlights that corruption can only be uprooted from the continent if Africans can go back to the moral principle of *ubuntu* (African Humanism) which advocates for sacrificial love for one another as Africans and as people of the world. In other words, to Armah, moral regeneration buttressed on the principle of *ubuntu* is the panacea for avarice for power and corruption in Ghana and in Africa, in general.

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