

LITTERATURE AFRICAINE

Titre de l'ouvrage : ***Fragments***

Auteur : **Ayi Kwei Armah**

Introduction

The African continent, for having endured a long and hard process of colonization, had been deprived of an important part of its resources. African peoples suffered a lot from colonial penetration. As a matter of fact, those hard-historical events could not be swept away overnight without leaving some indelible marks on the African people's psyche.

However, with the continuous growth of conscious intellectuals, the Africans are being more and more aware of the influence colonization had on their past and present times. And it is worth mentioning that in the group of intellectuals, the writers played a very important role in the sense that they made use of their writing abilities to convey their messages. Among those writers, we can mention Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (Kenya), and Ayi Kwei Armah (Ghana).

As far as Armah is concerned, his works show mostly a call for awareness, a call for actions towards changes. Armah attacks also the colonial powers in Africa and their African allies and watchdogs who exploit in some ways the masses. In doing so, he reinforces the view of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O about the functional role of literature. In effect, for Ngugi, literature has to be functional as it used to be in traditional Africa. In that perspective, he states:

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and image, tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative plane, of a community's wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process creating and recreating itself in history. (*Writers in Politics*, pp.5-6)

Therefore, as a writer conscious of his role Ayi Kwei Armah focuses a lot on the denunciation of the devastating effects of colonization. One of the most striking effects of colonization is the alienation of many Africans who have been in contact with European cultures. In the same way, as Cheikh Hamidou Kane depicts in *L'aventure ambiguë* a young intellectual torn between his African culture and the European one, Armah also shows in *Fragments* a young intellectual who is unable to fit his own society because of alienation.

Chapter I. The Author and the Work

A. Ayi Kwei Armah

Ayi Kwei Armah was born in Takoradi, Ghana, in 1939. He was educated in the local Ghanaian schools at Achimota before moving to the United States where he resumed his studies at Groton School and at Harvard University. He has worked as a translator and editor for *Jeune Afrique* in Paris; as a scriptwriter for Ghana television; and as a university professor in Wisconsin (USA) and Lesotho.

He belongs to the “second generation of writers”, that is those who are dissatisfied with most African affairs. In his works, Armah violently expresses his repudiation of corruption he looks upon as a disease that is destroying the Ghanaian society in particular, and African societies in general.

Although Armah writes from an African point of view for a basic African audience, his works have gained international attention. Armah is sometimes regarded as a controversial writer who does not hesitate to attack violently the African societies. His writings are original and characterized by a unique style that combines the realistic and the visionary. His focus on the wretchedness of most African societies is without a doubt due to his readings of Frantz Fanon. In fact, Fanon is the only intellectual influence Armah acknowledges.

Armah now lives in Senegal (in Popenguine) where he has settled his own publishing house: Per Ankh. He has published a number of novels:

- *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) which denounces political corruption in Africa just after the independence;
- *Fragments* (1970) which deals with the disillusionment of a young Ghanaian after a five-year-stay in the United States;
- *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) which is almost a continuation of *Fragments* reinforced by the theme of the return;
- *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) where Armah shows the destruction of Africa by Arab and European invaders who also altered the past of the continent;
- *The Healers* (1978) where Armah turns back to the customs through the practice of traditional medicine;
- *Osiris Rising* (1995) deals with the struggle of African countries against new forms of colonization; but also, for the restoration of the true history of Africa.

- *Kmt: In the House of Life* (2002) which is devoted mostly to Egyptology.

B. The Work: *Fragments*

Fragments, which is Armah's second novel, is divided into thirteen sections. The most important concerns of the book center around a religious and existential axis. Thanks to its autobiographical aspects (an autobiography is the life of a person written or told by himself), *Fragments* has a great impact on the reader. The structure of the novel is very complex because of the fragments it is made of; even though it is not too obscure.

Fragments is a step forward in Armah's attempt to denounce the corruption prevailing in Ghana. It shows the devastating effects of corruption on the individual. Moreover, the focus is directed toward an inquiry into the causes and the psychological consequences of corruption and up-rootedness. This appears through the conflicts (internal and external) characterizing the main protagonist, Baako Onipa.

Like *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments* is a novel in which the protagonists are gradually brought to an awareness of a deeply rooted sickness affecting the society. However, whereas in the first novel the analysis is essentially social and economic, in *Fragments* there is a more religious and philosophical explanation. The lack of orientation that Armah examines in *Fragments* is not something particularly Ghanaian or African; rather, it is an unavoidable characteristic of modern civilizations.

In *Fragments*, there is a discussion about the effects of corruption, particularly on the individual. In the case of Baako, those effects appear through a mental breakdown; hence the importance of the theme of madness.

C. The Shift in the Settings: A Growth of Awareness

When comparing *Fragments*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, and *Osiris Rising*, it appears that Baako and Samba Diallo are symbols of the weakness of the individual alone in his fight against the whole society. In effect, in *Fragments*, Baako fails to fulfill his duty as an intellectual because he is unable to face the problems resulting from his confrontation with society. Similarly, in *Ambiguous Adventure*, Samba Diallo fails in his duties not only as an intellectual but also as a Muslim as the man explains him. Because of the internal conflict of his own person, it is very difficult for him to make an appropriate choice; putting him thus in a dilemma expressed through a soliloquy that leads to his death after the negative answer. The misunderstanding lies in the fact that when saying "no" aloud, Samba Diallo was answering his own question, but not that of the madman who asked him if he would pray or not.

Contrary to the two previous novels, in *Osiris Rising* it is a group of intellectuals who decide to organize themselves in order to operate the necessary changes. They are aware of their struggle which cannot be led by an individual alone. There is a progressive enlargement of the setting moving from Ghana to the United States, and then back to Africa through Egypt. This can be associated with a broader view concerning the recovery of a lost identity.

When associating Egypt and Ghana with Africa, we may find that there is a metaphor of the return to the roots for us as Africans. People moved from Africa to America through different phenomena such as the slave trade (the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean). Now the time has come for us to go back to our history that would tell us "Who we are and why" (*Osiris Rising*): this is the necessary "homecoming"

Resources for Chapter I

videos

Global Conversations with Dr. Ayi Kwei Armah:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpJD7UxSwPQ>

Ayi Kwei Armah: The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krRQxNB4ZKg>

Web pages

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ayi-Kwei-Armah>

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghana>

<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/2441/Armah-Ayi-Kwei.html>

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/154550.Ayi_Kwei_Armah

Chapter II. Study of Some Characters

A. The Main Character: Baako Onipa

Baako is a man of 25 years who comes back after a five-year-stay in the USA where he was studying creative writing. The first and most important sign given about Baako through flashbacks in the novel is the nervous breakdown he suffered from. The second sign is his unannounced arrival to Accra, which means that the return has become a source of anxiety for him. In fact, that anxiety is particularly reinforced because Baako does not know if he would be able to meet the expectations of his society as a returning “been-to” (the term refers to those who have traveled to America). The “been-to” must provide evidence of his stay abroad by bringing material gifts and luxuries. Failing to do so would urge people to look at him as a failure. This is the case of Baako who comes back with nothing but a guitar and a typewriter. The friction is thus unavoidable.

A first and superficial analysis of the attitude of Baako's family towards him would tend to suggest that they do not love him at all. But a deeper look at the behavior of Efua and Araba shows that their reaction is far from being cynical. Rather, they prove to love very much Baako; even though he is no longer a source of pride for them. Baako is never forgiven his "betrayal", and his isolation inside his own family drives him into a lunatic asylum. His "uselessness" is intolerable for his family who let him know that no one needs abstract things by asking him "Who needs what's in a head?" (*Fragments*, p.190).

Baako is a wavering character (he has doubts because of the opposing forces that are around him). He is not totally convinced in a Ghanaian society where materialism is very strong as a myth.

Baako's main dilemma is related to the fact that he is unable to convince himself as far as the rightfulness of his stance is concerned. Consequently, we have on the one hand an individual struggling against a society which he is trying to relate to. On the other hand, there is the society itself in which Baako can no longer fit himself. The themes of alienation, loneliness, and isolation become thus central in the novel.

Baako is obviously obsessed with his despair because of his status of "been-to" without cargo. In fact, he considers this return without a "cargo" as an insult, as arrogance: "It's all arrogance without the others" (*Fragments*, p.192).

Baako's desire is to satisfy his family and his surrounding by providing them with the comfort they need. But he probably does not take into account the realities that make it impossible to achieve that goal because he has returned home with a richness that society considers as unnecessary, i.e. an

intellectual wealth. This consciousness of the contempt that society is manifesting towards his 'wealth' makes Baako anxious and uneasy.

B. A Survey of Other Key Characters

Brempong

Brempong, in full Henry Robert Hudson Brempong, is the symbol of the faithful “been-to” who does not hesitate to hide the truth for the perpetuation of the myth. He assumes his status as a “been-to” and he does all his best to meet the needs of his society. For that purpose, he always “prepares” his return home by making sure to come with his cargo. The reaction of his society is no doubt as it can be illustrated by his arrival at the airport. In effect, while Baako’s arrival is unnoticed, Brempong receives a very warm welcome:

Baako was surprised to see Brempong raise an arm and wave heroically toward the darkness in front of him before getting into the bus. Only after the bus had brought them to the terminal did Baako understand: behind the lining fence there was a waiting crowd, and several Akan voices had shouted when Brempong's shoes hit the tarmac, “here he comes!” One voice had screamed, “Uncle H.R.H.!” from the darkness, and Brempong had waved once more before he too entered the customs area.
(*Fragments*, p.54)

Brempong’s baggage is taken care of by many persons while Baako spends much time before getting his:

“About your luggage, sir,” the young man continued, “I have given all necessary instructions. We can go to the arrivals lobby and wait. I think your family is waiting for you there.” (*Fragments*, p.55)

That contrastive image emphasizes the gap existing between Baako (a “been-to” who returns with no cargo) and Brempong who has prepared his return. For

Brempong, the big mistake made by Baako is his failure to prepare his return as a real “been-to”. On their plane back to Ghana, he points out to Baako:

You just have to know what to look for when you get a chance to go abroad. Otherwise, you come back empty-handed like a fool, and all the time you spent is a waste, useless. /.../ But if you come back prepared, there's nothing to worry about. (*Fragments*, p.45)

Therefore, the main difference lies in the fact Brempong is very proud of his status as a “*been-to*” which he tries to safeguard by all means. He becomes thus the worthy son of a society whose needs he meets every time he comes back home. This is very important because in a society where the cargo cult is deeply rooted, the material opulence is the only evidence of a stay abroad for the “*been-to*”

‘It's no use,’ Brempong said, ‘going back with nothing. You may not have the chance to travel again in a long time. It's a big opportunity, and those at home must benefit from it too. I don't see the sense in returning with nothing. But you haven't had much experience.’
(*Fragments*, 53)

Thus, Brempong draws Baako’s attention on the devastating effects to come back empty-handed, that is without a cargo.

Naana

She is the prototype of traditions and the defender of ancestral order. Naana believes in the old moral and is firmly convinced of Baako’s return. In other words, Naana is witnessing the decline of the set of values that have kept safe the society for centuries. However, she appears to be powerless to impose her view on the new generation. Therefore, she has come to the

conclusion that all she can do now is to wait for death she looks upon as liberating because the world has become nothing but a “jungle”.

Naana is seen as mad because she rejects what is going on in her society; going therefore against a general trend. But contrary to Baako, she is very stuck to her principles and does not accept to give in to the pressures of society.

Juana

She is a psychiatric woman who left Puerto Rico to settle in Ghana. Juana and Baako are almost in the same situation that drives them very close to one another through a love story. Juana has become a sort of refuge for Baako who feels totally abandoned by society, particularly by his own family. Their relationship becomes thus a logical outcome for their reciprocal need for support.

Juana tries to defend Baako and to help him get rid of the feeling of guilt which is eating away at him from inside. She put Baako’s mind at ease:

‘The doctor says he’ll let you out when you respond to treatment. He just means he wants you to be quiet and take that medicine. Don’t argue with anyone. You can’t win.’

‘That’s something I should have known too. Outside.’

‘What really happened?’

‘You don’t need to be told. The cargo, that’s it, really. Do you think the traveler should have come back just like that? Who needs what’s in a head?’

‘You’re accusing yourself again. You’re not a criminal. You were trying to do something. It isn’t wrong just because people say it is.’ (*Fragments*, p.190)

In fact, through Juana, Armah recaptures what is lost through Baako, which is loneliness. She is there to fill in the gap caused by the loneliness in which Baako is put after his isolation from society.

Ocran

He is Baako's former art master at Akimota. He is the one who pinpoints the futility of writing in the context of an African society where materialism is deeply rooted. For Ocran, the artist is naturally doomed to suffer a situation in which he is alone as specified by the "post-Romantic European tradition". Therefore, for Ocran, Baako's isolation should not be a major surprise to him and to all those who understand the individual struggle he is involved in. He considers that Baako should stop putting the blame on him and be aware that he is not obliged to comply with the requirements of society. Besides, Ocran finds it insane that Baako is affected by its inability to meet those needs which, once he starts dealing with them, they will keep on multiplying:

But it's senseless to get sick because you can't help them get what they want. They'd be no end to these once you started destroying your life to satisfy them. (*Fragments*, p.193)

That idea is reinforced by Juana ho states:

It can be a terrifying conflict, if you see the need to help relatives, though, and also to do something useful in a large sense. There are two communities, really, and they don't coincide. It's not easy to work out priorities. (*Fragments*, p.193)

As Ocran points out, Baako must choose among a set of priorities, those that are really essential:

'We still have to choose,' Ocran said, sighing. 'Pardon me, I talk like a brute, but we have to choose. Yourself, Baako, your problems are different from your relatives.'

You have a fullness you need to bring out. It's not an emptiness you need to cover up with things. You're not a businessman.' (*Fragments*, 193)

For Ocran, Baako's concern should not be to fill a void, but rather to proceed to concrete actions. Baako is therefore bound to make a choice among many others. To do so, he must be able to not take into account some considerations of society for more freedom of action.

Resources for Chapter II

Web pages

<http://imdiversity.com/villages/global/book-review-moaning-pessimists/>

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64671/9/09_chapter%203.pdf

<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/download/34563/28598>

http://theijhss.com/force_download.php?file_path=wp-content/uploads/2015/06/9.-HS1506-040.pdf&id=1638

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