

**LONELINESS AND ACHIEVEMENT: A STUDY OF AYI KWEI
ARMAM'S PROTAGONISTS.**

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Critical response to Ayi Kwei Armah in Africa has tended to be negative. Chinua AchJoi, Atta Britwum² and most recently Charles Nnolirm have been the most articulate of those critics who object to the landscape of Armah's works, his type of hero and the so-called pessimistic tone of these works. Armah's group of supposedly ineffectual heroes have been found in the opinion of these critics to be unfit for the functional role which literature, and in fact art in general are expected to play in society. Professor R.N. Egudu was referring to the same problem when in a paper he presented at the 1980 Modern Languages Association conference held at the University of Benin, he lamented the lack of models, that is exemplary heroes, in African Literature. His particular reference was to Armah's hero, the man who is the central character of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Egudu's contention is that despite the hero's ceaseless fight against corruption Armah has failed to project him as a more positive character:

... the 'Man' who is the symbol of the virtue, spirit and ideology that can guide the people has fortunately triumphed in his stand. But we are sadly aware that the 'Man' is through the novel presented as a sorry sample of living humanity. His wobbling doggedness along the path of virtue is commendable, but his social life-in-death is lamentable.⁴

It is noteworthy however, that unlike the other three critics mentioned Egudu does acknowledge that the hero's victory lies in his moral stand which he maintains to the end of the novel. The man is the type of hero whom Armah has tried consistently to ennoble in his works, one whose victory must be seen not directly in overt success of a social or emotional kind but rather more symbolically in the doggedness with which he pursues the path of righteousness in a society which no longer cares for such values. Such a hero is usually placed in a collision course against the moral evils in the society. The man's personal commitment to principles, however vaguely defined or ambiguously demonstrated remains the centre of this novel and has been given symbolic interpretation in Ogungbesan's article, "Symbol and Meaning" in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.⁵

The man's choice of a life of integrity automatically places him in a very lonely position in the society. In fact, all Armah's heroes suffer from acute isolation and alienation from colleagues, friends, relations and society in general. But their achievement also emanates from this loneliness. This is a very existentialist stand since it implies that true freedom must be won in isolation, and that to be committed is to be in danger.

Throughout the novel the man fights alone. His isolation as much as his ordinariness makes him a true soul brother to the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Though a faceless hero, he refuses to give up the struggle, and his life becomes symbolically the archetypal journey through hell. It is to stress the man's degree of toneless that he is given a wife who is a complete shrew, and who by virtue of her negative posture accentuates his victory. Oyo's warped logic insists on externals and tends to confuse appearance and reality. It is a logic usually tailored to find its solution in her own needs or greed. It is symbolic that Koomson who has been Oyo's symbol of success later becomes the specimen for expressing her appreciation of her husband's integrity after the coup. The man's close association with Teacher is yet another aspect of his loneliness. His ability to rise beyond Teacher's despair underscores his achievement. As friend and adviser he performs a double role and therefore poses a double threat, emotional as a friend, intellectual as a teacher. Ultimately the man's vegetable are replete with images of death and despair. His favourable book, *He Who Must Die* is symbolic enough. The man must therefore fight such total flight from responsibility. His heroism lies in the fact that despite the taunts and jeers from relations, friends and foes; despite his loneliness and shame and quite often periods of doubts he rises beyond the total death-in-life position of his friend. These words are memorable:

"Teacher you know it is impossible for me to watch the things that go on and say nothing. I have my family; ism in the middle. "6

One, often hears the claims that the Man eventually succumbs to corruption because he too has confessed to Teacher that he loved shiny cars and international schools. It would be highly hypocritical and unnatural for Armah to pretend that his hero or any human being hated comfort. What distinguishes the man from the rest of his countrymen is his unwillingness to reach the gleam "by cutting corner" and taking the leap, eating the fruits of fraud:

"That has always been the way the gream is approached: in one bold, corrupt leap that gives the leaper the power to laugh with contempt at those of us who still plod on the daily round, stupid, honest, dull, poor, despised, afraid. We shall never arrive. Unless of course, we too take the jump". 7

Within the context of this depressing but realistic work and the moral temperature of the society on which it is based, the integrity of such a faceless hero stands out all the more. Armah has deliberately created a hero schooled in suffering but one too overwhelmed even with the problem of his own individual salvation to be politically committed. As a struggling man with little education and as one not backed by any special intellectual endowments or philosophical insights into the sickness of his society, he cannot therefore be expected to mobilise the type of mass awareness demanded of him by some Marxist critics. What he has is a wealth of humane qualities and a sense of determination which carry him through his problems. He remains till the end, in Sdyinka's words, the solitary, beleaguered representative of moral possibilities. His often cited role in the final escape of Kooson is not a sign of his fall into corruption but rather a frantic and desperate act of self-preservation and it certainly would have been suicidal for the man to let himself be found in Kooson's company. His action was dictated by fear and confusion rather than by any calculated attempt to abet crime. This is in keeping with his over-rail portrait in the book.

Different levels of loneliness are explored in Armah's works and these levels apply in varying degrees to the different heroes. There is physical, mental or intellectual loneliness, social loneliness and spiritual loneliness. Armah's heroes, unlike heroes of American Literature, such as Huckleberry Finn or Thoreau in Walden do not suffer from physical loneliness or withdraw from society. This struggle is built on the sharp and sad irony of living physically with their families but sharing very little mentally and spiritually with them. Throughout the man lives with his family but lives in total intellectual and moral isolation from his wife who would not hear anything of his principles. As an artist Baako's loneliness is further accentuated by virtue of the social image of the artist as a lonely man.

Armah's choice of Baako as his hero is significant in many ways and does reveal a deeper exploration of the motif of loneliness. Baako, like his predecessor, is isolated morally from his society and from the beginning shows a propensity towards social isolation in the quiet

unheralded way in which he comes back home, as opposed to the pomp and pageantry with which his countryman, Brempong, was welcomed. Even in the plane Brempong noticed him by his significant isolation, symbolised by his special attachment to his guitar. The typical image of the artist in society is that of an introvert and isolationist both of which Baako is. It is still more significant that he makes for the hotel after his arrival rather than for his family home. To crown it all he opts for the more imaginative, lonely and creative vocation of the artist which further forces him to work in loneliness. By vocation, by temperament and by taste he is an isolationist totally alienated from, the materialistic values of his society. He, like the man, is condemned to uphold a life of personal pride and psychic contentment by living through moments of intense loneliness, doubt and confusion. Baako too has been rejected by his family and society at large, because he would not take the jump into corruption. He refuses to buy a car and in fact to assume the normal African responsibility for one's family. These decisions accentuate his social loneliness. Efua constitutes the greatest threat to his integrity. She is the full embodiment of all that Baako is running-away from and a typical member of her society; as Baako says: "a closer, intenser, more intimate reflection of the society itself, a concave mirror." He is therefore fully aware of his predicament and what society expects of him. His mother, his sister Araba, his uncle Foli all constitute a gang which he must fight, all alone, in order to uphold his integrity.

In Ghanavision, among colleagues, Baako is also a lonely outsider and their rejection of his television script designed for the enlightenment of the masses has finally unveiled before him the immensity of the problem involved in fighting a whole society bent on destroying creativity and ideals. The immensity of Baako's problems and the pervading, nature of his loneliness emphasise his achievement and the degree of his ethical victory

His mental breakdown does not come as a surprise since he has already had a history of nervous disorder. When this returns his family hastens to confine him in a mental asylum, the citadel of loneliness. This action also brings Armah's hero closer to physical violence. Society has treated Baako the way it treats its mad men.

Perhaps it expected more from him because he has had the opportunity of going abroad to bring back "the cargo." But instead Baako rebels and society tries to destroy him. Ironically the hero exhibits unusual calm and peace while in confinement and is better able to understand his own

vocation. His achievement is more remarkable from this standpoint. Baako's victory is total in the sense that he does not waver in his ethical stand; it is a symbolic victory.

Baako's loneliness is underscored by the added fact that for help he could turn only to two "outsiders" his aged and blind grandmother, Naana, and his Puerto Rican girl-friend, Juana. The latter, a psychiatrist offers both emotional and mental help in contrast to the stifling affection of his mother. Naana too is an outsider, a voice from another time. She stands for a historical reality, pleading for the ancestors in a changed materialistic world that begrudges them even the usual traditional homage. Naana helplessly plays her role of the chorus of one warning Baako of the danger with which he is surrounded. To the end he refuses to conform and becomes a semi exile in Juana's house. Ironically Naana is just as lonely as Baako.

Baako's has been the story of the loneliness and helplessness of the creative individual who attempts to realise his potential in a society which appears bent on destroying all creativity. Armah provides no answer for the problem; the reward lies in the struggle itself, a very existentialist solution.

In *Why Are We So Blest?* the reflection of the loneliness of the hero in the geographical landscape of the novel is an intensification of the theme of loneliness and the struggle involved in accommodating it, hence Modin moves through the waste land of Lacryville with its symbolic name, through America and the Saharan desert but remaining "a stranger" in every one of the locations. In addition his associations with people merely sharpen the pangs of his loneliness. With Solo, Aimee, Naita, Mrs. Jefferson and Oppenhardt he features like a victim in the midst of preys. Unfortunately Solo who comes closest to offering Modin solace is on exile like Juana. He is a lonely refugee running for safety after an abortive attempt to help the guerrilla forces in his country. The incorporation of Solo in this book creates a more serious dimension to the theme of isolation. Modin tries to begin where Solo has tried and failed". He is still in the puzzled stage, confused, searching for definition and perhaps ultimately joining in the revolutionary struggle. Significantly he is rejected by Jorge Manuel and his band of confused revolutionaries.

Solo in this book remains the all-seeing but inactive commentator and artist who watches the steps by which Modin walks to destruction* but

does nothing about them. His insightful analysis of the letter's predicament and his accurate appraisal of Aimee's character are rendered useless by his inaction. The extended irony of the situation is that Solo himself is as lonely as Modin. Commenting on Modin's passionate but destructive alliance with Aimee he says:

*do not, in the end, understand his attraction to her. The truth is, I do not want to understand. I am afraid to understand. Afraid, ultimately, for myself.*⁹

He admits to having failed Sylvia, by offering her 'nothing but a piece of my own uncertainty.' It is this acute nihilism that makes the mood of why are we so Blest? so gloomy. Modin's main problems remain loneliness, separation from home and the constant necessity to adjust to alien realities. For him and Solo loneliness remains an insoluble problem, as was the case with Armah's earlier protagonists. In his diary Modin writes:

The pain is terrible. The more I think of what has happened, the harder I find it to escape the same conclusion: I am fated to undergo some form of death. There is no sanctuary. I have known periods of spiritual death when I have shut myself up away from this world. There is loneliness that is kind of death. But the solution available, involvement with these people, is itself a deeper form of death. ¹⁰

His farcical encounter with the Jeffersons in which he almost loses his life has forced this awareness on him. Isolation has always been a strong motif in Armah's novels. In *The Beautiful Ones* it is a constant threat to the man's conviction of the Tightness of his stand. It makes him feel guilty because practically no one else snares his beliefs. The man feels what Teacher understands, that the salvation of the individual must be realised as an achievement in isolation:

It should be easy now to see there have never been people to save anybody but themselves, never in the past, never now, and there will never be any saviour if each will not save himself. No saviours. Only the hungry and the fed Deceivers all. ¹²

Baako too feels intimately the pangs of isolation, perhaps even more painfully than the man, because of his commitment to art. His constant companion, his guitar, is the symbol of this isolation. The man and Baako, from their isolated positions, fail to save their societies but

manage to retain their integrity and vision. In *Why Are We So Blest?*, Solo too laments the impotence of his own thoughts. Crippled by inaction and depression, his eventual despair is the result of isolation from his society. He is unable to help Modin even when he is sure the latter is walking into destruction. But in the final analysis Solo is not different from Modin; he is simply the commentator while Modin is the actor in this drama of splendid waste and futility.

This search for a social direction has always gone hand in hand with the search for a visionary who can answer the demands of such a struggle. What Armah presents us with is a past whose social philosophy was a natural egalitarianism. The elderly Isanusi leads the band of devotees determined to retrieve this past. Armah "has deliberately spared Isanusi the mental shackles attendant on the acquisition of western education. He is fully nurtured in the soil of Africa and understands the problems in all their ramifications. Through Isanusi's dedication and struggle Armah not only presents us with a positive metaphor for liberation but also demonstrates through his protagonists a people's expression of the communal and authentic will to identify. Isanusi's archetypal quest for the salvation of society thus assumes an apocalyptic dimension in its anticipation of a people's journey from slavery to self-discovery

Despite Armah's positive vision in *Two Thousand Seasons*, its hero, Isanusi is the lonely hero par-excellence. His vision is as unambivalent as Armah's intention and theme are positive. In him the aspirations and dreams of Armah's previous heroes are realised, and violence, death, destruction and sacrifice are acceptable as the natural components of this realisation. Isanusi shares the experience of loneliness with his male and female warriors; hence there is beautiful Idawa who lives in the lonely grove with the hero after rejecting the advance of Koranche; Ndola, the poet and singer who also lives as an outcast and when she finally dies in the grove is buried single-handedly by Isanusi, a fellow outcast; there is also Abena, another remarkably beautiful woman, who fires the shot that kills Koranche. These individuals one time or other come into contact with Isanusi and do share in his loneliness, but none ever comes close to attaining his height in talent and self-discipline. A basic departure in Armah's treatment of the loneliness of the hero in this book is that he invests it with a deliberate political dimension, for it is Koranche the King who declares Isanusi an outcast and prescribes severe punishment for anyone found in his company. Here we are therefore dealing with the loneliness of a group whose commitment assumes national proportion. The family, accorded prominence in Armah's former works, gives way to

the whole community. However, the humanistic basis of the struggle links *Two Thousand Seasons* with the rest of Armah's works. Suffering and deprivation are components of Isanusi's destiny and that of all his followers. He is a man without family or friends.

Armah's most startling departure in this work is his insistence that the hero cannot stand alone in this phase of the struggle. Hence Isanusi is surrounded by a devoted band of young men and women who share his aspirations. The quality of leadership lacking in Armah's previous heroes now becomes an indispensable asset as Isanusi withdraws into the cave in preparation for his mission to recover Anoa. His withdrawal into loneliness however is a beginning not an end as in Armah's previous books. It marks a period of thinking, planning and watching in preparation for the inevitable hardship and loss of loved ones and comrades-in-arms. Armah's point is that freedom must be fought for to be truly appreciated.

It is noteworthy however that the communal effort in the book is not allowed to interfere with the individuality of each participant. In the same vein loneliness becomes not just the characteristic of the hero but that of anyone who opts for the hero's group which is truly a group of outcasts rejected by the society at large. Armah's belief that in order to find his true self the hero must be willing to dissolve his consciousness into the collective consciousness of the community, reflects his full realisation of the immensity of the struggle at hand and shows a definite involvement in his concept of the hero, it is also a demonstration in practical terms of the African concept of the universe and social relationship.

It is within this communalism that Isanusi realises his full potential. His experience at Koranche's court gives him a first-hand knowledge of corruption. His subsequent withdrawal into the cave parallels Christ's withdrawal to the desert, in preparation for his mission of salvation. His refusal to be forced to fit into strategies of (Instruction, to use his gift of eloquence for deceit or to be won over by the King's friendly approaches, symbolises his recognition of his special vocation.

Armah allegorizes the King's fear of Isanusi in order to demonstrate the ultimate helplessness of evil in the face of goodness. Many of the King's hired murderers never succeed in reaching the fifth grove, and Bofo, the 'happy fool' who does so, dies in single combat with Isanusi. Although the hero eventually dies through Fosu's treachery, his death does not

inflict on his followers that ashen paralysis of the will which kille action. Rather it propels them in the decisive action which leads to the sacking of Korache's palace and the death of his followers. Abena crowns their victory by shooting the King in the presence of his subjects.

Isanusi saves his followers before losing his own life. In combining the qualities and talents of Armah's previous heroes with his own physical and mental energy he forces society to recognise his presence. He is, by Armah's definition, a true liberation: "he who from a necessary silence, from a necessary secrecy strikes the destroyer."¹³ Symbolically, his blood nurtures the flowers of revolution to full blossom.

The evolvement of the hero in Armah's novels is an indication of the novelist's position and abiding interest in the socio-political problems confronting Africa, and proves that his ideas are anchored in contemporary African realities. His belief that Africa will eventually accept the leadership of men of vision is evidence of his idealism. In his novels he has explored the painful path that the hero must read in order to win his true place in society. From **The Beautiful Ones to Two Thousand Seasons** the journey to spiritual redemption through political commitment and practical action has been steady, although slow.

In the case of each hero he has laid emphasis on the fact that whether the social, emotional or spiritual level the hero must fight in loneliness. He must brave the rejection of family, friends and foes. Even in instances of partial friendship such as the cases of Teacher, Naana, Ocran, Juana and Solo, these friends are either physically or spiritually incapacitated, political refugees or social recluses whose presence offers little solace to the hero. The fact that all Armah's heroes are lonely and win or lose alone not only emphasises the immensity of their struggle but also underscores their achievement within such hostile surroundings.

FOOTNOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann 1975).
2. Atta Britwum, "Hero — Worshiping in the African Novel (The Case of Ayi Kwei Armah and others)", *Asemka*, (Mo.3 (1975).
3. Charles E. Nnolim, "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah," *African Literature Today* No. 10, Heinemann Educational Books 1979, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979, pp.207-223.

4. R.N. Egudu, "Literature, Language and Ideology, "Unpublished paper pp. 4&5.
5. Kolawole Ogbungbesan "Symbol and Meaning in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born". African Literature Today. (No. 7) London, Ibadan, Nairobi, Lusaka: Heinemann 1975). pp.93-109,
6. Ayi Kwei Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born (London: Heinemann Educational Books 1968), pp.64-65.
7. Ibid., p.113
8. Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.116.
9. Ayi Kwei Armah, Why Are We So Blessed, London, Ibadan, (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1972), p.209.
10. Ibid., p.159.
11. Ayi Kwei Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. p. 106
12. Armah, Why Are We So Blessed, p .231.
13. Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons, Nairobi, East African Publishing House. 1973), p.318.