

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AYE KWEI ARMAH'S NOVEL, *THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN* AND ARAVIND ADIGA'S NOVEL, *THE WHITE TIGER*

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### ABSTRACT

*Aye Kwei Armah and Aravind Adiga satirically portray the decadent moral values, the spiritual bankruptcy and rampant corruption in post-independent Ghana and India, respectively. Both these writers have spent a substantial time abroad to familiarize themselves with the American mindset and Eurocentric mindset. Though their countries are ruled by the native people yet their attitude is no better than their colonial white rulers. The sardonic mockery in their novels is directed against the practice of what Frantz Fanon calls 'Black Skin, White Mask'. In both the novels, it has been depicted how post-colonial leaders have become nonchalant not only to the political ideologies but also to the fate of their countries. They have seized to become instruments of change and have stewed themselves in dishonesty and corruption.*

**Keywords:** Corruption, Franz Fanon, national bourgeoisie , post-colonial literature.

### INTRODUCTION

The relation between literature and the historical phenomenon of imperialism has been both long and intimate. Literature certainly played a key role in validating imperial rule. Edward Said was never far from the truth when he stated that in literature some issues related to imperialism were “reflected, contested and even for a time decided” (Introduction, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii). The imperialists use the services of literature for the twin purposes of perpetuating Western ideology and culture in the colony as also exerting important influence on their own people in their motherland. Martin Green underscores that English men savoured the

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tales of Robinson Crusoe for nearly two centuries after the publication of Defoe's novel. Such tales charged "England's will with energy to go out to the world and explore, conquer and rule (*Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* 3).

Victorian literature was saturated with imperialist notions of racial pride and national greatness. The greatest spokesman of imperialism in literature was Rudyard Kipling. He fervently believed in the civilizing mission of Europe; small wonder he was looked upon as 'the greatest apostle of imperialism of his time' (*Imperialism Reader: Documents and Readings on Modern Expansionism* 87). It was in the early part of the twentieth century that the glory of the British Empire began to wane. Now the colonized writers began to register their protest against the imperial power. They did this not by a miracle but by appropriating both the language and the free form of the colonized people. This marks the beginning of anti-colonial and post-colonial writings in the colonies. It is with the experiences of the former colonized people that post-colonial literature is primarily concerned. Elleke Boehmer define post-colonial literature as "that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship" (*Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* 20). Post-colonial literature provides open expression to the colonial experience. It includes all the cultures that were affected by the imperial process. In the context of Africa too, there has been a substantial contribution to post-colonial literature.

The post-independent African situation is far from satisfactory. It is always plagued by political conflicts and *coup d'état*. One listens to the sad story of intra-party struggles and corruption even in the highest echelons of power. Needless to say that Africa gained political independence but this independence became synonymous with neo-colonialism. The outcome of these political developments was rueful. Africa was left at the mercy of imperialist forces and multinational corporations. The ramifications of colonialism were so deep that they began to create problems for Africa even after independence. The surprising thing about the African situation is that neither the nationalist leaders nor the subsequent military regimes gave the exploited masses the slightest opportunity to participate in the political processes. On the contrary, these regimes worked in such a manner that they legitimized the role of reactionary forces.

Ayi Kwei Armah raised a controversial storm with the publication of his first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). Armah was greatly influenced by Frantz Fanon. Fanon's psychological – therapeutic approach was primarily concerned with the states of mind of the colonized. He spoke of the different kinds of frustrations and complexes of the colonized African. Such frustrations do not give the natives an opportunity to view themselves as an entity so that they can gauge their deplorable economic plight. Fanon's treatise entitled *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) is a socio-psychological work that directs the attention of the black man towards the realization that his alienation is not an individual problem. Its roots can be traced to the inferiority of the black man which is determined both historically and economically. It is on these lines that Armah scripts the novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Armah acknowledged the influence of Fanon in his work and thought process in the following terms:

"The one theorist who has worked out consistent formulations concerning ... a revolutionary

restructuring of African society is Frantz Fanon.

(“African Socialism : Utopian or scientific?” *Presence Africaine*, No. 64 (1967) 29)

Critics have delved deep into the general philosophical pessimism of Armah’s novels vis-à-vis their thematic treatment. Even a perceptive critic like Charles E. Nnolim regards Armah not only as a ‘cosmic pessimist’ but also a ‘retrogressive pejorist’. The images of decay, degeneration, avarice, dishonesty and corruption goads Nnolim to remark that ‘Ghana is one giant stinking lavatory’ when he comments on Armah’s fiction *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. (*African Literature Today* No.10 207)

Chinua Achebe another great African novelist of repute labels *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* ‘a sick book’. Achebe castigates Armah for taking up the role of a reformer and a teacher in this novel. Achebe expatiates that the unnamed protagonist in Armah’s novel struggles to remain immaculately honest when everyone around him has fallen into the mire of corruption.

Aye Kwei Armah and Aravind Adiga satirically portray the decadent moral values, the spiritual bankruptcy and rampant corruption in post-independent Ghana and India respectively. Both these writers have spent a substantial time abroad to familiarize themselves with the American mindset and Eurocentric mindset. Though their countries are ruled by the native people yet their attitude is no better than their colonial white rulers. The sardonic mockery in their novels is directed against the practice of what Frantz Fanon calls ‘*Black Skin, White Mask*’

The trustworthiness of Fanon’s remark can be seen on a close perusal of Armah’s novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The Socialist party of Nkrumah in Ghana created a revolution in the ballot box with tall electoral promises in as much as the Congress party in India initiated the progressive Five –year plans to put the country on the economic map. But politicians and bureaucrats are surging on the wave of corruption, nepotism and dishonesty. As a matter of fact , dishonesty and favouritism have permeated even to the grassroots of the society. It is no longer the White rulers who misappropriate public money for their vested interests but it is the natives who swindle public money of the natives and make a total misuse of government machinery for their selfish interests. Unaccounted wealth accrued from the African natives leads to conspicuous consumption on the part of the members of the ruling Socialist party. All this is done at the cost of public money and the resources of the country. The chasm between the rich and the poor keeps on increasing because even the lower level employees are not free from this nefarious practice.

The nameless protagonist in Armah’s novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is not great professionally. The only qualification which this ordinary railway clerk has is that he is honest to a fault. On account of his sensitive perception of the society, he is able to make an incisive study of men and their morals. In Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, the protagonist Balram is able to know about every fibre of the Indian society through the manners and modes of the metropolitan chauffeurs. The protagonist of Armah keeps his eyes open to the changing social realities of his times and he always tries to adapt himself to the need of the hour in as much as Balram Halwai of *The White Tiger*.

Armah's unnamed protagonist is reluctant to be a part of the 'national game' (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 129) because he is never motivated by cupidity of wealth. Small wonder the society dismisses him for his being nonchalant to it. He compares his life with the life of his friend Koomson and his meteoric rise to the apex of fortune. Koomson is the emblem of corruption. Koomson symbolizes the corrupt people of post-independent Ghana. He has thrown all his conscience to the winds to attain prosperous fortune. Ethical considerations have little or no part to play in his life. He prizes his self and does not attach any interest to national issues. Koomson's 'doublespeak' (to use an epithet from Orwell) nature and blatant hypocrisy enables him to enrich himself with 'spoils of office'. It is in a coup that his decline becomes evident. The protagonist has every reason to believe that the problem of his dilemma is resolved and he is fairly sanguine that a new generation of beautiful persons shall be born.

It is needless to say that Armah's protagonist remains inviolate despite the corrupting influence of time. His mother-in-law and his wife Oyo seem to sail with the wind. They almost tease him out of his wits for his not taking bribes. They reiterate time and again that by taking bribes he shall help provide a better standard of life for his family. It is by his sterling integrity that he is able to overcome the compelling pressures of greed. It is none other than his wife Oyo who not only gives him a clean chit but also declares the superiority of her husband over Koomson. This is evident in her plain assertion: I am glad you never became like him. (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 165). The protagonist is able to foresee a beautiful era in the distant future when Ghana will be peopled with the beautiful ones. Armah sketches his mental graph with the help of a vision:

He was not burdened with any hope as new things were not yet ready to emerge. Someday in the long future a new life would maybe flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose its instruments the same people who had made a habit of killing new flowers. (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 159-160)

Armah paints the pathetic condition of a corrupt man who was highly powerful in the not too distant past. His condition has degraded to such an extent that he is compelled by circumstances to escape through a hole in the toilet ----- the toilet which he hated to use. The degraded man follows Koomson to his heels as he embarks on a boat to cross over to the other bank. When he sees his friend off he reads the inscription: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Armah's vision of a moral order is evident through the inscription which underscores the victory of virtue over a vicious system.

Armah is relentless towards the corrupt politician. The corrupt politician does not escape punishment even at the end. Here we appreciate the novelist's dramatic method of characterization. Armah makes a contrasted study of a conscientious law abiding citizen and his friend who flagrantly violates all standards of morality and displays naked cupidity of wealth. Though the unnamed protagonist sees people about him scrambling for a bit of cash, he refuses to become a votary of this godless civilization founded on money and material pursuits:

The man was left alone with thoughts of the easy slide, and how everything said there was something miserable, something unspeakably dishonest about a man who refused to take and

to give what everyone around was busy taking and giving; something unnatural, something very cruel, something that was criminal for who but a criminal could ever be left with such a feeling of loneliness? (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 31-32)

Post-independent Ghana is ruled by politicians who show their unbridled lust for power. There is a grain of truth in the remark of Lord Acton, 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. A man wins a lottery but to pocket the prize money, he needs to bribe the police officials. It is his tormenting agony which adds to his psychological crisis, "it costs you more money if you go to the police". The situation is identical in post-independent India where there is wide panoply of justice once the police intervenes in it. The reaction of the man in a highly corrupt society is certainly eye opening for he states that : The man realizes that in a society that has become highly corrupt, "it is terrifyingly plain that in these times honesty could be a social vice". (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 51)

The protagonist makes a contrasted study of the exploitation of the white men (colonizers) and the exploitative ways of the native rulers. The methods of governance of the native rulers of Ghana square with the methods of governance of the white men. In the past the white men exploited the African natives. Now it is the turn of the native rulers to exploit their countrymen. Armah's satire becomes pungent when he states that only the cowards and fools are honest:

When all around him the whole world is never tired of saying there were only two types of men who took refuge in honesty – the cowards and the fools...Very often these days he was burdened with the hopeless, impotent feeling that he was not just one of these, but a hopeless combination of the two. (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* 51)

Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* is an eye opener since it exposes the ugly features of post-colonialism. To a large extent, Adiga is an anti-colonial. He highlights the condition of post-colonial India or to put it appropriately post-independent India. The colonial masters had left the Indian shores in the forties of the last century but their place has been taken by the landlords of the village. The landlords own all the wealth and resources and so they dominate over the poor villagers. As the landlords are the owners of the factors of production, they exploit the labourers in ways more than one. They deprive the farmers of their legitimate wages and exploit the women sexually. Their cupidity for wealth and their covetousness have motivated the villagers to remember them by the sobriquet which they have given them. The greediest of the landlords is Buffalo; there are other landlords with different animal names, viz. the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven. Stork was named so because he 'took a cut of every catch of fish caught by villagers'. Raven was called so because he 'liked to dip his beak into their back side'. Just as wild animals gobble up the natural vegetation, similarly, the landlords eat up the produce of the land and deprive the farming hands from having even a small portion of the agricultural produce. In a post-colonial country, all the regions are allowed to grow and prosper together and all the people enjoy the same civic amenities. But this is not the case in Laxmangarh where the villagers lack the basic amenities like electricity, drinking water, sanitation and nutrition:



‘Children ----- too lean and short for their age, with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the Government of India.’ (*The White Tiger* 20)

The writer makes potshots at the poor standards of health, hygiene and sanitation of the village. The commodities sold in the shops of the village are either stale or below the cognizable standard:

There is one street in the village; a bright strip of sewage splits it into two. On either side of the ooze, a market: three more or less identical shops selling more or less identical adulterated and stale items of rice, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, cigarettes and jaggery. (*The White Tiger* 19)

Proper opportunities of employment are denied to them. Since they do not have proper employment, they are compelled to work as farm labourers, canteen boys in tea-shops, or rickshaw-pullers. In a tone of sardonic mockery to the landlords and in a mood smacking of pity for the labourers, Adiga equates them with spiders. The authenticity of the metaphor of the spider can be seen in this. Just as the spider spins web on walls and crevices and the webs do not have any productive value, similarly, the service rendered by tea-shop boys and rickshaw-pullers and the wages earned by them are not linked to productivity:

“human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven in their thirties or forties but still ‘boys’. (*The White Tiger* 51)

Adiga shows the hollowness of the anti-poverty programme of the government when he cites the instance of the sick and needy rickshaw-pullers like Vakeel Halwai and Kishan Halwai dying speedy deaths from consumption owing to lack of medical treatment in government hospitals. Adiga narrates how Vakeel got “*tuberculosis and died on the floor of a government hospital, waiting for some doctor to see him, spitting blood on this wall and that!*” (*The White Tiger* 86).

The corruption in the running of government hospitals prevents the fruits of medical treatment from reaching the poor masses. It is through the mouth of a Muslim character that we learn about the dishonesty in the appointment of doctors in government hospitals. Whenever the place of a doctor falls vacant, the post is filled by auctions that are done at very exorbitant rates. The newly appointed doctor parts one-third of his salary to the Medical Superintendent. The Medical Superintendent allows the newly appointed doctor to work in private hospitals as a return for the monthly bribe. Even if the new doctor does not attend to his duties at the government hospital, the Medical Superintendent presents a fictitious report of his regular attendance by his ticking the attendance register.

The Government of India has presented a rosy picture of the village of Laxmangarh and has glorified it incredibly. Though the Prime Minister has underscored that the standards of civic amenities, health and hygiene measure up to the standards laid down by the United Nations Organization and other organizations yet the picture is far from satisfactory. Adiga’s incisive irony brings out the difference between appearance and reality in Balram’s letter to the Chinese Premier:

“Your Excellency, I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarh is your typical Indian

village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the little children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, egg, vegetables, and lentils, will be found, when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set up by the United Nations and other organizations whose treaties our prime minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends". (*The White Tiger* 19)

As Balram shifts from Dhanbad to Delhi, he becomes aware of "the city of immense possibilities" with a feeling of naïve crudity. He sees his shift as a sort of cultural dislocation: from his native village roots to a technological society. His shift is not to be seen as a physical transfer alone. It is also suggestive of his change on the plane of his mind and sensibility. He presents a glorified picture of the nation's capital, the seat of the parliament and what not, but his euphoria dies down when he reflects on the slums adjoining the rich colonies of Delhi. The picture of reality is presented with shades of Adiga's sarcasm:

"They have come from the darkness too, you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, animal-like way, they live under the high bridges and over-passes, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them." (*The White Tiger* 119-120)

In a post-colonial country like India, the idealism of Gandhi, the apostle of peace and non-violence and the moral teachings of Buddha, should have some relevance. But the drivers are so frustrated by the evil-doings of their masters that all the tall idealism of sages reflected in their bronze statues have no impact on them. They manage to procure English wine from Embassies where tax-free wine is supplied, albeit unofficially. These inhabitants of light as they consider themselves in Delhi are strangers to real culture and refinement, if their "womanizing" ways are anything to go by. It would therefore, be in the fitness to describe Delhi as the city with affluence atop and visible darkness below.

Balram finds a striking contrast between the joviality of his native town, and the "boredom" of Delhi. It is Balram's statement of fact: "*you can sneak a bottle of Indian liquor into the car --- boredom makes drunks of so many honest drivers.*" (*The White Tiger* 149)

Balaram gathers some bitter experience about worldly life during his stay in Delhi. In his opinion the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of Indian economy. He uses the analogy of trapped chickens in a rooster coup. Balaram does not condescend to remain in this coup forever. He dreams of making it big in the entrepreneurial world. In the process he breaks the trust of his master, Ashok Sharma and makes capital of his master's munificence but at the same time he grows revengeful when Pinky's madam, the wife of Ashok meets with a car accident and Balaram is persuaded to own the responsibility. Later when Balaram is ensconced as an entrepreneur in Bangalore, his vehicle collides with a cyclist on the road but Balaram manages to save his skin by bribing the police. Balaram condones the dishonesty and corruption of entrepreneurs in a post-colonial country particularly in the heydays of the corporate sector.

Frantz Fanon is critical of the national bourgeoisie because they blindly follow the exploitative ways of their past masters:

The national bourgeoisie since it is stung up to defend its immediate interests, and sees no further than the end of its nose, reveals itself incapable of simply, bringing national unity into being or of building up the nation on a stable and productive basis (*The Wretched of the Earth* 128).

When we make an analysis of the two novels, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *The White Tiger*, we find that both the novelists Armah and Adiga like to expose the degeneration of moral values in the post - independent countries Ghana and India, respectively. It is the irony in the nation's history (Ghana and India) that after independence the great masses and their leaders have become nonchalant not only to the political ideologies but also to the fate of their countries. They have seized to become instruments of change and have stewed themselves in dishonesty and corruption.

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