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**The Corruption of Indigenous African Culture through the
Use of English: An Assessment of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The
Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born***

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ABSTRACT

Certain aspects of indigenous culture and sensibilities cannot be clearly expressed through a foreign language. Similarly, some alien ideas and norms cannot be clearly articulated through a local language. Although the English language has facilitated communication and correspondence among various people in Africa and in the rest of the world, it has also abused or enveloped local cultures and altered intentions and applications. This has resulted in the alienation of some people in their ancestral lands. In Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the unravelling corruption in post colonial Ghana connives to foster a rotten form of expression in English that is completely new and strange.

INTRODUCTION

The *West Africa Magazine* in its review of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, says among other things that:

What is impressive about *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is the way in which it expresses the disillusion and cynicism engendered in Ghana in the last years of Nkrumah, which his fall only seemed to compound... Its description of the vague existential ennui of his unnamed hero recalls Sartre's *La Nauseé* (Back Cover, Armah 1968 (1988 Edition))

Corruption of Indigenous African Culture Through Use of English

The above citation which also forms an advertorial or blurb for the Heinemann (1988) edition of the novel reveals it all. A meeting of two alien cultures necessarily generates conflict prior to a possible resolution and usual blending of such cultures. Language is a veritable tool for cultural expressions and nuances. A meeting of Europe and other foreign powers in Africa resulted in a lot of conflicts that left abundant scars that are yet to heal, even today. Specifically the arrival in Ghana of the British and their consequent imposition of the English Language and other aspects of the Western Culture, without necessarily ensuring the introduction and massive implementation of universal, free or affordable basic and formal education from the grassroots to the top echelon of society, manifested very strange and ugly scenarios.

Indigenous Ghanaian people, in their bid to adjust to their new colonial status, tended to concoct a forced mixture or marriage of the two cultural realities. In a nutshell, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a novel by the renowned Ghanaian writer, Ayi Kwei Armah. It was initially published in 1968. One should specifically note the author's deliberate misspelling of the word 'beautiful' as 'beautyful.' This deliberate act on his part sets off a volley of several anomalies within the story. According to *Wikipedia*, the *Free Online Encyclopaedia in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*:

The Unnamed protagonist, referred to as "the man" works at a railway station and is approached with a bribe; when he refuses, his wife is furious and he can't help feeling guilty despite his innocence (1).

To me personally, this character signifies the innocence of Africa and Africans prior to Euro-Arabic slavery, colonization and plunder of the African Continent.

Wikipedia further states that:

The novel expresses the frustration many citizens of the newly independent states in Africa felt after attaining political independence. Many African States like Ghana followed similar paths in which corruption and the greed of African elites became rampant. Corruption in turn filtered down to the rest of society and the 'rot' that characterized post-independent Ghana in the last years of Nkrumah is a dominant theme in the book. The novel provides a description of the existential angst of the book's hero who struggles to remain clean when everyone else around him has succumbed to 'rot' (Ibid)

This essay is not aimed at blaming Europe or Britain specifically for introducing the English Language or other aspects and forms of the Western Culture. Indeed, there are very many and very useful aspects of westernization - in particular the English Language, which is now the

Francis Ibe Mogu

universal language of choice for billions of humans on the face of the earth. However, it is said that, "the person that pays the piper dictates the tune(s) to be played."

The Main Essay

The British and other European colonial powers, after granting mainly political independence to their former colonies, especially in Africa, did not completely vacate or fade from the scene. Although 'largely invisible' after the independence of their previous enclaves, they remotely but actively and effectively controlled the state of affairs in those former colonies. Regrettably, this remains the situation of things in many African countries even today. The result of such hidden interference has largely been negative to the local African setting.

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* opens with a rickety, weather-beaten bus conveying local Ghanaian passengers through a rickety road to their various departure points. The state of disrepair in both the bus and the road it is travelling on further frustrates the passengers. This is in addition to the now perennial problem of hyper corruption and rot in the Ghanaian society and politics. To remain innocent or uncorrupt in the society portrayed here is to be eccentric, strange and undesirable - as exemplified in the protagonist character:

The light from the bus moved uncertainly down the road until finally the two vague circles caught some indistinct object on the side of the road where it curved out in front. The bus had come to a stop. Its confused rattle had given place to an endless spastic shudder, as if its pieces were held together by too much rust ever to fall completely apart. (Ayi Kwei Armah, 1968:1)

Even the matches refuse to bring forth a flame of fire as the bus driver attempts to light his cigarette and smoke, until after a third attempt. Rot is visible everywhere around the surrounding landscape and the driver seems to be used to the sordid and morbid state of affairs:

The driver climbed down onto the road from his seat, took a crumpled packet of Tuskers from his shirt pocket, stuck a bent cigarette in his mouth... After the third try a yellow flame sputtered briefly. The driver caught it quickly with the end of the cigarette before it died, cleared his throat and spat a generous gob of mucus against the tire, and began unhurriedly to inhale his smoke (Ibid).

The bus was conveying the passengers during the night time and they only began to arrive at their various destinations in "the darkness of the dawn." The relevant point in this brief episode is the rot manifested by the bus driver and his conductor. In this society poor people are viewed as impotent, while

Corruption of Indigenous African Culture Through Use of English

the rich are viewed as potent or virile and are practically adored and worshipped. No one bothers to investigate the source(s) of the rich people's wealth. In this incident as well, the bus conductor, at the end of the journey, was searching for "hidden profit" and uses foul or rotten English language on 'the man' whom he suspects to be spying on him. This brief episode further underscores the conductor's decay:

There was something still. Someone had at this time of the month held out a cedi for his fare. He had looked into the face of the giver, and sure enough, the eyes had in them the restless happiness of power in search of admiration. With his own eyes the conductor had obliged the man, satisfied his appetite for the wonder of others. He had not lowered his eyes: that would have brought the attention of the potent giver down to the coins in his palm, and the magic would have gone, and with it, the profit. So the conductor had not lowered his eyes. Instead he had kept them fastened to the hungry eyes of the giver of the cedi, and fed them with admiration... 'Yes, man. You are a big man' (2-3)

As the conductor focuses on his pastime, he suddenly realises to his shock and disbelief that someone else is watching him:

After the note the conductor began smelling the coins, but they were a disappointment. Not so satisfying, the smell of metal coins...

Again his nostrils lost the smell of the cedi's marvellous rottenness, and they itched to refresh themselves with its ancient stale smell. He took the note, unrolled it this time, and pressed it flat against his nostrils....

A pair of wide-open, staring eyes met his. The man was sitting in the very back of the bus, with his body angled forward so that his chin was resting on the back of the seat in front of him, supported by his hands. The eyes frightened the conductor. Even the mere remembered smell of the cedi was now painful, and the feeling in his armpit had suddenly become cold. Was this the giver turned watcher already? Had his own game been merely a part of the watcher's larger game? Vague fears of punishment drove their way into his mind. He had not thought it possible that so many shapes of terror could come to him in such a little time (3-4).

As the conductor realises that the man is not really his assailant and is a passenger who is left behind by others since he is fast asleep, he becomes indignant and:

Words shot out angrily from the conductor's mouth with an explosive imperiousness that woke the sleeper. 'You

Francis Ibe Mogu

bloodyfucking sonofabitch! You think the bus belongs to your grandfather?

'Are you a child? You vomit your smelly spit all over the place. Why? You don't have a bedroom?' **(He actually means bathroom)**

'Or were you waiting to shit in the bus?'

The man's foot hit the street and he moved slowly down the side past the front of the bus, peering ahead in the misty dawn air. The conductor's voice rolled out its message, enveloping the man with it. As he walked by the driver, the driver coughed, a short violent cough which ended with a hoarse growl as he cleared his stuffed throat. Then he collected his full force and aimed the blob far out in front of him.

The man who had come out of the bus felt the accompanying spray settle on his cheek and on the side of his upper lip. He looked back in the anger of the moment, only to see the driver unrepentantly preparing his throat and mouth for one more effort. He quickened his pace somewhat (5-7).

Generally, in indigenous African culture, elderly people are given pride of place in the society and are highly revered and respected. Younger people, especially children, are groomed to love, esteem and to honour elders. It is amply evident from the foregoing that both the bus conductor and the driver are much younger than the man they are railing and throwing spittle at. However, even though he is offended by their actions, the man maintains his decorum and walks away without avenging. This incident therefore shows the negative consequences of hurried and imposed westernisation and urbanisation on an indigenous African ethos. In the era before European colonisation in Africa, especially in Ghana, such nasty behaviour by young people on the elderly, would have been frowned upon, rebuked and punished instantly since it is immoral and reprehensible, to say the least.

In addition, the central character who is just referred to as the man, works in the Government Traffic Control Office which is charged with regulating and registering the transportation of goods and minerals. Here we witness hyper anomy and corruption in the Ghanaian society. As the man arrives at the office, the night clerk at the control desk is fast asleep instead of being alert and performing his duties. When the man wakes the clerk from his slumber: "The sleeper woke up in the grip of a brief, strong terror" (14). It takes the benign smile of reassurance from the man to restore confidence in him, even though he was caught sleeping on duty. However, the words he utters thereafter betray his guilt and reveal his 'rotten' English:

'Ah contrey,' he said, 'I tire'...

'There was a lot of work last night?' the man asked.

'No contrey,' said the other, 'not work. But when man is alone here all through the night...'

Corruption of Indigenous African Culture Through Use of English

'I know,' said the man, also shaking his head.
'Oh, you don't know, Contrey,' the clerk continued as if he had not heard. 'You don't know how last night was bad for me.'
'What happened?' (15)

Apparently, the night clerk was alone and lonely all through the night in the office and was struggling within himself over what to do or not to do about his survival amidst the rampant social rot, poverty and temptation to defraud other people and the widespread corruption in government offices. He found it extremely hard to discuss his inner battles for survival with the man. In the offices and at stations around the entire country nothing seems to work properly, equipment such as telephones and other machines are rickety and some are totally in a state of disrepair. Anomy is everywhere.

As the man returns from lunch break to his office, he ponders how and why some Ghanaians go to ridiculous lengths just to mimic the English people's accent whilst speaking. He finds such mimicry very irritating as he receives a visitor who speaks in that manner: "Erm, wort cin I dew for yew?" (24).

Soon after, the man with many teeth also known as Amankwa the timber contractor proposes a business deal to the man and offers a bribe to which the man vehemently rejects. The timber contractor begins his dialogue with the man in a familiar and accusatory manner even though he is a complete stranger to the man. To initiate his bribe offer process he says in response to the man's question, "now what have I done?"

'I should be asking you that question,' the visitor said.
'I should be asking you people in this office what have I done to you. Why do you treat me this way? The man just stared, and was lost completely in his surprise at the visitor's words and fascination with his teeth. Listening to the words required a real effort now. 'You know me,' the teeth man said aggressively. 'You know my name.'

'I don't know your name,' the man said quietly...
'Amankwa,' the visitor said at last, 'They call me Amankwa. I cut timber. Contractor' (28-29).

Amankwa even resorts to threats to try to cajole or persuade the man to oblige him and give him what he wants. The timber contractor wants a goods train to convey his timber from the forest. It appears that he is too impatient to wait for his turn to have the train convey his wood. When the man suggests that the timber contractor should approach someone higher up in the office to resolve his transportation problem, Amankwa becomes angry and furious, in spite of the fact that this is their first encounter and he is the visitor, while the man is the host: 'My friend,' the visitor said, 'don't joke with me. I need to talk to you' (29).

Francis Ibe Mogu

The man reiterates that he has nothing to do with the bookings or train schedules. And, this is the point in which the timber contractor offers his bribe to try to accelerate the conveyance of his timber from the forest. He bluntly tells the man:

'You can see that clerk for me.' The visitor looked suspiciously towards the door, then plunged his left arm underneath his *Kente* folds. 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. The man said nothing. The visitor put the ten cedi notes under a store paper weight on the table behind the man, to his right. The visitor drew his hand back from the table and the notes and stood staring at the man in front of him. The man said nothing.

'Take it,' the visitor said. 'One for you, one for him.'

'Why should I?'

The look on the visitor's face made it plain that to this kind of question no sane man would give an answer...

'You are a funny man, you this man,' he said. 'You think I am a fool to be giving you just ten cedis?' again the high laugh. 'Is nothing. I know ten is nothing. So, my friend, what do you drink?'

The man looked levelly at the visitor and gave his answer.

'Water' (30).

Despite the timber contractor's persistence, insistence and impatience for the man to accept the bribe, the man refuses:

'I beg you, let us stop joking now,' the visitor said... Take that one for yourself and give the other one to your friend. I myself will find some fine drink for you. Take it. Take it, my friend.'

The man looked at the face before him, pleading with the words of millions and the voice of ages, and he felt lonely in the way only a man condemned by all things around him can ever feel lonely. 'I will not take it,' he said too quietly, perhaps.

The visitor did not touch his money. He did not even look at it. He only said, 'Look I mean it. I offer you three times. Is good money.'

'I know.'

'Then take it.'

'No.' The man shook his head very gently, but there was a finality in the gesture which even the visitor could no longer mistake.

'You refuse?'

'Yes' (30-31).

Corruption of Indigenous African Culture Through Use of English

In the contemporary African setting, it is difficult to find civil servants who reject bribes, especially when they are very poorly paid for their work. The hero who is simply identified as 'the man' stands out from the crowd. However, instead of being rewarded and encouraged in his avowed transparency, the man is isolated, despised and made to suffer for being upright. At home, his wife, Oyo, nags, pressures and increasingly isolates her husband, in a bid to force him to conform to the prevailing trend of corruption. When she fails to persuade him to become corrupt like the others, she considers herself to be an unlucky woman in her choice of a spouse. It should have been the other way round. The man's wife should have rejoiced and taken pride in the fact that her husband was transparent when so many others had become corrupt. This situation vividly recalls Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons*, a historical play in which the central character, Sir Thomas More, is unsuccessfully pressured and persuaded to become corrupt by his wife, Alice; his daughter, Margaret, close friends and even the sovereign English monarch, King Henry VIII.

As Amankwa the timber contractor momentarily leaves the office, the man ponders and wonders over their encounter:

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 refuses to take and to give what everyone around was busy taking and giving: something unnatural, something very cruel, something that was criminal could ever be left with such a feeling of loneliness?(32-33).

We first catch a glimpse of the man's childhood friend and school mate, now turned politician, Mr. Joe Koomson with his wife, Estella, as they momentarily stop by some grocery hawkers along the street as the man returns home from work after an exhausting day. The Koomsons are the exact opposites of the man. As they do their purchases, it is apparent that they are the newly rich elite class in town. An elderly woman practically worships and eulogises Mr. Koomson as she frantically persuades him to buy loaves of bread from her even though he has already bought enough bread elsewhere for his household use. The elderly woman pleads relentlessly and finally, Koomson obliges her:

'My own lord, my master, oh, my white man, come. Come and take my bread. It is all yours, my white man, all yours.'

The car door opens and the suited man emerges and strides slowly towards the praise singing seller... The suit stops in front of the seller, and the voice that comes out of it is playful, patronizing...

'Hell-low,' says the smile--- (37).

Francis Ibe Mogu

Indigenous African culture actively encourages and rewards hard work and achievement that naturally results from toiling. In this novel, the reverse appears to be the case. The man works very hard and is honest and disciplined. However, he remains poor since he rejects bribes. He earns a low salary and, his wife, Oyo, chides him for rejecting bribes even when he desires to live a good life. She compares the man to the proverbial bird, the Chichidodo. The Chichidodo is said to be a bird that feeds on maggots, but vehemently "hates excrement with all its soul" (45). Simply put, Oyo wants the man to conform to the predominantly corrupt Ghanaian society.

This happens when the man tells her how he rejected the bribe offered by Amankwa, the timber contractor, at the office. She is incensed further when her husband declines to become part of Koomson's boat buying deal, despite her active persuasion and keen interest in it.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the English used by the protagonist is refined and decent. It is good, simple English. Conversely, the one used by corrupt, filthy and uncouth characters leaves much to be desired since it is crude and disrespectful. In the traditional African setting prior to the advent of European slavery and colonialism, the reverse scenario would have prevailed. Although at that period English would not have been their language of expression, the few corrupt ones would have been easily identified through their mode of speaking, whilst the dominant majority that earned a decent living through toiling would also have been identified in their polished and reserved manner of speaking and choice of words.

In this book, the man tends to be alone and lonely, while Koomson, Amankwa the timber contractor and their political and economic colleagues with a few lower class members such as the driver and bus conductor, are at the opposite pole. Whereas the man is clean, humble, hardworking and transparent, the others are filthy within, proud, arrogant, lazy and corrupt.

Try as he could, the central character finds it very difficult to make people around him understand the need for transparency in private and public affairs. Thus, he feels guilty even though he is innocent. Conversely, those who are corrupt and guilty of cutting corners feel and appear innocent. His aloneness and loneliness become acute to the point that he becomes alarmed and frets about his real reason for existence in the world. As the man visits and dialogues with the Teacher who is still in bed and almost naked he says:

'What I don't understand,' ... 'is my own feeling about it'. I know I have done nothing wrong. I could even get angry with Oyo about this. And yet, and yet I am the one who feels strange.'

'The condemned man.'

'Yes. I feel like a criminal. Often these days I find myself thinking of something I could do to redeem myself in their eyes. Then I sit down and ask myself what I have done wrong, and there is really nothing!'

'You have not done what everybody is doing,' said the naked man, 'and in this world that is one of the crimes. You have always known that' (54).

Corruption of Indigenous African Culture Through Use of English

From the foregoing discussion, it is very clear that the man speaks straight from his heart. His language is simple, vivid and down to earth. This contrasts sharply with the language used by people he is surrounded with – his family members, work place to colleagues, businessmen and especially his school classmate now turned minister, Joe Koomson with his wife, Estella. We have samples of such rotten expressions scattered throughout the novel. These reveal deep and embedded corruption in the Ghanaian society. Tellingly, we witness a scenario whereby the Ghanaian elite that fought for and obtained independence from the British colonisers now turn around and begin to behave like the British colonisers that they despised and replaced:

There is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days. Men who had risen to lead the hungry came in clothes they might have been hoping to use at Governors' Balls on the birthday of the white people's queen, carrying cuff links that shone insultingly in the faces of men who had stolen pennies from their friends. They came late and spoke to their servants in the legal English they had spent their lives struggling to imitate, talking of constitutions and offering us unseen ghosts of words and paper held holy by Europeans, and they asked us to be faithful and to trust in them. They spoke to us in the knowledge that they were our magicians, people with some secret power behind them. They were not able to understand the people's unbelief. How could they understand that even those who have not been anywhere know that the black man who has spent his life fleeing from himself into whiteness has no power if the white master gives him none? How were these leaders to know that while they were climbing up to shit on their people's faces, their people had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter? We knew then, and we know now, that the only real power a black man can have will come from black people--- (81-82).

It is evident here that the Ghanaian elite had, at this point in time, failed the Ghanaian people and a positive and drastic change in attitude and leadership became crucial. Armah, in this novel seems to be speaking for the mass of Ghanaians when he states further that the leaders had completely lost contact with the ordinary people:

They came hours late when we had been standing in the sun waiting to hear what they had to say, and they came with nothing but borrowed words they themselves had not finished understanding, and men felt like sleepers awakened only to hear an idiot's drooling tale.
'Ah Contrey, so these fat yessir-men in jokers' suits, they are the people going to lead us?'
'Aaah, Contrey broke o o, contrey no broke o o, we dey inside'...

Francis Ibe Mogu

'Sah,' our leader would say, 'mah contrey people no happy, sah.'
'What! After everything we've done for them?'
'Yessah.'
'Now, boy, tell me. What is it they want?'
The leadership smile expands. 'Massa, if you make me head man, mah contrey people go happy again.' Wider. Bow. Look of affection and gratitude (82-83).

The anomy and rot in the Ghanaian society prevails and even the use of English, the colonial language, was altered in the same manner colonialism had tolerated and accelerated corruption in Ghana and elsewhere. English is still the national medium for expression in Ghana and many other African countries, despite their independence from Britain. This is not necessarily bad, so long as speaking English does not turn Africans away from positive aspects of their indigenous cultures and traditions. Even after the military coup that removed Joe Koomson and the Nkrumah Government, corruption continued to spiral out of control and, with it, the English language that served as the prime medium for communication between the people and their leaders.

CONCLUSION

It is not a coincidence therefore that Armah revealingly entitled this novel, '*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*,' whereby the word 'beautiful' now becomes 'beautyful' – almost like saying that the prevailing society consists mainly of 'fools' who outwardly appear gorgeous, but inwardly are rotten. They are full of corruption even though they outwardly appear beautiful. Hence, "beautyful" – beautiful fool – a paradox! Thus, the Ghanaian society – and by extension, the African continent – the land of gold, diamonds and other shining minerals, consisted then and even now, of people who are filled with beauty, but who do not yet know how to harness that beauty for their over all goodness or benefit.

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