

# Corruption In Postcolonial Africa: A Study Of Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines corruption in postcolonial Africa through AyiKweiArmah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is Armah's first novel written in 1968. The paper gives insights into AyiKweiArmah's view of the corruptive nature of political leaders, civil servants and the masses. Political leaders use public funds for their benefits to the detriment of the masses. Civil servants take bribes, and ordinary people are encouraged to pay bribes to attain what they want. The upright suffers frustration since the society is interested in material wellbeing irrespective of the manner of attainment. Armah demonstrates the moral decadence of post-independence society with a view to debunking corrupt practices.

**KEYWORDS:** corruption, motive, postcolonial, transaction

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* specifically explores the history of the first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and focuses on corruption, one of Africa's problems. *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines corruption as an "act of dishonesty, especially using bribery or an immoral or wicked act." Corruption is the abuse of power for personal gain (Nye, 1967). (Johnson. 2005) also explains that most equate corruption with bribery, where people make illegal payments to a government official in return for some official state-sanctioned, authoritative act that has a selective and tangible impact and that in the absence of the secret payment would not otherwise have been made.

These definitions indicate that corruption is antithetical to the virtues of society. People must, therefore, refrain from it. It is on this premise that Armah writes to reveal the effects of corruption on Ghanaian society. According to (Gikandi, 2003), *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* focuses on the perversion of the national idea itself. The writer opines that rulers' change does not affect corrupt values and unfair practices. Blacks still possess exploitative and inhuman values. The political leaders and civil servants, workers and ordinary members of society are culprits. This study focuses on moral corruption, a pertinent issue in our contemporary world and other forms of corruption propounded by Morris Stephen (2011). Moral corruption is the justification of an evil act as useful. Armah challenges moral corruption in his work.

## II. CORRUPTION IN THE BEAUTIFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN

Ghana attained independence in 1957. However, as of 1968, the year in which the author wrote the book under study, the politicians who took over were depicted as corrupt, just like the colonial masters. Writers like AyiKweiArmah engaged in the description and interrogation of post-independence problems in Ghana. Thus, discussing issues of the present phase of postcolonial African literature: Neo Colonial phase (Olatunji, 2010).

This paper employs literary text analysis and postcolonial theory to unravel corrupt practices in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Some scholars view the term postcolonial as referring to the period after independence. (Dobie 2009) indicates that "some readers assume that postcolonial literature refers to texts produced after the colonized countries became independent, but others take it to mean the texts produced from the time of colonization to the present." This paper adopts the scholars who refer to postcolonial literature as the texts produced after independence since the texts under study fit the definition. The study seeks to identify the forms of corruption in the text and unravel how corruption affects people in a neocolonial society.

AyiKweiArmah's *The Beautiful ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) is a Ghanaian novel that tells how an unnamed man struggles to resist the temptations of bribes in his workplace at a railway station. His simple life creates enmity from his family and colleagues, making him feel guilty though he had done the right thing. The novel reflects the last days of the Regime of Ghana's first president, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the period

immediately after independence. This a period when corruption was in the ascendancy. There was an influence of imperialism in the government, and this informs Armah's writing. The novel reveals societal vices through the hero, the man.

### III. FORMS OF CORRUPTION

Scholars have categorized corruption in many forms. (Morris 10 and 11) categorizes the forms of corruption into three. These are the Institutional location of the actor and norms, the nature of transaction and motive or purpose.

**Institutional Location of the Actor or Norms:** Morris (2011) explains that this type of corruption involves public officials. Because the public sector is vast, corruption can occur at virtually any place within the government. Therefore, an easy means of identifying corruption forms is centering on the public official's institutional location, the executive branch, the legislature or the judiciary, the local government the police, customs agents or building inspectors. Corruption based on institutional location are "upper level" and "lower-level" corruption. The "upper level" involves Presidents, members of legislature, governors and other high-ranking officials. The "lower-level" corruption relates to civil servants. The distinction parallels differences based on the distinct political roles or functions of the public officials and the norms governing their behaviour.

**The Nature of Transaction:** This relates to the direction of corrupt influence. It distinguishes between bribery and extortion. With bribery, societal interests use extra-legal payments or bribes to influence state policy content or its implementation. On the other hand, extortion involves the use and abuse of state power by public officials to demand extra-legal payments or rents in return for providing a legitimate or illegitimate service. In extortion, the direction of influence moves from state to society, while bribery reverses the direction.

Another approach based on the transactions is the typology based on the relative size and frequency of the acts, commonly expressed in grand versus petty. "Grand corruption" involves large sums of money and usually less frequent transactions, while "Petty corruption" refers to smaller and more regular payments. "Grand corruption" is more likely to occur among high-level government officials, while "petty corruption" tends to occur among low-level workers who regularly interact with the public.

**Motive or Purpose:** This approach distinguishes corruption types based on the motives, purpose or outcome of the corruption. It separates corruption that promotes personal interest from one that benefits an exclusive group of individuals, a political party or an institution that may be more systematic.

### IV. MORAL CORRUPTION AND OTHER FORMS OF CORRUPTION IN *THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*

Armah's society is a society where bribery is a significant source of material wellbeing. Therefore, if one refuses to accept a bribe, he is criticized because people support corruption. (Angmor, 1996: 81) asserts that: In the *Beautiful Ones*, the social environment is rendered uncongenial for honest living by the prevalent dishonesty and selfishness of both rulers and generality of the citizenry, so that the honest performs who cannot indulge in general corrupt way of life is denied a decent economic life.

The text portrays a nameless protagonist who clings to his ethics as he resists corruption in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana in the 1960s (Niemi, 2017). The man's values are at variance with his society. He and Teacher stick to the ideals of honesty and selflessness, and they become miserable and never-do-wells. Judging by societal values, the man is considered slow, weak, conservative and foolish. The man agrees with the song played on Radio Ghana:

Those who are blessed with the power and the soaring swiftness of the eagle and have flown before, let them go, I will travel slowly

And I too will be there (the *Beautiful* p. 51).

The man's society sees "only two types of men who took refuge in honesty – the cowards and the fools." (p.51). To further confirm moral corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, The man's wife, Oyo, supports bribery acceptance. Her husband rejects a bribe at the workplace, and he informs the wife of his rejection. The attitude of the woman after the information reveals her as morally corrupt. The following confrontation ensues between the couple:

What were you afraid of then? The woman asked.

But why should I take it?

And why not? When you shook Estella Komson's hand was not the perfume that stayed on yours a pleasing thing? May be you like this crawling that we do but I am tired of it. . .

We don't know how she got what she has, the man said. 'And we don't care', the woman's voice had lost its excitement and reverted to its flatness (The *Beautiful* p. 44).

It could be inferred from the above quote that society values material things irrespective of the means of attainment.

### ***Institutional Location of the Actor or Norms***

Joseph Koomson, a minister in Nkrumah's government, is a former mate of "The man." He is a public official who embezzles government funds to enrich himself. In the public view, he is the real hero in Takoradi. He has a new Mercedes, a well-stocked liquor cabinet, a large house, a closet full of suits and a wife who smells sweetly of perfumes. He has arranged a scholarship for her wife's sister, Regina, to specialize in dressmaking. The man and his wife visit Koomson's family. and they are surprised at the quality of things in the house. The man thinks, "there were things here to attract the beholding eye and make it accept the power of their owner. Things of intricate and obviously expensive design (p. 144).

In a conversation with Oyo and Estella, Koomson's wife, tells Oyo how her younger sister in London has fallen in love with a Jaguar and threatens to kill herself if she does not get it. The couple is planning a foreign exchange for it. This is evident in the conversation between The Man and Koomson:

'I thought that was no longer possible', said the man, looking at Koomson. "Everything is possible" Koomson said, 'It depends on the person'. 'Hmm'. The man could have opened his mouth again to talk of the irony of it all, of people being given power because they were good at shouting against the enslaving things of Europe, and of the same people using the same power for chasing after the same enslaving (p. 149).

Ironically, those in power are embracing slavery in a different form. "New people, new style, old dance" (p. 157). Armah reveals how political leaders use their status to amass wealth at the expense of ordinary people. Koomson is a public official. He is involved in "upper-level corruption" since he is a minister.

### ***The Nature of Transaction***

People in society give and accept bribes in order to flout state policies. The police are involved in "petty corruption." Thus it has been a routine to collect small amounts from drivers they always come into contact with. The police receive bribes from bus drivers in public. The narrator says:

Once when the man was travelling to Cape Coast, three different policemen had stopped the little bus and asked the driver for his quarter license. The driver had not bought it yet, and each of the policemen had said to him in front of everybody, "Even Kola gives pleasure in the chewing." In each case, the driver had sailed and given the law twenty-five pesewas, and the law was satisfied.

In another instance, a timber dealer, Amankwa, goes to the man, who is the protagonist, to bribe him so that he can transport his timber from the bush. He refuses to accept the bribe, and the dealer becomes very angry with the man's attitude. The man thinks that that they must right procedure must be followed, but another colleague later accepts the bribe. In the eyes of the public, The man is an awkward person.

### ***Motive /Purpose***

Koomson, the minister, and his wife, Estella's visit to the man and his family, exemplifies a corrupt practice motive. Oyo and her mother want Koomson to buy them an expensive fishing boat. In their discussion, Estella calls socialism "foolish" since that one benefits the government. They think of what can benefit them as individuals. Estella confesses that party leaders buy things in other people's names. The fishing boat will benefit Koomson as well as the man's family. The smallest cost twelve thousand pounds, which Oyo's mother confesses, is a considerable amount. Koomson replies:

Yes. But the money is not the difficult thing. After all, the commercial bank is ours, and we can do anything (p. 136).

Koomson's statement illustrates how public officials embezzle money for their purpose.

## **V. POSTCOLONIALISM IN THE BEAUTIFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN**

(Dobie 2009:217) defines postcolonialism as "the study of culture after the physical/ and or political withdrawal of an oppressive power." The term postcolonialism was not in use until the 1980s but theories surrounding its concerns have been published since the 1960s. The study of postcolonialism has attracted the interest of literary scholars and critics over the years. However, because it is concerned with what happens to a culture from the beginning of colonization to the present, it is also making inroads in fields like political science, sociology and psychology. (Ann Dobie 2006). She further states that, the broadest view of postcolonial literature is that, it is the literature written in English by people in the formally colonized countries, some of it authored by the colonizers and their descendants, but more of it by those they colonized.

Postcolonial criticism looks at works of postcolonial writers but it is not limited to them. Because its practitioners are interested in how the colonized came to accept the values of the more powerful culture and to resist them too, it looks at canonical text as well as postcolonial ones. This theory is appropriate since the writer selected is a postcolonial writer.

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* has a postcolonial setting. Armah vividly describes Ghana's situation after independence. The chronic political incompetence, corruption in Ghana and the despair of its

people are explored. A professor from the University of Ghana, Legon, investigates the corrupt practices of the time. The narrator explains that:

There were a lot of noise, for some time, about some investigation to rid the country's trade of corruption. Deuncorrupt themselves? There was nobody around who was all that excited though of course men were willing to talk of the commission. The head of it was a professor from Legon... in the end it was being said in the streets that... the net had been made in a special Ghanaian way that allowed the really big corrupt people to pass through it. A net to catch only the small dispensable fellows trying in their anguished blindness to leap and to attain the gleam and the comfort the only way these things could be done. And the big ones floated free, like all the slogans. End Bribery and corruption (The Beautiful. p.154).

The above quote suggests that, the leaders of Ghana had transformed Ghana into a corrupt country. Meanwhile, they are able to escape the law because of their intelligent measures. Evidently, this affirms Dobie's assumption that "the effects of past colonialism still exist today, and a new form of colonialism is currently affected by international corporations operating in developing nations" (Dobie : 210)

A basic assumption of the postcolonial theory states that "colonial subjects practice mimicry – imitation of dress, language, behaviour, even gestures – instead of resistance. (Dobie, 209). Koomson and his wife want to live like a white man. The narrator describes Mrs. Koomson as "wearing a dress that seemed to catch each individual ray of light and aim it straight into the beholding eye" (p. 148). She wears a wig, which she keeps stocking from front to back to look like a white lady.

Koomson Europeanizes her name and calls her "Estie". Their daughter speaks good English and calls his father "Daddy." Their sitting room is full of things from the western world: an array of chairs and sofas, ashtrays, lights, a silver box, a toy-like pistol, marble tops, side tables, a dining room, glass-covered shelves, polished dishes and glasses, television sets, a radio set and a carpet on the noiseless floor (p. 146).

Furthermore, some of the characters abandon their own culture and values and adopt those of the "superiors." They see everything European as the best. Stella believes that the only good drinks are European. Koomson also loves to enjoy himself with the white men at the Atlantic Caprice. The description of Koomson's family depicts their colonial influence, which postcolonial theory addresses.

## VI. EFFECTS OF CORRUPTION

**Jeopardized Economy:** Corrupt practices jeopardize the economy of the state. The inscription on the public toilet speaks much about moral corruption and its effects on the country. The inscription reads:

MONEY SWEET PASS ALL  
WHO BORN FOOL  
SOCIALISM CHOP MAKE I CHOP  
CONTREY BROKE (p.106).

These inscriptions indicate that money surpasses everything, making people crumble for it, irrespective of how they get it. "Chop make I chop" has been the order of the day. From the political leaders to ordinary people, everyone seems to be thinking of stealing government funds. For instance, Zacharias Lagos works for a sawmill and earns little, but he can live like a rich man. "Every evening a company truck brought home great lengths of healthy wood which in his wisdom had written off, and he sold all of it" ( p. 95). When the management caught him, people curse the informant since they see Zacharias as a generous man.

AbnegoYamoah also sells government petrol for himself. He is so brilliant that authorities do not catch him, they instead accuse innocent cleaners and messengers and jail them. Society sees Yamoah as good and wonders why the man is not like him. The ill-effect of all these corrupt practices is "CONTREY BROKE". The country's economy jeopardizes.

**Frustration:** In a morally corrupt society, the morally upright are frustrated. The man is frustrated by his family members and colleagues who want to live a luxurious life. They pressurize him to involve himself in the corrupt practices at his workplace. When the timber contractor goes to the man's office to bribe him so that he can transport his timber from the bush, his refusal to accept the bribe makes him alienated. He is frustrated by everyone around him. His uprightness makes him lonely. The narrator says:

The man was left alone with thoughts of easy slide and how everything said there was something miserable, something unspeakably dishonest about a man who refused to take and give what everyone around was busy taking and giving. Something unnatural, something very cruel, something that was criminal for who but a criminal could even be left with such a feeling of loneliness (pp. 31-32).

The man further complains to the teacher, another upright man, how his wife compares him to Koomson, his classmate. Emphasizing that, if he wants to go far, he had to learn how to drive fast, that the fear of accidents will never keep men from driving and that Joe Koomson had learned how to drive. (p. 59)

**Denial of the Impoverished:** Another effect of a morally corrupt society is the denial of the impoverished, making the ordinary people also involve themselves in corrupt practices. A messenger wins a lottery but doubts if the lottery agents will pay his money. The man suggests that he goes to the police. But the messenger replies: "It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all". What will you do? The man asked. "I hope some officials at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as a bribe and allow me to have the rest ..."

You will be corrupting a public officer. The man smiled. This is Ghana (p. 19)

"This is Ghana" indicates that corruption is on the ascendancy. The police who are supposed to maintain law and order involve themselves in moral corruption. The service of the police expensive; hence the poor cannot afford it. The messenger affirms that, it is more expensive to go to the police.

### **Poverty**

Poverty is revealed as one of the problems Ghanaians face after their freedom from colonization. The leaders amass wealth for themselves at the detriment of the masses The writer affirms that after independence, the people are poorer and this is what leads the masses also to involve themselves in corrupt practices

### **Dishonesty**

The Corrupt practices of the political leaders make them dishonest. The leaders are not able to remain faithful to their followers. They make various promises but they are unable to fulfill them.

This is because the political leaders come to amass wealth for themselves but do not think of the welfare of the common people. The masses are deceived into accepting that once political power is given to the sons of the nation they would be free from depravity but this turns otherwise. The narrator states that, "for those who had come directly against the old power, there would be happiness. But for the nation itself, there would only be a change of embezzlers and the change of the hunter and the hunted." (The Beautiful, p.162)

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The paper has explored various forms of corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. It identified that Armah's society is morally corrupt. Koomson is a representative of upper-level corruption, grand corruption and corruption that promotes personal interest. The police and the man's colleagues represent petty corruption. Armah inculcates all these forms of corruption to portray the Ghanaian society's evils at the time of his writing and to express his disgust for such a corrupt society. In this kind of society, the upright suffers humiliation and dejection. Such societies infest ordinary people to also participate in corruption in order to achieve what they want. The corruption is either in the form of bribery or embezzlement, jeopardizing the economy. Some characters are affected by colonial influences hence their Eurocentric characteristics.

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