

## **Literary Democratisation in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?***

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Dans *Why Are We So Blest ?*, selon Adekoya, le roman subit une profonde transformation qui va au delà de la seule allocation déséquilibrée des chapitres aux trois principaux protagonistes. Armah, l'auteur du roman, adopte une stratégie narrative décousue reflétant l'esprit des trois protagonistes qui sont dans un état de tourmente permanent. Livré en fragments, le récit de leur vie désordonnée se déroule comme dans un tourbillon. Le lecteur est obligé de faire des allers et retours en permanence pour combler les trous, reconstruire la chronologie des événements, et rendre cohérent les fragments d'informations biographiques dispersés tout au long du roman.

**S**imply defined, literary democratisation is the integration of politico-economic categories and literary principles, the application of democratic rules in imaginative writing. An exemplification of the ideal of intertextuality in an age of interdisciplinary studies, it intromits into literature the gains made in the Social Sciences, especially in Economics, International Relations, Law and Political Science, in the area of democratic governance, human rights, and relations among nations and races of the world.

Ayi Kwei Armah democratises the form of the African novel by working the idea of egalitarianism into his technical devices in *Why Are We So Blest?* The construction of the novel – its characterization, plot-structure, points of view, setting, and themes – is controlled by the principle of collectivism. The conventional approach is to create a central figure who towers above all others and around whom minor characters mill to further enhance the paramountcy of the protagonist. Armah dispenses with this bourgeois mechanism and creates three protagonists – Solo, Modin, and Aimee – who speak for themselves without any authorial intrusion. It is not accidental that

their names serve as titles for all the chapters of the novel. They are the vicarious authors and Armah is only a midwife whose sole role is to ensure that the 'baby-novel' is safely delivered. The entire novel is a compilation by Solo of the diary entries and notes made by Modin and Aimee. Armah refines himself out of the novel through the narrative strategy. The novel turns out to be, not the achievement of one person's private struggle, but the product of the labour of a corporate body that comprises Modin and Aimee who supply building materials and Solo who completes the construction of the edifice. But, far from being a mere compiler of other people's diary notes, Solo contributes his own biographical entries as building blocks to the construction work. He has a total of eighty-five pages in a novel of two hundred and four pages, if we leave out the eight pages for bibliographical information and dedication, the thirty pages for chapter titles and the forty-six blank pages provided perhaps for readers' comments and notes. The form of the novel expresses Armah's vision of an equitable distribution of work and the products of labour in a truly egalitarian society. He liberates form by distributing space and time fairly equally among the three protagonists. Although it can lead to truncation of characters, the practice of literary democratisation inserts the principles of equity and justice in literary works not simply as themes but as structural elements.

In *Why Are We So Blest?*, the novel form undergoes a profound transformation that transcends the mere allocation of chapters to the three protagonists involved in the action. In a novel of thirty uneven chapters, Solo is allotted eleven chapters, Modin thirteen, and Aimee six. Judging by the external structure, which is the most readily perceptible, it appears as though enough fictional space was not allowed Aimee. The imbalance may be deliberate, for Aimee represents the imperial West that robbed Africans and Asians in the colonial period and still exploits them under the prevailing unjust international capitalist system. To redress the economic imbalance in the world, the West must be made to part with its excess profits, a significant proportion of which really constitutes the unpaid labour forced out of colonized peoples. It

may be argued that, by giving Aimee six out of thirty chapters, Armah plays the politics of reparation with the plot-structure. It is important, however, to state that the law of equity is in operation in the internal structure of the novel. The chapters are thematically connected and the three characters, especially Modin and Aimee who respectively have the largest and smallest numbers of chapters, interact in most of them. The mere fact that a chapter bears a character's name as its title does not imply that it is solely devoted to that particular character. All it means is that we see the action in the chapter through his or her eyes. The novel allows Aimee as much fictional space as it gives Modin. As far as we know, it is the first in Africa to use the diary form in such an ingenious manner that it enhances a robust realization of such cinematic techniques and kaleidoscopic methods of narration as interior monologue, flashback, foreshadowing, and shifting points of view that reflect the discontinuous nature of contemporary consciousness. What moves close to capturing the novel's narrative strategy is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*. Left-leaning works like Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* are bold attempts at literary democratisation but do not attain the height of excellence achieved in *Why Are We So Blest?* Although he appears late in the former novel, Bakayoko towers above all other characters and his overpowering influence is felt through the entire narrative. Unlike in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's ideological bravura displaces form in *Petals of Blood*.

In *Why Are We So Blest?* Armah adopts a broken narrative strategy which reflects the minds of the three protagonists that are in a state of constant agitation. Narrated in fragments, their lives of dissipation and inaction run as in a whirlpool. The reader is constantly compelled to go forward and backward in order to fill gaps, reconstruct a chronology of events, and make a whole of the bits and pieces of their biographical information scattered haphazardly through the story. For example, Aimee's disastrous visit to Kansa and her sexual escapades there are narrated in broken sequences that are themselves

interpolated between different phases of her fruitless wanderings in America and Congheria. The method of narration challenges the reader's expectations, enhances a critic's objectivity, and frustrates a facile identification with any of the three protagonists. It reflects in a way the static motion in which most African countries find themselves in contemporary times.

Armah adopts an eclectic approach that makes *Why Are We So Blest?* a unique literary montage in African prose fiction. An examination of the first three chapters reveals that the work is a *pot-pourri*, a turning out of a salad bowl, to use a culinary idiom, from a melting-pot. Narrated by Solo in Laccryville, Congheria, the first chapter is a self-dependent unit that embodies the narrator's thoughts on the failed Afrasian Revolution. The second chapter, excerpts from Modin's personal diary on his loneliness and dissatisfaction with Western education in America, is equally complete and independent. The third chapter, the transcript of a tape recording of Aimee's interview with Mzee Nyambura in Kijiji, Kansa, is a complete entity. The episodic ordering of the chapters violates the principle of causality, turns Aristotle's law of unity of plot upside down, and makes it possible to move a chapter forward or backward without destroying the coherence of the novel. Though it appears disjointed on the surface, the story is nevertheless meaningful. Arranged in an illogical manner, the chapters fuse at the thematic level to form a concatenation of episodes linked by the controlling ideas in the novel, namely. African art, love, revolutionary work in Africa, Western education, and white racism. What is at work in the broken method of narration is the democratic principle of unity in diversity. The multiple narrative voices, as in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, exercise their right to free speech, without which democracy is impossible.

Such a loose narrative technique can easily undermine its own strength, for it can create a bedlam where all speak and none is heard. To prevent such a state of confusion, Solo plays the combined roles of a self-effacing coordinator and an unobtrusive commentator. But he is not omniscient. However stentorian

his voice is in the novel, it does not drown Modin's and Aimee's. Solo is not the hero of the novel. In fact, the novel has no hero. The lack is neither an oversight nor a shortcoming but conforms, according to Atta Britwum, to Armah's deep abhorrence for hero-worship. The true heroes, in the opinion of the one-legged man, are 'the essence', anonymous militants like him who die or are maimed in the struggle for their people's freedom (Armah 1974:27). Generally, they are not rewarded by the society that used up their collective energy as petrol for its forward thrust.

Although it is meant as a democratisation device to subvert the idea of capitalist individualism, the broken narrative technique seems to uphold it and its accompanying amoral principle of social cannibalism which is euphemistically called free competition. The shifting points of view, however, suggest that life is alterable. As captured in the structure of narration, social life is flux. Armah imports into the novel one of the anti-illusionist devices of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre and accomplishes what the strong element of immediacy made unrealizable in the theatre.

A ritual number, three acquires a symbolic significance in the novel. For there to be true economic stability and lasting political unity in the world, justice must be done in the tripartite relations among the three races – the Black, the White and the Yellow peoples. As a Yoruba proverb puts it: *ààrò méta kùí dobè nù* (three hearthstones do not upset a pot and waste its soup). Just as there are three narrative voices, there are three countries in which the story is set. They are – America, where Modin and Aimee meet and start a love relationship, Congheria (a fictive name for Algeria) where a war of liberation is being fought and the love affair comes to a tragic end, and Kansa, a fictive name for Tanganika (present-day Tanzania), where Aimee researches into the Maji Maji rebellion. The setting reflects the novelist's thematic preoccupation, namely the politico-economic relation between Africa and the West. The Congherian Revolution is an archetypal example of all wars of liberation fought by colonized peoples.

Solo – the name connotes loneliness and solitude – is the author's mouthpiece and Modin's alter-ego. He cuts the despicable image of a failed revolutionary of a Portuguese colony who now lives a humdrum life and justifies his act of renegation on the ground that 'at the end of each effort there is only futility' (Armah 1974:13). Judged on the basis of his self-confession: 'I went into the movement – But I failed. I wasn't strong enough', he may even be called a coward (Armah 1974: 260). But Solo is neither an apostate nor a coward. He is an ironic character, a highly sensitive realist, whose revolutionary fervour has been mellowed by experience. He laments: 'I reached the place of my dream. I found pain, not fulfilment. The arrangements made for fighting privilege were themselves structures of privilege' (Armah 1974:114). Yet, Solo is not a starry-eyed idealist who cannot make necessary compromises or accept the unavoidable inequalities that permeate every revolutionary movement that seeks to end injustice, for as he himself categorically puts it: 'I will not attack new arrangements pitted against the old. In the end... in the end, always in the end' (Armah 1974:115). What then is the end of the Independence struggle in Congheria and Kansa, or Algeria and Tanzania, to use their real names, or even Africa, for that matter? Is the dream of democracy, of a community sharing the joys and sorrows of life, in place of the mad capitalist acquisitiveness and individualism, realized?

Solo provides answers to the questions:

Here in Laccryville? The deep things have ended. The revolt is over. The survivors have been pacified with their masters' hypocritical honors, and a peace indistinguishable from triviality has descended on the place. The presence of beggars and cripples is one more impotent question. There is a kind of revolutionary conscience so clever it has space for the beggar and the newly rich, for cannon fodder and the briefcase-carrying traveller (Armah 1974: 115).

Solo's strong sense of alienation and futility derives from the negation of the African Revolution which has created a neo-colonial situation on the continent. The death of the beauty, dream, hope, and truth of Independence is the subject

of his gloomy monologue that begins the novel. It breeds despair, fears, languour, and nightmares, and causes the disease that dispatches him to the hospital where he meets the one-legged man who wades through tomes in the hospital library in search of answers to his two crucial questions: 'Who won?' 'Who gained?' (Armah 1974:24-25). The invalid represents victims of the Congherian war of Independence, the fruits of whose labour are consumed by opportunists, like Jorge Manuel, who masquerade as revolutionaries. Armah images modern cities of neo-colonial Africa as cities of beggars, sorrows, and tears. Laccryville is a sad testimony to the failure of the Congherian people's struggle against colonialism.

It is no wonder, therefore, that when Modin and Aimee arrive in Laccryville, exuding revolutionary fervour, Solo perceives them pitifully as people whose energies are doomed, essentially because their destination has been reached by him and found wanting. Solo's own painful experience with Sylvia, a Portuguese whom he intended marrying and who finally succumbed to her people's judgment that any love relationship between a black person and a white person could only come to a disastrous end places him in a vantage position to see further than deluded Modin. By choosing Aimee, a white lady, as a lover, Modin has contracted the disease that will kill him. 'What, save its own dissolution', Solo ponders, 'would move an African soul to a European?' (Armah 1974: 139).

Love is an equal relation of exchange but, as practised by Aimee, who symbolizes European capitalist individualism and insatiable greed for human and material resources of Africa represented by Modin, it is a structure of exploitation and oppression. Their love affair, therefore, is an oblique metaphor for a continuation of the colonial relation. Aimee preys on Modin, her soul food, and gives nothing back. Unequal and exploitative, their symbolic relationship is a negation of the democratic ideal.

A brilliant Ghanaian student, Modin wins a scholarship that takes him to Harvard. His life is symbolic of the African tragedy itself, a consequence of

the corrosive contact with the white world. Unlike Solo who is an irredeemable realist, Modin allows his revolutionary idealism to mar his perception of the reality of white racism. He tries to practise his belief in the possibility of Black activists working in fruitful collaboration with white progressives. But, as admonished by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Black revolutionaries should incorporate the colour dimension into their class analyses of colonialism (Fanon 1967:30).

Modin discovers early enough that the African Education Committee in the United States is an assimilationist and imperialist agency whose primary function is the psychological disorientation of African students, the colonization of their minds. He denounces Oppenhardt's racist remark that Africans without Western education are unintelligent and rejects the cheques given him by the paternalistic committee as a financial bait to lure him into playing the despicable role of a 'factor', a traitor who for filthy lucre collaborates actively with the enemies of his people (Armah 1974:78). As if to take vengeance on the White World for the colonization of Africa and the enslavement of the Blacks, as Mustafa Saeed does in Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North*, Modin starts having indiscriminate sexual relationships with white women, all at immense risks to his life and against constant warnings by Naita, Mr. Scott's Black Secretary, that friendship between the Blacks and the Whites is impossible. He begins with Aimee whom he meets in a Psycho Lab where, for money, he offers himself to be used as a guinea pig in an evil experiment that is designed to test the race, between the Blacks and the Whites, that can tolerate electric shocks and physical torture more than the other.

The purpose of the experiment is to confirm Nietzsche's idea that 'Africans, being an inferior race, were less sensitive to pain than Europeans' (Armah 1974:171). Modin rejects a mild form of humiliation (the cheques) only to embrace a virulent one. All the sexual relationships he enters into with White women in order to overcome his problem of loneliness in America are symbolic

of the unequal cultural, economic, and political relations between Africa and the West. True development and freedom, Armah seems to say, shall continue to elude Africa for as long as she maintains capitalist relations which are based on inequality, injustice, and dependence with the West. The emphasis in *Two Thousand Seasons* on 'the Way', that is, the pre-colonial African communal existence, is not by any means fortuitous. Modin acquires knowledge of the truth contained in Naita's warning that his involvement with white women will only get him into trouble when he is stabbed several times by Professor Jefferson while making love to the man's wife.

The climax of Modin's stultifying stay in the United States is the exchange of polemics with Mike, the fascist, on a Thanksgiving Day in Celebration of American Democracy. Mike represents the United States as a New World free of the flaws of feudal Europe, a perfect realization of the myth of Paradise, while Modin demystifies American Democracy by pointing to the genocide committed against the Indians, the millions of souls lost to Africa through plantation slavery, the present pariah status of African-Americans, and psycho-social problems bred by industrial capitalism, such as boredom, crime, and drug addiction. 'America', Modin says, 'may have been a paradise when the Indians ran it, but it's a shambles now' (Armah 1974:100). Her democracy, if ever she achieved it, has come to a dead-end (Burns 1963). Bored and frustrated, Modin and Aimee leave America for Congheria to participate in the revolution. Their dream of working for the revolution unrealized, Aimee leads Modin to the Sahara desert where she is raped and her lover is tortured and his manhood mutilated by a gang of four white racists.

His initial refusal notwithstanding, Modin plays in the end the role of Mwangi. An African houseboy to an impotent white settler in Kansa, Mwangi is invited, after his boss has left home for his Maji Maji patrolwork, by the settler's wife for lovemaking. While they are still at it, she watches her husband return, aim his gun at the boy's head, and shoot him. Fantasizing that she is the settler's wife, Aimee makes the following remark: 'I say nothing to Mwangi.

He feels so good in me' (Armah 1974:188). She derives as much pleasure from the fantasy as she does from kissing Modin's broken penis in the Sahara desert. She and the white rebels leave Modin to die in the desert which is itself a symbol of the wasteland that European Imperialism has made of Africa. The sexual relationship between Modin and Aimee exposes the secret of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, as the title of Walter Rodney's seminal book aptly puts it. Although *Why Are We So Blest?* exudes sex, it is not by any means a pornographic novel. The journey to the symbolic desert opens Modin's mind to the truth at last that love between the Blacks (the exploited) and the Whites (the exploiters) is not only impossible but amounts to self-annihilation for the former and, therefore, is an abrogation of all democratic principles, for democracy after all is an attempt to institutionalize love.

Aimee, whose character is a complete negation of the meaning of her name (the loved one), represents the capitalist West. Her frigidity is symbolic of the coldness and deadness of her mechanized world, a total contrast of community. Modin's sexual energy, which could have been sublimated and diverted to creative purpose for the development of his society, is wasted on Aimee: a barren soil. His love brings him death. The paradox of a love that keeps the lover in thralldom is themetized in the novel and graphically illustrated in its cover photograph: flowers and chains intertwined. The irony in the title of the novel is unmistakable. Armah wonders why America is blessed with a tremendous capacity for evil. Her blessings and those of the West as a whole, as revealed in the novel and expounded in Chinweizu's *The West and the Rest of Us* are as a result of terrible sins committed against the rest of humanity.

The solution proffered by Armah to the problem of dissociation of sensibility caused by Western education which emasculates the African elite is mental decolonization through a revolutionary process. African art has a significant role to play in the monumental task of reconstructing African societies. It must be communal in orientation and revolutionary in form and content. As Armah puts it, through Solo: 'In this wreckage there is no creative

art outside the destruction of the destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art, revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction' (Armah 1974:231). Informed by the principle of literary democratisation, the novel itself is a supreme exemplification of African art.

Armah ransacks the fields of architecture, art, literature, and automobile engineering for appropriate metaphors and symbols for expressing his ideas about art, education, love, and revolution as they relate to Africa. He depicts the hierarchized ancient Graeco-Roman world as analogous to the modern capitalist American society. Olympus represents the upper class, the plains the middle class, and Tartarus the lower class. As argued by Mike, the American commonwealth is Paradise and the remnant of the world is Hell. Modin corrects and completes the picture by drawing the fascist's attention to the fact that the United States is a class and racist society divided into two: heaven and hell. The blessed owners of capital revel in the former, while the damned workers turn to opiates to overcome their despair and solitude in the latter. Modin contrasts the Great American Dream with his vision of a true democracy which is defined as 'community. In place of isolate bodies, greedy to consume more privileges to set us above, apart from others, there would be community: sustenance, suffering, endurance, relief, danger – all shared' (Armah 1974:114). The idea of community informs the technical devices employed by the novelist. He demolishes reactionary myths that are created to keep the riches of the world in the pockets of a select few and legitimize poverty with the Promethean myth which is founded on love for humanity and which puts light where there is darkness and joy where there is sadness. His type of hero is the self-sacrificing one that puts the community in the centre, that puts out the fire in Hell, and that frees the dying souls in Tartarus.

The Ananse mask which is meaningless to Dr. Lynch is Africa reduced by white predators from the West to a barren land. The head of the figure, that is, the political leadership, is too enormous for the spindly legs that represent wretched masses of people to bear. The fact that the mask has no chest, no

stomach and no groin signifies the hollowing out of the continent by Western imperialists. The name Lynch suggests, not just the cruel pastime of the Ku Klux Klan, of which Modin is a victim in the novel, but the emasculation of the Blacks through education and the process of assimilation. Modin, like Africa, loses his being to the Whites. His mistake is the conception of love in the abstract. In a similar vein, the Maji Maji leaders fail to give their water symbol a materialist interpretation.

Although the dream of creating a community founded on the principle of equity and justice is not realized in Congheria, it influences the characterization, plot-structure, and method of narration in the novel. Critics like Charles Nnolim and L. Kibera who level charges of cynicism and pejorism against Armah mis/take the social reality portrayed in his novels for his idea of community. Armah opens up the rotten underside of a diseased society and does not present a deodorized image of modern Africa in his fiction. But, given the horrendous destruction caused by the plague of moral corruption in African countries in the last quarter of the twentieth-century, who would accept Chinua Achebe's criticism that Armah distorts the picture of the Ghanaian society and imposes his own existentialist anguish on the man, the protagonist, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*? The unity of form and vision in *Why Are We So Blest?* is predicated on a communal mode of existence. There is a persistent tension between form and vision, on the one hand, and the social reality represented in the novel, on the other. Whereas in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* Armah uses the conventional novel form to celebrate the heroic moral stand of an individual against the social malaise of corruption, in *Why Are We So Blest?* he democratizes the narrative art form and puts the emphasis on the collectivity. Even though the experiment adopts an extreme Manichean methodology and obliterates the grey zone in social life and the paradox of human nature, it is nevertheless a revolution in African prose fiction.

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by Ayi Kwei Armah. No Customer Reviews. No Synopsis Available. 11 people are interested in this title. We receive fewer than 1 copy every 6 months. Add to Wish List. Customer Reviews. Armah was born in 1939 in the coastal city of Takoradi, a seaport of the then-British colony of the Gold Coast. During World War II, citizens of the Gold Coast participated in the war effort, often under the auspices of the British military. In the postwar period, veterans and others who lived in the Gold Coast realized they had just fought a war against oppression and wanted to gain their own freedom. Works in Literary Context. Influences and "Un-African" Style Armah's combination of an African background with an American education has made the question of the literary sources of his fiction a difficult one. In the case of Armah's third novel, *Why Are We So Blest?*, black American literature and polemic were added to the list of influences. English Literature, Literary Theory and Criticism, Linguistics, Film Theory, Ebooks, UGC NET JRF Preparation, Novel Analysis, Scholarly Articles Nasrullah Mambrol. The term "African," when applied in this essay to the novel and other literary genres, does not include the Arab states of the north or the peoples of European descent who may have settled in Africa. It refers to the  
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