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SPEAKING WITHOUT TONGUE:
SILENCE AND SELF-SEARCH IN ARMAH'S
The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

by Tess Akaeke Onwueme

I cannot yet recall any literary work in the corpus of African literature that has been subjected to the kind of undignifying trial that Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), has been made to endure. Numerous critics have made charges against the author for writing a "sick book,"¹ for exhibiting a "warped vision," for his "misanthropic vision,"² and his "rigid moral sense."³ The conclusive statement Eldred Jones makes in his assessment is that the "dominating mood of the novel is one of hopeless despair,"⁴ thus in concurrence with Molly Mahood whose conclusion is that "the dominating mood of the novel is one of almost total disillusionment,"⁵ and in this sense these critics justify Arthur Ravenscroft's classification of the book among the "novels of disillusion."⁶ Of these charges, the one which seems most to tilt the balance of justice against the novel and its author is the prodigious amount of evidence brought against them in the article "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah," by Nnolim. This critic is unsparing in the effort to demonstrate that Armah

is a writer whose philosophic pessimism is undisguised in each work. . . . [He] is both a cosmic pessimist (who views the world as inevitably and intrinsically bad and life in it essentially gloomy and futile), and a retrogressive pessimist or **pejorist** (one who views the world as undergoing an inevitable corruption and degeneration).⁷ (Author's emphasis)

For proof of his final judgement and sentence against Armah, this critic joyously imposes overbearing exhibits of data and imagery from the text as final clamor for the crucifixion of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. In this regard he states that

Armah, who seems to be unusually excited by images of decay and corruption, never fails to focus on the wetness that accompanies corruption and decay (to everyone's disgust). Hence the preponderant images of **ooze, clamminess, slime, lubricity, mucus, urine**, with their accompanying offensive smells, often made more disgusting with the images of

retching, farting, vomiting, and bad breath.⁸ (Author's emphasis)

And to prove his point further, the critic enumerates

the linguistic cognates of pejorism (Latin: Pejor, Pejoris—worse—implying that things are always moving from a better to a worse state) [which] are: corruption, **decay, rot, decomposition**; which also go with their own cognates: **shrinking, dwindling, emaciation, sickness, death.**⁹ (Author's emphasis)

With such abundant evidence, it would be risky at this point to attempt to acquit Armah from the judgement of these indignant critics who had expected him to conform to standards of visualizing and representing reality set by such writers as Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka and Ama Ata Aidoo. Instead of using a rhetoric that would enhance the imagery of "hope, progress, augmentation or increase," Armah turned dissident and frustrated critics "fixed" in their expectation of what should be valid in African literary aesthetics, and offered the "imagery of defeat, decay, frustration, disappointment, shrinking and dwindling—all subsumed under the figurative language of bathos—since in pejorism all movement is anticlimactically pointed."¹⁰

Even precocity has its price and maybe for this reason, one would be tempted to leave Armah to pay the necessary price for daring to be different, and for not conforming to norms of literary establishment among the African literati. However, the truth and import of Armah's vision in the novel are compelling enough for me to do otherwise.

My urgent task in this study, therefore, is to attempt to stage another hearing for Armah and elicit alternative evidence based on other interpretations and analyses of the text and context to enable us see the dimensions and other face(s) of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. We will therefore dissect the problems posed by the novel, tear through and delve beneath the superficial evidence of pessimism accumulated with the encrustations of rot, decay, waste, and slime, to observe their characteristics with the aim of arriving at a possible hypothesis and, maybe, some theoretical statement concerning the anatomy of decay. In this regard my initial premise is that decay or rot is not antithetical to growth or development but is an essential complementary phase in the cycle of a transforming or evolving organism. I would, therefore, proceed further by stating that in the natural cycle, beneath the surface of rot, decay and waste, is the node of hope, renewal and growth whose potent force within shoots forth,

impelling and precipitating the disintegration and fragmentation of undesirable waste above the surface for continuity. Harnessing this phenomenon to some concrete observation from real life, is it not paradoxical that in order to harvest from growth the yam head must first be buried alive, to rot and decay before a new shoot can sprout from it for seed? This seems to be the underlying philosophy that informs the preponderant show of rot and decay in the *Beautiful Ones*, who are **Not Yet Born** but **will be born** eventually, so long as Teacher, The Man, Baako, Naana and others stay determined to be the nodal spirit and nexus of growth, and not succumb to the general body of rot and decay. My own prognosis therefore is that embedded in the rhetoric and scatological imagery of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is the grain of hope and salvation naturally derivable from a conscious revulsion to the negative energy of sin, decadence, and consumption.

A little digression may have some salutary effect for now. Recently, I was privileged to see on television a brilliant black scholar and theologian, Cornel West, in an interview with Bill Moyers. West's argument, which focussed on the black condition and predicament, hinged on the paradox of "combative spirituality" which has engendered the rhythm of blues, jazz and rap (or a marriage of "rhetoric and music").¹¹ These have become the predominant modes through which black people over the years have steered the course of tragic history to look beyond the sordid deflationary reality by "confronting it in the face,"¹² to visualize the ray of hope behind the clouds. West also termed this phenomenon "subversive joy," in which the rhetoric of Jazz, Blues and Rap have turned "tears into laughter."¹³

Although West was making those statements with specific reference to the condition of blacks in America, a discerning mind cannot fail to rationalize its equivalent to the human condition in the fragments of *The Beautiful Ones* of Armah's Ghana. For that matter, any African country that is still gripped by and grappling with the throes and traumas of psychic disorientation and fragmentation inherent in the dehumanizing factors of "market culture" and "market mentality"¹⁴ consequent upon a people's subjection to westernization and neocolonialism will exhibit such characteristics. Let us now depart from this circumstantial evidence for our thesis, derived from the view of Cornel West, and proceed into a more intricate and intimate analysis of the existential paradox which fosters bloom from doom, hope from failure, growth from decay, and rebirth from death.

Thus, contrary to the popular verdict against the seeming pessimism of Armah's vision, I feel motivated to commute the sentence passed on the author. This positive judgement of Armah's pessimism derives from a non-sentimental understanding, interpretation, and analysis of the phenomenon of dualism, and the underlying mystery

inherent in the "rites of passage," from sin to salvation, from decomposition to development. In these rites of passage, the psychological burden of conscience arising from corruption churns the inner mind of the individual, inducing nausea and retching by way of emotional dissociation, as in a confessional which in the final analysis evokes and impels cleansing and renewal through expiation.

Thus a valid reaction to the obfuscating imagery of decay, rot and squalor which most critics have gleaned as pessimistic and dystopian in Armah's novels should in fact be visualized beyond the superficial. Transcending this realm, what should be revealed and accented is the cyclic node of growth, hope and regeneration underlying the flux and chaos of immediate, disintegrating reality. In some respects, Margaret Folarin's concluding statements in her analysis of *The Beautiful Ones*¹⁵ would be quite supportive of my stance at this point. In the words of Folarin, "the final values which emerge from the book seem to me not unpositive. The novel is certainly not simply a censorious gesture against a corrupt society."¹⁶ Furthermore, this critic goes to great lengths to illustrate that the novel does not suggest that

the "beautiful ones" can never be born. The flower which presumably illustrates the caption is "very beautiful" (p. 214) unlike the pasted brick "flower pattern" on the Railway and Harbor Administration Block in Chapter 1. Finally when the image of the beautiful flower design on the bus disappears it is replaced by a "melodious note" (p. 215). . . it may also mean that there is life and even genuine happiness to be had even when society is rotten and corrupt.¹⁷

Another exceptionally charitable critic has also tried to put in a good word or two (though sometimes not convincingly) to uplift the significance of Armah's vision. Robert Fraser, quoting Gerald Moore in his article on Armah's second novel, writes,

There is a marked **therapeutic value** to much of Armah's work. We can now see that he is concerned fundamentally with the ethical quality of a nation's life, a potential for exuberant health he sees as having been strangled by an infection of foreign origin.¹⁸ (My emphasis)

We move from these premises to argue that the healing vision (which is analogous to the "therapeutic value" referred to above) is a dominating theme in Armah's novels. Starting from his very first novel, it would appear that the journey or quest for renewal from dirt and decay begins in the mind of the individual, and in this way, from self-questioning and

self-search; the self encounters reality and confronts it or stands face to face with it to rationalize, albeit in potent silence. From this position, the spiritual quest gravitates towards the family (note for example the chastening and salutary effects Koomson's betrayal and dethronement have on the "loved ones," with Oyo as their choral leader) and of course the chastening effect Efua has derived at the end of the frustrating demands on Baako to yield to their maddening "market culture" or the "cargo-mentality," to use Cornel West's terms.¹⁹ Thus, whereas the rhythm for cleansing and ritual purification are intoned in minuter units of social organization, namely the individual and family in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments* respectively, they progressively gain empowerment through the collective voice of the larger community from *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) to *The Healers* (1979). In this regard, the spiritual excursion which is begun in the soul of man to exhume, excoriate, and churn out dirt in *The Beautiful Ones* generates a motion not just to produce a cathartic effect but to reveal "the way" hidden beneath the depth of decay so as to unravel its beauty and open up new frontiers and vistas of hope for *The Healers*.

Thus, rather than impose negative sanctions, in particular against *The Beautiful Ones*, I affirm that the healing vision and mission of the author's later, and relatively more acceptable, novel *The Healers* was already hinted at in the shocking, repulsive and nauseating images of sin, decadence and corruption in *Fragments* and *The Beautiful Ones*. In fact, it is my contention that the evocative silence of waste and rot stabbing the conscience in these earlier novel(s) is seminal to the nurturing of hope or the healing vision and insight in *The Healers*.

Moreover, this "healing essence" belying the encrustation of decay should be seen as an essential ingredient required for the natural process of decomposition, which in turn empowers the organism towards self-regeneration and self-transformation. Because this metabolic process is internal or, rather, metaphysical, it gathers momentum beneath the facade of the surface. In a paradoxical sense, it acts as a catalyst, stimulating and rejuvenating the soul within the organism to recreate harmony out of fragments and discord and to refashion disintegrating factions of cells or polity to merge into one new body with a healthy soul for continuity.

This brings us to the potent power of silence in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Although the ever-present heap of dirt and decay accost the visual and other senses in the novel, it is in the mind that the psychological imprint endures as burden in the conscience and consciousness, demanding expiation. I shall have cause later to argue that it is essentially for this reason that the action of the novel takes place "inside" the mind of The Man and that it is in fact not

the physical man we observe going on an excursion from home through the bus to the administrative office but his mind which is on a spiritual journey for renewal.

Because the accompanying anguish and conflict dramatizing the trauma of being occurs away from the rust and gold that accost the eye, the "healing" or regenerative process occurs within, internally subdued but provocatively encoded in silence. In this state of wordless agitation, the self retreats to its inner eye, the mind, to weigh and question the prevailing odds, the chaos, anarchy and contradictions surrounding it (especially the fragmenting coating at the surface), not as a "misanthropic" denial of the reality of the human condition, but as a means of reintegrating and fortifying the traumatized ego to affirm its identity.

The Man in the novel is, then, not a man in that narrow, physical sense, but the **Inner Will** or **Conscience** fostering the humane essence in the soul of being to reprimand or impose sanctions against outer dissident drives. Thus The Man in man is his ego, his position of strength and will which acts in silence on the part of man in *The Beautiful Ones*. In this regard, Silence is not a mark of impotence or marginalization but a function of empowerment and a superior mode of action. Leslie Kane's analysis of the "language of silence," in which ". . . silence is a moment in language,"²⁰ is quite valuable at this point. Silence in the novel is not a retreat from action or decision but an authoritative recourse to redress the devaluation, marginalization and vulgarization of the word as speech. Note, for example, the careful narration of awe and moral uneasiness which The Man's silence imposes on the bus conductor:

A pair of wide-open staring eyes met his. . . The eyes frightened the conductor. . . even the more remembered smell of the cedi was now painful, and the feeling in the armpit had suddenly become very cold. . . vague fears of punishment drove their way into his mind. . . he was about to go down as to stare. **He did not need to hurl any accusations.** In the conductor's mind everything was already too loudly and too completely said.²¹ (My emphasis)

The narrator goes on further to give us clues indicating that speech and action had receded from the physical and verbal realm to that of the psychological and the unspoken:

"I have seen you. You have been seen. We have seen all." It was not the voice of the watcher. **It could not be the voice of the human being the conductor knew.** It was a

large voice rolling down and everywhere covering empty spaces in the **mind** and never really stopping anywhere at all. So this was it. **The Watcher. What could a poor man say to their voices?** What was there to reply to tricks and the deception of the innocent?²² (My emphasis)

There is ample evidence to point to the fact that "the mind," and not The Man, is the protagonist in the novel, and therefore that the entire action in the novel is a spiritual quest.

The narrator relentlessly provides us with more information and description about the various stages of this excursion of the mind to enable it to synthesize the conflicting reality:

Thinking of the endless round that shrinks a man to something less than the size and the meaning of little short-liveds flying ants on rainy nights, **the man followed the line of the hard steel tracks where they curved out and away from inside the loco yard and straightened out ahead for the melancholy piercing push into the interior of the land.**²³ (My emphasis)

It is obvious from our context that the "steering away from planes into the hard steel tracks. . . piercing push into the interior of the land" has metaphorical implications in the journey of the mind of man towards vision and revision.

As if to clarify this point, the narrator does not leave us guessing about possible interpretations of this metaphorical spiritual journey and quest. By way of reinforcement, the narrator states,

Out ahead, however, the tracks drove straight in clean shiny lines and the air above the steel shook with the power of the sun until all the afternoon things seen through the air seemed fluid and not solid anymore. The sourness that had been gathering in his mouth went imperceptibly away until quite suddenly **all he was aware of was the exceedingly sharp clarity of vision and the clean taste that comes with the successful defiance of hunger. . . .**

Nothing oppressed him as he walked along now, and even the slight giddiness accompanying **the clarity of his starved vision** was burried way beneath the unaccustomed happy lightness.²⁴ (My emphasis)

These allusions to sight and insight that arise from "the exceedingly sharp clarity of vision" are not incidental or even accidental references in this contest of the man's mind's search for renewal, meaning, and essence. To erase any chances of ambiguity and any possible chance of misunderstanding, the narrator continues:

Far out, toward the mouth of the small stream and the sea, he **could see** the water already aging into the mud of its beginnings. He drew back his gaze and was satisfied with the **clearness** of a quiet attraction, **not at all like ambiguous disturbing** tumult within awakened by the gleam. And yet here undoubtedly was something close enough to the gleam, this clearness, this beautiful freedom from dirt. Somehow, there seemed to be a purity and a peace here which the gleam could never bring. . . .To the clarity of his tarnished vision had been added a sharpness as he rose ready to return.²⁵ (My emphasis)

Thus having gained this tremendous amount of spiritual insight by looking beyond the surface dirt of sin and decay to seek cleansing, the mind retreats into its innermost recesses to gain fortitude in Silence. It is no wonder too that soon after this spiritual retreat, we are faced with the encounter ostensibly between The Man and Teacher.

I view The Man's meeting with Teacher as an encounter with destiny. It is an instance of man's journey through the tunnel of his mind to question, negate and, ironically, affirm reality. Teacher in the novel is symbolic of the inner moral conscience that holds the reigns on the will to self-destruction.

The action now recedes in silence to man's mind and the narrator is more concerned with revealing to us the internal and spiritual processes motivating man towards penitence, and renewal of faith to reaffirm his capacity for continuity.

This is also the source of the drive for The Man's spiritual journey to meet Teacher who, like The Man in the novel, is not defined, named, or limited to corporeal existence. Teacher too functions as the "superego" when the "self meets self" to question itself in its inner, naked, and stark revelation of the truth of being.

The Man's meeting with Teacher is, therefore, not an encounter of the "self" with the "other," but of the "self's" encounter with "self" in its introgressive search in the soul to create harmony out of the fragments of chaos. This is an essentially healing mission.

In some sense, too, Teacher is a mirror-image of the mind of The Man, or more appropriately, of the superego imbued with the power to censor the drift of ego. The narrator does not spare any moment to insinuate that this supposed meeting between Teacher and

The Man is a search for the soul for as soon as the spiritual encounter is over, this is the description that immediately follows:

The naked man turned on his bed. He turned the left knob on the radio till it would go no farther, and then gave the tuning knob an inward pull that slid the red line smoothly across the **glass face. . . . Opposite him**, the man went very quietly back to the desk and sat on it, **just thinking, looking and listening.**²⁶ (My emphasis)

The underlying meaning here, reinforced with the emphasis on "thinking," "looking," "glass face," "opposite him," is that having undertaken this spiritual encounter with the "self," and having churned out its impurities and dirt, man finds peace, salvation and renewal which prepare him for the spiritual growth required to fortify him against the lure of material demands and desires reincarnating in the Koomsons, the Oyos and other representatives of sinful humanity.

Furthermore, in order to amplify the "eloquence of silence" as a position of strength through which the mind gains empowerment, the narrator is careful almost at every turn in the novel to juxtapose, or rather superimpose, Silence on speech or the word. At one time in the life of the people, speech, or the word, was a meaningful vehicle for expressing and conveying value and identity. The word had integrity and functioned as a unifying, powerful force for expressing the collective voice and will of the people as a harmonious entity. Then the word had the power and prestige of "mother tongue," but in the chaos, the anarchy of the fragmentation, and the disintegration of the people's social and moral values, the word had tumbled from its prestigious height of mother-tongue to a mere "tongue," a mere babble of a rabble, lacking coherence as well as collective action and will.

In the novel, therefore, the mind searching for resolution of this crisis of wagging "tongues" immediately evokes the power of silence to rescue it from drowning in the noise, the "confused rattle,"²⁷ the "unending rattle,"²⁸ and the shuddering of the unstable physical space and surface. Note, for example, the narrator's juxtaposition of noise and silence at these crucial moments in the novel:

"You see, we can share," he said, as he came up to the man. But only the **unending rattle of the bus answered and absorbed his words. The man in the back seat just sat and his eyes just stared**, even when the conductor brought his cigarettes to about a foot of his face. . . .

The watcher was no watcher after all, only a sleeper. **Words shot out angrily from the conductor's mouth with an explosive imperiousness that woke the sleeper.**

"You bloody fucking sonafabitch! Article of no commercial value! You think the bus belongs to your grandfather?" The sleeper awoke and looked up at his accuser understanding nothing of the words at first. . . **The conductor laughed a crackling laugh.** "So countryman, you don't have a handkerchief too?" **The man did not answer. . .**

"Well," he **shouted above the death rattle of the bus, "get out!"** **The man had already started out of the bus, saying not a word.**²⁹ (My emphasis)

The rhetorical interplay of noise and silence, as evidenced above and in several other moments in the novel, unravels to the mind of the critical listener and reader the meaningless, vulgar, and undignifying proportions to which speech, the word, and language (as mother tongue) had become devalued. More significantly, it reveals the extent to which degenerative speech lacked empowerment for collective action, thus abdicating its place and role to Silence with its vast, profound, superior, authoritative power "to express the unspoken and the unspeakable."³⁰

On a final note, it is this recourse to the evocative power of Silence that imbues the mind with a keen awareness of its impediments which can only be resolved not by taking flight or taking the hypocritical stance that they do not exist but by looking them squarely in the face and confronting them. Through such spiritual confrontation with evil, the mind gains insight and empowerment to cleanse, heal, and seal the cracks that impede growth and progress. It is this spiritual mission and vision that the mind as protagonist accomplishes for the individual in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, which progressively empowers the collective spirit of the people to speak with one voice as chorus from *Two Thousand Seasons* to *The Healers*.

¹Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," in *Massachusetts Review*. XIV (1973), pp. 624-5.

²Bernth Lindfors, "Armah's Histories," in *African Literature Today: Myth and History*, 11. Edited by Eldred D. Jones (London: Africana Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 85-96.

³Emmanuel Obiechina as quoted by Charles Nnolim in "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah," in *African Literature Today: Retrospect and Prospect*, 10. Edited by Eldred Jones (1979), p. 107.

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- ⁴Eldred Jones, *African Literature Today*. 1.2.3.4, III (1969), p.55.
- ⁵Molly Mahood as quoted by Robert Frazer in *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah: A Study in Polemical Fiction* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 2.
- ⁶Arthur Ravenscoft, as quoted in Frazer, *Ibid.*, p.2.
- ⁷Charles Nnolim, *Op.Cit.*
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹*Ibid.*
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*
- ¹¹Cornell West, in an interview with Bill Moyers, April 1, 1990.
- ¹²*Ibid.*
- ¹³*Ibid.*
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*
- ¹⁵Margaret Folarin, "An Additional Comment on Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*," in *African Literature Today*. 5 (1971), pp. 116-128.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ¹⁸*The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*, p. 13.
- ¹⁹Interview with Bill Moyer, *Op.Cit.*
- ²⁰Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1945), p. 17.
- ²¹Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 4.
- ²²*Loc. Cit.*
- ²³*Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ³⁰Leslie Kane, *Op. Cit.*, unnumbered page.