

The Role of the Hidden Part of the “Iceberg” in Connection with Pre-colonial and Postcolonial African Imagined Communities: The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born as an Example

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الملخص:

يدور موضوع هذا المقال حول "دور الجزء المضمور من جبل الجليد". و هذا يعني أن بعض الكتاب الأفارقة مثل فرانس فانون في كتابه **المعذبون في الأرض**، و الذي تأثر به الكثير من الروائيين الأفارقة مثل ارما و نقوقي، يركزون في تحليلاتهم على الحكام الأفارقة و يواجهون اليهم أصابع الاتهام بأنهم هم المسؤولون عن وضع الدول القومية الأفريقية الاقتصادية و الاجتماعي المزريين، بينما يغفلون الدور المهم لغالبية الشعوب الأفريقية التي ساهمت و ما تزال تساهم في تردي الأوضاع على جميع المستويات، ذلك لأن هذه الشعوب تحب تقليد الغرب و استهلاك كل ما يأتي من هناك و تنفر من الاختراع و الابتكار و باتت تعتبر الرشوة و الفساد أمرين عاديين. أتتبع في هذا المقال التمثيلات الأدبية لهاته الأفكار في رواية الكاتب الغاني أبي كوي ارما **الجميلون لم يولدوا بعد** و روايات أخرى لنفس الكاتب و لكتاب آخرين. و في الأخير و كنظرة نقدية حول هؤلاء الكتاب أنفسهم فاني الفت النظر الى ان أولئك ساهموا بشكل كبير في حالة الركود التي توجد فيها افريقيا اليوم على العموم بحيث انهم لم يقدموا بديلا فكريا عن أفكار النهضة و عصر الاستتوار في الغرب.

الكلمات المفتاح:

-جبل الجليد، المجتمعات المتخيلة، افريقيا، الرواية الأفريقية، الفساد، التخلف، فرانس ابراهيم عمر فانون، ابي كوي ارما، نقوقي واثينقو، شينوا اشيببي، كوفي اوونور، البرجوازية الأفريقية، الوطنية، الاستهلاك، الابتكار.

Key words :

Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Kofi Awoonor, imagined communities, nationalism, underdevelopment, corruption, Frantz Ibrahim Omar Fanon, the iceberg, innovation, consumerism

Each nation takes on a character that defines it and, through a “daily plebiscite” or complicity, the community imagines, in Benedict Anderson’s sense of the term, and inspires, good or evil doing as the individual incites, imagines and preaches it within his/her societal organisation. What is meant by the hidden part of “the iceberg” is that some African novelists such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and even Chinua Achebe attribute, via their narratives, the collapse, the fall, the failures and the underdevelopment of their communities respectively not only to the rulers or the chiefs in their respective nation-states, but essentially to the “unseen” part of the iceberg, which means the rest (and the majority) of those communities. Although Frantz Ibrahim Omar Fanon argued in his renowned essay “On The Pitfall of National Consciousness” that the rulers alone are to be blamed since “the working class of the towns, the

masses of unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen [...] only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie,” (Fanon, 1960: 125). I retain my position that pre-colonial and postcolonial African imagined communities are no different from their “petty bourgeoisie” rulers in the sense that they as a whole (and not only the rulers or the chiefs) made Africa colonisable, to use Malek Ben Nabi’s premise, and maintained neocolonialism by consuming blindfoldedly all that came from the West without resorting themselves to creativity and innovation. Also, corruption has become a daily and normal behaviour for the majority of the people. I will contend that the writers discussed here contributed themselves to the predicament of Africa in that they (being the intelligentsia of Africa) have not as yet provided an intellectual alternative to the European Renaissance and Enlightenment elites’ world view. I will shed light on examples from the work in question (and from other works of the same author and others) as I go along.

Many critics agree that *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born* is about the Ghanaians’ disillusionment with the postcolonial leaders, namely Nkrumah’s regime and the coup d’état in 1966. For the African people soon realised, with the insisting symptoms of injustice, that the ideals of nationalism raised by African leadership notably Nkrumah are, as Armah sees it in his essay “African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?”, mere “sloganeering gimmick” which were forgotten shortly after attaining power (Quoted in Booker, 1998:108). We should also note that Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong’o had been greatly influenced by the works of Frantz Fanon particularly his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*. Still, for me, the writers added to Fanon’s analysis their pointing as it were at their respective societies in particular and to the African grassroots as a whole in the sense that the latter contributed tremendously to the enslavement of their fellow counterparts and to the reinforcement of the pillars of colonialism and neocolonialism.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born contains an ironic tone about the old leaders being only replaced by the new ones “since the only slogan of the bourgeoisie is “Replace the foreigners” (Fanon, 1961: 105):

These men who were to lead us out of our despair, they came like men already grown fat and cynical with the eating of centuries of power they had never struggled for, old before they had even been born into power, and ready only for the grave. They were lawyers before, something grown greasy on the troubles of people who worked the land, but now they were out to be our saviours. Their brothers and their friends were merchants eating what was left in the teeth of the white men with their companies. They too came to speak to us of salvation. Our masters were the white men and we were coming to know this, and the knowledge was filling us with fear first and then with anger. And they who would be our leaders, they also had their white men for their masters, and they also feared their masters, but after the fear what was at the bottom of their beings was not the hate and the anger we knew in our despair. What they felt was love. What they felt for their white masters and our white masters was gratitude and faith. And they had come to us at last, to lead us and guide us and to guide us to promised tomorrows (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 81).

The same tone is to be found in Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth My Brother* notably in the images of filth which refer to the disillusionment with the national leaders and the adulteration of the writer’s imagined community’s history to be replaced by Europe’s history of wallowing in materialism:

A nation is building. Fart-filled respectable people toiling in moth-eaten files to continue where the colonialists and imperialists left off. Follow my laws, my children, follow my laws for I am the one who brought you from the dust of degradation.

And he cast us back into degradation...With the cry of Long Live the Party, the party is supreme, he cast us into degradation.

Woman, behold the son; son, behold thy mother. This revolting malevolence is thy mother. She begat thee from her womb after a pregnancy of a hundred and thirteen years. She begat thee... and you woke up after the eight day screaming on a dunghill.

You crawl through the dunghill of Nima unto the blue Hills of smoke to catch the infinite immeasurable bliss to say to the dancers on the hills of spice, lift up your cloths for the nation is yours, the land has come back. The yoke has been smashed by the nights of valor, the corridors are cleared for new feet to walk through (*This Earth, My Brother*, 36-37).

As argued above, this passage is built on irony. The “new feet” have only replaced the old feet of the colonials and the imperialists. The expression the “nation is building” is also ironic in the sense that the new leaders are actually not

making significant efforts of innovating laws appropriate to Ghanaian traditions and structure of thought. On the contrary, as argued earlier, they are only following in the footsteps of the old colonials. This is done through “toiling in moth-eaten files.” In another passage in the novel Awoonor refers directly to Nkrumah as having only continued what the coloniser laid the grounds for:

Nkrumah, from all accounts, just continued the work of the British colonialists. Government by force of arms-vis et armis- government by chicanery, tricks, new tricks will be worked out with devastating logic for a one-party state in which colonial activists will attend a meeting where they will collect a guinea per head to build a writers’ and artists’ home at the beach between the lagoon and the sea in the picturesque village of Botianor. Lectures will have to be organized to explain the African personality, the role of the press, and the importance of creating a new identity, after centuries of colonial rule, slavery and rape (*This Earth, My Brother*, 92).

Nonetheless, Armah emphasizes in the previous passage the psychological substructures of their treachery. Fanon for his part argues that the African bourgeoisie, unlike their Western counterparts, were not justified historically in the sense that they did not take part in any innovative movement. This is so because in Africa the energetic, initiating aspects, the quality of the discoverer and of the inventor of “new worlds” detected in all national bourgeoisies are deplorably lacking. In the colonial nations, the character of extravagance is prevailing at the heart of the bourgeoisie; and this is because the local “bourgeoisie identifies itself with the Western bourgeoisie, from whom it has learnt its lessons”. The prior, Fanon emphasizes, follows the latter “along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention, stages which are an acquisition of that Western bourgeoisie whatever the circumstances. In its beginnings, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West. We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact beginning at the end” (Fanon, 1961: 153).

Armah allegorizes his nation in connection with Fanon's analogy between the African bourgeoisie and the Western bourgeoisie. For example, the striking image of the premature decadence in a picture Teacher saw when he was at school. This picture was in a book of "freaks and oddities". It showed a seven year-old child who has already grown old with grey hair. He was "born with all the features of a human baby, but within seven years it had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity and old age, and in its seventh year it had died a natural death" (Fanon, 1969: 63). What can be withdrawn also from the image and Fanon's thought as well is that not only did African intellectuals get perverted by focusing on their personal interests at the expense of their nations', but they also did, as Basil Davidson would put it, help in connecting the history of Africa to Europe for good when they did not reconnect their nations with their pre-colonial political models, nor did they imagine new continuities with their traditions. For the image of the elderly child could stand for a newly independent nation which shrinks shortly after independence into a weak nation heading towards backwardness instead of being put back on the track of its natural growth.

The images of dirt and decay in *This Earth, My Brother* are similar to those of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Such images are: the child with mucus overflowing from his nose and his mother sucking it; a woman with a disfigured body by "creases of prematurely tired skin"; "streets are littered with rubbish that overflows from dustbins onto pavements, banisters on building stairs are coated with vast accumulations of dirt, and lavatory walls are streaked with organic brown matter "about the level of the adult anus." Everybody is described as sweating, coughing and spitting. "All around decaying things push inward and mix all the body's juices with the taste of rot"(Wright, 1992: 102). These images of dirt, like in *This Earth, my Brother*, are brought in stark contrast with the 'gleam'. The two images in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are inter-related in that the commodity culture seen by Ghanaians as the 'gleam', something shiny and attractive, is itself transformed into the litter strewn on the streets after being

consumed. Images of dirt also stand for corruption which is represented in the novel as being unavoidable just like the organic functions and the decay of the body. An example of this is the lottery winner who tells the train station officer that he will bribe some officer at the lottery place to get his money:

“What will you do?” the man asked.

“I hope some official at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as a bribe and allow me to have the rest.”

The messenger’s smile was dead.

“You will be corrupting a public officer.” The man smiled.

“This is Ghana,” the messenger said, turning to go (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 22).

Another instance of corruption is Koomson’s agreement with Oyo, the Man’s wife, to consider legally the fishing boat as Oyo’s propriety. Also, the timber man tries to bribe the Man, the booking clerk, in the absence of the latter’s colleague, the space allocation clerk. The timber man tells The Man: “if you work in the same office, you can eat from the same bowl” (34).

Moreover, Amamu in *This Earth, my Brother* could be compared to the Man and Teacher in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Amamu, like the Man and Teacher, is described as being absolutely alienated from the rest of Ghanaian people. Even in the midst of his drinking companions, he finds himself forced to withdraw:

Conversation flowed on. Amamu was leafing through a book he was holding. He had suddenly withdrawn from the discussion. His friends and the other club members were aware of this habit of sudden withdrawal. And they said he was a queer man. He also had a habit of introducing such outlandish topics as philosophy and theosophy...He would go on and on. Suddenly he would realise that no one said anything, no one interrupted. So he would become silent, withdrawal was his immediate refuge (*This Earth, my Brother*, 33).

Amamu’s alienation is caused by his realisation that his job, as a lawyer, and the privileges which it confers, are totally inadequate in view of the injustices and corruption prevailing in post-colonial Ghana. Besides, in popular tradition, the

lawyer, as a corrupt and powerful member in the nation-state is thus sarcastically portrayed:

A lawyer is next to God. He is the one who gets you out of trouble; he is the one who puts you into trouble. If you steal a thing and you are caught, get a lawyer; he is clever. He will argue with “them” and you will go free. He is the one who can talk with the law. And the police respect him. He is the one who can say anything to the police. And they can’t touch him. Because he knows the law (*This Earth, my Brother*, 203).

The Man in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* feels utterly alienated for the same reason for he is made to sense that only he cares about morality while the rest of the people in his imagined community care only about possessing the ‘gleam’ whatever the means. For instance, when he refuses to take bribes his wife, Oyo, accuses him of being a *chichidodo*, a bird that “hates excrement with all its soul” but “only feeds on maggots”, which “grow best inside the lavatory”, that is he is indirectly corrupted as well (Armah, 1969: 45).

The Man realises that there are no answers to his questions and he witnesses another scene of corruption. “The man had seen this gesture before, several times. Usually its maker would add the words, “even *Kola* nuts can say ‘thanks’” (214). The expression “even *Kola* nuts can say thanks” is a metaphor. The latter, according to Derek Wright “has its humble origins in the giving of *kola* in traditional African society, either as a mark of hospitality to an important and influential guest or to someone from whom a favour was expected” (Wright, 1989: 82). This means that Armah is suggesting that corruption did not begin in post-colonial Ghana; it is rather connected to human greed and thus found also in traditional African imagined communities. Derek Wright argues further that Armah connects in his novel bribery, corruption and exploitation to people’s natural needs like eating, digestion and excretion. This suggests the inevitability of corruption and immoral behaviour.

The inability to act, the paralysis and the failure to be proactive on the part of the protagonist (which Fanon attributes to “laziness” especially in connection with the African intellectuals) are aptly portrayed in *This Earth, My Brother* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Apart from refusing bribery, The Man acts only when he ridiculously rescues Koomson through the lavatory hole. This is so because the description of The Man throughout the novel, except for rejecting bribes, gives us the impression that he is powerless and cannot act. Yet The Man’s swimming in the sea and his success to reach the shore could denote symbolically his purification. Amamu, on the other hand, acts only to begin a journey to his final doom. Yet, the narrative describes his death as being a victory, a reunification with the self and the past of his imagined community represented as a field of flowers.

Likewise Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* simply but meticulously, shows the already existing deficiencies in the Ibo imagined community which led to the annihilation of its economic and national sovereignties. For Achebe, the Ibo nation’s naivety was an important factor. This is represented in the novel with the Ibo allowing the European evangelists to set up their church under the conviction that very soon none of them would survive the power of the evil forest. Achebe here emphasizes the animist beliefs prevalent in the African minds. He even suggests here that the Ibos believed they had a defensive force more powerful and lethal than the bows and machetes they could have tried to use to defend themselves before they eventually realised that they committed a blunder. This is so when he portrayed the protagonist utilizing a gun. Of course, he could not be implying that gun powder was invented in Africa, but rather stressed the fact that Africans could have taken advantage of their contacts with the Chinese. To show the ridiculousness of this thought Achebe does not abstain from portraying their stupor at the white man’s ‘immunity’ to the evil forest’s effect. The portrayal gives the impression that their gods have abandoned them. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in *Petals of Blood*, similarly, is critical of his imagined community’s superstitious thought when he describes his fellow Kenyans looking with expectant eyes at the

modernizing machinery in the process of bringing down Mwathi's shrine. Ngugi describes the villagers watching with awe the obliteration of this compound. This caricatured portrayal is made to appear as a snapshot of the disappearance of the last pockets of some old beliefs that are at odds with rationalism –the trend of modern times:

We said: it cannot be. But they still moved toward it. We said: they will be destroyed by Mwathi's fire. Just you wait, just you wait. But the machine uprooted the hedge and then it hit the first hut and fell and we were all hush hush, waiting for it to be blown up. Even when the Americans landed on the moon . . . we were not as sacred as when Mwathi's place was razed to the ground. The two huts were pulled down. But where was Mwathi? There was no Mwathi. He must have vanished, we said, and we waited for his vengeance. Maybe he was never there, we said, and the elder who might have helped, Muturi, had become suddenly deaf and dumb at the sacrilege (*Petals of Blood*, 94).

For more illustrative purposes, the grass-roots' over all world view (or the "outcast masses" as Fanon puts it) metamorphosed in Africa in the sense that they no longer possess a sense of oneness. Instead, "savage" individualism set in. In Armah's *The Healers*, the griot relates that the ritual games which were the symbolic rituals of people's struggle to reach a common destination are now a field where individuals egoistically demonstrate their strengths and one person will ultimately be declared triumphant:

Something else. A few remembered the old ceremonies as rituals in which all people of Esuano had done things together to reach difficult destinations. But then that too had changed. The games were now trials of individual strength and skill. At their end a single person would be chosen victor, and isolated for admiration of spectators and the envy of defeated competitors. (1978:6)

This sense of oneness for Fanon disappeared and was replaced by ethnicity or some "territorial limits". For him this is due to the rulers' "ambiguous language" addressed to their people particularly the idea that the ruling class must exclusively consist of "Negroes or Arabs". This language is not that of an authentic nationalism but "merely correspond to an anxiety to place in the bourgeoisie's hands the power held hitherto by the foreigner" (Fanon, 1960: 126). This tendency is only expected to create inner conflicts and rivalry in African *imagined communities* such as what happened in Ivory Coast, Ghana and Senegal shortly

after independence. Also, what renders this unity a mere slogan is the fact that the rulers never behave respectfully towards their fellow citizens who they consider as juvenile and immature. For they never actually state to them clearly what their plans are for development.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that the African novelists discussed here represent clearly the part their respective societies play in rendering Africa what it is now, they themselves could be considered to have played a paramount role in the state of stagnation the African continent has witnessed until today. For the colonials claimed that they would bring “light” to Africa, yet their attempts only proved the extent to which “Western intellectual production is, in many ways, complicit with Western international economic interests” (Spivak, 2010: 21). Since the objective reality still proves this. African intellectuals read Western philosophies of Renaissance and Enlightenment and produced a thought and work or art that has even deepened Africa’s entrenchment in ‘disorientation’ and alienation. An example of those African intellectuals was Attoh Ahuma, a Gold Coast clergyman, in his *Gold Coast Nation and National Consciousness* urged lettered Africans to help Africans “find a way out of Darkest Africa.” The latter for him is “no darker than the dark primeval forest of the human mind uncultured”. The solution for him is that Africans should “emerge from the savage backwoods and come into the open where nations are made” (Quoted in Davidson, 1992: 39). Ahuma also compared the reforms which were to take place among the Ga people in Accra to the ones followed at the Meiji in Japan. Another African intellectual belonging to the Gold Coast, John Mensah Sarbah went in the same direction into comparing the Fanti’s attempts at modernization to the Japanese’s with the difference that Japan was not colonized and modernization did not have to mean alienation in it. The so called intelligentsia in Africa is to blame because they have not as yet broken away from the shackles of the 'alien' philosophies of Europe, nor have they tended away from the “ambiguous” and impossibly romantic ideas of

Negritude and PanAfricanism to begin a renaissance, an enlightenment or an intellectual revolution that could put Africa on the track of its 'lost' history again.

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