An Image of Africa and the U.S.A. in ayi Kwei Armah's *Why are we so blest ?*

M'hamed BENSEMMANE
Université d'Alger

Abstract

Ayi Kwei Armah is a controversial figure in African Literature. His image of Africa is often projected with intensely negative tropes. His critics have noted the blunt nihilism with which the points to poor leadership and corruption in African states: the
" saviours" of Africa have in fact been trained by the West so that their countries remain fettered and subservient to the "empire".
Why Are We So Blest? , Armah's third novel, tends to dramatize this point of view by focusing on the traumatic experiences of his protagonist Modin, who goes to America to study at Harvard, but is later duped and brutalized by members of academia. Armah adopts here a fanonian stance, and develops an anti-colonialist discourse through Modin, and Solo his alter ego in Laccryville (i.e. Algiers): America is the centre of power, " an outgrowth of Europe", that continues the de-structuring process started by the old continent, by controlling its elite.
We shall submit that Armah's discourse functions by means of refined political and philosophical formulations, which are currently used and amplified by such analysts as Edward Said, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. Nonetheless, Armah's argument is restricted in compass, and reduced to stereotypes of Americans, Africans and Algerians. It excludes any progressive currents in societies, and notably African efforts to promote political and economic success at home.

The celebrated Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah has been a frequent visitor to African and Western countries. His prose fiction is notably informed by his practical acquaintance with the U.S.A., where he was a student and later a lecturer, and Algeria where he worked as a free lance translator shortly after independence. His Algerian and American experiences are reflected in his third published novel, *Why are We So Blest?*

(WAWSB)1, in which the fragmented story of his African protagonist, narrated by means of shifts in space and time between the two countries, produces a modernist and pessimistic vision of the post-colonial situation. Undoubtedly the relationship between Africa and the West is a haunting and fascinating theme for Armah. In *WAWSB*, it is treated in a language pervaded by stereotypes and hyperboles figuring white racism and an aggressive attitude towards African people. Armah uncovers a problematic picture where America , as "an outgrowth of Europe", perpetuates imperialism, and where Africa is a destructured and mismanaged continent. However, at the same time, an organised and sustained anti-colonialist argument runs through the novel; the writer uses his main characters' perceptions and analyses to convey his adherence to pan-Africanist views and his rejection of western influence. The driving argument in the novel, echoing the discourse of liberation developed by Frantz Fanon, is illustrated by concepts and metaphors that can be examined from a post-colonial perspective.

The stereotypes of the arrogant West and the corrupted African continent are to be examined in the first instance: they are pervasive in the novel and constitute standard images in the descriptions, narrations and judgements of the protagonists, who are Solo Nkonam, a failed writer and former student of the university of Lisbon, and Modin Dofu, a young man who drops out of Harvard university after registering for a PhD. Another narrative voice is added, that of Aimée Reitsch, Modin's white American girl-friend whose own evocations reinforce the method of stereotype used by Armah to express his rejection of the western mode of life.

Solo's Portuguese reminiscences are undeniably sketchy, and converge in an image of a conservative and racist Europe; at the centre, there is Sylvia, a "gentle and soft-eyed" fiancée, whose love for the African young man is

genuine; but then prejudice takes over, and the affair is terminated because of the influence of Sylvia's kith and kin; Sylvia and her group are rather crudely pictured through the stereotype of European narrow-mindedness, even if the young girl's decision to leave Solo "can only have come out of great fear" (p.56), that of being ostracised by her milieu. Modin for his part is a more articulate presenter and judge of Western traditions, and the setting where his experiences first occur is the United States of America. His evocations are sustained, detailed and illustrated by his traumatic dealings with the academic world. We perceive, below the surface of good intentions, lecturers playing a part in American hegemony, and using their young African students for their schemes. Dr. Oppenhardt, a racist teacher, is cast as "an angry white man" (p.24) who violently refutes the argument of African intelligence defended by Modin; for him this young man is a rare exception of excellence in an "uncivilized" African world, hence the scholarship he offers him to finance his PhD studies.

Professor Jefferson, the white Africanist has a similar frame of mind, considering his African students as token participants for his research programmes. Moreover he is marred by a perverted personality, ambiguously condoning his wife's love affair with Modin and eventually assaulting him with a knife.

Modin's apprehension of his university "benefactors" is that they are a "lie" (p.97), a hypocrisy coupled with a neurotic compulsion to hate Africans. In his counterstereotypes, Modin makes caricatures of racist lecturers, with a view to deflating the self-righteous image of American academics, and expressing the dissent of an "angry young African". Modin's formulations function in an abrupt, offensive mode, and his African -American girl-friend Naita, university secretary, follows-up with: "they want to mess you up. If you're dumb enough to treat them seriously, that's what they'll do to you (p.98). More crudely she refers to those Harvard academics as "crooks" (p.89) and "a bunch of bastards" (p.95).

Such formulas come as a far cry from the traditional image of the American character, whose salient features, as Luther Luedtke remarks, include "high evaluation of individual personality", "humanitarianism", "tolerance of diversity" and "democracy". Armah notably crystallizes his own perception of the American character in Mike, the student who is keen to celebrate

Thanksgiving, and whose portrait is caricatured as a "cross-eyed fascist" who embodies "smug America". His stereotyped declarations about America as "the land of the blest" and "a paradise" are deflated by the counter-stereotype of aggressive America formulated by Modin:

Anyone who can write an article on Thanksgiving and leave out the mass- murder of the so-called Indians a street-corner hustler, nothing better (p.80).

Impressionistic references to white false humanism and destructiveness abound in Modin's rendition of American society. They are supplemented by the sexual metaphor where lusty American females seeking African lovers stand for America exploiting African resources, as it is the case with Mrs. Jefferson; she uses her affair with Modin as first a sexual prop, but remains insensitive to the young man's subsequent brutalization by her husband. Aimée, Modin's American girl-friend is for her part sketched as a numb and insensitive representation of America, as her frigidity suggests. Cured of this frigidity with Modin's help, she reverts to destructiveness, as we can gather from Solo's point of view. Solo indeed views her as the symbolic agent of Modin's castration and murder by French military elements still stationed in Southern Algeria after independence. The symbolism is thus formulated :

"The American girl is the hyperactive embodiment of that energy, that hatred that has impelled Europe against us all" (p. 180)

For Robert Fraser, writer of a monograph on Armah, American women in the novel function as "matrix for all those vices which Modin comes to see as most characteristic of white America"[3]. Solo, Modin's alter-ego, views them as "destroyers", "criminals" and "beasts of prey" (pp. 180-181).

Such hyperbolic tropes become used intensively in Armah's next novel, *Two Thousand Seasons*, from which one can quote for instance the Akan prophetess warning her people against white invasion :

"That race is a race of takers seeking offerers, predators hunting prey. It knows no giving, knows no receiving"[4]

This declaration with its xenophobic overtones, amplifies Armah's metaphors related to the western hegemonic and exploitative spirit. But in WAWSB, the novelist is equally offensive towards the black-American elites who toe the line with white "liberal humanism". Modin is contemptuous of Dr. Earl Lynch, an integrant black scholar who, according

to a white academic, expects to become a "Harvard Professor in twenty years". Married to a white American woman, Lynch exemplifies the "whitened black man" who counterpoints the black nationalist image, promoted by figures like Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Stokeley Carmichael [5], whom Armah would certainly consider as positive examples of black assertion. In Armah's imagery, Earl Lynch's depersonalization is equated with self-destruction and death. Modin muses: "Earl is a suicide. All these integrants with their white wives are suicides. How to avoid their death ?" (p. 21).

In his Manichaean, uncompromising portrait of characters, the novelist implicity condemns black and white association. His protagonist in Laccryville, Solo, projects a negative image of George Manuel, the representative of an African liberation movement, who has a white American mistress. This mulatto, the "Foreign Minister of the Congherian Movement in Exile", shows more taste for decorum, Western consumer goods and costly receptions than genuine militancy. Manuel is the prototype of the glib, Westernized and insincere African leader and his mundane pursuits are to be construed as a betrayal of Africa. Using the same type of cardboard, two-dimensional portraiture, Armah attempts à rendition of the political situation in newly independent Algeria, whose name is disguised as Afrasia, and its capital city turned into Laccryville.

Algerian civil servants are thus rendered as caricatures of incompetence and negligence. The "cadres" of a large socialist farm, formerly a colonial property, are seen by Modin and Aimée to take their tasks at a leisurely pace; they are made irresponsible staff, enjoying hunting and four wheel drive car rides more than their farming tasks. Furthermore, we are informed of the exclusion of women from top responsibilities and their relegation to menial positions. The farm director declares rather cynically to Aimée.

"Yes, we have had a revolution. Our women helped us a lot. They continue to help as you cas see. Revolutions are not for turning women into men" (p. 193).

Through his suggestion of broken promises, revolutionary, actions deferred, people swindled and oppressed, Armah renders the situation in broad and uneven strokes. A case in point is the Algerian one-legged war veteran who talks to Solo in hospital about people who gained nothing from the Afrasian

revolution, but whose declarations remain unstructured and directionless : *"Who gains, Afterwards, who gains ?" (...) "it is not the militants", he said with emphasis. "I know it is not the militants (...) All the best ones died. And many of those left are cripples worse off than I am. But who has gained ?" (p.18).*

Elsewhere, describing the streets of Algiers, Solo laments at the horrifying number of beggars he meets, *begging while someone else is elevated to the position of bountiful giver. And then as if it were not enough to whine for my casual droppings, they thank the dropper and ask the blessings of their Allah on my head (p. 8).*

True, such utterances and such nightmarish descriptions are worked out within a modernist framework; they make Algeria the recipient of a failed revolution, of a socialism which has shown disastrous results. But then there is no organized rhetoric reflecting the protagonist's criticism. The impressionistic rendering of political leaders, war cripples and mendicants is not likely to provide sufficient ground to suggest the failure of a system, and to imply that new republics like Congheria will be replicating the supposedly negative Afrasian/Algerian experience. As Robert Fraser suggests, Armah constructs a prose that is "polemical" in nature [6]. As such it has elicited a number of hostile critical comments.

The most vehement of Armah's critics have pointed out the offensive, and even destructive tendencies in his depictions, to his use of exaggeration and caricature as means to forcefully express criticism. Charles Nnolim, who refers to his "pejorism", thinks that Armah discloses insensitiveness, and reflects "the futility of any genuine connection between Africa and the West"[7]. James Booth, in an article on WASB, submits for his part, that Armah is "a figure of negativity in African literature", "carrying a sentimental desire to blame all the problems of contemporary Africa on the Whites"[8]. In the same vein, the American critic Bernth Lindfors charges Armah with "xenophobia" and racially selective misanthropy", as well as fascism ; he deplores that this writer, "rather like Hitler, wants his homeland to return to a state of mythical ancestral purity "[9].

From an African point of view, and using a different rhetoric, Nigerian scholars like Ben Obumselu and Chinua Achebe tend to consider Armah as

an uprooted writer, imbued with nihilistic pessimism and bitterness about fellow-Africans. The former thinks that WAWSB is blighted with "misanthropic neurosis"[10], while the latter refers to its author as an "alienated native who writes like some white district officer"[11].

Among Armah's apologists, we can note Robert Fraser, who presents Armah as a "moral writer", and adds : "to construe his morality to be of the narrow, carping variety is totally to misread his novels"[12]. Let us likewise bear in mind the opinion of Kofi Anyidoho, who approves of Armah' treatment of the "metaphor of disease" in society : "(His) creative mind first concerns itself with the diagnosis" in society : "(His) creative mind first concerns itself with the diagnosis and then the treatment of current and recurrent societal ill-health"[13]. We might note also the argument of the Kenyan critic Ken Lipenga, who draws attention to Armah's evenhandedness, insisting that his African protagonists "are as critical of fellow-Africans as they are of imperialists"[14].

Without underplaying Armah's excessive and reductive stereotypes, one has to consider indeed that these are part of a rhetorical system where the subjectivity of the main characters and the hyperbolic formulations they use are consistent with Armah's expression of rebellion and search for genuine liberation. In this respect, the Zimbabwean critic Emmanuel Ngara writes that in WAWSB, "neo-colonialism is defined in precise terms" and Armah equally points to "the dependence of African governments on Western powers and their consequent neglect and betrayal of the African masses"[15]. Armah has his main characters voicing concern and judging those responsible for the moral and physical degradation of the continent. An authorial discourse is carried through them, echoing Fanon's ideology of pan-Africanism, while the criticism of the bourgeois leaders neglecting the masses is a reflection of Fanon's observation that "the economic channel of the young state sinks back inevitably to neo-colonialist lines"[16].

The perpetuation of neo-colonialism is exemplified in Modin's experience at Harvard : he is subjected to manipulation and, like other fellow-Africans, he is "denied information and locked out of participation, being brought in only for the purpose of rhetoric" (p. 175). This experience illustrates

Fanon's judgement that "Europe has for centuries kept other men from making progress and has used them for its own purpose and glory"[17].
In particular the role of the African intellectual as a party to the subjugation of Africa by the West is brought into the debate : accepting an American education is thus "an inevitable part of the assimilationist African's life within the imperial structure" (p. 23), and one would think that George Manuel is the westernized and corrupt African leader that Modin and Solo could well have become through their Western academic training. The university is viewed by Armah as a centre of power and manipulation, and Modin regards his Harvard interviewers as active elements of this power:
I tried to see old men as highly intelligent beings, but it was impossible. I could only imagine they were powerful (p. 97).
Modin's self-analysis acknowledges an unwise hunt for the kind of science and illumination that only the empire owns and controls. It echoes the metaphor of the "centre and periphery" that is used currently by post-colonial analysts. One of them, the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, praises Frantz Fanon who first studied the relationship between these two poles and "began to appear as the prophet of the struggle to "move the centre"[18], i.e. to discuss essential world issues from a Third-World perspective. In Armah, awareness of such issues is conveyed through Modin, who realizes that by entering Harvard university, he has unwittingly been drawn to the imperial "centre", and "away from the periphery of the world I found" (p. 23); leaving the periphery means for him "loneliness, separation from home, the constant necessity to adjust to what is alien, eccentric to the self" (p. 24). Modin's introspection leads thus to a field of study currently debated, notably in the recent book by Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism.*
We can infer, in the wake of Said's views, that Modin and Solo act as "contrapuntal" characters[19], as visionaries who debunk the self-praising myths of white civilizations. For one thing, Dr Oppenhardt's advice to Modin to never hesitate "to use his intelligence" is ironically turned against him when the young man turns down his scholarship, because it is an instrument of dependence, of "payment for obedience" (p. 30). Similarly he comes to consider lectures at American universities as "a part of a ritual celebrating a tradition called great because it is European, Western, white"

(p. 22), in which he would become an instrument of hegemony, "a factor in our history. A factor in our destruction" (p 129).

From this perspective, the false leaders of African liberation movements observed by Solo appear as part of the imperialist setup attacked by Modin. Both George Manuel and his subordinate Esteban Ngulo have risen from the masses to misuse the wealth of their countrymen in their diplomatic bureau which is ironically located at "1, rue Frantz Fanon" in Laccryville. In the language used by Naïta, both men are simply "relaxing on the shoulders of our sold people" (p 131).

In contrast to Fanon's advocacy of a well-administered socialism, Armah expresses utter pessimism about this imported policy. His protagonist Modin rejects it as "the whitest of philosophies" (p. 133), and therefore doomed to failure in African countries. Its misapplied principles can be observed in the caricature of Koomson, the corrupt minister of Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*[20], whose eventual demise is associated with the metaphor of human excreta.

While Armah's African protagonists bear no direct hand in African politics, they are nonetheless made to share responsibility in the Western World's scheme to weaken Africa by controlling its intellectuals. In this context, as Solo observes, Aimée plays no innocent role in the alienation : by befriending political leaders and other African intellectuals, she acts as a western agent of destabilization and destruction.

But while Modin and Solo flesh out with great insight the imperialist process and discover their own responsibility in it, there is no indication that they will react to their victimization and that of Africa in general. Having been "assimilated Africans" (p. 65) and hunters for Western degrees, they do not follow a dialectic of positive militancy and their quest leads to a dead end. "Emptiness" and "death" are the recurrent words they use, and the actual place of their annihilation is neither Europe, Nor America, but Algeria where the revolution has presumably failed. The metaphor of death signifies the uncreativity of the disillusioned hero. Solo's thoughts "have remained impotent, unable to give birth to anything I might offer" (p. 4), and Modin is doomed the moment he discovers his indirect role as "colonial agent", and not a factor of African reconstruction. Simon Gikandi writes :

The central irony in the novel is the transformation of aspiration into self-annihilation : Characters aspire to ideals which are in themselves humane but have to go through a process of spiritual death to attain what they discover is unattainable[21].

This paper has considered some avenues for the interpretation of WAWSB by pointing to the fragmented narrative, the inflated and impressionistic depictions realized from the points of view of Armah's African protagonists. The image of the U.S.A. rendered through this medium is restricted to the appreciation of an overwhelming power exerting its negative influence throughout Africa. For Armah, this goes with a large-scale dehumanization and destruction, and African countries are left groping towards a problematic liberation, because of their corrupted leaders. Stereotypes and reductive tropes prevail in Armah's depictions of the U.S.A. and Algeria, to the extent of improbability.

But then Armah's discourse is tempered by a moral debate on public responsibility, and on the central question of the intellectuals' commitment to the national issues which, as I have suggested, are to be bound up with post-colonial rhetoric. This central argument remains, on the whole, restricted in compass, with characters' comments resorting to clichés and sweeping condemnations, rather than positive actions toward the regeneration of their societies.

NOTES:

[1] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Why are we so blest* ?, New york : Doubleday, 1972; Nairobi : East African publishing house, 1974. The novel will be subsequently referred to as WAWSB. All page numbers will be indicated in the text, and will refer to the East African Publishing House edition.

[2] Luther Luedtke, "The Search for American character", in Luedtke (ed), *Making America, The Society and Culture of the United States, Washington*: U.S.I.A. Forum Series, 1987, p.8.

[3] Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*, London : Heinemann, 1980, p. 86.

[4] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, Nairobi : East African Publishing House, 1973, p. 26.

[5] See in this connection : Kevin Ovendem, *Malcolm X. Socialism and Black Nationalism*, London : Book marks, 1992.

[6] Robert Fraser, op. cit. This monograph on Armah is sublitled "A Study in Polemical Fiction".

[7] See Charles Nnolim, "Dialectic as Form : Pejorism and the Novels of Armah", *in African Literature Today*, no. 10 (1979) pp. 207-222.

[8] James Booth, "Whay Are We So Blest and the Limits of Metaphor", *in Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 15, N° 1 (1980), p.63.

[9] Bernth Lindfors, "Xenophobia and Class Consciousness in Recent African Literature, *in Bayreuth African Studies*, 1986, p.12.

[10] Ben Obumselu, "Marx, Politics and the African Novel", quoted by Bernth Linfors in "Armah's Histories", *African Literature Today*, 11 (1980), pp. 85-86.

[11] Chinua Achebe, quoted by Ken Lipenga, in "Malignant readings : The Case of Armah's critics", Journal of Humanities, I, 1 (1987), p.5.

12 Robert Fraser, op. cit, p.12.

13 Kofi Anyidoho, "Literature and African Identity" : The Example of Ayi Kwei Armah, *in Bayreuth African Studies*, op. cit. p.23.

14 Ken Lipenga, op. cit p.10.

15 Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel,* London : Heinemann, 1985, p.53.

16 Frantz Fanon, quoted by Ngara, loc. cit, p.53.

17 Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Paris : Maspéro, 1961, p.239. (translation mine).

18 Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *Moving the Centre*, London : James Currey, 1993, p.2.

19 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London : Vintage, 1994. In this book, Said defines contrapuntal interpretations as "reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England" (p.78).

20 Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* London : Heinemann, 1969.

21 Simon Gikandi, *Reading the African Novel*, London : James Currey, 1987, p.95.