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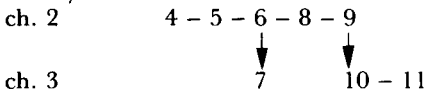
Abstract

On a first reading Fragments may appear confusing because of the broken time sequence, but looked at more closely this feature gives the clue to the significance of the main metaphor of the book and thus to its meaning.

Loss and Frustration: an Analysis of A. K. Armah's *Fragments*

On a first reading *Fragments* may appear confusing because of the broken time sequence, but looked at more closely this feature gives the clue to the significance of the main metaphor of the book and thus to its meaning.

The time pattern falls into two distinctive groups; a circular and a linear one. The first group comprises the first and last chapters of the book, the end meets the beginning and forms a circle; the second group consists of the remaining ten chapters, arranged in a broken sequence. Chapters two and three which introduce us to the two main characters occur at approximately the same time, but in two different places, chapter six generates a memory which is contained in chapter seven, and chapter nine prompts two flash-backs which take up chapters ten and eleven. The time sequence could be summarized in the following simple diagram.



The action of this main section of the book takes just over one year. As friends and neighbours are escorting Baako to the mental hospital one of them says, 'a been-to, returned only a year ago'.¹ It seems fitting that just as the year has come full circle Baako has reached the logical end of his development. This mechanical ar-

range of chapters into two time sequences coincides with the two major – and opposing – world views in the book, which could be described as the traditional African and the modern Western outlook respectively. The form of the book can therefore be said to not only reflect, but be an integral part of its message or meaning. I shall deal with these two movements separately, starting with the circular aspect and then continue to discuss areas of overlap between the two and what possible conclusions can be drawn.

The circular movement is represented solely by Baako's grandmother, the old blind woman Naana. She is firmly rooted in traditional African thinking which is essentially a religious mode of perception, rejecting rational, scientific explanation of phenomena in favour of a transcendental, mythical system which defies logics and operates through ritual.

The circular movement of this part of the book is not just in space (the shape of the book) but in time as well which is of much greater significance. A circular concept of time is possible when death is not considered final, and thereby ending a sequence in time, but is looked at rather like a change in the mode of being in which the essence of the deceased continues in some form or other. Naana's main concern in life is to keep her circles unbroken; her most important circles are those of life and death and initiation, and her means of keeping them unbroken are sacrifice and prayer.

The life and death cycle is discussed in terms of Naana's own imminent death and the birth and outdoor of Araba's son. When Naana dies she will become an ancestral spirit. These spirits are as real to the clan or family as its living members. They are supposed to be imbued with more wisdom and power than mortals, and sacrifices are made to them to ensure their guidance and protection. Parrinder says about the ancestors and their relationship with the living:

The ancestors . . . have life and power in themselves, they are dead persons who have survived as real and immortal beings. The profound conviction of the vitality and continuity of the dead as a 'great cloud of witnesses' cannot be explained as . . . a simple experience of the survivors.²

Death is thus an elevation into a higher state of being, but one which has close connections with this life and which in many ways resembles it. Naana shows her expectancy of the familiarity of the spirit world when she says:

My spirit is straining for another beginning in a place where there will be new eyes and where the farewells that will remain unsaid here will turn to a glad welcome and my ghost will find the beginning that will be known here as my end. (p. 280)

This certainty of the nature of her new mode of life excludes all fear and explains the absence of fear of death in many African communities. The remark 'And what is an old woman but the pregnancy that will make another ghost?' (p. 10) shows her confidence in the cyclical movement of her existence, and she is already anticipating her role as a guarding spirit on a higher level in the African chain of being: 'When I go I will protect him if I can, and if my strength is not enough I will seek out stronger spirits and speak to their souls of his need of them' (p. 283). Just as Naana must die in order to be reborn a spirit, so babies must die in the spirit world in order to be born as human beings. This explains the meaning of the outdoor ceremony:

You know the child is only a traveller between the world of spirit and this world of heavy flesh. His birth can be a good beginning, and he may find his body and this world around it a home where he wants to stay. But for this he must be protected. Or he will run screaming back, fleeing the horrors prepared for him up here. (p. 139)

The first eight days of the baby's life are considered an interim period in which spirits and human forces are fighting to keep the baby among their number. 'There is often fear of supernatural trouble in the early days of a baby's life when it is still a visitor from the spirit world'.³ Another Ghanaian writer Kofi Awoonor gives a dramatic description of the ancestors battling for the new born baby:

Seventh night at deep night when man's mouth has closed the law when they say the terrible god Sakpana will walk, sometimes covered with sores followed by barking dogs, sometimes the rich owner of land in velvet and a king's sandals shining on his feet dropping benevolence where he goes. The seventh night, deep deep night of the black black land of gods and deities they will come out . . . If they insist then I shall die the death of blood I shall die the death of blood.⁴

Another important ceremony in Naana's life is the one connected with initiation. Initiation in this context is closely connected with the journey metaphor and Jung's ideas of the archetype of the new birth. Initiation is described in terms of a departure, a death often in the shape of a visit to the land of the gods (Tutuola's Dead's town or Bunyan's Celestial City) and a return with a 'divine boon', a new insight which the quest hero can use to solve his own or his community's problems. The journey always includes a symbolic death of the old personality of the hero so that his new self can be born. On a psychological level it becomes the Jungian individuation process, on a mythical level it is the initiation rituals which occur at the onset of adolescence in most traditional African societies, and in philosophical terms Mircea Eliade has called it 'an ontological mutation of the existential condition.'⁵

Naana sees Baako's journey to the white man's land in terms of a quest journey and an initiation. Using the analogy of the life/death cycle she says, 'All that goes returns. He will return' (p. 1). The analogy is very apt; initiatory death is often symbolized by the initiate being swallowed by a monster and remaining in its belly until he is reborn like Jonah in the whale's belly. On seeing Baako walking into the aeroplane Naana says, 'We saw the line of people . . . go like gentle ghosts into the airplane. When it swallowed Baako in his turn, I could look no more' (p. 16). She visualizes him in the land of the dead (in Africa ghosts are white) 'roaming to unknown forbidden places, just born there again after a departure and a death somewhere' (p. 15). Just as she knows that he will return she also knows that he will be different, reborn

into a new state of awareness.

Straining across an immense culture gap Baako's vision of his studies abroad coincide with Naana's, even though he does not share her religious beliefs. He wants to use the knowledge he has gained abroad to widen the consciousness of his fellow Ghanaian, and it is when this hope is thwarted that his disillusionment sets in, resulting in another and more final death, symbolised by his madness.

Naana keeps her circles unbroken by means of 'the words and actions they have left us to guide us on the circular way' (p. 5). The words arrange themselves into prayers, and here Naana's insistence on keeping strictly to the formula is interesting. In his book *Muntu* Jahnheiz Jahn maintains that words were imbued with power of their own, irrespective of who said them. The prayer which Baako's drunken uncle said at his departure were 'perfect words, even coming from a man himself so blemished' (p. 9). Words could create a reality simply by being spoken, a concept which is also present in the Old Testament in the words 'In the beginning was the word'. From this belief springs the use of magical formulae which are strings of words that have a certain desired effect when spoken, and this is essentially how Naana views her prayers. She remembers how perfect the words said at Baako's departure were, and this reassures her that he will return.

The action that guides Naana are sacrifices, in this case liberation: 'The schnapps she pours on the ground at Baako's departure is a sacrifice of propitiation, which tries to remove sin, obvert danger or obtain a blessing'.⁶ Again, the ritual itself is important as a reality, not a symbol, and when Foli does not pour enough drink she rectifies this by pouring an extra drink herself.

Naana represents true spirituality, the seeing blind eye as opposed to the blind seeing eyes that surround her. The unity which is essential to her vision is, however, slowly being destroyed, a fact that she laments. 'The larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago has shattered into a thousand useless pieces' (p. 280). Armah is

concerned with retrieving lost African values which could bring back to modern Ghana some of the spirituality it lacks. This is a concern he shares with many African writers, the Sierra Leonian poet Lenrie Peters being one of them:

HOME COMING

Our sapless roots have fed
The windswept seedlings of another age
Cultivated weeds have grown where we led
The virgins to the water's edge.

There at the edge of town
Just by the burial ground
Stands the house without shadow
Lived in by new skeletons

That is all that is left
To greet us on the home coming. . .⁷

The circular aspect of the book has been explored through time and space (arrangement of chapters), but Armah adds yet another media, that of visual impact. This is achieved through the somewhat contrived description of Baako's television scripts as he is burning them. A TV script is itself of mixed media in so far as it is ostensibly a piece of descriptive writing, which is, however, meant to be translated into visual images. Baako's script gives a concrete image of the twofold pattern into which the book falls, and so helps to fix this in the reader's mind. The circular movement in the TV script represents 'recipients of violence, vague fluid forms filling screen, circular yielding, soft, all black' (p. 20). The setting is a 'coastal village, quiet, circular and dark' (p. 20). This ties together many strands of Armah's vision of Africa. It is exploited, oppressed and peaceful, unable or unwilling to fight back. In his next book *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah deals extensively with this theme, postulating a Garden of Eden existence in black Africa before the coming of the white man.⁸

To return to the TV script. Superimposed upon the circular pattern are 'long, severely linear, sharp-edged pillars, shafts, all white like rows of soldiers at attention' (p. 207). These images represent 'the agents of violence', and they translate easily into their emotional equivalents, representing an aggressive, insensitive hard and cold culture, in other words, Europe.

This severely linear pattern is elaborated upon in the second movement of the book, that which deals with the modern Western outlook. Even though the aggressors in Baako's script are white the main target of his, and Armah's criticism, is the black bourgeoisie, a fact which rubs salt into an already very painful wound.

In general the criticism is directed at the various aspects of corruption and nepotism which are so much a part of life in West Africa. Baako has difficulties in getting a job, due to his reluctance to 'dash' the 'junior assistant to the secretary of the Civil Service Commission' (p. 110), even though he is given a clear indication of what the clerk wants when he says, 'come and see me . . . you want me to help you'. 'If you help me, I'll help you' is the current euphemism one uses when offering a bribe, but Baako ignores even this clear hint. The incident where the hospital refuses to admit Araba even though her condition is critical because she is not the wife of a V.I.P. is significant because it reveals the vehemence of Armah's revulsion. The uncompromising nature of Armah's vision has earned him critics and enemies among the established literary elite in West Africa, including Chinua Achebe who writes that 'Armah is clearly an alienated writer' and that 'there is enormous distance between Armah and Ghana'.⁹

Against the background of the general decay Armah focuses on one aspect which he treats in depth, that of the role played by the 'been to'. This creates an alternative vision of Baako's homecoming and highlights the difference between the two views. A 'been to' is a person who has been to England or America, usually to study, and he is expected to come back, laden with all the wonders of Western technology: radios, stereo equipment, refrigerators,

deep-freezes and cars. Brempong is the perfect 'been to'. 'Every time I go out I arrange to buy all I need suits and so on. It's quite simple. I got two good cars on this trip' (p. 65). He states categorically that 'it is no use going back with nothing' (p. 76), and his family gives him an ecstatic welcome in anticipation of the presents he is going to hand out. Armah chooses to discuss this phenomenon in terms of the Cargo Cult.

Cargo Cult was a social-religious movement in New Guinea between 1870 and 1950. It was the result of colonial interference with a traditional system which resembled West Africa in economic and social structure as well as religion:

The function of religion was to explain, through myths, how the deities and, in one recorded case, totems (but never the spirits of the dead) originally brought the cosmic order into being, and to give man the assurance that, through ritual, he was master of it.¹⁰

The socio-political organization was almost as changeless as the cosmic order, and the body of knowledge which consisted of the magical formula necessary to influence the gods was therefore also static. Necessity had given the culture a materialistic direction, and most rituals were directed at obtaining material gains such as crops, pigs, wives etc. The idea of good was based on materialism, 'what furthers wealth is good'. When the white man appeared on the scene the traditional way of life was disturbed, but the need for material necessities obviously remained the same. However, the variety of material goods that could be obtained was widened considerably by the presence of the colonial powers, and with supreme logic the people of New Guinea adapted their traditional belief to the new situation and arrived at a belief whereby 'European goods (cargo) ships, aircraft, trade articles, and military equipment were not man-made but had to be obtained from a non-human or divine source',¹¹ through the familiar means of sacrifice, prayer etc. Although supremely logical and also reasonable in its attempt at sharing wealth on a more equal basis the movement became totally bizarre and ultimately destructive. It

included burning of crops, worshipping of aeroplanes and resulted in the killing of missionaries (for withholding the cargo) and war.

What connection does this system have with the role of the 'been-to' in modern West Africa? Armah sees the 'been-to' as the modern equivalent of the spirits who were supposed to produce the cargo. The living equivalent only 'fleshes out the pattern':

The main export to the other world is people. The true dead going back to the ancestors, the ritual dead. . . At any rate it is clearly understood that the been-to has chosen, been awarded, a certain kind of death. A beneficial death, since cargo follows his return. (p. 223)

The emphasis on the importance of the been-to in terms of what cargo he brings is brought out in the reception which both Baako and Brempong receive. When Baako's uncle tells his mother on the phone that he has returned he uses the phrase 'I have a huge present waiting for you here' (p. 98), and one of the first things Baako's mother says to him is, 'When is yours coming, Baako?' (p. 101). Brempong's sister even calls him 'our white man' (p. 81), thus unconsciously echoing the allusion to the spirits or ghosts. Armah is not the only writer to take up this theme, it occurs in West African literature with a regularity which one suspects reflects the writers' own disillusionment at the welcome they had when they returned from overseas. The closest parallel to Baako is Obi in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. The following quotation is part of the welcome address to Obi on his return to his village:

We are happy that to day we have such an invaluable possession in the person of our illustrious son and guest of honour. . . He traced the history of the Umuofia Scholarship scheme. . . and called it an investment which must yield heavy dividends.¹²

Western education replaces magic as the force which can produce the cargo, but it is noticeable that the been-to only conveys the goods, he does not produce them. He is 'not a maker, but an intermediary':

The idea that a ghost could be a maker . . . could also have something of excessive pride in it. Maker, artist, but also maker, god. It is presumably a great enough thing for a man to rise to be an intermediary between other men and the gods. To think of being a maker oneself could be sheer unforgiveable sin. (p. 224)

This idea was originally put forward by F. Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon sees the national bourgeoisie of the newly freed nation as a major impediment, not only to socialism, but to economic growth as such. He argues that it is a decadent class which can only imitate its European counterpart. 'It follows the Western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention'.¹³ It has no interest in national development, neither does it possess any technical knowledge despite its university education. 'The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type'.¹⁴ Armah has even picked up Fanon's keyword and made it his own. Fanon says, 'The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary'.¹⁵

This hatred of the black bourgeoisie is one of the motivating forces behind *Fragments*. It explains the characters of Ashante Smith and Akosua Russell and the savage parody of pseudo-traditional poetry. The fact that Ashante Smith is said to be a caricature of Kofi Awoonor and Akosua Russell of Efua Sutherland only emphasises the loneliness of Armah's position and his alienation from the social class which produces most of West Africa's writers. Needless to say they do not share his vision of themselves. Kofi Awoonor says, 'I particularly think that Armah is much more concerned with the degree of despair, which at times is very relentless, much more relentless than is warranted by the conditions'.¹⁶

A society that regards a class of people as a conveyer belt for cargo is an alienated and dehumanized society, and this aliena-

tion on an economic level is bound to be reproduced on a personal level in the lives and relationships of the people who live in it. The result is that 'Modern man is alienated from himself, from his fellow men, and from nature. He has been transformed into a commodity, experiences his life forces as an investment which must bring him the maximum profit obtainable under existing market conditions'.¹⁷

As a logical correlative to the cargo cult the characters in *Fragments* mainly deal with each other in this fashion. The most obvious case is Baako's sister who refuses her husband sex to make him agree to outdoor the baby too early because 'An outdoor ceremony held more than a few days after payday is useless' (p. 125). Armah creates an image to symbolize this kind of relationship: 'the killing embrace of enemy insects crushing each others exoskeletons and squeezing out the pulp of life within in the unending destructiveness of life' (p. 128). The image is in fact an apt portrayal of all aspects of life as it is conceived within the linear movement of *Fragments*, thus affording maximum contrast to the cyclical movement.

The two movements not only contrast they also overlap, and when this happens the linear pattern always gains at the expense of the circular. This is symbolized visually in Baako's TV script by the fact that the 'white square is *superimposed*' upon the 'single dark screen' (p. 210 – my italics). In terms of the plot this is seen as a perversion of once meaningful rituals. At Brempong's arrival instead of the traditional gesture of washing his feet his sister *pours champagne over his shoes*, and the gesture wins approval precisely because it is a waste. It proves that there is 'more beyond' (p. 83 – my italics). The most important example of this, however, is the outdoor of the baby. The original meaning of the ceremony is lost, the two most important factors the timing and the libation are ignored, and instead the baby becomes a moneymaking object in the brashest fashion imaginable. The symbolism is very carefully sustained throughout the description of the ceremony; the baby is put 'on the porch, a square of the morning sunlight falling on

one side of a wide brass pan next to him. The fan stood behind the cradle' (p. 258). The fan is one of Araba's most valued possessions and ironically it is the very thing that kills the baby. With its circular form and destructive function it becomes a symbol of the perversion of the ceremony itself, a white circle. Its destruction of the baby also marks the breaking point of the hero. When he hears the baby crying Baako 'took the thing by its stem and yanked it in anger once. Sparks flew out in a small shower where the cord snapped at the base of the fan, and the clown let the heavy thing drop into the brass pan, still turning, scattering the gathered notes' (p. 266). Baako and the baby are in fact the same. In the hospital Baako muses 'there had been the other, the child that was to have grown to become him, but they had killed him' (p. 258). They are the family's investment in the future. The child is born soon after Baako's arrival, and it only survived because he rushed its mother to hospital thus saving both mother and child. Araba says, 'Now see, it is such a good thing, your coming. Already you have brought me this, the baby. Other blessings will follow, that I know' (pp. 121-22). The other blessings, the cargo, did not follow, and when at the outdoor ceremony they tried to extract it they went too far and caused Baako's total rejection of them, symbolized by the death of the baby and Baako's madness, which is a symbolic death. In a discussion about the feeling of Africans who try to assimilate into white culture and fail Armah says:

The resulting sense of despair . . . is excruciatingly keen. The vision is of the annihilation of the self, the feeling is that the subject has striven so valiantly only to become nothing. The deathwish is a natural consequence, probably resolving itself in most cases into a suicidal depression.¹⁸

In *Fragments* Armah has vented his anger on the native bourgeoisie rather than the white foreigners, but the feeling of alienation and bitterness created in Baako by that class is obviously no less vehement. *Fragments* is to a very large extent autobiographical, and it did not surprise anyone that Armah himself

chose to leave Ghana as a gesture of final rejection.

NOTES

1. A. K. Armah, *Fragments* (London, 1969) p. 248. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. G. Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (London, 1969) p. 171.
3. *Religion in Africa*, p. 25.
4. Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth My Brother* (London, 1972) p. 13.
5. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos & History* (New York, 1959) p. 83.
6. *Religion in Africa*, p. 73.
7. Lenri Peters, *Satellites* (London, 1969) p. 39.
8. A. K. Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Nairobi, 1973) p. 53.
9. Achebe, Awoonor, Soyinka, *In Person* (Seattle, 1975) p. 14.
10. Peter Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo* (Manchester, 1971) p. 13.
11. *Road Belong Cargo*, p. 1.
12. C. Achebe, *No Longer At Ease* (London, 1972) p. 52.
13. F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London, 1970) p. 123.
14. *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 120.
15. *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 122.
16. *In Person*, p. 147.
17. Eric Fromm, *The Sane Society* (London, 1973) p. 63.
18. A. K. Armah, 'African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?' in *Présence Africaine*, 'Hommage à Langston Hughes', p. 17.