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The Subtle Plague: Materialistic Visage of Neocolonialism and Its Consequences in Armah's *Fragments*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the materialistic visage of neocolonialism in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*. While neocolonialism is often seen in African leaders' role as stooges of the erstwhile colonial powers in order to perpetuate themselves in office, this paper argues that the masses' unbridled penchant for foreign goods and life styles is itself another form of neocolonialism, albeit subtle. This paper not only sees this development as part of the "new realism" which came in the wake of political independence but also posits that the way forward in the continent may lie in nonconformity, its repercussions notwithstanding and a return to the way of production, human relationship and reciprocity as symbolized by the visionary Naana.*

Introduction

I was powerless before the knowledge that I had come upon strangers worshipping something new and powerful beyond my understanding, which had made all the old wisdom small in people's minds and twisted all things natural to the service of some newly created god - *Fragments* (p. 199)

In his brilliantly monumental but understandably African literary history biased volume, the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of African Literature* (2009), Simon Gikandi categorizes the European presence and domination of Africa into four phases. The first phase began with the arrival of European powers on the West African Coast at the end of the fifteenth century culminating in the major period of slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The second period in the colonial encounter in Africa was

the time when colonialism spread across much of the continent and christian missions were established leading to the founding of the schools that were to educate the early generations of African writers and readers (Gikandi, 2005, p.22)

This was the period when the African continent was physically occupied by the Europeans who, under the guise of civilizing and christianizing mission exploited her labour and materials for their own economic and technological development.

The third period (1880-1935) witnessed the expansion of colonial rule to most parts of the African continent. This was the period that the European powers sought to remake African societies in their own image by introducing political systems and economies and overthrowing ancient cosmologies and sundry cultural systems. According to Gikandi, “it was during this time that the idea of literature and culture as modes of resistance against the colonial system became crucial to the ideology of the African elite” (p. 122).

The long and hard struggle which led to decolonization brought in political independence. This period (1945-60) Gikandi calls the “last phase” of the colonial encounter in the continent. Political independence meant that the new African state came under the rulership of black men who took over the reins of power from their European predecessors. The heady euphoria that came with political independence, understandable as it was, did not however, last long as the people’s hopes and aspirations have since been criminally betrayed by many an African leader. In deed, ever since, by their demonstrable inferiority complex and mindlessness, many of the continents leaders have not only “been compelled to imitate their former European masters on whom they depend”, (Ezeigbo, 1989, p. 147) but actually more often than not act as “a policeman of international capital and often mortgage a whole country for arms and crumbs from the master’s table” (Ngugi, 1981, p.120).

In their headlong betrayal of the ideals of independence, African leaders have become political stooges of the erstwhile colonial masters. These political leaders; according to Armah, “have been sucked into the role of hypocrites, actors involved in a make-belief situation” (1965, p. 29). Thus, as “agents” of the former European colonizers”, Africa’s leaders have brought in colonialism, once again this time through the “back door” whereby Europe (and America) now control Africa indirectly. Going by Gikandi’s analysis, this might be the fifth phase of European presence in Africa otherwise known as neocolonialism.

Soon after political independence, intellectuals and politician began to realize that in structural and economic terms decolonization had not really led to the liberation of all spheres of political and economic life. The unevenness of economic relationships between the metropolitan European powers and the former colonies was so obvious that Kwame Nkrumah who had welcomed the independence of Ghana as the dawn of a new era coined the term “neocolonialism” to describe the political economy of the new nation. In his book, *Neocolonialism: the last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) he states:

The essence of neocolonialism is that the state which is subject to it is in theory, independent and has all the outward trapping of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside.

Nkrumah’s new awareness which, no doubt, made nonsense of his earlier slogan of “seek ye first the political kingdom” came a few years after Ghana’s independence. In fact, confronted by economic paralysis self assertion appeared meaningless. While Nkrumah’s viewpoint is no doubt germane, members of the ruling class themselves have become catalysts in the neocolonial process. In this light, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981) states that neocolonialism is:

the continued economic exploitation of Africa’s total resources and of Africa’s labour power by international monopoly capitalism through continued creation and encouragement of subservient weak capitalistic economic structures captained and overseered by a native ruling class. In the political sphere this class will often make defence pacts and

arms agreement with the former colonial masters as a guarantee of its continued claim to political power (p. 24).

But neocolonialism may not necessarily be through politics, defence pacts, arm agreement and trade. In fact, according to Ezeigbo (1989:108) it thrives well in the fertile soil of Africa, albeit subtle, through “other means”. One of these sundry “other means” is neocolonialism. This paper sets out, therefore, to explore the materialistic visage of neocolonialism as portrayed by Ayi Kwei Armah in his *Fragments* (1969).

Materialism as a visage of neocolonialism

The chase after the enslaving things of Europe which Armah warns against in his *Two Thousand Seasons* is the overriding practice in *Fragments For*, here, virtually all the African characters are nothing but slavish, promoters and consumers of foreign products and life styles. In fact, in the observation of Ejet Komolo, Ghana has become “one bleached mess of western acquired values” (1974:88), Right from the start the reader is taken aback by Foli’s new fangled greedy materialistic tendency. Baako’s family has come together to solicit the protection of the ancestors for the traveling Baako. But Foli, Baako’s uncle, does not pour the libation wine until the end of his long prayer and when he eventually does, he only pours out, contrary to the frudition, a few drops of the stuff so that he could reserve enough for his greedy self. That Foli can turn a supposedly solemn and sacred ceremony meant to establish a compact between the ancestors and the living into a material feast is no doubt a statement about the deep seated and materialism-soaked spiritual depravity in the modern Ghanaian society.

Contrary to the traditional communal consciousness of the people, individualism, consumerism and materialism of the western world have become the trinitarian god on whose altar modern day Ghanaians are in a hurry to worship. The hero in the past was one who succeeded in turning defeat into victory for the whole community. But as Baako tells Juana, the Puerto Rican doctor, the modern hero exploits the community instead of protecting it, to turn his family’s poverty into sudden wealth. The community has become the enemy at whose expense the family gets its victory. In deed, the hero myth has been abused unto “something deeply set now” (p. 13).

Everything that comes from the white man is of great value and everyone who has visited the white man’s country is called a “been to”. The “been to”, going by the dictates of the material society, is expected to requite his love to

his people by bringing material gifts to them. He is under obligation to provide a proof of his residence abroad and a demonstration of his good will towards those he has returned by “bearing with him a certain quota of material gifts, luxurious artifacts” (Fraser, 1980, p. 33). In one trip alone, for instance, Brempong ships home two German cars and a deep refrigerator to take a whole bull which his mother has always wanted for Christmas. Each time he travels to Europe he always seizes the opportunity to buy things like suits, lighter and tape recorders in order not to come back home “empty handed like a fool” (45).

Anyone who has visited Europe is regarded as “a hero” “a big man” or even “a whiteman” imbued with power because of the material gifts he or she is expected to bring to his loved ones back home to turn their situation for the better. The reception of Brempong at the airport grounds by his sister and other relatives is no doubt a demonstration of how far the people have come to accept the capitalist world and all it represents as the only true source of wealth, power, fame and happiness. He is carried shoulder high and ever made to walk on a rich kente cloth. In his sister’s attempt to “protect” him from the stampeding crowd of welcomers, she tells the villagers:

Don’t come and kill him with your T.B. He has just returned, and if you don’t know, let me tell you the air where he has been is pure, not like ours. Give him space let him breath (p. 59).

Brempong and Fifi have long learnt to swim along with the current of their loved one’s desire by voting for the shiny tinsels of westernization. But Baako refuses to conform. Baako knows that, as a “been to”, he is expected to play the role of an “osagyefo”, the glorious redeemer, the modern equivalent of the miracle worker who returns from his trip and with his material gifts turns his family’s poverty into sudden wealth. But Baako is alone in this crowd of worshippers in the shrine of mammon. He explains the situation to Juana, his Puerto Rican girl friend: “It’s not confusion. I know what I’m expected to do ... it’s not what I want to be” (p. 103).

Baako himself is not unaware of the wider implication of his refusal to play the role his family and in deed, the wider society has assigned to him. In fact, one of the things that contributed to his nervous breakdown in the United States was the fear of returning home without the much expected cargo. He eventually returns unannounced later to face the resentment and hatred from his mother and sister. The first question Efua asks her son Baako on his

return is when his car will be coming so that her “old bones can also rest” (71). But Baako has returned bringing neither a limousine nor a deep freezer but a guitar and a typewriter; “worthless” instruments to his supposed loved ones. He is therefore, regarded a failure, a deficient “been to” by his family who had expected their lot in life to be better by his return. To Efua his mother, Baako must be the proverbial eagle that does not want to soar like the rest worldly wise eagles. He is the self-stunted tree that punctures the loved ones’ every inflation of hope destroying their bubble of happiness in the process. And to think that Efua had actually expected her son to return and turn her unfinished building into a mansion!

According to Ga and Akan tradition:

After the birth, the child is kept indoors for seven days; it is then held to have survived seven dangers and is worthy to be called a person. If it dies before the 8th day, it is considered as having never been born and thus no name. The “Kpodziemo” or “going out ceremony” at which the child is named takes place on the 8th day after birth (Manoukia 1980, p.89).

Rather than follow this age long tradition, the lure of materialism blinds Efua and Araba into moving the outdoor ceremony back three days to coincide with the payday so as to collect the fattest droppings. An outdoor ceremony intended to welcome a harmless child has been elevated into an inflated feast to which the wealthiest acquaintances are invited. This is no doubt a perfidious act against tradition by both women which on a wider scale translates into a woeful betrayal and neglect of the ancestors.

Everywhere, the lust for foreign goods is elevated to an uncanny act of worship. The crowd of guests at Araba’s outdoor ceremony is all wearing woolen suits, flashing shoes, bright rings and sundry cold climate over coats from Europe or America held straight traveler-fashion over an arm. Baako’s mother is disappointed that instead of wearing something decent like the other guests who are sweating out in tuxes and suits in a warm country he is wearing a “mere” shirt and a northern batakari over a pair of shorts. To add to her horror, Baako as the master of ceremony not only turns out sensibly clad in order not to play monkey to the Whiteman but simply limits his speech to nothing less than a perfunctory announcement. Grabbing the microphone from Baako’s hands she embarrasses her guests into more generous donation.

Like the abused hero myth the Arts has been turned into a mere money making venture. Rather than as an avenue for creativity Akosua Russel “the sweet poison”, has converted the Arts into a utilitarian activity to make money for herself. The workshop session at Accra Drama Studio, for example, is turned into a fund raising directed at the American Ford Foundation. The pursuit of the tinsels of westernization itself goes with all kinds of vanity pervading the society. This is demonstrated by Efua’s admiration of the picture advertising Ambi-Extra lightening cream.

In the center foreground stood a couple of Africans with successfully bleached skins looking a forced yellow-brown. Around them several darker Africans stood in various poses, all open mouthed with admiration of the bleached pair (p. 87).

When we add this blind craze to bleach in order to look like the white people to the consistent advertisement at the airport to get the taste of international success by smoking State Express 555 and the foreign song of the children of Radiant Way International Day Nursery, what we get is European mentality. This itself is a form of cultural imperialism, a big prop in the neocolonial enterprise.

Consequences of neocolonial practice

The effects of this excessive longing for materialism are mammoth: The “cargo cult” mentality of the people has a devastating consequence on the people as well as the larger society. Efua’s penchant for the glittering things of westernization, for example, not only makes her spiritually bankrupt but, and more importantly, blinds her to her son’s needs and artistic talent. It blinds her from giving Baako the much needed motherly love and affection. It is Juana the psychiatrist who provides him these and Baako breaks down when she is away to her home country to observe her annual leave. With the exception of the visionary Naana all other members of the family Foli, Efua and Araba are anything but the loved ones they are supposed to be. In deed, they are nothing but greedy and meistic “jackals threatening to devour the loved one” (Ezeigbo, 1989, p.112).

Having been prevented from practicing his art by a materialism crazy society and denied communication even with his own family in a supposedly communal conscious environment, Baako withdraws into himself. He finds solace in solitude like a western artist who celebrates creativity in solitude. Baako’s solitude now directs his mind to a search for the source of his

people's obsession with materialism which he finds in the "Melanesian Cargo cult" an abject awe before "material objects which fastens on the returned traveler as intermediary" (Frazer, 1980:36). But the little salvation Baako finds in his private world of self communion and writing soon fizzles out for, a chance meeting with her son writing "for no eyes but his own", soon sends Efua racing to Baako's avaricious uncle Foli, who immediately makes sure that Baako is consigned to a lunatic asylum.

Even in his supposed madness, Baako is still able to recall the genesis of his problems; unlike Skido "who was bringing all the cargo", he, Baako had returned with nothing save knowledge which nobody wants. He tells Juana:

You don't have to be told, the cargo, that's it, really.
Do you think the traveler should have come back just
like that? Who needs what's in a head? (p. 190).

Baako's seeming inability to defend his position at the end as seen by his "they are right, I am crazy" (p. 190), should not be taken on its face values. Such a statement is nothing but an irony. This is why one must surely find it difficult to agree with Frazer's assertion that "Baako is finally mable to convince himself of the rightness of his moral stand" (1980:36). Even so, Baako's confinement in the asylum by a society already bastardized by "supremacist whiteness" is another irony. For, actually it is Baako who ought to run after his society which has gone utterly mad for western values and put in check by confining it to a rehabilitation home and not the other way round. It is the society that is the pariah here because it has lost touch with its roots via its consumerist mentality and cargo cult. To declare Baako insane simply because he dares to stand against the general current is unfair, after all in the timeless words of Ibitokun (1998, p. 114).

We all know that the epistemological parameter for the investigation of truth and the ideal are not the monopoly of the collective. The individual may be right while the society to which he belongs totally wrong (p. 114).

The consequence of Efua and Araba's heedless urge to make instant wealth is the fatal outdoor ceremony of the latter's child. The child had been seen by both as an avenue to realize their dream of material fulfillment which Baako had earlier "denied" them. This is the reason for their hurrying of the outdoor ceremony of Araba's son even though it was not yet time and

there are hints in Naana's lamentation which are informed by Akan traditional belief that the ancestors have been spurned by the pair of Efua and Araba in their action. The ancestral spirits soon respond. First, the spirits whose sacred day, Sunday, the day of the Aday's commemoration of ancestors is appropriated for the outdoorings and to whom no libation is offered, take back into the underworld, the child who in Naana's view is still in their keeping.

Second the offended earth spirit for whom Korankye's drunken sacrifice of a ram will not suffice to undo the harm already done by the decision on the early outdoorings are made by the poetic logic of events to demand the greater sacrifice of the child itself, a fitting punishment for those who abuse the earth's fertility at a time of the year when it is ritually renewed. The idea of "natural justice" executed by an angry earth is repeated one year later at the death of Skido in the chapter "Igya" (sacrifices) Armah's recourse to Akan religious mythology, according to Derek Wright is to show how far modern Ghanaians have strayed from the beliefs of their ancestors and more importantly, shows how the most "vital human values enshrined by those beliefs – the sacredness of human life, the graduation of growth by the laws of natural time processes—have been abandoned for the worship of trinkets of western technology" (1987:184).

They have, therefore, sacrificed the baby to the insatiable god of materialism of the west just as their greedy ancestors had sacrificed their children by selling them to western slave dealers for the sake of the glittering paraphernalia of westernization. Naana puts this in a clearer perspective:

The baby was a sacrifice they killed to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that the same long destruction of our people when the elders first ... split their own seed and raised half against half, part selling, gaining, spending till the last of our men sells the last women to any passing white buyer and himself waits to be destroyed by the great haste to consume things we have taken no care nor trouble to produce (p. 199).

Akosua Russel's sacrifice of the development of a robust indigenous art on the altar of instant wealth for herself is the death of encouragement and development of youthful talents. The youth Adegbobba is synecdochic of the lot of aspiring creative writers who have been frustrated by the antics of the

materialistic Akosua Russel. Her list of anthologies not only shows her as a sycophant of the west but also portrays her as a promoter of neocolonialist art education.

Like Akosua Russel, the supposed producers at Ghanavision have become sycophants of the government in power. Rather than produce, they share among themselves television sets meant for the countryside. Baako's attempt at production is frustrated by the corrupt Asante Smith. The pair of Akosua Russel and Asante Smith is no doubt a symbol of the death of artistic creativity in Ghana. Sterility is the order of the day. Like fanatical devotees of a cult, modern Ghanaians rather than produce have found pleasure in consuming things that other have produced. Lack of production itself leads to the gross inefficiency in the civil service, selfishness, greed, disorder, stampede at the ferry landing and what Ashaolu has called "grab-and-graft mentality in the public corporations" (1980, p. 127).

In this cargo mentality-awash society, anyone who dares to stick out himself or swim against the current of crazy materialism becomes a victim of alienation or ostracism. Baako's case is that of non-conformity. His crime is his refusal to submit to what Eric Fromm has called "anonymous authority" which operates through the mechanism of conformity.

If I am ruled by an anonymous authority I lose the sense of self, I become a "one", a part of the "it" (1979, p.153)

Baako has refused to give up himself in order to become a part and parcel of the neocolonialist herd because he wants to be himself. He wants to obey the dictates of his conscience. And so, like the mad dog, he encounters a hostile society with only a few friends-Juana, Ocran and the true relic of the productive and visionary past; his grandmother, Naana. Like the only friend of the dog who is too powerless in the face of persecution and eventual death of the dog by the mob, Baako's few friends are helpless in the face of the hostility of the society. And like the witches who should have made silence their wisest speech instead of being too articulate thereby risking death, Baako is eventually destroyed by jeopardizing his own sanity. Fromm's assertion is here on target:

Lack of conformity is not only punished by disapproving words like "neurotic", but sometimes by cruel sanction (1980, p. 159).

Baako's experience is no doubt a case of the tragedy of the lone reformer in a society soaked in all kinds of social inanities with a fanatical hatred for production. And yet as Armah points out, this craze for cargo and corruption is not confined to the Ghanaian society alone. It is everywhere in the continent. This is the significance of the name "Beebi arani" which when translated simply means "this is everywhere". The moral and spiritual sterility that arises from the people's penchant for materialism in *Fragments* is part of the post independence realities in the African continent that have left many alienated and disillusioned while others have embraced open dissidence. These realities have tended to shift the focus of African literature from the earlier romantic imagination to a new perspective of vision. Abiola Irele calls this development "the new realism" "which

suggests that process by which the African writer has begun to modify his standard to adjust his angle of perception to take account of those political and social realities that began in the wake of African independence to impress themselves more upon the general attention through the entire continent (1981, p. 70).

Thus, through the use of symbols, detailed descriptive passages, unified structure and theme, Armah's *Fragments* becomes a parable of our present condition in Africa "the sum of whose meanings amounts to a negative judgment upon that condition and upon the human impulses that may be said to be behind its making" (Irele, 1981:89). Unlike in *The Beautiful ones* are not yet Born, Armah's first novel, nauseating images like the portrayal of the Junior Assistant Secretary's dirty habit are fewer here. There is a kind of suggestive characterization. Fifi's moral bankruptcy is suggested by his laughter while on the telephone while the physical description of the dog hunters is also suggestive of their psychological states. On the whole, Armah's style is a function of his attempt to marry his content to form and technique with a daring iconoclasm if the occasion demands" (Awosika, 1997, p. 7)

Conclusion

What the foregoing has shown so far is that neocolonialism in Africa is not only through the leaders acting as stooges to the former colonial powers in order to remain in power but also through the masses' uncanny penchant for

the glittering but enslaving things of Europe and America. The moral deficiency and sterility in the society are a consequence of the people's avarice and ignorance which in turn have made them to hanker after foreign goods. The analysis so far leads to an inescapable submission which is that the economic, political, religious, cultural and materialistic visages of neocolonialism "are interrelated facets of the same prism" (Okereke, 1980:38). Once again, as in the better forgotten days of colonialism, Africans have willingly or unwittingly in their whole sale embrace of materialism of the west manifested a stark disregard for "the unique features of African culture" (Rodney, 1980:39) which celebrate human values instead of materials. In deed, as Charles Larson has relentlessly stated "materialism and westernization dance hand in hand" (1978:153). Any hope in sight for the continent? Not in the present socio-political structures that are riddled with all kinds of neocolonialism Armah seems to say but in a return to the African way of production, egalitarianism, reciprocity and human relationship symbolized in the character of the visionary Naana, Baako's cherished grand mother.

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