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“The self and the world against which it had to live’’: Neocolonialism and the resistant subject in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Sarah Jilani
University of Cambridge

Abstract: *Armah’s The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) has been read in terms of its political criticism of the native elite in Nkrumah’s post- independence Ghana, and for its treatment of individual consciousness – but these elements have been treated largely in isolation from each other. This article argues that the novel establishes a nuanced interdependency between subjectivity and the material everyday of neocolonialism, grounding its exploration of the psychic strain of such conditions on its exposé of Ghana’s neocolonial economy. Defining subjectivity in Fanonian terms, it argues that the multi-temporality of *Beautiful Ones*, and its treatment of its protagonist’s interiority, illustrate how the self and its socio-economic conditions are mutually constitutive, explanatory and effectual. The neocolonial circumstances that Armah’s protagonist navigates each day equip him with the consciousness to historicize his psychic malaise. In this way, the novel gestures towards what a resistant subject, responsive to such corrupt conditions, might be.

Keywords: Ayi Kwei Armah; African literature; neocolonialism; subjectivity; postcolonialism; Frantz Fanon

In a scene just prior to the climax of Ayi Kwei Armah’s first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, first published in 1968, the nameless protagonist and his wife are taken home in the chauffeur-driven car of their acquaintances: Joseph Koomson, a corrupt minister in an ostensibly socialist government, and his wife Estella, who rarely “reconcile[s] herself to being an African” (Armah 1969, 155). The protagonist’s mental state exhibits a particular kind of exhaustion:

How was the man ever going to be able to fight against all the things and all the loved ones who never ceased urging that nothing else mattered, that the way was not important, that the end of life was the getting of these comfortable things? For the self, or if not for the self, then for the loved ones, for the children. (177)

What would it mean to get these “comfortable things [...] for the self,” apart from the acquisition of wealth for personal use? By this point in Armah’s novel, we know what it would entail in post-independence Ghana – risk-taking, a lack of scruples and artifice. But what, as the reflective voice prompts us to consider, is the relationship between the self and the material conditions of a daily life spent either in the getting of, or fighting the desire to get, “comfortable things”? The protagonist, his resolve nearly at an end, recognizes an insidious but fundamental effect of the neocolonial socio-economic order in which he finds himself: that the pursuit of wealth becomes the means by which

people constitute themselves as subjects, and the way intersubjective relations are conducted – how care and love are expressed, identity and recognition reinforced.

In a novel that examines both the legacies of colonialism and daily life in Nkrumah's Ghana, this quiet moment of reflection demonstrates how the psycho-social and economic stakes of neocolonial circumstances are interwoven. Armah's conscience-driven protagonist seriously contemplates the ease of participating in such "normal" social conditions, and the promise of integration it offers. He is in fact contemplating what would amount to a kind of self-erasure, to make way for a new kind of self altogether. The current article traces the nuanced interdependency established in *Beautiful Ones* between subjectivity and the economic, and argues that Armah's narrative harnesses the devices of multiple temporality and character interiority in order to suggest that neocolonial socio-economic conditions and the very subjectivities of the novel's characters are mutually constitutive, explanatory and effectual. Identifying the extent to which these connections have been addressed in existing Armah scholarship, I will propose a syncretic approach to the key concerns of these critiques, which tend to consider subjectivity and economic conditions in isolation from each other. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's conception of subjectivity, which posits the self as a material phenomenon that has a corresponding interiority, my reading seeks to demonstrate how *Beautiful Ones*, which offers no narrative or political resolution, nonetheless gestures at the condition from which resistance can stem: consciousness of one's embodied experience within one's material conditions. Charting its protagonist's understanding of his relation to the neocolonial economy and to other people, *Beautiful Ones* considers subjectivity an essential terrain in the struggle to transform society.

Armah was among the very first of African writers to question the meaning of independence from colonial rule and to address the continent's continuing dependence on the west. He was born in 1939 to Fante-speaking parents in Takoradi, Ghana, and his first novel received critical attention for its uncompromising attack on the Ghanaian elite for their role in generating the moral and economic bankruptcy of post-independence society. Laden with the disappointment of failed socialist promises of anti-colonial nationalism, *Beautiful Ones* narrates a Ghana betrayed by the very class that promised liberation. The narrative follows an unnamed man who works as a clerk in the Railway Traffic Control Office. His job is monotonous, but provides some satisfaction in that it is a place to be and a thing to do. Within such a routine, he muses, "it was not so difficult to forget the self and the world against which it had to live" (Armah 1969, 182). Yet the man seems to neither count himself entirely as one of the "suffering sleepers" around him, nor amongst those who have "found in themselves the hardness for the upward climb" (23). In fact, forgetting and remembering the self, as he experiences cycles of both refusal and self-comparison with the category of "climbers", is to become the man's trajectory in the novel. Centring the man's subjective experience on our understanding of the material conditions that Armah critiques, the novel, as Jarrod Dunham (2012) observes, also "positions individual characters in relation to one another in interactions that mirror and amplify Armah's larger social concerns" (281). Its political agenda is enabled, problematized and strengthened in equal measure by these two interpenetrating portrayals: the everyday interiority of the protagonist, and his relations with others.

Scholarship on *Beautiful Ones* has examined Armah's novel for the way it exposes political, historical and socio-economic forces, and also in terms of the individual's struggle within and against society – but has treated these two elements largely in isolation from one another. Materialist approaches have often prioritized the socio-political overtones of Armah's writing over the individual portraits of the native elite's excessive lust for material goods, and its allegorical depiction of the decay of revolutionary hope. But this approach has also had limiting effects. Armah's narrative techniques for linking the lust for wealth and economic dependence on the west are read by G. Ojong Ayuk (1984) as Armah's "fictional axe [aimed] at those leaders whose thinking has unfortunately been distorted by current materialism" (33). However, *Beautiful Ones* '

careful historicization of this lust for wealth, and its exploration of the role interiorization can play in this “current materialism,” is left under-explored by Ayuk. In fact, interiorization comes to the fore in moments of the novel where Armah identifies colonial history (including complicit African chiefs) and the psychic consequences of neocolonial capitalist conditions as equal culprits in need of urgent examination. At one point, the protagonist bitterly thinks he should “have asked [Koomson] if anything was supposed to have changed after all, from the days of chiefs selling their people for the trinkets of Europe” (Armah 1969, 176). For Derek Wright (1989), Armah’s portrayal of the pervasive materialism of all classes in Ghana “produces a socio-cultural monolith, in which the bourgeoisie [...] absorbs into itself a wholly emulative, sycophantic and bureaucratized working class” (36). While the complicity of all social groups is indeed, to some extent, a recurring element within the novel’s criticism of postcolonial elites and acquiescent populations, Wright reads Armah’s content and delivery as being at odds with one another, arguing that the novel “is rescued from the cartoon-like banality of its political themes, the bareness of its plot, and the suspicious simplicity of its cyclical view of history by the performance of its language” (30). Few things happen to the protagonist, whose life remains materially the same at the end as it was at the beginning, but the plot is hardly bare, for the man undoubtedly experiences changes in his relationships to himself, his wife and his own conditions. And it is, of course, the very “banality” of the neocolonial politics depicted in *Beautiful Ones*, and the “cyclical” history it laments, that imbue Armah’s remarkable language with the depth of effect that Wright implicitly celebrates. Armah certainly criticizes greed, but not as an unfortunate, inescapably human drive; it has a traceable, historicizable trajectory of becoming, and manifests itself within different classes in different ways as a result of the conditions that sustain them.

Neil Lazarus’s (1987) interpretation anticipated two important critical threads that scholars of Armah have explored in the past two decades: analyses of the potent bleakness of the material reality depicted and its underlying causes, such as John Lutz’s (2003) comments on commodity fetishism and conspicuous consumption, and those readings, such as Minna Niemi’s (2017) Arendtian interpretation, that focus on the protagonist’s moral resilience as an indication of Armah’s grimly optimistic vision. Through an approach that incorporates both, Lazarus reads the novel via a dialectic wherein the latent and manifest, the present and absent, are transformed from logical into ontological opposites, formulated on the premise that it is “only by knowing one’s world, by seeing it for what it is, that one can ever genuinely aspire to bring about its revolutionary transformation” – its double lens being the precondition for producing knowledge that is disclosive of the roots and causes of the national and societal decay it depicts (1987, 139). This kind of knowledge, born of the everyday living conditions and their effects upon one’s subjectivity, is the precursor to one’s actions within one’s society. However, Lazarus’s reading of this relationship as an inner voyage “couched” inside the novel’s dialectic is problematized by the text itself. Indeed, there are two particular themes, for which Armah’s language is a crucial vehicle, that make this novel a dialectical work of the kind Lazarus identifies as well as one that approaches subjectivity not only as the location of the protagonist’s inner voyage, but also as a source of knowledge about the material contradictions of his world. The first is the theme of multi-temporality, manifest in the protagonist’s experience of disjunction between a national past/present and a subjective past/present. The second, interiority, is examined through the detailed and lyrical narration of the effects on the man’s psyche of his material everyday. Together, they explore the (neocolonial) material processes shaping both that everyday and its subjects.

The sheer quantity and depth of writing on subjectivity in western and non-western scholarship cannot be considered in this limited study; however, for the purposes of understanding the particular relation between subjectivity and material conditions in *Beautiful Ones*, I look to Frantz Fanon (1967), whose *Black Skin, White Masks* envisages a socially relational subjectivity that is constituted by the material. This selfhood crucially remains capable of response to economic structures (such as colonialism and capitalism) in ways that can transform both its conditions and

the self. "It is apparent to me", Fanon writes, "that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalisation" (4). He thus locates subjectivity as constituted by the sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting frameworks of politics and psychology; indeed, the self remains capable of resistance and transformation by its very refusal to conflate or sever the two.¹ This theoretical positioning also resonates to an extent with Fredric Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping, in that its very representability is made possible by narrative devices that must allow for the simultaneous mapping of the particular, embodied experience of material conditions, and of these conditions 'existence as part of a global structure.'² This "necessarily includes the psychic and the subjective within itself" as part of the "social raw material" it draws upon (Jameson 1995, 4). Since he prioritizes the question of representation, however, Jameson does not pause long on his foundational assumption that material reality constitutes subjectivity. But it is precisely this mutual interaction of "the psychic and the subjective" with "the social raw material" that Fanon's conception of the self allows us to examine in relation to Armah's novel, and begin to interpret its implications for the possibility of resistance.

Neocolonial time

Armah's protagonist weaves his existence within and amongst a temporal incoherence that is not merely indicative of the political incoherence around him, but also reflects his subjective experiencing of the contradictions that characterize the transition from the short-lived promises of independence to postcolonial nationhood (and the return of capitalist exploitation in a more disorienting and nebulous form). The man's experience of multiple times establishes an interdependency between subjectivity and nationhood that grounds the psychic within the material in a Fanonian sense. There is a national time that is hurtling forwards, non-synchronous with the time of the majority of the governed, who are quite literally disoriented by their own disidentification with the present: they are the "living dead [who] could take some solace in the half-thought that there were so many others dead in life with them" (Armah 1969, 25). If, in the novel, the liberational promises of independence can be construed as a movement forwards, this is always accompanied by a reverse movement, a national time hurtling backwards (represented by a return to colonialist exploitation under another guise). The result is the psychological equivalent of motion sickness. A valuable triangulation between nation, time and subjectivity has been proposed by Vilashini Cooppan (2009) in her book on national identity and literary form, *World Within*. Cooppan proposes that the postcolonial nation can be thought of as an entity constructed through movement – one of spatial and temporal unevenness, interiorization and exteriorization, constituted as much by what it borders as by what it contains. Describing the nation's psychic locale and its "propensity to mix up the realms of inside and outside, past and present as it constructs the narrative of [national] identity" (2), she characterizes it as one of incessant movement between distinct spaces, times and attachments through which national identification (and disidentification) comes into being. The effect of this incessant movement, however, can also be temporal disorientation, which *Beautiful Ones* configures as a state of nausea. And whilst nausea in the novel has been commented on frequently in Armah criticism, interpretations like those of Alexander Dakubo Kakraba (2011) and Derek Wright (1990) focus on disgust as its sole source – a disgust the protagonist certainly feels towards the corruption and obscene wealth disparities he witnesses in postcolonial Ghana. However, Cooppan's observation of the way postcolonial nations themselves mix past and present in order to construct themselves provides a valuable lens, hitherto unconsidered within Armah scholarship, reminding the reader that this perpetual national movement is also a cause of nausea. The nation, whose crony capitalist present looks much like its colonial past, and which professes an attachment to ideologies like socialism and nationalism whilst political and economic realities suggest the very opposite, is in nauseating motion. Effecting and effected by its subjects, such a nation-time makes for a sickening experience for "the thinking mind," as

Armah's protagonist observes: "Here we have had a kind of movement that should make even good stomachs go sick. What is painful to the thinking mind is not movement itself, but the dizzying speed of it. It is that which has been horrible" (1969, 62). The nation's colonial and postcolonial history is experienced viscerally within people, temporally and spatially, in the form of a daily jarring between present conditions and the circumstances that led up to it. The transformation of Nkrumahism within the space of a few short years from a revolutionary promise to crony capitalism weighs heavy on the man's sense of the present. He cannot entertain progress and regress as distinct, for effects within and without are one and contradictory.

For the protagonist, and presumably those few like him who have not found the "hardness in themselves for the upward climb", the effect at first seems to be paralysis. Nonetheless, this is a state that has a certain ontological and existential dynamism. This is suggested in a haunting sentence that links the new stage of capitalism Ghana has entered to a *longue durée* of colonialism, accumulation, exploitation and violence to a description of a rotting wooden banister in a government building. Encountering a repeatedly polished yet still filthy banister has him thinking on all the "diseased skin" that has touched it, a striking metaphor on the rottenness of the foundation itself (neocolonial capitalism): "In the natural course of things [the wood] would always take the newness of the different kinds of polish and it would convert all to victorious filth," and the individuals who daily choose to oil this economic system: "[a]nd there were, of course, people themselves, so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course toward putrefaction" (Armah 1969, 12). As dark as the metaphor is, it historicizes the present state of things, painting a picture of systemic and deliberately sustained decay rather than suggesting that "something went wrong" after independence, or that any one individual is the orchestrator of the problem. There is unflinching clarity as to the continuities of capitalist extraction in its post-independence guise, facilitated by its post-independence beneficiaries: "[w]hat had been going on there was going on now and would go on and on through all the years ahead was a species of war carried on in the silence of the long ages" (Armah 1969, 15). The lyricism of the novel's language is always being interrupted with a reminder that time is transforming even that which seemingly, like most objects described, is, however, solid.

Through imagery featuring organic material produced over time, like mould, rot, sweat and faeces, these reminders are frequently delivered in obscene language: "how were these leaders to know that while they were climbing up to shit in their people's faces, their people had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter?" (96). Times change; even if once duped, people change. Obscene language, Kakraba suggests, serves as Armah's "therapeutic shock, [meant to] awaken a very decadent and dying society" (2011, 312), although it can also be argued that the psychic effects of degrading material conditions, obscene inequality and historical betrayal can only be narrativized, for Armah, through a similar harshness of style. The graphic imagery and the sense of contempt in the above passage positions the masses as empowered in their ridicule, able to see through the deceit practised by the elite.

In fact, the Ghanaian people have encountered such deceit before, because national time in *Beautiful Ones* flows in circles, or indeed repeats itself without generating any real change. The two temporalities at work in Armah's novel do not easily map onto distinct parallel lines (modern-versus-organic or Ghanaian-versus-African, for instance) so much as onto a circle. Nevertheless, circularity in the postcolonial nation state sustains a certain ceremonial rituality that is necessary to maintain the appearance of autonomous power, concealing its actual neocoloniality. Achille Mbembe (2001) points out the effect of this kind of repetition in general: "consider, for example, ceremonies for the 'transfer of office' that punctuate postcolonial bureaucratic time and profoundly affect the imagination of individuals – elites and masses alike" (65). Metaphors of circularity abound in *Beautiful Ones*: the night-man's circuit, the chichidodo bird, the two bus journeys that bookend the plot. It is clear that these are allegories of recurring political corruption, the long chain

of bribes, and the replacing of one “fat yessir-man” with another. However, Armah is not interested in dissecting how and why the promise of liberation was diverted into cycles that maintain only the appearance of progress. Like everyone else, Nkrumah himself – the main political figure whose presence hangs over the novel – is framed as both a passive and an active agent. The protagonist thinks of the “promise [Nkrumah] had held out but which he himself consumed, utterly destroyed. Perhaps it is too cruel of us to ask that those approaching the end of the cycle should accept without fear the going and coming of life and death”, he concludes (Armah 1969, 103), leaving us with a sense of the fallibility of individuals in the face of such entrenched structures, as well as the fact that individuals can either perpetuate or change structures.

This question of agency is examined as the narrative unfolds. It suggests that the truly disabling effect of neocolonial conditions can be found in their infiltration of people’s subjectivities via social rituals (such as ceremonies of nationalism) and the upkeep of the new order through participation in crony capitalism. In other words, the continuation of neocolonial conditions comes to mean ontological security, ensured through wealth and social status. Thus, sad acceptance of the corrupt nature of the present poses, for Armah, an even greater risk than the corruption itself; as serious as corruption may be, the acceptance of corruption has the country sleepwalking into economic dependency. A seemingly throwaway moment in the novel emphatically reminds us of this:

Only a few goods trains would be coming down, and there was nothing going up with which they could possibly collide. [...] Until the old 1:50 train started up to bring Tarkwa gold and Aboso manganese to the waiting Greek ships in the harbour, this would be a time of peace. (Armah 1969, 24)

A steady stream of raw material departs, and products will be manufactured elsewhere. Naming the precise sources of African wealth, and the Mediterranean route it will take, suggests that the destination of the goods is Europe. National independence has not changed the direction of the flow of goods from inland to coast. The protagonist, whose daily job is to keep those trains on schedule, observes these external developments in tandem with his inner feelings of contradiction.

The making of subjectivities

The interaction of the subjective and the material world in *Beautiful Ones* is darkly energized by the realizing of these contradictions. Armah communicates this through flowing narrations of the man’s interiority, which begin to critically articulate the material self he had earlier begun to establish through multi-temporality. Far from suggesting the stasis of despair, the protagonist’s internally torn state signals a self-orientation not directed towards wealth and status, for he can simultaneously both hold dissatisfaction with his material reality and understand the way others embrace it. Here, for example, the protagonist asks whether his restlessness is not a sign that he refuses to accept that the promises of anti-colonialism should lead to this disappointing post-independence reality:

The promise was so beautiful. It was there. We were not deceived about that. How could such a thing turn so completely into this other thing? [...] What can a person do with things that continue unsatisfied inside? Is their stifled cry not also life? (Armah 1969, 100)

In an everyday existence that requires him to accept as natural the “nauseating” motion of a promised liberation towards its opposite, the man instead holds that what “continue[s] unsatisfied inside” is life itself: the stifled but enduring belief in the possibility of change. In a society where wealth and status are the sole criteria of success, the man is not exempt from the attraction of such things, nor is he passing detached judgement from morally higher ground. Having “loved ones” of

his own, the man knows that his sense of self cannot be detached from awareness of others. Unlike the reclusive Teacher, our protagonist lives anchored within the society he sees so clearly, with a family who have fully internalized the imperatives of commodity fetishism. His dissatisfaction is profound because he cannot shake off thoughts of what can yet be. Living daily with the struggle of resisting or acquiescing to his neocolonial society's pressures gives him clear sight of both its systemic oppressions and how these penetrate his psyche at a subjective level.

There is a nuanced difference here between such a simultaneously subjective and material understanding, and the two conclusions critics have reached about Armah's approach to the self: that he either locates potential for change in the notion of the autonomous individual, or that he regards individuality as irrelevant. For Robert Fraser (1980), Armah is "concerned with the salvation of the people in toto, the reformation of the public will, rather than the redemption of the private soul or mind" (xii). Lutz similarly emphasizes that Armah seeks to foreground how the appeal of acquisition stifles individual agency and distorts interpersonal relations, "shrink[ing] the sphere of human activity to the exchanges of the marketplace and, in doing so, negat[ing] any singular or autonomous human activity struggling for articulation" (2003, 103). Whilst the pursuit of neocolonial wealth in *Beautiful Ones* does indeed illustrate these facts, that it does so through the subjective experience of the protagonist is crucial, for this choice links rather than compartmentalizes the social realm and the subjective. Codes that indicate class and behaviour in neocolonial Ghana are propagated by individuals seeking self-assurance within the structures of a neocolonial or global capitalism as much as they are a result of colonial hierarchies and historical continuities, Armah emphasizes. One moment in the novel particularly captures how this internalization of economic imperatives shapes subjectivity. The protagonist's wife, Oyo, who is aspirational and has assimilated the values and practices of the elites, suddenly changes her behaviour on their journey to the Upper Residential Area, Minister Koomson's home:

Travelling, even a short ride in a taxi, had a very noticeable effect on Oyo. [...] She would talk, bringing up the few rich things that had happened to her all her life, and some that had not really happened, some that had not even almost happened. (Armah 1969, 165)

She compulsively performs a particular identity in terms of the agreed social code of neocolonial Ghana: "that in spirit, at least, they too belong to such areas" (165). Annoyed that her husband's familiarity with the driver is undermining a rare moment of class superiority, she responds with a performance of cosmopolitanism through sudden references to (perhaps non-existent) relatives in the west. Her identity is then consolidated – the driver began "to speak to her as if he now understood her greatness" – but the protagonist observes the whole exchange as "some form of disease" (166), a fake exchange that harmfully perpetuates the agreed codes of status in the neocolonial nation state. Armah frames these false relations as both effects and reproductions of capitalism and cronyism. Koomson and his wife Estella, along with Oyo in her desire to emulate Estella, all demonstrate this interpenetration. Once Oyo and our protagonist arrive at Koomson's, their visit turns into a performance of power and deference, negotiated through commodities like Estella's imported record player:

"What is that?" asked Oyo. At times she had the ability to make herself sound exactly like an admiring villager. A trick to please. [...] Estella, as if this Sunday music had really moved her soul, closed her eyes, breathing deeply. (176)

The self becomes a performance constituted via the commodity, through which virtue- or wealth-signalling can take place. The man cannot bring himself to participate, but nor can he confront it outright, for he must continue living in this society if he hopes to see it changed.

This and similar moments have been read by some critics as Armah's approval of individuals acting at a remove from their socio-economic environments. "Through this concentration on individual morality during the darkest of times," Niemi argues, "Armah can actually imagine a way forward; it is only through the main character's ethical actions that any light is brought into the novel" (2017, 219). Likewise, for Dunham, by "existing apart from the dominant social pursuit, [the protagonist] is able to recognise its mechanisms at work" (2012, 288). These readings place greater faith in the possibility of an autonomous subjectivity than Armah does: after all, the protagonist often reads his own "struggle to resist the allure of the gleam" in passive rather than active terms, with "impotent" a frequent self-description (Armah 1969, 54). Armah repeatedly emphasizes that the protagonist is refraining from confronting the political situation; indeed, the novel dwells on whether inaction and stasis may be the next best thing when faced with the impossible odds of the way things get done in the postcolony. The work required for political, economic and social change – for decolonization worthy of the name – is not that which can be carried by select individuals with moral fibre, even if they be the "everyman" of our protagonist. When considering the man's capacity for separateness, Armah repeatedly asks whether or not its resulting psychic and societal alienation is of any use: "Was there not something in the place and about the time that sought to make it painfully clear that there was too much of the unnatural in any man who imagined he could escape?" (55). A capacity to remain separate from society can be a self-preserving advantage when under pressure to conform – in fact, it is precisely the protagonist's enduring capacities for imagining alternatives that cause such inner turmoil within himself. Nonetheless, at several moments in the novel, Armah comes close to adding that it provides little else beyond the advantage of self-preservation. Always in danger of fading into inconsequentiality at the societal scale, this micro-resistance is also always imbued with the possibility of becoming perpetuated and amplified via everyday inter-subjective relations. In this irresolution we find a dialectics, if we consider Fanon's conception of "the lasting tension of their freedom, [through which] men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world" (1967, 231). Armah, with his often-divided protagonist, is not turning away from the values of anti-colonialism, liberation and revolution to despair. *Beautiful Ones* narrates a process that Fanon, too, saw as necessary: the way that anti-colonial struggle (whether against Europeans before constitutional independence, or against complicit native elites after independence) also entails the self-negation of the (neo)colonial status of the subject. This negation is also "a founding activity, and an extremely radical terrain" for the constitution of a new political subject (Samaddar 2009, 228).

The tension of freedom

What sets the protagonist's moral conscience apart is therefore not so much an outright, defiant refusal of the kind Dunham and Niemi read as Armah's championing of the importance of individual morality, but the fact that he acts responsively to the context of the everyday in which he remains immersed. Or, in the words of Fanon's closing *cri de coeur* in *Black Skin White Masks*, the inner turmoil provoked by his material circumstances have made the protagonist into "a man who always questions" (1967, 181). When the coup exchanges one corrupted regime for another, and the men in his office go to join the crowd outside "in the same manner they had gone out in fear to hear the farts of Party men", the protagonist instead says: "I know nothing about the men. What will I be demonstrating for?" (186). His thinking response, in the novel's dysfunctional society where "sleepwalking" is the expectation and norm, cannot be insignificant. It does not straightforwardly translate into the individual's separating himself from society, nor into the expression of a collective, burgeoning national consciousness – his question is too inconsequential to be the former and too unrepresentative to be the latter. Nonetheless, the protagonist refuses what Armah suggests may be the greatest of neocolonialism's victories: an unthinking, uncritical day-to-day existence that prevents consciousness and therefore the possibility of new political subjects. For even though the

protagonist seems resigned to the transfer of power, his questioning the point of a staged demonstration momentarily makes visible the structures of the neocolonial regime:

“I know nothing about the men. Who will I be demonstrating for?”

“Look, contrey, if you don’t want trouble, get out.”

“If two trains collide while I’m demonstrating, will you take the responsibility?”

“Oh,” said the organiser, “if it is the job, fine. But we won’t tolerate any Nkrumahists now.”

(Armah 1969, 186)

In the way the man performs fealty to his job, and in the way the union man performs acceptance of our protagonist’s obviously political abstention from demonstrating as, instead, a seriousness attitude towards the job, the native bourgeoisie’s power, as mere sign/symbol, is rendered visible. To obey here is not so much to follow a direct order (a simple power relationship), but to appear to fulfil the contradictory expectations and demands of a corrupt power structure (thereby often ending up with ineffectual action, inaction, or resistant action not clearly punishable, for not wholly oppositional). This retention of the right to disengagement and restlessness in an almost impossible situation is Armah’s investment in the subjective realm of interiority as informed by lived experience. It is that which evades surrender to power structures by the very mechanisms it has developed to survive it – and sometimes survive with it, in apparent conviviality. In a moment like the above, the protagonist seems to be refusing to partake of what Mbembe calls “the common daily rituals that ratify the commandment’s own institutionalisation,” even displaying “the subject [in the postcolony]’s deployment of a talent for play” in order to evade what the state requires of him (1992, 5). *Beautiful Ones*, however, does not long sustain that merely evading performing loyalty to the neocolonial state is de facto an act of resistance.³ No immediate freedom or power accompanies the protagonist’s interior struggle: indeed, being Fanon’s “man who questions” means “things continue unsatisfied inside,” making it perhaps the hardest way to choose to survive neocolonial power structures. It is difficult to differentiate the effects on the protagonist of this moment of covert refusal from any other occasion where he feels daily life grating away at his capacity and motivation to act; however, in this scene, we do see the novel’s conception of selfhood as that which simultaneously refuses to sever itself from the material reality that shapes it, and refuses to reconcile itself to it. The possibility of such a subjectivity rests in the fact that the protagonist’s interiority is informed by his experiential understanding of the same material reality as those within the society he views so critically. It comes about only by experiencing the same temptations and hardships, not hovering at a partial remove.

This complex sense of how subjectivities can, if they must, transform under and despite the pressures of neocolonial circumstances is finally borne out by Oyo and the man’s unspoken reconciliation at the end of the novel. In many ways more climactic than the confused and inconsequential news of the coup against Nkrumah, the couple’s passive-aggressive battle of mutual misrecognition, where each has persisted throughout in what they believed to be the only way of surviving this reality, comes to an end when they both allow their own selves to be reconstituted in recognition by the other. Upon seeing Koomson’s fall from power, Oyo understands her husband’s reasons for refusing to participate in Ghana’s post-independence kleptocracy. “Perhaps for the first time in their married life,” the man felt, “he could believe that [Oyo] was glad to have him the way he was. He returned the increasing pressure of her hand” (Armah 1969, 194); seeing Koomson’s state, Oyo feels “tremendously disturbed” within, followed by “a deep kind of love and respect” (194). It is indeed a disturbing experience, for she must rearrange who does and does not deserve her respect upon confronting the exploitative and fickle power structure she has (literally and figuratively) invested in. Yet it is also liberating, for this may translate into a potentially more harmonious future: a small change in the material and social world they move in.

Conclusion

Beautiful Ones has been classed as part of a “literature of disillusionment” in some respects (Lazarus 1990, 18), and, considering its frequently fatalistic tone, its bitter condemnation of the native elite, and uncertain conclusion, the observation is not unfounded. But when considered via the two particular devices discussed above – Armah’s use of multiple temporality, and his narrating the protagonist’s interiority – the novel is also deserving of Abiola Irele’s (2001) description of it as showing “the new realism” of its time and place (495). The loss of the illusion that independence would bring restructuring provokes a historical search for the causes and extent of the present decay; what emerges is that subjectivities themselves are at stake, and their constitution under neocolonial conditions signal bleak repercussions for society. But this mutual interdependence is at once both precursor and parallel to the confrontation with contemporary reality that fundamentally drives *Beautiful Ones*. It illustrates how material circumstances, and their effects at a subjective level, meet at the point where the protagonist remains dissatisfied with, and internally riven by, his reality. In asserting that “the future goodness may come eventually,” but also asking “where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it?” (Armah 1969, 188), *Beautiful Ones* leaves us with an understanding that the reconstituting of subjectivity, and the re-forming of intersubjective relations, is an indispensable task in national decolonization. Although it is their material conditions that people must reconcile themselves to – either passively witnessing or participating in injustice – this is likewise only surmountable if one has experience of it: an epistemological privilege shaped as much by daily “thoughts of the easy slide” as by their rejection. At the novel’s end, we know where the radically new cannot come from (the corrupt elite); however, we do feel that change will eventually come; what we do not have is an indication as to what, within the cyclicity at present, could possibly be “preparing the way for it.” What is indicated, through Armah’s seeking to locate postcolonial subjectivity, is that these very circumstances equip the self to politicize subjective experience. Through such a confrontation with reality, the man sustains his dissatisfaction with the so-called freedom at hand, and wrestles daily with conditions that nudge him towards participating in the neocolonial economy. There is no societal congratulation for his wrestling, but it sees Armah’s protagonist through the belly of the beast, both literally (he and Koomson escape the authorities through a latrine hole) and figuratively (the protagonist neither hands Koomson over to claim a reward, nor does he accept anything in return for saving him). His refusal to choose is the refusal to participate; far from resigned, bitter or apathetic, he is a conscious subject, which intolerable conditions turn, in the end, into a resistant one.

Beautiful Ones does not try to offer a solution to the problem neocolonial state; it does the fundamental work preceding any such political transformation, proposing that only those who daily live the social and psychic reality of neocolonial material conditions see the latter’s undeniable contradictions. Because material conditions also beget consciousness of their own workings within the very subjectivities they constitute, the internalization of those conditions does not necessarily result in selves that are a seamless reflection of the economic. This is what makes the conflicts within Armah’s protagonist not only necessary, but resistant in nature; as Fanon argues, “this risk [of conflict] means that I go beyond life toward a supreme good that is the transformation of the subjective certainty of my own worth, into a universally valid objective truth” (1967, 83). In other words, it is living within society, and therefore risking social censure and psychic malaise by choosing to daily experience its conditions, that enables the protagonist’s subjective certainty of the injustice of those conditions to be understood as a valid objective truth: that which is systemic is made visible through the vantage point of subjective experience. *Beautiful Ones* asserts, without illusions but with a deep attachment to the stakes, that only material subjectivities – daily grappling with the affective powers of neocolonial capitalism – can give rise to resistant subjects.

Notes

1. Although Vilashini Cooppan (2009) proposes a link on the basis of form between this Fanonian subjectivity, African literature and the theme of multiple temporalities (she calls it the “time of genre”), my reading disagrees on one important point as well as the generally broad-brush terms in which it is stated. Cooppan argues that “African novels of the neocolonial era inherit a form, as much as a content, from Fanon” (2), and that form is characterized by a temporal flux pointing backward (to African traditions), outward (to European narrative forms) and forward (to a life beyond neocolonialism). It is doubtful whether Fanon attributes equal importance to “pointing backward” with looking outward and forward for those subjects (and of course, by relation, those nations) that are emerging from colonialism. His contemporaries Amílcar Cabral and Léopold Senghor were, by comparison, explicit in both their political writing and actions about the importance of recuperating some traditions. Frantz Fanon remained sceptical of the epistemological stability of the notion of “traditional” knowledge, and of its uses for a revolutionary anti-colonialism.

2. A term originally taken from the geographer Kevin Lynch’s (1960) *The Image of the City*, “cognitive mapping” effectively describes an intersection of the personal and the social, which enables people to function in the urban spaces through which they move. For Jameson (1995), it is a way of understanding how the individual’s representation of his or her social world can escape the traditional critique of representations because the mapping is intimately related to practice – to the individual’s successful negotiation of space. The knowledge gained through experiencing the everyday is not subject to the critique that representation is always only a mediated version of reality, because it is representation made and remade in and through practice – through experiencing social reality, and allowing social reality to shape one’s subjectivity.

3. Here, I use performativity in Achille Mbembe’s sense; in seeking to define the “postcolonized subject,” Mbembe observes that, in the postcolony, it may well be the ability to engage in “apparently contradictory practices [that] ratify, de facto, the status of fetish that state power so forcefully claims by right. And by that same token [it] maintain[s], even while drawing upon officialese (signs, symbols), the possibility of altering the place and time of this ratification” (2001, 129).

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