Armah is one of the most experimental of the West African novelists. Though he has written short stories, poetry, and some astringent political criticism, he is best known as an exceptionally innovative novelist. Starting with realistic social fiction, he has led the novel into pastures new and thus exploited the potentialities of the African novel.

The tendency of the African novelists who write either in English or in French is generally to use formal structures deriving from non-African origins. Well known exceptions to this are Achebe, who uses folk tale in his novels, and Amos Tutuola whose prose sagas have a remarkable African quality about them. The tendency of many writers in the field has been that the content of their narrative has not been matched by an equivalent daring in its formal structure. That is, the novelist has not sufficiently exploited the roots of the African narrative in the vernacular oral traditions and devised an appropriate authorial voice with which to address his reader. It is from this point of view that the work of the contemporary novelist from West Africa, Ayi Kwei Armah, makes a welcome change. Armah examines the
question of the place of the writer in the current African setting. He further probes the question of the function and duty of the creative artist and the social and literary critic.

Armah was born at Takoradi in 1939, a harbour city in Western Ghana. After his early education at Achimota (near Accra, the capital of Ghana), Armah took his first degree in Political Sociology at Harvard and his Master's degree in Fine Arts at Columbia. He spent several years in America as a student and a teacher. His return to Ghana in 1964 was marked by a deep sense of loss and disillusionment with the Ghanaian situation in the aftermath of the Independence of the country.

Armah is one of the most controversial novelists that Anglophone Africa has produced to-date. The controversy that surrounded him with the publication of his first novel The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968) was compounded when he followed it with more novels Fragments (1970), Why Are We So Blest? (1972) and The Healers (1978). Armah's typical concerns become apparent as he unfolds the total consciousness of a whole people. In all his writings Armah's focus is on two predominant African themes, namely, political corruption, especially in Ghana, during the regime of Kwame Nkrumah (1960-66), and the glory of the traditional way of African life. His anger is directed both against the aliens who exploit
the land of the people of Africa and the new rulers who are corrupt and allow evil to corrode the society.

Armah's international fame was established with the publications of The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born in 1968. With this he has been seen as a fearless writer at odds with the literary establishment. Moved by the novel's power Eustace Palmer remarks, "Even if Ayi Kwei Armah had not written a second novel he would still have to be mentioned in any discussion of the African novel." On seeing this book, Chinua Achebe said that it was a "sick book" and subsequently he described Armah as an "alienated native... writing like some white District Officer." The destructive, negative images of Africa projected in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born made Chinua Achebe think Armah was overwhelmed by existential despair, and therefore the question was towards what kind of social transformation could Armah be committed? The hypocrisy of nationalist leaders like Nkrumah and the imitation of their colonial masters prompted Armah to express his anger by using nauseating symbols of filth, rot, and stench in the first novel The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. The "Black skin, White masks" syndrome infected every walk of life and was appalling to the young intellectuals. This led to an inner conflict within the artist, and Armah's second novel, Fragments, illustrates this situation.
Armah has answered some of the questions raised about his art by writing two novels, Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers, in which not the negative but the positive is stressed. In Two Thousand Seasons, Armah retreats into the dim distant history of Africa stretching back a full millennium. The Healers recreates the well documented events of just a century ago that led to the downfall of the Asante Empire. In both these novels, Armah appears to be retreating into history and immersing himself in bygone times and thus swimming against the tide. This is because the other African writers have begun insisting on the creative artist coming to grips with the tangles of contemporary African realities. But as Bernth Lindfors has rightly observed, Armah possessed "a Janus-like view" which looked "forward at the same time as it fixed its gaze on the past. In fact, these novels are really more concerned with tomorrow than with yesterday or today. They are visionary myths rather than historical chronicles."  

Since his removal to Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, and later to Lesotho, Armah has become increasingly concerned with the democratic basis of his art. His effort has been to reach out to a larger reading public than the literate and university intelligentsia. There is further a growing awareness in him that as an artist he should aim at a recapturing of the spirit of the oral artist which has a wider ancestral appeal. This shows that the directness and the wider appeal
of the later novels reflect a growing awareness in Armah of the social context within which the artist in Africa operates.

It is tempting to read current Tanzanian political ideology into the fictions of Armah. The emphasis on self-reliance and unity, brotherhood and sharing prompt such a kind of reading. The philosophical assumptions behind this writing are that there should be equitable distribution of wealth in the society and that the welfare of the community takes precedence over individual welfare. From this follows the idea that the institution of kingship or chieftaincy is an arbitrary form of hierarchical social order which is exploitative and unnatural. Critics of the early work of Armah tended to upbraid him for a preoccupation with the idea of the isolated artist figure placed in an unsympathetic environment. But in more recent writing, Armah has shown a change of perspective whereby the artist figure is merged with a wider professional group or guild. This reveals, as Robert Fraser has pointed out, how Armah has redeemed himself of "a certain dependence on notions and obsessions arising ultimately from the Utopian Romantic Tradition." 5

Armah is a literary artist who makes use of racial memory, communal consciousness, and the plural voice. A development of the collective voice in the later works of Armah reveals a revolutionary trend not only in his art in particular but in the field of the African
novel in general. But it is not as though this is a trend observable only in the later fiction and that in the development of the narrative art of Armah there is a disjunction between the earlier ones and the later ones. The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born introduces a long sequence of reminiscence in Chapter Six which can be described aptly as an exploration on the part of the artist of the device of communal memory. Taking into account the resonances carried by these early novels, one cannot easily come to the conclusion to which Charles Nnolin has come: that the creative vision of Armah reveals an unredeemed philosophic pessimism undisguised in the work.6

On the other hand, Armah's conception of the role of the critic and his function reveals the critic to be a protective device to shield the society from unpalatable truths. His views on the critic are significant in the light of the cultural dislocation he portrays:

The key to the skillful interpreter's role lies in his relationship with his audience. The skillful interpreter functions in close tune with the allergies, aspirations, ideals, manias, philias, phobias and prejudices – above all the prejudices – of his audience. The skillful interpreter knows how to respect and protect his audience's prejudices. Operating almost by instinct, he censors information before he transmits it.

If any of this information threatens to clash too pointedly with the audience's sensibilities, he
prudently blunts its point and turns it harmlessly aside, if he cannot bury it altogether. And if any particular item reinforces his audience's prejudices, he sharpens its point. If there is a shortage of flattering information, the really skillful interpreter, in short, does not allow information to ruffle his audience's sensibilities. He uses information to reinforce his audience's prejudices.7

The foregoing observations of Armah on the function of the critic have a particular relevance to a discussion of his own work. Both in the West and in Africa, critics have discovered simultaneous symptoms of acceptance and rejection. The critical resistance to Armah's work thus is also symptomatic of the cultural dislocation which it portrays. This is especially so because the impulses governing Armah's writing have very few links with England. In novels such as The Beautyful Ones Are not Yet Born, Fragments, and Why Are We So Blest?, despite the tone of individual anguish, Armah's primary concern is with the cultivation of the collective, rather than individual sensibility. His theme is the process through which a nation may reach a state of health after a long period of spiritual infection. The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born has remained the most vivid and daring attack on those squalid interests that have led to the betrayal of the dreams of independence of the underprivileged Africans. The impact of the novel is on account of the consistency with
which Armah uses the quest motif to present Africa's post-independence maladies through the experiences of a particular African country. The action of the novel is woven round the protagonist, the man, a vehicle through whom the disorder, filth, and irresponsibility in Ghana are examined. The narrator exposes the corrupt practices taking place between drivers and conductors of public transport and their police collaborators on the roads, the neglected and crumbling offices, such as the administration block the filthy streets and toilets in Ghana. There is a naked contrast between the life style of the elite and the stark poverty of the underprivileged.

Armah seems unusually excited by images of decay and corruption. Thus the preponderant images in his fiction are those of ooze, clamminess, slime, lubricity, mucus, with their accompanying offensive smells. His language which is figurative, full of irony, bathos, and reductive imagery reveals a rhetoric which stresses the imagery of decay, defeat, disappointment, shrinking and dwindling. In his depiction of an atmosphere of decadence Armah reveals a kinship with Walter Pater, Paul Verlaine, and Joseph Conrad, fin de siecle symbolists, whose work shows a fascination with decay and corruption. But with all its pessimistic strain and with all Armah's "squandering" of his enormous talent and energy in pursuit of the human condition, a novel like The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born is one which fuses the fable and the narrative technique. The
technique of the novel shows an "openness" of ending. Our experience of the corruption and the futility and despair in the body politic of Ghana keeps expanding even after the action of the novel is rounded up. The smell of shit which clings to the man even after the cleansing action of the sea symbolically mirrors this experience. The concluding passage of the novel shows this openness of ending by projecting the idea that it is not a better life the man is going back go, and it is not a greater Ghana which the military coup has made possible:

Over the school latrine at the bottom of the hill a bird with a song that was strangely happy dived low and settled on the roof. The man wondered what kind of bird it could be, and what its name was. But then suddenly all his mind was consumed with thoughts of everything he was going back to—Oyo, the eyes of the children after six O' clock, the office and everyday, and above all the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him. In fact, the title of the novel itself offers a statement that involves looking forward to the future for an answer and the raising of a pessimistic question whether the beautiful ones would ever be born.

In his work, Armah is concerned with the reformation of the public will rather than individual redemption. Take for example the religious debate in Fragments. Baako and Juana discuss the relative merits of the Protestant and Catholic modes of salvation. Baako here
offers a perspective on the whole novel. He sees the idea of man's spiritual destiny in terms of the salvation of the whole community. And in so doing, he draws some meaning out of the idea of the wastage of the foreign state. Baako's siding with the Catholic doctrine should not be mistaken for Armah's endorsement of the Catholic doctrine. In *Fragments*, Juana is a character who throws light on major characters and events. An expatriate doctor in Ghana who was struck by the sign OBRA YEKO, Juana says she is in a land where she finds herself trying to forget that the sum of her life was only "that she was here in another defeated and defeating place, to forget all the reminders of futility." 

There is a touch of despair and nihilism when the narrator says about Juana's life in Ghana where she gathers shreds of her shattered life in the Caribbean:

She searched in herself for something that might make sense, but there was nothing she could herself believe in, nothing that wouldn't just be the high flight of the individual alone, escaping the touch of life around him. That way she knew there was only annihilation. Yet here she knew terrible dangers had been lying in wait the other way – other kinds of annihilation. How could she find the thing to break down his despair (Baako's) when she had never conquered hers? There would be no meaning in offering him a chance to swing from
present hopelessness to a different flavor of despair. (271)

The *Fragments* tells a pathetic story replete with triumphs that end in defeat and ideals that are frustrated by the real and actual. Life's frustrations are presented here through a series of juxtapositions and contrasts. A less technically daring, though no less subtle and effective, device is the comparative method which we find in *Fragments*. Here the narrative voice is shared between one who speaks with the wisdom of past tradition, usually an older member of the community, and a voice or voices closely acquainted with contemporary scholarly arguments about history, culture, and physical environment. In the novel, the formal voice is that of Naana and the latter voices those of Baako and Ocron. The significance of the title of the novel is revealed in the thinking of Naana who says that what remained of her days would be filled with broken things. This sense of fragmentation is conveyed in terms of a fragmented society and in terms of a narrative voice which carries an incantatory tone. Naana's spiritual intuitions seem to offer a perfect fusion of traditional Akan and Christian thought. Examined in the context of the entire corpus of Armah's writing, they suggest a new direction of sensibility in Armah's creative concerns. Whereas in *The Beautyful Ones* the focus is sociological and historical, in *Fragments* the concerns centre round religious and existential dilemmas. The novel contains a good
measure of the inner drama of the anguish of the idealistic young man who wants to be a producer in a society that has no room for such ideals. As with the man in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, the action of Fragments is centred round Baako. Like the preceding novel, Fragments is really about African societies, about the need for Africans to abandon unhealthy social habits and return to traditional industry, simplicity, and integrity in order to carry their society forward. Thus Armah directs a fair measure of his satiric venom at the elite who should lead this programme but who are as yet far from attaining the expected standard. Fragments further introduces a debate on the true role of the artist. Baako who interprets and practises the traditional role of the artist is rejected by the very community his attempt is designed to serve. Starved of communication, he is forced to accept the western notion of the artist as a secluded visionary. His notebooks reveal a search for the source of his country's malady. He chooses to see it in terms of the Malanesian Cargo Cult. It is only Juana who is able to interpret Baako. The novel projects Baako, the struggling individual, and the society with which he tries to relate himself. Like Kofi Awoonor's novels of Ghanaian life This Earth My Brother, Fragments is an astute portrait of the contradictions involved in a period of transition. The state of disorientation which Armah is examining in the work is not something
of a purely Ghanaian vision. It can be seen as a salient characteristic of modern civilization itself.

Armah's third novel *Why Are We So Blest?* differs from his other books in that although its two principal characters are Black Africans, very little of the story is set in sub-Saharan Africa. The action is polarised between two distant locations, the East Coast of America and the Muslim Maghreb. This geographical breadth involves Armah in a considerable feat of balance. Although the plot is brought to a climax in the Saharan waste, as Robert Fraser observes, "the ethical judgements brought to bear on it derive from America in the years of racial confrontation."\(^{10}\) In this novel with its stark insights and multiple perspectives, Dofu's diary references to the urgency of conflict seem to be indicative of a prolonged inner struggle and a journey towards mental emancipation rather than a call to arms.

*Why Are We So Blest?* marks a new phase in Armah's writing in which he breaks away from the liberal and gradualistic approach to the issue of decolonization. Advancing the battle initiated in the earlier work against the erosion of African values by the West, *Why Are We So Blest?* demonstrates the manner in which western education as an agent of neo-colonialism turns Africans into citizens who are alienated from their roots but are not given the status of white men due to the phenomenon of racism. These Africans who
revolt against Western values see themselves as liberators of their people from colonialism and are often looked up to by their people as saviours. However, the violence of westerners has deprived them of dignity and self-assertion so that they cannot easily recover their roots. Western violence is heightened by sexual exploitation, in which western women exploit myths of the sexual superiority of Africans. These myths are new versions of the older myths of Africans as savages. As a result, the dream of inter-racial harmony recedes and Africans continue to be victims of white racist stereotyping. In Fanonian terms, Armah advocates decolonization by violent means, if necessary, but disqualifies western-educated Africans from leading the struggle since they lack the ability and the orientation for the purpose.

Armah answers some of the questions raised about his art by writing two novels which attempt to put the accent on the positive. These two novels are Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers. In these two novels, Armah retreats into history. In Two Thousand Seasons, he traces the dim-distant past of Africa. The Healers recreates the events that lead to the downfall of the Asante Empire. Two Thousand Seasons deals with a more non-specific location bounded on one side by a great desert and on the other by the great sea. The people living in this peaceful heaven are subjected to territorial incursions. Aggression on their territory is made possible by an undue advantage taken of their generosity and trustfulness.
Internecine political conflicts make their vulnerability even more possible. That is, the book presents Africa as a victim of forces which it can resist but cannot contain. The chaos of the present Africa is a legacy of the past, and is attributable to the degradations of the past and the deprivations and destitutions deriving therefrom.

Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* are concerned with the issues of social change. They also present a reconstruction of African history, either of recent origin confined to a single event or of remote past, with a view to directing the focus on social justice. *A Grain of Wheat* depicts the Kenyan nationalist struggle for independence. Ngugi portrays the anti-colonial struggle as having been dominated by a nationalist sentiment and subverted by the agents of colonisers. Sembene Ousmane's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, which is a recreation of the Niger-Dakar railway strike in 1947-48, has a Marxist dimension. The novel assumes epic proportions in its treatment of the heroic struggle carried out collectively for the restoration of a sense of justice. In the same way, *Two Thousand Seasons* offers a picture of wholeness while *The Healers* duly brings in inspiration. These novelists attempt to offer a way of life in positive terms. They attempt to indicate what features of the African traditional system are worth preservation. One can also discern the purpose of examining the past and reconstructing different historical phases through the medium of
fiction. In the words of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*, it involves collective functioning: “together plan the future we want.”

Armah envisages in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* a view of history which inevitably recognizes a sense of the past along side a continued concern for the present. There is no escape into the past on the part of Armah for the sake of creating a romantic illusory world. The past is a source of providing a fertilizing, sickness-redeeming spring of the present. Bernth Lindfors succinctly summarises this in the following words:

> Only by properly understanding that past and present will Africans collectively be able to tackle the problems of the future: how to get the victim back on its feet, how to raise the materially oppressed and downtrodden, how to heal the spiritually sick. Instead of merely cursing various symptoms of the colonial disease, as he had done in his first three books, Armah now wants to work towards effecting a cure.

*The Healers*, and *Two Thousand Seasons* demonstrate the influence of Nyerere’s Ujamaa or socialism, especially in the matter of the open attack on feudalism and all forms of inequality in society. Traditional “reciprocity,” “wholeness”, hospitality, and creativity have been eroded by colonialism. These are treated vividly in these two novels. These novels were published by the East African Publishing
House, "an African outfit based in Nairobi," staffed mainly by Africans. This is part of Armah’s effort to “effectively break out of the colonialist strangle hold of western publishers such as the Heinemann African Writers Series, to reach his large African audience directly.”

Two Thousand Seasons, like Ouologuem’s Bound to Violence, is of particular interest in its handling of the “Arab factor” in African history. Armah’s contention in Two Thousand Seasons is that the Arab “predators” with their perverted religious outlook and their tendency for sybaritic self-gratification maimed or destroyed whatever they touched. Contact with such a pathological evil led to a susceptibility on the part of the Africans to follow the predators’ path. Armah describes these categories as the “Zombis,” “the ostentatious cripples,” and “Askari Zombis.” The Arab invasion caused a migratory process, and the archetypal refugees from religious, political oppression reached their so-called promised land only to be encountered by a new race, the European “destroyers”. Two Thousand Seasons describes how one small band of Africans who get sold to European slave traders stage a successful shipboard revolt. Thus European and Arab imperialism is sought to be countered. In the depiction of the rise of the pioneer liberation army, Armah creates a communal group united and committed to the struggle against evil. Thus from accounts of the individual’s fruitless struggle and
existential despair, Armah moves on to the projection of revolutionary hope.

Here comes the question of an evaluation of Armah's assumptions regarding the new view of man and society. His belief was that Africa was a Garden of Eden. Before its pollution by the enemy incursions, people lived in harmonious communities devoted to the principle of reciprocity. This is what Armah calls "our way, the way".

Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness. Our way knows no oppression. The way destroys oppression. Our way is hospitable to guests. The way repels destroyers. Our way produces far more than it consumes. The way produces before it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction.14

Armah's vision of history involves a destruction of the destroyers, a theme reiterated in Two Thousand Seasons with a remarkable fervency: "destruction of destruction is the only vocation of the way ... The liberator is he who from a necessary silence, from a necessary secrecy strikes the destroyer. Nothing good can be created that does not of its very nature push forward the destruction of destroyers" (203-5). The very last paragraph of Two Thousand Seasons conjures up a glowing picture of a receding but bright future: "against this what a vision of creation yet unknown, higher, much
more profound than all erstwhile creation! What a hearing of the confluence of all the waters of life flowing to overwhelm the ashen desert's blight!" (206). The concluding note, with its confidence and optimism, serves to readjust the impression of the much commented upon disillusionment in Armah's earlier writing. The Beautiful Ones may not yet be born, but the seed is sown in the soil.

The Healers, bearing the categorical sub-heading "an Historical Novel," is a book which offers not merely a reinstatement of a neglected and misunderstood phase of the colonial past, but it is a part of the total reclamation of history. The Healers marks the climax of Armah's fictional achievement to-date. Armah here returns full circle to the whole question of roots, the return to Africa's indigenous values, as a precondition for emancipation. The most political of Armah's novels, The Healers shows the way in which the thrust of his thinking has somewhat moved away from abstract moral notions of culture, even though the ultimate goal remains the restoration of the old order. The novel emphasizes the primacy of resistance to physical conquest as an antidote to imperial domination. It relies less on myth and more on history than Two Thousand Seasons. The disunity that rendered the powerful Asante nation of Ghana vulnerable to British imperialism is presented as a paradigm of how other black communities were undermined during the period of
western imperialist incursions into the continent. Armah asks all black people to unite in their struggle for emancipation.

The Healers shows an appreciation of the various factors involved in a complex historical issue. Armah is a novelist and not an academic historian. In his pursuit of the ideal of spiritual health, he has used history as a medicine and acted as a healer of his own people. The deep divide in Asante between those who value peace and those who favour aggression is depicted subtly in the novel. In this, Armah follows closely the findings of historians like Ivor Wilks. These historians have given us a picture of a society according to which the balance of forces between factions of war and factions of peace was constantly changing. Again in the recapturing of history, Armah does not rely on the more easily available European accounts but on other versions which do not project a view of the tyrannical nature of the traditional Asante. The Healers is a novel in which weaving fiction into the fabric of fact, Armah attempts to offer young Africans an opportunity to reshape their perspective on the past. The healers work towards the ultimate goal of brotherhood and peace:

Healing is work, not gambling. It is the work of inspiration. If we the healers are to do the work of helping bring our whole people together again, we need to know such work is the work of a community. It cannot be done by an individual. It should not depend on any single person, however
heroic he may be. And it can't depend on people who do not understand the healing vocation – no matter how good such people may be as individuals.\textsuperscript{16}

This conclusion leads poetically the ideal of wholeness and a sense of the community. The novel is a culmination of the fictional concerns of Armah. The oral method of narration employed in the novel introduces a narratalogical dimension which shows the unique place of this novel in the art of fiction.

The success of \textbf{The Healers}, as a novel of self-reassessment, results quite substantially from the way in which Armah talks through an omniscient narrator who plays the role of a wise epic performer drawing his inspiration from tradition in order to redirect the present. This didactic element in \textbf{The Healers} is woven round Armah's fascination with traditional life. Esuano in the novel stands for traditional black communities experiencing the tensions from communalism to colonialism, a change from a well-ordered state to chaos. Disunity is the disease afflicting black people and the antidote is unity. This is another major theme in the novel.

At the heart of Armah's novels is a constant visualisation of a conflict which is essential for arriving at a vision of history. The conflict involves the struggle between the native genius of a people trying to "assert its cultural integrity" and "the forces, usually
internalised, which would divert it into alien channels". The roots of this conflict, as Armah discovers it, lie in the deep abysses of history. And Armah examines the confrontations that lay in these deep abysses with a trenchant purpose.
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