


## The residual effects of colonialism on transformation in Africa: A post-colonial study of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*



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### ABSTRACT

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The political transition from absolutism to democratization in African societies forced many countries on the continent to redress the past colonial rulership's wrongs and destruction. After taking reigns from the colonialists, the democratic leadership in various parts of Africa set out to rebuild the continent. This initiative meant rehabilitating the African continent and liberating her from colonial identities. It is during the colonial period that severe conditions were imposed upon African natives and their aboriginal identities marginalized. Today, under autonomous incumbency, Africa is still menaced by colonial vestiges that hinder it from progressing socio-politically and economically. Thus, this qualitative paper aims to probe the colonial legacies in today's Africa and their impact on the continent's transformation from a literary perspective. This noted, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* serves as a primary source of data and a lens through which the residual effects of colonialism on transformation in the African continent are scrutinized. The paper found that the continent is still grappling with socio-political and economic maladies such as inequality, poverty, unemployment and corruption due to the colonial influence that is still predominant in post-colonial Africa among other causes.

**Contribution/Originality:** The originality of this paper lies in its contribution to the existing literature by exploring the transition from absolutism to democratization in Africa. The paper offers new insights on how colonial legacies mold the current realities in the continent. Moreover, it calls for African empowerment in regaining autonomy, addressing injustices in post-colonialism as well as giving insights to uphold socio-political and economic enhancement, as the existing literature does not fully address colonialism in a post-colonial setting.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The imperialists' dethronement from governance in the African continent resulted in the political landscape undergoing a momentous shift from autocracy to democracy. This political transition incentivized the previously marginalized African natives to decolonize the continent in an effort to acclimatize it to a democratic praxis. Imperialists are the presiders of the extension of a country's socio-political and economic power and dominance over other countries (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). Led by imperialists, the government championed autocratic tendencies, showed behavioral patterns of a dictatorship, and reserved power solely for the ruler. However, the culmination of the colonial government saw the dawn of democracy where power lies in the hands of the people. Prior to imperial emancipation, the African continent was habituated to colonial identities that could be distinguished through racial segregation, restricted rights, harsh conditions and deprivation of socio-political and

economic opportunities for non-white groups. The destruction that the colonial forces engendered in Africa during the colonial era still threatens the continent in the post-colonial age and has a great effect on its socio-political and economic development. Montle (2022) affirmed that democratic Africa has not fully uprooted colonial agents from the African land. Moreover, the continent is terrorized by the remnants of colonialism, notwithstanding the democratic system being set in motion. Panda (2023) postulated that the supreme negative impact of colonialism on Africa is the exploitation of natural deposits that benefited the colonialists and excluded the natives. These colonialists invaded the African land during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and forced Africans into submission under their tyrannical rule. One of the motives behind this invasion was the extreme interest in the continent's natural resources. Thus, according to Ocheni and Nwanko (2012), the current primary position of Africa in the global economic arena as the predominant source of raw materials and other natural deposits is as a result of lengthy years of colonial submission and exploitation. The colonialists throughout their dictatorial rulership of the African continent championed racial stereotypical outlooks that occasioned discriminatory attitudes against African natives. The distribution of socio-political and economic activities, quality education and societal veneration depended on racial motivation. This resulted in non-white groups being excluded and subjected to inferiority, poverty and extreme levels of unemployment. The African natives endured these conditions in spite of their continent being rich in natural resources. Chinweizu (1978) noted that "Europe now felt a need to export her power into Africa's interior to reorganize the farms, mines and markets for Europe's greater profit. Her adventures banded together, obtained charters from their national governments, and came to seize the African markets, from the African middlemen with whom for centuries Europe had been content to trade." It is clear that the colonialists aimed to expand the European empire without considering the dire impacts that this imperial action could have on the colonies. Hence, the beginning of socio-economic ills, such as inequality, in the African continent can be traced from the onset of the colonization of the continent. It is the colonialists that engineered inequality among the racially diversified individuals in Africa during their rule, and despite the dispensation of independence, colonially-rooted problems still affect the continent, specifically its socio-political and economic transformation. Fanon (1961) asserted that "the national middle class that takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an under-developed middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case, it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace." Despite the African elites of democracy taking political reigns from colonial forces, the socio-economic transformation of the continent is still menaced by colonial legacies to the extent that the previously marginalized groups during the colonial era are still handicapped even today in the post-colonial area. There are many studies that center on post-colonial Africa's status quo and its efforts to reconstruct itself, but little unmasks and addresses colonialism in a post-colonial setting.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

Post-colonial issues, which are problematic linkages of the colonial past that emerge in the period subsequent to the political transition from the autocratic colonial system to the democratic administration are explored in this study. As a result, post-colonial theory, which underpins studies that address the colonial past's influence on the present age becomes a relevant theoretical lens to support this study. This theoretical lens is pertinent to research that focuses on issues that are entrenched in colonialism and persist in post-colonial dispensation. Ashcroft (2017) noted that post-colonial theory addresses the consequences of colonization on societies' cultures and responses. Classic scholars of post-colonial theory, such as Lye and Waldron (1998), describe it as a theory that "deals with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries, or literature written in colonizing countries, which deals with colonization or colonized peoples," whereas Young (2003) appreciates it as "a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries." This noted, colonialism is the crux of this theoretical framework. According to Ugwuanyi (2014), "the ancestry of the concept of post-colonialism

can be traced to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in French in 1961 and voicing what might be called 'cultural resistance' to France's African Empire." Fanon argued that the first step for colonized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. The colonial administration brought problems that distressed the natives in their colonies. These colonies ultimately attained political emancipation and became sovereign entities. However, this did not put an end to the destructive missiles that the colonialists had released against the colonized masses during the imperial era. For instance, Africa as one of the previously colonized continents is still afflicted by the colonial past even though the continent is under a democratic jurisdiction today. The continent is handicapped by colonially embedded maladies, such as corruption, identity crisis, racial tension and debasement of standards. A compelling example of colonialism's effect on the transformation of the African continent could be drawn from the destruction of colonial statues in South Africa. The year 2015 marked a demolition spree of statues believed to uphold the colonial drive. The statues of colonial agents such as Paul Kruger, Cecil John Rhodes and Hendrik Verwoerd were vandalized. South African citizens such as Mabongwana (2015) on African News Agency noted that "the fact that these statues, which are symbols of white supremacy, are still found in this city is a crime against our people. We are going to remove everything that represents apartheid and white supremacy from this city." The presence of these statues, which some believe commemorate colonialism, is said to perpetuate white supremacy (Montle, 2020). Equally as important, Resane (2018) asserted that Hendrik Verwoerd and Cecil John Rhodes' statues, among others, have been vandalized by virtue of their depiction of persistent colonial dominance and influence. It is the colonialists that westernized the African continent by championing Eurocentric identities at the expense of African ones. According to Dobie (2009), one of the fundamental assumptions of post-colonial theory is that the "colonial subjects practice mimicry – imitation of dress, language, behavior, even gestures – instead of resistance." Thus, in the present day, identity crisis has become one of the crucial themes that has garnered plenty of attention from different dimensions. A variety of mechanisms, such as the annual celebration of Heritage Day on September 24 in South Africa, the official recognition of traditional customs such as initiation schooling, and the promotion of indigenous languages, were set in motion to re-essentialize African identities that the colonialists virtually abraded.

Rafapa (2016) noted that "the distinctive cultural consciousness and lifestyle of a people constitute such a people's identity." Therefore, there is a need to add Afrocentricity as a theoretical paradigm to qualify and narrow the study's critical discussion of colonialism's effects on transformation to Africa. Karenga (1988) defined Afrocentricity "as essentially a quality of perspective or approach rooted in the cultural image and human interest of the African people." This philosophical approach has emerged to assert the aboriginal African identities in an effort to antagonize Western foundations within the African setting. Chawane (2016) noted that Afrocentrists combat the traditional Eurocentric outlooks. For instance, in the quest to decolonize and re-Africanize the continent, South African society saw the rise of the #FeesMustFall movement in October 2015. The #FeesMustFall movement is an "intersectional movement within the black community that aims to bring about a decolonized education.

This means that the Fees Must Fall movement is a part of the larger effort to eradicate the Western imperialist, colonial, capitalist patriarchal culture" (BusinessTech, 2016). This movement is a consequential effect of colonial influence on present-day Africa. It is the colonialists that engineered inequality among the diverse racial groups in Africa and world at large, made it a privilege to access education, and subjected African natives to a poor standard of colonial education. The movement also demanded a provision for funding free Afrocentric education up to undergraduate degree level for all excluded black people. It is an education that is rooted in putting black people first, both in learning content and how it is transferred (BusinessTech, 2016).

### 2.1. Research Method and Design

This study, which is text-based, relies on qualitative data to examine the residual effects of colonialism on transformation in the African continent. By virtue of the study's literariness in terms of the research standpoint, it

adopts a qualitative research method, which centers on the exploration of idiosyncratic experiences, views and attitudes, and primarily aims to produce comprehensive accounts of the phenomenon being scrutinized and discover novel insights (McLeod, 2023). The study further adopts the explanatory design, which George and Merkus (2021) describe as “cause and effect” model, and can aid in adding one’s perception of a given subject to determine how and why a certain phenomenon is developing and predict future developments.

## 2.2. Sampling

The study draws its primary data from a literary perspective, specifically post-colonial literature. Dobie (2009) stated that “some readers assume that postcolonial literature refers to texts produced after the colonized countries became independent, but others take it to mean the texts produced from the time of colonization to the present.” Based on this, purposive sampling was used for this study, which affords the researcher the ability to select an appropriate literary text to utilize as a case in point. Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* was purposively selected out of Armah’s literary texts, including *Fragments*, *Why Are We So Blest?*, *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers*, *Osiris Rising*, *KMT: The House of Life*, and *The Revolutionaries*, due to its outstanding reflection of the effects of the dregs of colonialism on transformation in Africa in the post-colonial period.

## 2.3. Data Analysis Method

The data collected in the study is presented, analyzed and discussed through two relevant themes that encompass the dregs of colonialism in the post-colonial period of Africa as well as the impacts on the continent’s socio-political and economic transformation. A thematic content analysis method is used as it aids and qualifies the researcher to generate thematic ideas to analyze the findings. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic content analysis is a research technique that is utilized to identify, analyze and report themes within data. Moreover, eponymously, the themes derived from the data actively construct the patterns of meaning to answer a research question. In short, themes are ‘a patterned response or meaning’ derived from coded data that represents overarching ideas embedded within a larger data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This noted, it is through this analytic method that a researcher can present the findings using themes that are in line with the objective of the study.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a post-colonial literary text that delineates the hegemonic rapport between the era of independence and the colonial past. It points out the degree of influence that the colonial past still exerts on post-colonial Africa. This is reflected through a fictional Ghana among other African states. The novel presents a series of socio-political and economic issues that are fostered by the legacies of colonialism.

### 3.1. Dregs of Colonialism in the Post-Colonial Area

The novel presents corruption among other colonial legacies such as racism, colorism, identity crisis and many more as an incidental remnant of colonialism that is posing a severe menace on the socio-political and economic transformation of the African continent. This corruption is fictionalized through the Ghanaian leadership of independence that took over from the colonial government. The African leadership of independence was sworn to serve their people reliably and ethically, unlike the morally decayed government of the colonialists who led the country with selfish ambition and greed to expand their imperial empire at the expense of the masses under their leadership. However, the novel points out corrupt elements within the African leadership of independence as colonial perpetuation. Nyamekye (2021) noted that Ghana attained independence in 1957. However, as of 1968, the year in which the author wrote the book under study, the politicians who took over were depicted as corrupt, just like the colonial masters. These leaders have adopted the colonial attitude of using political power for selfish gain at

the expense of others. This noted, these leaders appear to be under colonial influence as they perpetuate some of its agendas such as self-interest and the socio-economic exclusion of the people being led. Gakwandi (1977) noted that “we are presented in a world in which the sewage pipes of history have been exploded and everything is polluted.” The novel exposes the corruption and its severe impacts within the then Ghanaian government. It presents Joseph Koomson, a minister in the government, as one of the most corrupt government officials who are mainly concerned with enriching themselves at the expense of others:

“He has seen corruption, public theft in Ghana. Life is so corrupt that the good ones are imprisoned while the corrupt ones who are cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud are surviving and are cherished too. Zacharias Lagos sells great length of healthy wood. He has written off from the sawmill. Abednego Yamoah, in his corrupt practices sells government petrol for himself” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 95).

Koomson is obsessed with luxuries and uses his political position to facilitate bribes, commit fraud and embezzle government funds in an effort to fund his expensive lifestyle. His words “Twelve thousand pounds yes. But the money is not the difficult thing after all, the bank is ours and we can do anything,” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 136) point out his degree of moral decay. Moreover, Amina (2015) noted that “Koomson is the depiction of the rot of the day’s government, so Armah is showing that post-colonial leaders have failed in developing their country.” The corrupt tendencies of government officials such as Koomson engendered hopelessness in the people of Ghana to the extent that they came to believe that one cannot achieve anything without paying a bribe: “There would always be only one way for the young to reach the glean...eating the fruits of fraud” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 95). For instance, when the messenger won the lottery, he concluded that he would not get all of his money due to the institutionalized corruption in their society. Hence, he stated, “I hope some official at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as a bribe and allow me to have the rest” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 19). The nameless character known as the “man” further points out the extremity of corruption in the Ghanaian community in his conversation with the messenger:

“I know people who won more than five cedi’s last year. They still haven’t got this money. Have they been to the police to help them get their money? ‘You’re joking,’ said the messenger with some bitterness, ‘it costs you more money if you go to the police that are all, what will you do?’ the man asked. ‘I hope some officials at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as bribe and allow me to have the rest.’ The messenger’s smile was dead. ‘You will be corrupting a public official,’ the man smiled. ‘This is Ghana,’ the messenger said” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 18–19).

The “man”, who is also Koomson’s friend, constantly declines to be involved in corrupt tendencies. As a result, characters like the “man” in the novel end up suffering a backlash from the people around them due to their refusal to become involved in corruption. For example, when Amakwa offered the man a reward to illegally transport his timber from the bush, he rejected the bribe:

“Take one for yourself and give the other one to your friend. I myself will find fine drink for you. Take it. Take it, my friend.

‘I will not take it’ said the man” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 31).

Amakwa eventually said to the “man,” “...you are a very wicked man you will never prosper” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 31). The “man” has endured criticism, even from his family, for not engaging in corruption to enrich himself like other government officials such as Koomson. When the “man” and his wife Oyo visited the Koomsons, the “man” was amazed by the luxurious items that he found in Koomson’s house that even Oyo began to envy the Koomsons. Thus, she said, “Aah, Koomson has done well we must say it, he has done well for himself and his family” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 139). It is through these expensive items that the “man” acknowledged money as the root of evil as Koomson did not hesitate to go to extreme levels of corruption to attain

all his luxuries: “There were things here to attract the beholding eye and make it accept the power of their owner. Things of intricate and obviously expensive design” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 144). As a result of Koomson’s appalling corruption and greed, Armah expresses resentment for this character through the narrator:

“His mouth had the rich stench of a rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the new smell had gone down in the mixture with liquid atmosphere of the Party man’s farts filling the room. At the same time, Koomson’s insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder which in its fullness sounded as if it had rolled down all the way from the eating throat thundering through the belly and the guts, to end in further silent pollution of the air already thick with flatulent fear. Oyo had remained silent all this time, standing close to the door. But now, with choking sound, she retreated into the hall” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 96).

When it was Koomson and his wife Estelle’s turn to visit the “man” and Oyo’s household, Oyo was not so content about it as they did not possess the luxuries that the Koomsons had. Thus, when the “man” asks if he has left anything out, Oyo makes a comment about the drinks not being of great standard for their guests (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 115). Oyo pressurizes the “man” to be corrupt like other officials to provide her with luxuries, and the “man” consistently refuses. Consequently, he is referred to as a weak man and a *Chichi dodo*. According to Amina (2015), a *Chichi dodo* is a very clean bird which hates any form of filth. The bird goes through all pains to keep filth out of its way. The ironic thing about the Chichi dodo is that despite its sanitary standards, it feeds on maggots found in animal excrement, which is filthy. The “man” ultimately questions his personality, especially considering that he schooled with Koomson, but he is different from him. He finds solace in the teacher: “I am asking myself what is wrong with me. Do I have some part missing? Teacher, this Koomson was. My own classmate. My classmate. So, tell me what is wrong with me?” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 57). The teacher is also another character in the novel that condemns practices of corruption, and this is clearly indicated through his language of antipathy when making reference to government officials like Koomson:

“He will no doubt jump to go and fit his tongue into new arses when new men spring up to shit on us” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 89).

“No difference at all between the white and their apes, the lawyers and merchants and now the apes of the apes, our party men” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 135).

### 3.2. Effects on Transformation

During their time of reign in the African continent, the colonialists thrived in excluding the natives of the continent both socio-politically and economically. Today, in the post-colonial age, as reflected in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the dregs of colonialism, such as corruption, pose a threat to the transformation of the continent. The corrupt tendencies of government officials engender an economic crisis that gravely affects the people being led. Nyamekye (2021) stated that corruption endangers the economy of a state. Consequently, social ills, such as poverty, emerge that hinder the development of the state. In the novel, the rampant corruption in the Ghanaian society has resulted in the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer. This is due to, among other things, the high cost of living occasioned by institutionalized corruption.

The reality of these struggles can be seen in characters such as the “man” being unable to make ends meet, junior employees resorting to corruption to meet their daily needs, and some women selling their bodies for jobs and money. For example, Zacharias Lagos, a low-income earner, unlike other junior workers, is able to afford a lavish lifestyle due to corruption as “every evening a company truck brought home great lengths of healthy wood which in his wisdom he had written off, and he sold all of it” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 95). The depth of corruption in the Ghanaian society is unveiled through the words that the “man” read on the toilet: “Money sweet pass all who born fool socialism Chop make I chop Country broke,” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 106) and

also through the failure of the University of Ghana's Professor Legon to succeed in investigating corruption within the Ghanaian society:

"There was a lot of noise, for some time, about some investigation to rid the country's trade of corruption. Deuncorrupt themselves? There was nobody around who was all that excited though of course men were willing to talk of the commission. The head of it was a professor from Legon... in the end it was being said in the streets that the net had been made in a special Ghanaian way that allowed the really big corrupt people to pass through it. A net to catch only the small dispensable fellows trying in their anguished blindness to leap and to attain the gleam and the comfort the only way these things could be done. And the big ones floated free, like all the slogans. End Bribery and corruption" (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 154).

Many people in society have come to believe that it is only corruption that can get them by, thus, other employees, like Abnego Yamoah, ended up stealing government petrol to make more money for themselves. Moreover, characters such as the "man" who refuse to be involved in activities of corruption are stigmatized and, to a worse extent, they struggle to provide for their families and meet the demands of their wives. The women in the novel, such as Estella and Oyo, are obsessed with luxuries and push their husbands to engage in corrupt activities to make a lot of money. Hence, Oyo advised her husband to accept the bribe from Amakwa and also be part of the boat business deal, and when he declined, she scolded him. The women's insatiable greed for luxuries points out that the effects of past colonialism still exist today, and a new form of colonialism is currently affected by international corporations operating in developing nations (Dobie, 2009). For instance, the Koomsons appear to champion western identities at the expense of their African ones. This is delineated through their attempts to westernize their lives by embracing the English language more than their native languages, preferring western dressing styles, decorations and drinks, and hanging with white men in places such as Atlantic Caprice, which Nyamekye (2021) depicts as a colonial influence that the post-colonial theory aims to address.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper has probed into the legacies of colonialism in post-colonial Africa and the impact on transformation through the lens of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The novel, using a fictional Ghanaian society as a case in point among other African states, delineates corruption as a remnant of colonialism that handicaps a country's socio-political and economic transformation. It is the corrupt tendencies of government officials like Koomson that perpetuated colonial predispositions of marginalizing the natives of the African continent in pursuit of self-interests. This noted, the dethronement of the colonial government and the installation of an autonomous administration has not met the expectations of the independent masses of Africa as demonstrated in the novel. Social maladies, such as inequality, poverty and the denouncement of African identities to adopt western ones, are still at large and are primarily driven by the colonial behavior of selfish interests, which the independent leadership has assumed.

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