

*Ayi Kwei Armah in America:  
The Question of Identity in  
“Why Are We So Blest?”*

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UP TO THE 1940s and 1950s the belief that Western education held the most promise for the liberation of Africans from colonialism and all the attendant problems of racial discrimination, economic exploitation, backwardness, and poverty was still prevalent. One result was an increased enrolment in the few schools that had been established by the various colonizing powers, and an upsurge in the number of Blacks going overseas in search of higher education, then commonly nicknamed ‘the Golden fleece’. In Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Obi Okonkwo’s university training in England through a scholarship by the Lagos branch of the Umuofia Progressive Union offers one fictionalized reflection of such a widespread view of education as a tool for communal (tribal/national) development. But, as Obi Okonkwo’s inability to meet the expectations of his clansmen for their transformation also shows, the return of the educated Blacks from abroad to positions of authority vacated by their white overlords after independence of African nations soon made it clear that education was a means of preparing the select few for access to élite roles rather than a means to achieve emancipation for the entire society.

Quite appropriately, Black writers were the first to voice disapproval of Western education as anathema, a phenomenon that only succeeded to “build up a class of ‘native literates’ who after passing through the elementary and secondary stages of colonial education considered themselves as belonging to a higher level of culture” (Asein 25). The consideration of education as synonymous with westernization had led to the turning of Africans into

Black Englishmen, whom E. N. Obiechina describes as "Black Victorians" (76). Most of the writers, who had themselves been overseas for their training, had been exposed to the disorientation of being turned into citizens who are alienated from their roots but were not given the status of white men that they aspired to and for which their education had prepared them. If, as it has been remarked, "many (Black) autobiographers do not concern themselves with the psychic and cultural tension inherent in the African quest for western education" (Izevbaye 10), the reasons for the muted responses cannot be divorced from the passions of the individual writers some of whom were too ashamed, and quite clearly could not bear to throw into the open the bitterness that had attended their hunt for a fortune that turned out to be misfortune. Thus, for example, *The Dark Child* (1954) by Camara Laye and Leopold Senghor's numerous poems use nostalgia in portraying the harmonious life of an African village in order indirectly to attack the psychic and cultural torment suffered by the writers in Europe.

What is more noteworthy is that the few who did attempt openly to indict the process of the Black man's mental and physical journeys in the West have achieved a great measure of poignancy in laying bare not only their personal hardship but also the indignities suffered by all other members of their race in similar contexts. Among the latter works could be grouped Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* (1954), Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956) and *Mission to Kala* (1957), Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1958), and John Pepper Clark's *America, Their America* (1964). Ayi Kwei Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972)<sup>1</sup> is a brilliant and honest addition to this corpus of the Black man's literary response to his voyage in the land of whites, a corpus the tradition of which could be traced to the slave narratives of the Nigerian-born Olaudah Equiano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Ottobah Cugoano.

Armah's handling of the theme of identity of the Black travellers in *Why Are We So Blest?* indicates some connection between his own life abroad and the experiences of the two main Black characters in that novel, thus confirming the view that "autobiography and fictional works are to a great extent so intimately linked as to be inseparable" (Durix 3).<sup>2</sup> Through this line of thinking, I hope

further to expose the shallowness of claims such as Gikandi's (94) that *Why Are We So Blest?* "does not explicate any particular themes," and that "the setting of the novel is merely an existential canvas."

To establish Armah's particular historical experiences which provide the broad framework for the novel, we may well begin with a brief synopsis of the work. When the main protagonist, a Ghanaian scholar Modin Dofu, cannot cope with white racism in America, he abandons his university education and travels to Africa with his German-American mistress Aimée Reitsch to enlist in a liberation movement. But they are rejected by a body known as the Bureau of the People's Union of Congheria, based in a place called Laccryville, "a rather thin disguise for Algiers" (Fraser, "American Background" 40). On their return journey to America after their failed mission, Aimée leads Modin across a desert, a symbol of futility (Nnolim 222), where a French marauder kidnaps them, castrates Modin to death, and then rapes Aimée before abandoning her. She returns to Laccryville and entrusts their diaries to a man called Solo (a budding artist/writer), an intimate friend who has recently returned from a university in Portugal. Reading and commenting on their diaries, his monologues form a third narrative point of view which reveals the sordid experiences of the narrators.

It is certainly not mere coincidence that in 1959, after his secondary school education at the Achimota College, Ghana, Armah had left for the United States of America, where he studied at Groton School in Massachusetts, and at Harvard. He could not complete his final year at the university because of his response, like Modin Dofu's at Radcliffe, to white racism. "The kindness, the respect" which Armah says, in his essay entitled "One Writer's Education," whites bestowed on him as an individual while they committed "crimes against Lumumba, the Congo, Africa" (1972), are analogous to the paternalism which crushes Modin.

Armah recalls in the same essay that he changed from literature to Social Science studies out of desperation and in order to understand "the interconnections between the economics of continents, the politics of nations and the sociology and culture of peoples" (1973). Armah's resolution, "if possible to work with the libera-

tion movements in Southern Africa," echoes Modin's stand on a similar occasion, although, as Armah admitted in his interview with Dimgba Igwe, it was a nervous breakdown similar to Baako's in his second novel *Fragments* (1971), and not a white woman, as in Modin's case, which ultimately aborted that dream.

*Why Are We So Blest?* is not set "merely" on "an existential canvas"; rather, in it we find an elaborate attempt made by Armah to convey the texture of his American experience which he first sketchily treated in the story entitled "Contact" (1965). Because the events narrated are rather close to the novelist, "we are constantly aware," in Dan Izevbaye's words, "that the story is not wholly feigned, for the characters do not seem to exist independently of the views held by their author" (15). Robert Fraser ("American Background") might be correct in attributing the novel's mood to the race consciousness engendered by the administrations of Kennedy and Johnson, but there is no doubt that the recent belligerency of the Reagan era could equally have resulted in that document or one of equal virulence.<sup>3</sup>

Armah's fury is wedded to the quest for self-realization, which leads in every case to a crisis of identity within his protagonists. The novel itself is held together by the rage accompanying the novelist's attempts to capture and explore the failure that dogs the different dimensions of the characters' search for self-fulfilment: whether through platonic love (Solo), banal sexuality (Aimée and Modin), or considered political action (Modin and Aimée), the search always ends in futility.

A discussion of the theme of the Black's lack of identity in a land of whites — an isolation that is defined in this novel not only by his being in a numerical minority but more starkly by his presence in a world where he is constantly ignored or maligned — should begin with Armah's emphasis that Modin Dofu's estrangement differs from Solo's only in degree. This presentation forms part of the strategy to debunk the view that acculturation is mainly a problem of an African who goes to America for his education. The novelist even indicates the fact that the cultural dislocation associated with Modin's élitist education began right at home, in Africa, although it is not until he reaches its turning point in America that Modin begins to express his disenchantment. Having exhausted the role

of the imported structures of Western education as agents of de-Africanization in their new settings in Africa in his story "Yaw Manu's Charm" (1968), Armah now turns to their functioning in the metropole, the centre where, in Modin's words, "the cruder forms of manipulation" (33) take place.

Next, one observes Armah's tendency to view depersonalization of the Black as a sickness that defies medication, as the cases of both Manu and Modin make clear. Thus, although, on the surface, Modin's declaration that "All existent methods are absurd and deadly outside of a revolutionary commitment to Africa" (31) may leave an impression that he is clear-sighted about the methods that could lead to his recovery, his subsequent debates with himself reveal confusion and apathy:

I should have stopped going to lectures long ago. They all form a part of a ritual celebrating a tradition called great because it is European, Western, white. The triumphant assumption of a superior community underlies them all, an assumption designed to reduce us to invisibility while magnifying whiteness. My participation in this kind of ritual made me not just lonely, not just one person unsupported by a larger whole, but less than one person: a person split, fractured because of my participation in alien communal rituals designed to break me and my kind. (31-2)

These statements direct attention to Modin's identity crisis, his psychosis, occasioned by experiences which dehumanized his racial self. Retrospectively, Modin's internal monologues reveal that he has been trapped, and his desperate efforts to escape the educational system that he criticizes are belated because he initiated action only after he had become too culturally dislocated to reverse the phenomenon.

The comparison of Modin's mental paralysis to that of Dr. Earl Lynch, the anecdotal Black American scholar in Modin's diary who is being satirized by his white colleagues for hoping that "in twenty-five years perhaps he might qualify as the first black full professor at Harvard" (32), is, therefore, meant to stress the fact of the essential sameness of the predicament of the African and his Black American brother.

Thematically and stylistically, Dr. Lynch's story serves well as an example of Armah's adept use of allegory to advance the ex-

ploration of the writer's artistic intention, namely, to impress the view that the forces working against the Black man in America have been extensively entrenched through centuries of colonial subjugation. Modin's transformation into an equivalent state within his relatively brief residence in America pointedly portrays the image of mainstream American life as a monstrous tragic landscape that devours all: if Black Americans fall its prey it is not because they possess any inherent weaknesses. This is where Armah's response to the dilemma of Black Americans appears to be more sympathetic, than, for instance, J. P. Clark's contemptuous dismissal of this group in his *America, Their America*. Clark discredits Black Americans for perpetuating platitudes and stereotypes about their origin, but he refuses to probe the social conditions responsible for their plight; hence, his position is as superficial as the attitudes he attacks.

In *Why Are We So Blest?* we find a remarkable indepth study of the sort of racial insults on American campuses in the sixties against which Black students were pitted. True, it can be argued that Modin, the controlling focus of Armah's novel, possesses the stuff of which tragedy is made, and that white racism merely provides the landscape for the conflict. Modin's essential flaw is his naïveté, which Naita promptly notices when she meets him at the African committee building shortly after his entering America. She is the Black secretary to Mr. Scott, one of the officials whom Modin must see before he can meet the scholarship people. Rightly perceiving Modin's scholarship to study in America as a ploy to place him in the hands of manipulators who are more interested in propaganda and the defence of the white race than in giving true aid to Africa, Naita regards Modin as an unfortunate being and hopes that he is not "one of them dumb ones they bring on their little tours" (110).

Naita's fears come to pass and Modin cannot escape his destiny: he swallows the racial abuses from the African committee members, particularly Professor Jefferson, an obsequious scholar — snobbish, racist, and bigoted — who tries to force on Modin white assumptions that Africans lack reasoning and that Modin's intelligence is atypical of his race; Modin loses the opportunity to assert himself by talking back; he then submits to study under the thor-

oughly ignorant Professor Jefferson, who claims to be an “Africanist,” “one who specializes in Africa,” and rests his professional confidence on the considerable shift of opinion in America in favour of Africa’s justifying “advanced study” (119).

It is apparent that, unlike Naita, Modin is slow in perceiving racial rejection; his failure to initiate a return to his roots until his Ph.D. thesis — “all those books and index cards and notes” (91) — is nearly, and his alienation is unquestionably, completed illustrates his sluggishness. In fact, the grounds for his decision not to complete the programme simply fail to address his dilemma: “First, the security thing. The degree puts me in the élite. Guaranteed income, perks, the whole rotten deal I tell myself I don’t want” (91). There is some confusion here, and Modin’s superficial, self-centred, and pointless arguments show that he is taking a moralistic approach to essentially political issues which need to be tackled in a down-to-earth manner. When he resolves that, “Don’t know exactly. But I know I’m leaving” (90), Modin has become a desperate actor whose decision to be a revolutionary is no more than a fad.

Nevertheless, Armah reserves his coldest and most satiric attack for the environment in which Blacks receive their education abroad. Armah’s picture of this social setting clearly shows that the Black student has not the slightest chance of resisting the system of indoctrination that emphasizes his inferiority, his sense of inadequacy that is responsible for his crisis of self-definition. The problems that attend Modin’s attempts to follow Naita’s advice and change from his initial policy of accommodation to confrontation reveal the futility of any attempt by the student to be his own man. Mr. Oppenhardt, the chairman of the African committee, misconstrues the self-assertion, which contrasts with Modin’s earlier timidity, as insolent afterthought, and becomes enraged, “completely red” (127); his reaction epitomizes the obstacles in the way of effective dialogue between the student and his teacher, the servant and his master.

The Black student’s problems are often compounded by real lack of funds, an absence of financial independence that directly leaves him at the mercy of white benefactors. And Armah tends in *Why Are We So Blessed?* to respond with sensitivity to the diffi-

culty the Black faces in trying to overcome this problem. The episode in which Modin is seen grappling with this crisis readily comes to mind. Not until Mrs. Oppenhardt's reprimanding comments that Modin has been "a naughty boy, haven't you" (127) does it occur to Modin that he is being treated as a pauper who is obliged to return the generosity of his guardian with obedience and humility. But when Mr. Oppenhardt, giving Modin a cheque for "tuition and expenses," comments patronizingly that he is sure Modin will "find nothing to argue about *that*" (128), the sarcastic statement at last forces Modin to action, although his attempt to free himself from the Oppenhardts' paternalism leads to ironic reversals of his intentions, among which are his entanglements with Mrs. Jefferson which nearly costs him his life, and Aimée Reitsch, a move that ultimately leads him to his death in a most brutal and pathetic way. Modin's involvements with Mrs. Jefferson and Aimée Reitsch, because they highlight Armah's skilful use of irony, satire, and caricature to explore the deepening crises that follow his quest for financial independence, deserve detailed attention.

However, let me start with the preliminary remark that part of the significance of the illicit affair involving Modin and Mrs. Jefferson also lies in the fact that it exposes the manner in which, as Modin makes his tortured transition to whiteness, his perception has come to be increasingly determined by ideas of beauty as conceived in Western terms. Here Armah treats the theme of the gulf between appearance and reality. Thus Modin finds Mrs. Jefferson physically alluring, but when they make love she is repulsive and reacts horrifyingly, expressing fear and tortured excitement to a union that should open their personalities to each other for mutual enjoyment. In any case, the horror of the ordeal, which contrasts with Modin's earlier harmonious and blissful love making with Naita (is this meant to underscore the differences between *African* and the Western practices of sexual intercourse?), and which should have put Modin off, ironically rivets him to Mrs. Jefferson. And so, if we stretch the symbolism further, it is not far-fetched to interpret as snares of imperialism both Mrs. Jefferson herself and the trap that Professor Jefferson sets for Modin,



when he uncovers the immoral affair, by organizing a party at home and inviting Modin to it.

More significant is that the couple are traps of death, set for the Black enemy, as later events quickly show. Deceiving Modin into thinking that he will be away at "some conference," Professor Jefferson instead retires, Modin learns when he arrives, upstairs to bed, "too depressed to do anything but sleep" while the party goes on (154-55). To reflect the treacherous mood of the occasion Armah employs ironic reversal: as Mrs. Jefferson leads Modin to "a part of her garden" where they noisily make love, the moon disappears; thus, what ought to be the traditional symbol of romance turns into an omen of ill-luck and the supposed atmosphere of tranquillity soon sours into a murderous landscape where Modin is stabbed in the head, neck, and abdomen before making his escape. He has to be hospitalized for two weeks, and placed on blood transfusion. He writes in his diary:

Nothing surprising in all this. My life here has had a self-destructive swing all the time, only I haven't thought seriously about it. Loneliness. The search for a way out. Involvement, the thing you warned me against, Naita. Catastrophic involvement. Disaster. Exhaustion. Then withdrawal, intense, complete. Loneliness again. (156)

Modin's search for self-fulfilment through sexual self-surrender to the opposite sex, a lover, ends up as a bitter acknowledgement of self-defeat. And his perplexity is reflected in his inarticulateness. The masterly deployment of key words like "self-destructive swing," "Loneliness," "Involvement," "Catastrophic," "Disaster," and "Exhaustion" create a vivid sense of foreboding. The device makes the reader anxious to know the likely outcome of Modin's career because the verbal motifs convey the sense of Modin falling into a trap out of which, the reader knows, escape appears most unlikely.

Armah's attempts in the novel to graft onto the naturalistic convention the devices of psychological realism are wholly successful in heightening the variations in the reader's interpretation and judgement about Modin's lingering crises. Although the solution is to leave America, Modin chooses wrongly to remain there. By considering himself a helpless victim whose dilemma cannot be

resolved, he betrays an incapacity to make rational judgement. When he begins to regard his quest for Western education in the Western mythological tradition of gallantry, and to regard himself as a competitor for "the Western European damsel in distress, the valued prize after the conflict between dragon and knight" (157), Modin has become an imitation white man.

The relapse into self-lament in which Modin's language takes on the contours of abstraction and generalization, spurious logic and illogical leap, eccentricity and obscurity exemplifies well Armah's search for a mode of presenting psychological reality. "The hunger that brought me here is not a hunger for knowledge. It cannot be. . . . My hunger has been for things of the flesh" (159-60), Modin observes. The result of his equating his quest for Western degrees with sensuality is that Modin blurs his perception and so denies himself chances of acting intelligently. Visualizing the world as consumed by the destructive influences of the West and himself as typifying the agony of his race are in no way the best means for Modin to overcome his predicament. Nor does he help his case by simply criticizing the policy of wickedly alienating some Africans from their roots. Although Modin rightly concedes that his policy of reconciliation caused his being "irretrievably caught in total whiteness" (163), like Dr. Lynch he uses his crisis instead to justify staying in America where anything but his impunity could be guaranteed.

What we need to bear in mind, in turning to Modin's association with Aimée Reitsch, therefore, is that it comes as a climax to his career of errors, as a matter of tragic inevitability. Irony hangs heavy over this relationship, for it is in his quest to earn a living that Modin picks up Aimée Reitsch, who will ultimately bring about his death. Another irony is that Aimée's appearance — both her vulgarity and her physical repulsiveness — which promptly puts off the other people in the laboratory, is the very source of Modin's attraction to her.

A reviewer of *Why Are We So Blest?* has aptly described Aimée Reitsch as "the archetypal man-eater in this tale of aborted revolution and collapsed ideals. One of those bored little rich girls all too prevalent on American campuses today, she opens her carnal and carnivorous career . . . contributing to interracial understand-

ing by 'sleeping around with Africans'" (Thomas 81). Aimée's developed credential is that she has previously carried out a subversive assignment during a Western imperialist incursion into East Africa. Thus, Aimée has always been part of the heritage of injustice and cruelty in the West's relations with Africa. By ignoring her coarseness, as it were, and saddling himself with her, Modin is choosing the instrument for his own death. The contrast between his insularity and the visions of Solo and, to a lesser extent, of Ngulo and Jorge Manuel, is too glaring to be overlooked. It may well be that in Aimée Armah creates "almost an allegorical figure" who is "distinctly shadowy" because he is not "humanly affected by his white characters" (Fraser, "American Background" 43).

However, what matters is not whether or not Armah's observations are realistic or exaggerated and invented, since caricature, allegory, and myth are recognized and accepted universal modes or artistic conventions. For instance, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), especially, D. H. Lawrence uses exaggeration to expose the healing power of erotic sensations as a way of combating the dearth of communion in sexual relationships among whites, a defect he ascribes to acute self-consciousness that makes it impossible for men and women to explode their barriers and come to understand one another fully through self-surrender to each other. And it has been remarked in another context that "Armah's descriptions of physical love are often as graphic as D. H. Lawrence's — most untypical of African writing" (Larson 273). Even if there is no direct borrowing from Lawrence, it seems fairly certain that Armah has been influenced by the stereotypical image of whites which he could have picked up during his stay in the U.S. In that regard, Armah could be said to be engaged in some myth making, using one myth to destroy another.

Other African writers, for example Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer At Ease* (1960), Oyono in *Houseboy* (1958), Laye in *The Radiance of the King* (1956), and Beti in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956), also use stereotyping to underscore the superficial interactions between Blacks and whites that preclude one race's knowing the other beyond the levels of the racial stereotypes each holds about the other. The objective and open-minded approaches to race relations to which Achebe, Laye,

Beti, and Oyono looked forward have proved unattainable; whites go on perpetuating their savage attacks and brutality on Africans whom they narrowly perceive through their cocoons of racial stereotypes.

Aimée Reitsch's career illustrates the motif of whites' undiminishing view of the Black man as a sex machine, a variation of the older myths of Africans as savages whose actualization constitutes a violence that deprives the African of dignity and self-assertion. What is worse, in Armah's view, is that, like Modin, some Blacks have come to accept white assumptions about themselves, and now live up to such expectations. Thus, for Armah, the sexual violence caused to Modin lies at the core of his psychic disorders, and Aimée's role is crucial in this regard. As a matter of fact, the picture that Armah paints of the bohemian parties at which Modin dissipates his energy for the satisfaction of white girls clearly indicates a self-indulgence and cultural abandon out of which he could not plausibly have hoped to recover. Here is Modin's own description of the wreck that attends such occasions:

The floor was littered with butts. There had been such a quantity of good marijuana no one had bothered this time about emptying butts to make fresh joints. Someone had carefully lined the walls with empty soft-drink cans and bottles — Canada Dry, 7-Up, Cokes, Pepsis, apple cider, cranberry juice, each with bent straws sticking out. There were perhaps a dozen large paper frappe cups, also neatly arranged against a wall. There was no food left: the marijuana had turned most appetites and thirsts from liquor to food and soft drinks; cellophane wrappers covered the floor. (92)

The scenes of shabby drunkenness and drug abuse which Modin participates in as he plays sexist roles that white girls mark out for him to detonate their frigidity, are some of the most vividly realized in the novel. The details of bottles of unopened drinks, packets of unused cups, unsmoked cigarettes, and so on are excellent examples of Armah's realism: these are significant elements of the alien communal rituals that cause Modin to become a zombie who loses the little of the will and initiative he had.

In *Bound to Violence* (1968), where Ouologuem similarly portrays his hero, Kassoumi Raymond, as an African whose sexual abuse by whites results in a permanent sense of inferiority and

inadequacy — his identity crisis — the reader learns that Kassoumi went to study in France as part of Europe's package of aid to enable Africa to govern itself in the future; however, he was strangulated in the new Western values he acquired under Western education. And Ouologuem presents Kassoumi's plight as continental or archetypal rather than particular, reflecting the dilemma of his class of Western-educated Africans.

Part of the sympathy that Armah extends towards Modin also derives from his falling a victim to crude Western stereotyping. Not only in formal lectures, such as those in which Mike celebrates America as the Olympian height of civilization, would Modin get bombarded with open declarations of Africa's inferiority. His efforts having failed to remind his white colleagues that America's prosperity was built on cruelty and injustice against Indians and Africans, Modin is severely humbled:

It was not Mike's voice that bothered me. It was my own thoughts. Olympus. I was here. No use pretending I didn't run from the world below. Blindly? The more desperate my need to get here, then. Physically, I felt suspended, midway between a bad flu and the light — marijuana — take-off feeling. (102)

These are the agitations of a man experiencing mental disintegration due to assaults on old psychic wounds. Modin's quest for self-realization has led him to a shocking vision of the reality of his situation: that he, by virtue of his education, is intrinsically part and parcel, not of the solution, but of the forces oppressing his people. And his growing crisis of conscience is responsible for his problem of identity.

In *Why Are We So Blest?* it is Solo who enables Armah to avoid the oversimplification of treating anti-Black racism as simply an American problem. As an African who attends university in Lisbon, where he comes face to face with white racism, Solo is thus representative of the experience of Blacks who go to Europe for their education. Armah's use of the technique of retrospection to convey the specific, traumatic experience of disappointed love that has been decisive in the conditioning of Solo's personality is particularly striking. The technique serves as a sample of Armah's genius for realism, the recreation of the drama of experience capturing the tension of life in a raw form — the fears, hopes, pain,

and agony of relationships. When the reader learns of the broken romance with Sylvia, whom Solo wanted to marry but could not because of the opposition from her fellow Portuguese friends who destroy the growing understanding between the prospective couple, he forms a better grasp of the background to Solo's disillusionment.

Solo is impressed on the reader's imagination by his bewildered response to life, by his confused state, essential isolation, and sense of personal inadequacy, all of which are revealed in constant outbursts of self-pity, as in the book's opening lines: "Even before my death I have become a ghost, wandering about the face of the earth, moving with a freedom I have not chosen, something whose unsettling abundance I am impotent to use" (11). A word for Solo's sickness is alienation, for his whole life is dominated by the yearning for the unattainable, "the attraction of one person to his opposite, the power that brings the white to the black and leads them all to open to each other areas of themselves which they have long kept hidden from everybody else" (12).

An artist in the pure Western sense, Solo is also faced with another problem, that of finding an appropriate idiom of expression that could convey the pressure of his thought and capture the spirit of his day. "The only occupation I desire is with beautiful truths" (15), Solo tells us, even as he moves along the degraded city of Laccryville. However, in contrast to the image of the committed African artist, such as Edogo in Achebe's *Arrow of God* (who is ever one with his community's aesthetic values, a rich reservoir from which he draws his inspiration), Solo does not show concern for the suffering of the majority. Thus, he displays immense facility with language but his goal does not extend beyond exploiting the possibilities of language — its sound patterns — for musical effect only, as in the episode where he takes an aerial view of Laccryville in the company of the young engineer, or in the library scene with the one-legged man who had fought in the country's wars of independence. The absence of proverbial usage in Solo's language, such as is habitual even with a detribalized figure like Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, points up the degree of Solo's spiritual uprootedness.

Solo's ambiguity and ambivalence are also embedded in the

puzzling role he plays as a narrator of the story who is sometimes a detached observer and commentator but who is often a consumed participant in the heat of the action he describes. The cumulative experiences force Solo at the end of the novel to an awareness, which motivated Modin's quest all along, of the reality that the solution to the problems of underdevelopment of his society cannot be found through Western education. The climax of Solo's conflict is thereby understood. Exploding into full-scale militancy, he resolves that

Europe hurled itself against us — not for creation, but to destroy us, to use us for creating itself. America, a growth out of Europe, now deepens that destruction. In this wreckage there is no creative art outside the destruction of the destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art, revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction. (231)

In this excerpt we learn the frustration, anxiety, panic, and hatred of the speaking voice who has at last come to an understanding of his situation: that, as a predatory élite, he is part of the problem he wishes to address and not its solution. What Solo and Modin, therefore, have in common with all the people like them who are products of Western education is their membership in a select group that, by training, are rendered incapable of participating in the struggle for the liberation of their people, an essentially proletarian struggle. The crises of identity that afflict the characters is a corollary to the guilt that comprises the self-inadequacy felt by educated Africans.

Armah's world-wide travels place him in a good position to handle the suffering of Blacks in alien territories which he himself has experienced first-hand. In 1963, he took up residence in Algeria and worked as a translator for a magazine called *Révolution Africaine*. Between September 1967 and September 1968, he worked in France, and left later for the United States of America, where he remained until June 1970. All his knowledge acquired from the diverse settings has crystallized into the making of the novel. He found the diary form and the use of orthodox English perfect methods for the drama of the psychological disorientation caused by the estrangement of his heroes who find themselves in foreign lands, objects of ridicule and social rejection.

An additional advantage is the shift from the omniscient third-person narrative point of view of the previous novels, the main limitation of which was that, despite the great freedom it bequeathed on the author to move from one character to another, and one event to another, presenting the actions and thoughts of the chief actors, Armah could not (especially in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* [1968]) altogether avoid arbitrariness and contrivance. The reader was unable to grant one narrator ubiquity and omniscience. But when a character tells his own story to himself/herself for a self-indulgence in diary form, the experiences the author presents thus take on an aura of authenticity, the credibility in-built in the diary deriving, of course, both from our belief that no one expects the diarist to deceive himself/herself, and from the knowledge, therefore, that, in reading a writer's diary, a reader is looking over the writer's shoulder to share his/her intimate experiences. This is the sense in which *Why Are We So Blest?* enables Armah to come closest to the consciousness of reality.

The cynicism and misanthropy in Armah's portrayal of the lives of the central figures of his novel reflect his determination to create better global understanding through an appeal for the eradication of the prejudice, social scorn, xenophobia, and ignorance which have stood for long in the way of attaining inter-racial harmony. *Why Are We So Blest?* comes in a long tradition of Black protest travel literature which invites readers to participate in the Blacks' ordeals in alien territories in order to feel what it means to be Black: victims of social stereotypes.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All page references depend on the 1974 Heinemann African Writers series edition, issued in London.
- <sup>2</sup> Bede M. Ssensalo argues that, at least for the Black writer, there is no distinction between pseudo-autobiography, in Ssensalo's words "a fictional narrative in which the imaginary narrator assumes the posture of an actual person writing or narrating his autobiography" (93) and autobiography, i.e. "novel in which, whether written in the first-person narrative style or otherwise, presents a character who is a mask of the author and lives within the writer's own experience" (94). According to Ssensalo, all Black writers of the two modes have one aim, "to convince the reader that the events described actually occurred."
- <sup>3</sup> An interesting exposure of current racial problems on American campuses can be found in a recent paper by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which tends to



corroborate Armah's views, and so lends timeless relevance to the novel that was published almost two decades ago. Professor Gates writes: "Action programs on campuses have become ineffective window-dressing operations, necessary 'evils' maintained to preserve the fiction of racial fairness and openness in the truly academic environment, but deprived of the power to enforce their stated principles." Quoting statistics gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau, Gates illustrates the continuing decline in Black undergraduate enrollment due to racial problems, adding: "The decline in black graduate enrollment is even more alarming" (12).

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