Armah's Fragments And The Vision Of The Whole

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AYI Kwei Armah's second novel, *Fragments*, was widely and favorably reviewed in the United States when it appeared in 1970, and has attracted similarly favorable notice elsewhere since its belated appearance in Heinemann's *African Writers Series*.[1] Gerald Moore, reviewing the novel for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in 1974, said that there were "good reasons for believing that it will eventually establish itself as superior to *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* [Armah's first novel, 1969] in quality, profundity, and originality."[2] Moore's review indicated some of the directions that subsequent criticism might take; his remarks on the use of "dislocated ritual" in the novel are particularly suggestive. *Fragments* has received some critical attention since, and Armah is generally acknowledged as one of the finest stylists among "Anglophone" African writers: but, even now, little attention has been paid to the structure of the novel or to the relation of image and theme within that structure.

The plot of the novel is slight. Baako Onipa, a Ghanaian who has just completed his university studies in the United States, returns to his own country. He has suffered a nervous breakdown during his stay in America, and returns to face his family's expectations that, as a "been-to", he will bring money, influence and prestige to the family. He finds himself alienated from his society by its open and cynical corruption, and from his family by their inability to understand that his ambitions are not primarily material ones. Doubly alone, he moves slowly towards a second breakdown; his friend and lover Juana, a Puerto Rican psychiatrist, is away when it occurs. At the end of the novel, it seems likely that Baako and

Juana will be reunited when Baako is released from hospital.

The novel bears a superficial resemblance to its predecessor, *The Beautyful Ones*. As in the earlier novel, Armah portrays Ghana as a society corrupt at every level, and embodies his sense of the moral atmosphere in vivid images of rot and sterility. Again, a single more or less good man is isolated from society by his refusal to acquiesce in its corruption; and, again, his uprightness gains him nothing and does not alter the social order. These resemblances are, however, largely matters of narrative surface. On any other level, the two books are fundamentally different.

The earlier and shorter novel has the simplicity and force of allegory. Its chief character is nameless, and encounters, in true *Everyman* fashion, type-figures of temptation and corruption before enduring a symbolic descent into Hell and a sea-rebirth which returns him to the world. The characters, scenery, and incidents of *Beautyful Ones* are in the tradition of apologue: the moralized landscape in particular reminds the reader of *The Pilgrim's Progress* rather than of "realistic" fiction. *Fragments,* on the other hand, is more obviously a novel. The elements of allegory and apologue are muted; *Beautyful Ones* is built around a few clear and appalling images, while *Fragments* is based on ambiguity and contradiction. The confrontation of the protagonist and society is particularly problematic.

In *Beautyful Ones,* the protagonist's isolation from society preserves him from the corruption of that society and constitutes a kind of proof — not least to himself — of his moral purity. After he helps his friend Koomson to escape, for example, the man feels "a vague freedom, like the untroubled loneliness he had come to like these days"[3] This sense of solitude as saving is strongly present in *Fragments* as well. When he first returns to Accra, Baako takes a room in a hotel instead of returning to his family's home: already wary of the family's expectations, he feels "an ambiguous comfort, savoring this sense of being so alone back home, connected for the moment to no one, with no one save himself knowing where he was" (pp. 92-93). Juana, whose work as a

psychiatrist presents her daily with evidence of society's destructive effects, resorts to the "comforting pigeonholing reflex" and is able to push back "the threat of having to confront another human being" (p. 143). The extreme form of this desire to isolate oneself is physical flight, to which both Baako and Juana have recourse. Juana takes long drives when the hospital becomes too much for her, and Baako flees from his family twice when they try to take him to the asylum. During his second escape, Bakko again experiences the joy of solitude, "the happy feeling . . . that now he could run miles and miles and sense no tiredness" (p. 236).

Even Naana, Baako's grandmother, feels the relief of being by herself. A traditional African, she has a strongly developed sense of community and the importance of communal life; but in the world of present-day Ghana her isolation (she is blind and partly deaf) appears to her as a boon: "Since so much of what remains to be seen brings fear and the sights of day are followed in the night by this silent danger which has no name, I find it a matter in which the path of my soul has been good: that my body should be closing all the holes through which the world has entered me" (p. 279). Her first monologue, which begins the book, includes her sense that her blindness has been "sent . . . to save me from the madness that would surely have come with seeing so much that was not to be understood" (p. 14).

All of this is quite in keeping with the vision of things in *Beautyful Ones:* contact is a sort of contamination, a surrender to the corruption around the self. In *Beautyful Ones,* however, there is no real temptation to succumb; the man's isolation is practical as well as moral, since it prevents his being purged, after the *coup d'état,* by the new regime. Baako's dilemma in *Fragments* is that he senses the necessity of some kind of human contact even while recognizing the danger of it. This sense of human contact as something at once desirable and dangerous is shared by the other chief characters. Juana, despite her own urge to solitude, realizes that "the high flight of the individual alone, escaping the

touch of life around leads only to "annihilation" (p. 271), and her last comment is the observation that "Salvation is such an empty thing when you're alone" (p. 276). Naana, in her first monologue, remembers an old ritual song: "A human being alone/ is a thing more sad than any lost animal/ and nothing destroys the soul/ like its aloneness" (p. 6).

But a satisfactory human relationship is hard to come by in a corrupt society. Baako's sister Araba, for example, is frankly manipulative in her relationship with her husband Kwesi: " '. . . the midwife says Kwesi should leave me alone for two months. If he doesn't agree to the things I'm going to ask for, I'll add another month' " (p. 127). Efua, Baako's mother, exploits her friends in order to make her grandson's outdooring ceremony profitable for the family. In fact, the only example in the novel of a life-giving relationship is the affair between Baako and Juana.

The sexual aspect of this affair is described graphically, but never very sensually; one has the impression that sex is really a metaphor for what Juana thinks of as "the human touching [,] the hunger for which continued in her in spite of everything" (p. 19), The first time Baako and Juana make love, Armah's diction itself suggests the metaphoric nature of the act. "She reached for his hand, but before she could touch it all her control went out of her body, the salt taste of the air was deep in her throat, and she was saying words she'd thought she could never use again, and there was one moment when nothing that had happened to her made any difference, and all the steadying, controlling separatenesses between things did not matter at all to her" (p. 171). The loss of control, which is equated with Juana's "separateness," is both life-giving and threatening, since Juana is now susceptible to the pain of involvement which she has carefully avoided for so long. A later sexual scene makes it clear that eroticism is not central to the relationship.

> She rubbed his nipple gently, once, and it was pure pain but it made him hard, and she turned slightly and took him into herself, lying motionless in his embrace.
>
> "Just stay in me, Baako," she said.
>
> He moved deeper, searching her for more of her warmth, his

> head filling with a fear of nameless heavy things descending upon him, pushing him to seek comfort in her. He pulled her completely to himself. She was warm against him, but in a moment he became aware she too was shivering. They lay together, neither moving. (p. 204)

What brings on Baako's second breakdown, then, is the problem of choosing between the almost impossible alternatives of a safe but sterile solitude on the one hand and, on the other, a potentially fruitful and loving relationship which exposes him to the likelihood of pain if he loses Juana — who is in fact away when he needs her most. The conflict is one which another contemporary novelist, Angus Wilson, has expressed more overtly in the thoughts of one of his characters: "To be one alone was to uphold one's right to the inner poetry, yet to be one alone was also to be an insufficient human being. To be two was the start of all human fulfilment; and also of all gangs and conspiracies."[4]

The problem of human involvement reflects the theme of Armah's novel as a whole. Baako is concerned with the question of whether to remain alone or to become part of something larger (a relationship, a society), and *Fragments* deals essentially with the question of cosmology — whether individual things can be made to cohere into some sort of larger pattern. The title itself suggests that "things fall apart," and Baako has abundant evidence that there is no coherence in the modern world. But the novel portrays both sides of a complex issue, and suggests at least the possibility of some kind of order.

Admittedly, the idea of any *ultimate* order appears to be mocked at various points in *Fragments*. Baako recalls a production assistant at Ghanavision who defines himself as a "nexologist":

> I confess it was a thrill to hear him define nexus so well, everything in the world connected, the air itself some connecting fluid, each man a connecting center node set in the nexus. The fact of connection meaning consequence: here I wondered if he understood what he was implying or was sloganizing with doctrines swallowed, but I would not have interrupted him for all the world. . . . Example: a nexologist wakes up one morning, counts his wealth and finds he's broke, only pennies between him and the world. . . . The practicing nexologist under such conditions does not despair, throw up his arms, lose faith

> in himself. On the contrary: the hopeless-looking moment is the moment not only for hope, but for the expression of faith in hope . . . he would take his last coins, find his way to a crossways, then scatter the last of his wealth in all directions. Now that wealth would be bound to return to the scatterer in one form or another, multiplied like grain seed. . . . He said the scattering would be answered by a wished-for return because of the nexus, because the nexus meant connections, and no such act of prayer ever took place unconnected to results that could look like magic to the blind. (pp. 228-29)

This simple-minded faith in the Emersonian unity and benevolence of the natural order reminds Baako of the cargo cults of Melanesia, and other forms of faith in the novel — Efua's adherence to a fraudulent prophet, for example — are likewise seen as mere wish-fulfillment. Throughout the book, Baako senses the separateness of things and the absence of any true nexus. As he moves towards his second breakdown, even his words fail to cohere into thought: "he opened [his notebook] and looked again at the words of the previous night. He could not not make them flow together; they remained separate words, separate letters" (pp. 238-39). The landscape itself shows a radical disorder in nature: "It was a clearing that seemed filled with broken things and with unfinished work stopped violently for some sudden reason, leaving wrenched, jagged edges that gave the eye a feeling of being grated against a thousand snapped fractions of things" (p. 254).

But it is well to remember that we see these things from Baako's point of view, one which becomes progressively more unreliable. Armah has sought, much more consciously than he did in *Beautyful Ones,* to avoid a confusion of his protagonist's point of view: when we are not experiencing Baako's sense of things, we see the world through the eyes of Juana or Naana. Naana's monologues begin and end the book, and they provide a corrective contrast to Baako's bleak vision of the world. Naana is, of course, immersed in the past, but her faith in the unity of all things cannot be passed off as naive, for she understands the fragmented state of the modern world. "The larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago has shattered into a thousand and thirty useless pieces.

Things have passed which I have never seen whole, only broken and twisted against themselves. What remains of my days will be filled with more broken things" (p. 280). Naana claims to have given up the effort to understand, and has, by her own account, "found rest in despair" (p. 281). Nevertheless, her monologue closes with an expression of faith in a god or God she never names. "I know of the screens in life you have left us: veils that rise in front of us, cutting into easy pieces eternity and the circle of the world, so that until we have grown tall enough to look behind the next veil we think the whole world and the whole of life is the little we are allowed to see, and this little we clutch at with such desperation" (p. 286). Her image of order, the circle, is a traditional one, and is reflected in the structure of the book. The last page of the novel returns us to the first, where Naana expresses her faith that "Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns round" (p. 1). The image of the circle also is, like most of the images in the novel, an ambiguous one. Circles represent perfection and eternity, but a closing circle suggests impending doom; a ring of men closes in on the dog Juana sees killed, and a similar circle closes in on Baako to take him to the asylum (pp. 246-47). Ocran's anguished sculptures also form a circle.

It can be argued, of course, that Naana is wrong, that her faith is as naive as that of the nexologist. And, we recall, she is blind — a fact which surely says something about the quality of her perceptions. In fact, however, the other chief characters are blind as well. During her first conversation with Baako, Juana has the impression that she can see "a small but very vital blind spot which broke into the wholeness of the dome [her image of Baako], yet without which it would quite simply fall apart" (p. 148). Baako himself, when he talks about going against the current of his society, describes its force as that of a "cataract," and this delicate pun again suggests the saving nature of his partial blindness. Earlier, Juana has seen that the foreigners who survive life in Accra

have deliberately become less sensitive to the life around them: "with the opening of her own mind to accept the place she had come to, Juana had found it difficult to understand the willingness with which the expatriates kept themselves imprisoned in their little blind incestuous groups. With more looking and understanding she saw it was not really blindness, but a decision quite consciously made not to see, or to see but never to let any real understanding intrude" (p. 36). Despite "the opening out of her own mind," Juana herself takes drives and walks on the beach in order to avoid facing the reality of the hospital too directly for too long. Even "Ghanavision," the state television network, is afflicted with a politic blindness: it produces only flattering portrayals of state leaders.

Blindness seems, in fact, to be preferable to any kind of clear-sightedness, simply because, like solitude, it spares one a good deal of pain. Lawrence Boateng, an aspiring writer, gets drunk at a literary soirée and embarasses the successful hacks who dominate official Ghanaian culture. His self-destructive behaviour is, as he says, the result of clear sight: " 'Lawrence Boateng is a drunkard, Lawrence Boateng drinks too much. I'm tired of people talking about me. I drink, yes. I see the truth when I'm drunk, and I can say what I see' " (p. 152). The sculptor Ocran conveys in a series of terra-cotta heads his anguished sense of the human condition. "They had been arranged in some kind of rough order, so that the tension captured in the heads seemed progressively to grow less and less bearable, till near the end of the whole series . . . the inward torture actually broke the outer form of the human face, and the result, when Baako looked closer, was not any new work of his master but the old, anonymous sculpture of Africa" (p. 111). Baako's breakdown is presumably the result of the same kind of vision. The economy of the novel seems to suggest that Naana is right to be thankful for her blindness.[5]

But Boateng, Ocran, and Baako are all artists, and none of them can deny his sight without denying his very being. The

problem, then, is to develop a kind of sight which will encompass reality without plunging the viewer into despair. In the light of this problem, *Fragments* can be seen as an African *Kunstlerroman* — a novel about the artist's education, situation, and responsibilities — and the opposed images of the novel (isolation / contact, fragmentation / order, blindness / sight) as aspects of the artist's traditional problem of reconciling apparently incompatible elements into a unified whole.[6] Baako's success in doing this is obviously far from complete, but his concern with the problem is evident. His first script for Ghanavision, for example, is an obscure symbolic drama dominated by images of a dark circle and a white square; the action reflects, on different levels, the history of Ghana and Baako's own sense of alienation from his society.[7] Baako manages, to some degree, the reconciliation of isolation and community, since his relationship with Juana overcomes his loneliness and does not implicate him in the corruption of society. At the end of the novel, however, he has apparently failed to order the fragments of his world into any significant whole — His mind itself has, in fact, fragmented. It would be wrong, however, to see the novel as essentially pessimistic. The second-last section concludes with Juana's preparations for Baako's return, and the last section is Naana's monologue, with its assertion of faith in the circle of eternity which appears to flawed human sight in "easy pieces." It is possible that Naana's last comment on the world is also that of the novel: that we see parts of the puzzle, fragments of the whole, and live in the faith that the pattern, the completed circle, actually exists. ". . . Still clutching the useless shreds of a world worn out, we peep behind the veil just passed and find in wonder a more fantastic world, making us fools in our own eyes to have believed that the old paltriness was all" (p. 287).

In the meantime, nothing will make the artist's lot an easy one. The particular predicaments of Boateng and Ocran are clear enough; Baako later see the general situation of the artist embodied in a scene the meaning of which is at first elusive. As Baako and Juana watch a group of fishermen

pulling in a net on the beach, a young boy tries to join the group and is knocked out of the way. Retiring from the group, he finds a double gong. The men, fatigued, slow the pace of their work. Then

> in a gap of quiet when neither the breeze nor the men's voices were high, the small boy added his voice to the beating of his gong. It was a clear voice, high as a woman's, and the song it was carrying could have been anything about the sea, like a woman's long lament for one more drowned fisherman. One irritated strong man kicked sand at the boy and shouted at him, perhaps to shut him up; he stopped his singing only briefly, recovered and continued. On the next return another big-bodied man, this one with a slow, pensive step, . . . took up the song, his voice deeper but his rhythm the same. Where the two singers paused the only refrain was the sound of the sea, till one after the other the remaining men and a few of the waiting women began also to hum endings to the song. Now the pulling took a rhythm from the general song. The men dug their feet deep into the sand and pulled from fixed positions on the rope.
>
> It was two hours at least before the bag net itself emerged from the water, but the time passed quickly, imperceptibly, and the sun mellowed to an early evening warmth. In that time the boy started separate songs, each in itself made up of long and subtly changing verses held over easy chorus hums, and the men sometimes unfixed themselves and pulled on the ropes with a slow shuffling march whose steps were all measured to the songs. (pp. 183-84)

It is a beautifully realized scene, emblematic rather than symbolic. The fluidity and shapelessness of the sea are set against the order and harmony of the boy's song, which helps the men even when they reject the singer. The various functions of art — as pastime, practical aid, form of knowledge, means of community — are all invoked without being specified or isolated. Baako is, understandably, fascinated by a scene which suggests the exalted vocation of the artist, the ignorance of society about that vocation, and the hard usage the artist can expect as a result.

It is possible, of course, that the artist's adversity can be turned to advantage. In Paris, Baako sees an inscription which reads

> TOUT HOMME CRÉE SANS LE SAVOIR
> COMME IL RESPIRE
> MAIS L'ARTISTE SE SENT CRÉER
> SON ACTE ENGAGE TOUT SON ÊTRE
> SA PEINE BIEN AIMÉE LE FORTIFIE. (p. 74)

If this is anything more than a comforting slogan, Baako's breakdown itself may be part of his education as an artist.

Throughout the novel, Armah is careful to insist upon the ambiguous nature of the reality with which the artist deals. Juana thinks, after her first meeting with Baako, that his desperation is so deep as to be "indistinguishable from hope" (p. 149), and a similar ambiguity is apparent not only in the pairs of opposed images we have already looked at but also in the multiple meanings which cluster about a single image. Water, for example, seems at first glance to have only positive associations related to the value of sexuality and "the human touching." The association is a natural one, since water and sexuality are both sources and sustainers of life; it is fitting, then, that Baako and Juana make love for the first time on the beach. Afterwards, Baako tells Juana the story of Mame Water and the musician: " 'The singer goes to the beach, playing his instrument. These days it's become a guitar. He's lonely, the singer, and he sings of that. So well a woman comes out of the sea, a very beautiful goddess, and they make love. She leaves him to go back to the sea, and they meet at long, fixed intervals only. It takes courage. The goddess is powerful, and the musician is filled with so much love he can't bear the separation. But then it is this separation itself which makes him sing as he has never sung before' " (p. 171).[8] The singer is strengthened, like Antaeus, by contact with an elemental force, but the water brings desolation as well as pleasure: the singer who makes love to Mame Water now knows, among other things, " 'the fear that one night he'll go to the sea and Mame Water . . . will not be coming anymore.' " (p. 172).

Elsewhere in *Fragments*, water is clearly a malign force (the lorry-driver Skido is killed in the water, for example) but it is most often associated with illusion. During one of her walks, Juana catches sight of the sea: ". . . from the hill it seemed so immediately close that for a moment Juana felt she could take one vertical step and fall straight down into it. From time to time the planted vegetation and the tall reeds parted and revealed not only the sea but a ship on it, white

and solitary but looking very close. An infantile illusion, this closeness, Juana knew, thinking of forgotten days back home when she had run from her mother's restraining hold thinking she was going down to find this time a ship really touchable on the shore. Even now the urge was not entirely dead, in spite of knowledge and the passage of years" (pp. 39-40). A few pages later, Efua's "prophet" conducts an orgiastic baptism on this same stretch of beach. In these passages water suggests the infinitely fluid nature of experience, its formlessness, its susceptibility to various interpretations — suggests, in short, ambiguity itself. The relation of the singing boy and the sea is therefore analogous to that of the woman and the sea in Wallace Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West": the shapeless element is momentarily subdued and given form by the art of the singer.

Armah alludes twice in *Fragments* to the story of Ananse without relating it[9] and in part of this old Akan myth lies one aspect of the novel's largely unspoken affirmation. It is said that Ananse Kokrofu, the great spider, grew worried about the state of wisdom in the world; it was not being looked after properly, and some of it was getting lost. He decided to collect all the wisdom and store it at the top of a tree. Basil Davidson tells the rest of the story:

> In due course, the elders say, Ananse did indeed finish collecting the world's wisdom. He packed all this in a gourd and began to climb a tall palm. Halfway to the top he got into difficulties: he had tied the gourd in front of him, and it hampered his climbing. At this point his son Ntikuma, who was looking up from below, called in a shrill young voice: "Father, if you really had all the wisdom in the world up there with you, you would have tied that gourd on your back." This was too much even for Ananse, who was tired from long labour. He untied the gourd in a fit of temper and threw it down. It broke and the wisdom was scattered far and wide. After a while people who had learned their lesson came and gathered in their own gourds whatever each could find. It is this that explains why a few people have much wisdom, some have a little, but many have none at all.[10]

Here is a traditional African view of fragmentation, and one which implies, like Naana's last monologue, the order and unity we cannot see. At the end of the novel, Baako's mind and the vision of order are both fragmented, but there is a

note of hope in the theme of the artist's developing perception. If Baako says, in effect, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins,"[11] the novel implies a fuller vision to which he may yet attain. The ultimate order we yearn for may exist only in the artist's mind, and the artist may be, like Baako, far from attaining his vision of the whole, but Armah seems to suggest that we must believe in the possibility of success if we are to accomplish anything at all. The artist's relation to his vision is perhaps analogous to Juana's glimpse of a beautiful bird perched on the stalk of a flower: "The impulse to touch that smooth beauty grew strong in her, and she approached the flower quietly, hoping to draw near without frightening the bird. But before she could take more than a few steps the bird flew upward, hovered almost without any motion just above the greenness, then darted swiftly sideways to settle on a reed more safely out of reach" (pp. 40-41).

Armah has shown, from the beginning of his career, a willingness to take great chances. In *Fragments,* his use of ambiguous and contradictory images runs the risk of confused or self-defeating effects, but his success in treating the theme of the artist's perception is near-complete. What I have attempted here is not, of course, a complete account of Armah's novel. *Fragments* contains, as Gerald Moore suggests, elements of the satirical *roman à clef;*[12] it also deals with alienation, of which Baako's madness is an extreme example, and — less obviously than *Beautyful Ones* — with the political ideas of Frantz Fanon. But, precisely because the apparently simple narrative suggests different interpretations, the theme of perception remains central to the novel and to our understanding of it.

NOTES

[1]All references are to the first edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) and will be given parenthetically in the text.

[2]"Armah's Second Novel," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 9, no. 2 (August 1974), 69.

[3]*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 176.

[4]Angus Wilson, *No Laughing Matter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 293.

[5]Cf. *Beautyful Ones,* p. 69: "The destructive thing wee [marijuana] does is to lift the blindness and to let you see the whole of your life laid out in front of you."

[6]Baako wants to write, if only for Ghanavision, but he is carefully associated with other arts as well: he plays the guitar, and we know from Ocran that he showed talent as a painter before leaving Ghana.

[7]Pp. 210-13.

[8]It is this myth which Baako and Juana will unconsciously act out: Baako is the musician, he and Juana do make love in the water (pp. 177-80), and Juana is absent during Baako's breakdown. Note that in the myth, as in the novel, solitude and human contact are the sources of different kinds of strength, and the artist's suffering contributes to the perfection of his art.

[9]See, e.g., p. 95: ". . . the repeated figure of the protean spider Ananse, always in a different position along the turns and radiating lines of his web." This description and parts of the myth suggest Ananse's symbolic role as a type of the artist.

[10]Basil Davidson, *The African Genius: An Introduction to African Cultural and Social History* (Boston: Atlantic, Little Brown, 1970), p. 17.

[11]T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land,* l. 431.

[12]"Armah's Second Novel," 69.