

## Symbolism and Narrative Strategy in Armah's *Fragments* and Why Are We So Blest?

**BOUHADIBA Malika**

(Université d'Oran)

### Résumé

Le but de cet article est d'éclaircir le symbolisme des deux romans. L'argument présenté est que ce symbolisme est étroitement lié aux thèmes principaux de ces romans: la pratique révolutionnaire et la réhabilitation culturelle. Par ailleurs, l'article essaye de démontrer comment Armah manipule la structure narrative des deux romans. L'article maintient que grâce à une manipulation magistrale de la technique du 'monologue intérieur', *Fragments* est le roman le plus réussi de l'œuvre d'Armah

*Fragments* has a strong symbolic dimension. This dimension has been granted special attention by Joe Lurie, in his '*Fragments between the Loved Ones and the Community*'.<sup>1</sup> But his treatment of the symbolism of the novel is, at times, overdone. This is the case when he attempts to find a symbolic explanation to some events that seem to be realistic ones, since they often occur in daily life. Take as an instance the explanation he gives of the two ducks in the pond in Paris, which he regards as anticipating Baako's madness. He writes: 'The momentary violence of the duck's departure prefigures Baako's insanity, his separation from Juana who remains in the water in a society that has little to give'.<sup>1</sup> The incident might simply have been witnessed by Armah himself, while in Paris. The other incident that Lurie sees as symbolic of Baako's madness is that of the killing of the rabid dog. This, again, might have been an incident that Armah witnessed, since in 1967, when he started writing his novel, there were many rabid dogs in Ghana.<sup>1</sup> Some of the outstanding symbolic events of the novel have, however, been disregarded by Lurie. This is the case of the boy's predicament, in Chapter 6, which symbolises Baako's. The boy who sings for the fishermen, offering them a piece of their

traditional culture, is silenced by them because they reject that culture since it goes counter to their material strivings. Baako who was appalled at the ill-treatment of the boy remarks: 'that boy, he was giving them something they did not have' (p. 129). Like the boy, Baako is silenced by the 'big shots' of Ghanavision, who do not want him to remind them of their traditional culture, since its principles are antithetical with their self-interests. They silence him by rejecting his scripts, which have a cultural bias. Again, like the boy who does not bring any fish from his trip, Baako does not bring the 'cargo', i.e., material goods, when he comes back to his country. Another symbolic event that has been overlooked by the critics of the novel is the destruction of the television set. This event symbolises the shattering of Baako's vision of a better future for the masses. Baako has expected the television to contribute to the awakening of the masses' revolutionary consciousness, through didactic films made out of his scripts. These scripts express Baako's commitment to social reform. Their intended didacticism seems, however, hampered by the extensive use of abstract symbolism. The message of the films made out of them will most certainly be as incomprehensible for the masses; it is aimed at, as would be an impressionist painting or a surrealist poem. In the script entitled 'The Roots', which illustrates the slavery era, the White men are symbolically referred to as: 'LINEAR. SHARP-EDGED PILLARS' (p. 146), and the Blacks as: 'VAGUE FLUID FORMS ... CIRCULAR' (p. 146). In the other script, 'The Brand', which dramatises the plight of the masses in modern Ghanaian society, different geometrical forms are used to symbolise different groups of people. There is a circle and a square. The circle represents the masses and the square the elite. The circle is weak and dark. Its darkness symbolises the misery in which the common people live. The square is strong and white. Its whiteness represents the welfare of the middle class. The square is above the circle. Its inhabitants have reached it by using the shoulders of their countrymen from the circle. This may be seen as a symbolising the exploitation of the masses by the bourgeoisie. Among the climbers,

there is the hero who attempts to fool the masses, whose shoulders he is using as steps, by claiming that his march upwards towards the square is an attempt to achieve their liberation. This is an indirect reference to the Ghanaian rulers' attempt to deceive the masses by telling them that they are working for their welfare, while they are busy with self-aggrandisement projects. Once he has reached the square, the hero has changed his objectives and has given up his role of 'Osagyefo', i.e., saviour. This symbolically refers to Nkrumah's betrayal of his people. Like the hero, he has gradually renounced his revolutionary principles. In this script, Baako points to different people's attitudes to the existing socio-economic order. He uses different persons to represent different groups. There is the old man who refuses to serve as a step to those who are climbing towards the square, and therefore he lies flat. He represents the traditionalist elders who refuse to conform to the new order. He is gifted with foresight, as Naana is. He knows that once the hero reaches the top, a high social position and belongs to the middle class, he will never come down to join the masses. The second protagonist of the script is the middle-aged man who sees the solution to the existing situation in the encouragement of mass-climbing towards the square and the destruction of the circle, i.e., the poor class. The third actor is the weeping old woman who is ignored by all. She warns about the extermination of the poor, i.e., the circle, by the rich, i.e., the square. She represents the Naanas, those who stand for traditional culture, and who campaign for the return of communalism. The fourth actor of Baako's script is the angry woman. She occasionally wakes up from the lethargy into which she has fallen through despair, to call for the destruction of the square. This woman represents the common people who often are submissive to their fate, but who, at times, become aware of the necessity to act against their exploiters. The fifth actor is the 'thinker', i.e., the intellectual. This man represents the revolutionary intellectual who preaches revolutionary action but remains passive. He adopts the Marxist view of the internal contradictions of capitalism. He believes that the square will be

defeated by its own forces. The two choruses of the script, the circle and the square, represent respectively, the working class and the middle class. The people of the circle are in a state of despondency because of their destitution, and those of the square are in a state of buoyancy because of their opulence. On the whole, this script expresses Armah's concern for revolutionary praxis. The other script, 'The Root', expresses Armah's concern for cultural rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup> It is a re-enactment of the slave trade. Armah attempts to recreate the slave trade episode to remind his people of their forebears' misfortune at the hands of the Whites. Through his recreation of the past, he seems to suggest that lessons can be learnt from it. In the main, in this script, whose title is quite significant, Armah prompts his people to look for their roots. Through the script, he makes Baako carry out the task of cultural revival. As the example of the scripts shows, Armah's symbolism is tightly related to his thematic concerns and serves his didacticism. This is also the case in *Why Are We So Blest?* There symbolism is simple when Armah deals with the fate of the community, such as the oppression of the African masses and their exploitation by their ruling class. This is clearly meant to serve the revolutionary message of the novel. For instance, through the image of the lorry that Solo draws, Armah attempts to drive home his message about the revolutionary betrayal of the African leaders and the necessity for revolutionary change. The picture shows a truck going up a hill with the villains, i.e., the corrupt people, on board. The truck is pushed by the 'militants' who are destroyed during the operation. Solo points out that the image 'represents society' (p. 27). This image applies both to the colonial and the post-colonial situation of African countries. In the former case, the truck represents the country, and the summit towards which it is pushed represents Independence. In this case, the destroyed 'militants' stand for the martyrs who died for their country's independence. In the latter case, the truck represents the middle class, and the 'militants' who are pushing it represent the working class. The exploitation of the working class by the middle class appears in the fact that some people are comfortably on board

the truck, whereas some others are painfully pushing it forward. Another example of this didactic symbolism features in the analogy Armah draws of Modin, and by extension that of the revolutionary African intellectual, with Prometheus. In the Greek mythology, Prometheus attempts to save humanity, by stealing fire from Zeus and taking it to the Humans. Like him, Modin rebels against the 'blessed', the elite to which he belongs, and joins those of a lower social status, the masses, whom he plans to help improve their social conditions.

Symbolism is, on the other hand, obscure when Armah deals with the fate of his protagonists. A case in point is Solo's statement: 'Perhaps I am the spume, a little speck of fugitive water sent into the air by huge waves in their crashing against hard obstacles' (p. 11). This kind of obscure image is used when Armah deals with the personal fate of his characters to show how confused their minds are as a consequence of their existential alienation.

Since Armah is concerned with existential alienation in the two novels, he uses a modernist narrative strategy. *Fragments* has a complex structure. The chapters appear as non-related fragments, especially the first three ones. The link between them becomes clearer and the novel takes shape by Chapter Four. The plot centres round two antagonistic forces, the forces of good and evil, representing respectively, uprightness and immorality. Most chapters of the novel embody two events, one of which is violent, and around which the action centres. In Chapter 2, the violent incident is the killing of the dog and the peaceful incident is the women's baptism in the sea. In Chapter 4, the violent event is Bukari's fight in the bar, and the opposite event is Araba's childbirth. In Chapter 5, the violent incident is Boateng's clash with the American writer; the peaceful event is Baako's first meeting with Juana. The violent incident in Chapter 6 is the brutal mistreatment of the child by the fisherman. It is juxtaposed with the event of Baako's and Juana's peaceful rest by the seaside. In Chapter 8, the violent event is the two men's fight over the T.V. set, its peaceful parallel is Baako's relief after burning his scripts.

The violent incident of Chapter 9 is Baako's victimisation by those who attempted to capture him, to take him to an asylum. The opposite incident is Baako's recording of his thoughts on the 'cargo cult'. These paired events form a symmetrical design running through the text.

This symmetry reappears in the characterization of the novel. There are antithetically paired types of protagonists who can be classified as positive or negative characters according to their behaviour. In Chapter 1, the positive character is Naana. She wants to perform a proper farewell ritual for Baako. Her negative counterpart is Foli, Baako's uncle, who wants to cheat the spirits. He pours a small quantity of schnapps on the floor for them, and keeps the remainder for himself. In Chapter 2, the positive character is the little child, who attempts to save his dog's life. His opposite is the man who kills the dog. Baako is the positive protagonist of Chapter 3. He is an honest citizen, since he does not use his professional status to enrich himself, as it is commonly the case. Brempong is his negative counterpart. He is a corrupt person who practises nepotism. The positive character of Chapter 4 is Ocran, a man of high integrity, whereas the negative person is the Principal Secretary who indulges in corrupt practices.

In Chapter 5, Boateng is the positive character. He is victim of the unscrupulous Akosua Russell, who is his negative counterpart. She exploits young artists by using their works for her own profit. The positive character in Chapter 6 is the child who attempts through his song to remind the fishermen of their culture. His negative counterpart is the fisherman who beats him, a symbolic attempt to reject the cultural values that the child proposed. In Chapter 8, there is, again, an encounter between Baako, the positive character, and Brompteng, the negative one. The latter goes past Baako in his Mercedes, a fruit of his corruption, and does not stop for him, though he waves to him. In Chapter 11, Naana represents the positive person. She cares for Araba's child's safety. She wants the outdooing ceremony to be held in accordance with the customary laws so that the child's life can be saved. The negative person is

Efua, whose greed for material gain is apparent in the way she extracts money from her guests, during the outdoor ceremony. These two kinds of characters represent the two classes in Ghanaian society, the rich and the poor class. The antagonism between the positive and the negative characters in the novel represents the conflict that exists between these two social classes. The wealthy class is represented by the negative characters whose material welfare has been achieved through unscrupulous means. The poor class is represented by the positive characters whose integrity is an impediment to the improvement of their social status. Besides representing the oppressed class, the positive characters, who are endowed with a high morality serve the main motifs of the novel. Baako exemplifies the 'existential alienation motif and that of social reform. Naana is an agent of the cultural rehabilitation motif, and Juana is that of racial retrieval. She serves the motif of historical reconstruction, since she is the offspring of a slave, slavery being an important aspect of this motif.

Like *Fragments*, *Why Are We So Blest?* has a complex structure. Its complexity lies in the lack of chronological sequence of the different sections. This is due to the flash back technique that Armah uses. The novel is made up of thirty unnumbered sections that bear the names of the major protagonists, Solo, Modin and Aimée, and that centre round their plight. The first three chapters are devoted to these three characters respectively. This cycle is, however, not maintained throughout the novel. At times, two consecutive chapters bear the name of the same character. The size of the chapters and the number of chapters devoted to every character vary according to the importance given by the writer to the character. The longest chapters are devoted to Solo, who is the narrator. The biggest number of chapters, thirteen is, on the other hand, devoted to Modin, since he epitomizes the main themes of the novel, i.e., revolutionary commitment and Negro Nationalism. The shortest and the fewest chapters are devoted to Aimée, who plays a secondary role. In the main, Armah devotes more space to

his black characters as he is primarily concerned with the predicament of his brethren.

The episodic dimension of narrative structure also accounts for the complexity of the novel. Some events are announced but details about their occurrence are delayed to a later stage. The incident of Aimée's rape is a case in point. There is a reference to it in Chapter Twenty Eight, but its causes are not disclosed till Chapter Thirty. This modernist technique of indirect provision of information which is meant to sustain suspense is used in Chapter Two, where Solo is reading and disclosing the content of Modin's and Aimée's notebooks, but the reader is not informed of this fact till Chapter Twenty Eight. Modin's experience is re-enacted according to its description in his notebook, as a post-mortem. Suspense is also maintained when Armah keeps his characters anonymous, when he first introduces them, e.g., in Chapter Three, or when he introduces them and keeps their role in the plot secret for a while. This is the case for Naita and Mr Oppenhardt. They are referred to in Chapter Two, but their role in the protagonists' life is not indicated until Chapter Eight. Hence, the events Armah describes require piecing together to have an overall idea of the main plot.

The stream-of-consciousness narrative technique<sup>1</sup> that Armah uses accounts for the fragmented form of the novel. This technique is notably used in the episodes where the protagonists speculate about existential alienation, using an existentialist rhetoric. A case in point is Solo's interior monologue about Modin's alienation: He, plucked from the damned, turned into whatever it is the Anglo-Saxons call their assimilateds, the line of his growth bent, his soul grown into some new freak, something lonely, needing playthings to punctuate an unbearable loneliness, chose, a lonely child, what among the arsenal of consumable things attracted him most, and found in it destruction. (p. 207). Another example of the use of such abstract language is Solo's reflection: 'If there were a way for those with the guts and the desire to end our destruction to contain aloneness long enough to find souls to travel with, not to embrace

destroyers!’ (p. 209). Here, Armah is being ironical about the African intellectuals and their obsession with their alienation.

In the main, as the modernist narrative structure of the two novels shows, Armah is as much concerned with form as he is with content. Still, his handling of form is much more elaborated in *Fragments* than it is in *Why Are We So Blest?* In fact, the mastery with which he handles narrative structure, notably the stream-of-consciousness technique, in *Fragments*, makes it the most aesthetically pleasing of his fictional works.

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