Hybrid Discourse in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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Abstract

Our paper appropriates Bakhtin's typology of hybrid discourses in order to investigate the language of Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968). Armah is a Ghanaian elite writer, who has always denied the influence of Western writers on his fictions. Yet, his first novel shows that he is also the heir to Africa's popular writers, who extensively appropriated the texts of western master-narratives (Newell 2000). This article is underpinned in the distinction that Bakhtin makes between the intentional and the organic kinds of hybrid discourse. It re-reads the organic type through the layers of quotations highlighted by Stephanie Newell in her investigation of the 'unofficial' side of African fiction.

Résumé

Notre article emprunte à Bakhtin la typologie du discourse hybride afin de d'étudier la langue d'écriture du roman d'Ayi Kwei Armah The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born (L'age d'or n'est pas pour demain 1968). Armah est un écrivain ghanéen qui a toujours nié l'influence des auteurs occidentaux sur son œuvre. Et pourtant, son premier roman démontre bien qu'il est aussi l'héritier des auteurs populaires africains, qui approprient abondamment les textes des grands récits occidentaux (Newell 2000).Cette étude se base sur la distinction opérée par Bakhtin entre les discours organiquement et intentionnellement hybrides. Elle propose une re-lecture du discours organiquement hybride à travers les 'niveaux de citations' soulignées par Stephanie Newell dans son étude de la partie 'officieuse' de la fiction africaine.

Two creative thrusts straddle the poetic imagination of the modern African writer, with regard to the literary heritage of the West. Ashcroft *et al*. (2004: 37) call them appropriation and abrogation. Abrogation, on the one hand, is a disjunctive process which involves the rejection of the Western language and its culture, because it perceives them as remnants of the colonial past. Appropriation, on the other hand, is not as clear cut. It looks for accommodation rather than rejection. It involves two languages, two cultures in a negotiation

process that attempts to create local meaning, a particular worldview, with foreign words. Postcolonial literature, therefore, grows out of a tension, an *agon*, in the poetic imagination of the writer, torn as he is by these two creative impulses, these two ideological postures.

Translated into the discursive categories of hybridity, appropriation and amalgamation correspond to Bakhtin's typology of hybrid discourses (1992): the organic, "unintentional, unconscious" hybrid, and the deliberate "intentional" hybrid. The former is the discourse in which the mixture of languages is fused into a new system, which elicits the historical evolution of all languages, whereas the latter is the "internally dialogic" form, in which languages and ideologies are consciously set against each other. Bakhtin sees the first kind of hybrid structure as characteristic of any living, evolving language, while he assimilates the second to the immanently dialogised nature of the language in the novel.

In other words, organic hybrid discourses involve mixing and fusion. They are part and parcel of a natural process in language and cultural contact. Bakhtin explains that they are always mute and opaque. Nevertheless, they remain historically "productive [… with] potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world" (ibid. 360). Contrary to this kind, the intentional hybrid comes as a result of an artistic intention to dialogize hybridity; an artistic intention that produces disjunction rather than fusion. The aim of this disjunctive type is separation, because it is essentially a contestatory site of more than one discourse, with one of them trying to unsettle, disarticulate the other discourses representing authority. For Bakhtin, therefore, hybridization, best concretized in the novel, is closely linked to subversion of authority.

Applied to the modern development in creative writings in Africa, organic hybrid discourse finds its most conspicuous expression in the productions of the popular writers. According to Stephanie Newell (2000), organic hybridity, even if she does not use the Bakhtinian terms, was born among African popular writers as a result of a generational conflict between the elderly and the young. At the level of linguistic performance, including literature, the young popular writers affirmed their social status vis-à-vis the elderly, who manipulated the traditional proverbs, by drawing authority from "a shared pool of [foreign] literary languages, crossing different genres and language registers and, in the process, creating narrative

whirlpools that are self-consciously textual" (18). In the traditional society, proverbs were, to paraphrase one of Chinua Achebe's famous proverbs, the palm wine with which words are eaten. But in the acculturated context of the colonized society, the quotation replaced the proverb in its function of putting across and articulating arguments related to social issues such as money, corruption, gender relations etc.

Unlike market popular writers, Africa's international novelists seem to have resorted to intentional hybrid forms in their novels. Moved by deep nationalist convictions, these fiction writers assimilated their creative task to the nationalist struggle for political liberation and cultural revival. As a consequence, they meant their fictions as contestatory sites, in which they grappled with all the symbols of Western hegemony. Polemics, parody and anxiety of influence are all hallmarks of the discourse of these literary productions.

Many works belonging to the early generations of African novelists elicit the literary and ideological orientation towards contestation and struggle, in one word disjunction. Chinua Achebe's first novels are cases in point. It is, indeed, interesting to relate how he matured the project of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, the Nigerian writer and critic writes

> At the University I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much-praised *Mister Johnson,* and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned.
>
> Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way I know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son (123).

Although Achebe just half states it, he nevertheless recognizes that the birth of his first novel, not to say the whole blossoming of his artistic talent, came as a result of his contact with the colonial fiction, of which *Mister Johnson* is only one example. *Things Fall Apart* can, therefore, be read as a dialogical novel, which attempts to challenge the hegemonic voices contained within the classical type of colonial

fictions, of which Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are two prototypes.

Our aim in this article is to show that organic and hybrid discourses within the African modern novel may also exist side by side. In our view, the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah is a novelist whose poetic imagination accords equal importance to the intentional and organic hybrid discourses. It is true that in his extra-literary writings he has encouraged critics to see the hybridization process of his novels as essentially contestatory vis-à-vis Western writers. For instance, in his response to Charles Larson (1971), who has drawn many parallels between his two first novels and many novels belonging to European writers, mainly the fictions of James Joyce, he took him to task by calling his criticism "larsony" (1976). However, Armah's corpus of novels to date clearly shows that he is also the heir of the popular novelists, whose imagination was lit up by the poetic fire of their Western counterparts.

This article attempts to substantiate the claim above through the study of Armah's first fiction *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968)[1]. This novel is a sardonic critique of African leadership and an extended commentary on the continent's popular disillusionment with Independence. Its modernist intricate form and its grotesque bodily and excrement imagery have left no critic indifferent. However, unlike all the critics who focused on the novel's pattern of images solely from an intrinsic perspective, we propose ourselves to dwell a little more on the same imagery as part and parcel of Bakhtin's categories of the hybrid discourse, the organic and the intentional. Our approach will, therefore, be a comparative approach that involves many comparisons between *The Beautyful Ones* and other Western master narratives. Of particular interest and length will be the comparison that we shall undertake between this novel and William Wordsworth's "Ode, Intimations of Immortality through the Recollections of Early Childhood" (1806).

The opening chapter of *The Beautyful Ones* features a corrupt bus driver counting the money he has stolen from innocent passengers. Suddenly, he becomes aware that not all the passengers have left the bus. One of them has remained inside and surprised him admiring and smelling an old Cedi note. In order to comment on the sense of guilt which overtakes the conductor, Armah enlists a quotation from the Bible and reinstates it in the narrative in order to create a new

meaning: '*And so words and phrases so often thrown away as jokes reveal their true meaning. And Jesus wept. Aha, Jesus wept*' (p. 4 italics in the original). This quotation achieves textuality with the Bible, which it uses as a master-text. At the same time, it also asserts the proverbial dimension of Armah's borrowings, since it situates the narrative in a didactic space, rather than a realist one. Seen from this perspective, the novel can be inscribed in the genre of moral fables, which are no less than 'advice-giving spaces', dynamically spilling in the realm of proverbs.

However, Armah's borrowing from the arch-text of the Bible is not always used in the context of his narrative as authoritative discourse. In fact, in another context of the novel, the narrator proceeds to the description of 'the shitman' (p. 104), i.e. the latrine man who is in charge of cleaning the railway block's lavatories, and follows his description with an italicised quotation from the Bible: '*The last shall be the first. Indeed, it is even so*' (p. 104). Taken in its context within the novel, this Biblical quotation reads like a sardonic commentary that deflates the authority of its master-discourse and, in Keith Booker's words, 'both challenges the official seriousness of the Bible and also uses the biblical passage to suggest a possible inversion of the existing power structure' (111).

According to us, Armah's use of the two biblical statements above is paradigmatic of his complex quoting modes from other Western texts. In the fashion of most Ghanaian market writers, his, too, is a hybrid discourse, which draws authority from a multiple set of genres and language registers. However, unlike these popular writers who engage narrative resources chiefly for demonstrating their proficiency in the art of quoting others, Armah inserts quotations as forms of both creative organic fusion that merges different styles, and a dialogised subversion that destabilises and contests certain modes of representations and master-discourses. In this way, Armah's novel seems to espouse Bakhtin's concepts of intentional and organic hybrids, without ever favouring one at the expense of the other.

The Beautyful Ones is replete with other quotations from foreign master-texts and narratives. Teacher and the Man are the characters through which the author displays his proficiency at quoting from other sources in order to secure a proverbial space of his own. Teacher is described as an alienated individual deeply immersed in foreign cultures and arts. During his conversations with the Man, he usually

tells him about other cultures and philosophies. For instance, one day, he describes his loneliness through Plato's story of the cave. Teacher identifies himself with Plato's philosopher who ventured outside the cave, and encountered the world of colours and light. His identification with the figure of the myth confers to him the status of an advice-giver, who may guide his audience towards certain decisions. Obviously, Armah's designs in drawing the ethical portrait of Teacher in *Platonian* traits are didactic. They are meant to meet the same ethics as the moral standards, which lead the behaviour of the main character, the Man.

The Man, too, is a moral type of characters, and his position in the novel as the morally virtuous requires from him, and through him Armah himself, to display skills in proverbial quoting, which are likely to confer to his behaviour moral acceptability, and provide artistic authority to Armah. Many examples illustrate Armah's use of quotations, even though they are not always marked as quotations *per se*. For instance, in one of the Man's frequent meditations on his surrounding environment, he recalls the story of a friend of him who had adopted the name of Rama Krishna, in a desperate attempt to escape the final decline and disintegration of the body. The remembering of the tragic story of this Ghanaian re-incarnation of the Indian deity triggers in the mind of the main character some lines from Gibran's *The Prophet,* quoted at a paragraph length

> Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth,
> And like an air plant be sustained by the light.
> But you must kill to eat,
> And rob the newly born of its mother's milk to quench your thirst,
> Let it then to be an act of worship (p. 48).

Armah's evocation of Rama Krishna and his quotation from *The Prophet* aim at fulfilling a proverbial function, whereby he claims legitimacy as a writer, and enforces the moral designs inherent in his fiction. For *The Beautyful Ones* is a novel that is deeply permeated by moral sensibility, and strongly committed to the denunciation of the social evils, which plagued African governments and societies after Independence. Hence, Armah's quoting from Gibran's poem enables him to draw on a mode of discourse which is easily recognisable and culturally familiar to his African readers.

The marked quotation of Gibran's poem and the invocation of Rama Krishna are only two small illustrations of Armah's tendency to write like most of his young Ghanaian contemporary popular writers. Even though they hold no pivotal position in the novel's structure of imagery, they show that Armah was eager to incorporate and fuse deliberately a wide variety of quotations within the body of his text, creating dynamic meanings with local connotations.

To appreciate more the creative fusion of local and foreign influences in *The Beautyful Ones*, we suggest scrutinizing his use of the metaphor of the gleam. The latter is a metaphor that structures most of his imagery, and which has its origin in William Wordsworth poem *Intimations of Immortality from the Recollection of Early Childhood*. Armah's critics were quick to acknowledge the importance of this image to the imagery of the novel, and register the thematic potential carried through it. For instance, Margaret Folarin (1971) connected the gleam to the image of the cave, and thus to a wider structure of light and shadow images, demonstrating that the gleam is no less than 'the light of a Hades' (1971: 118). Unlike Folarin, John Lutz (2003) has gone in a deeper analysis, and linked this image to the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism, arguing that the allure of the gleam results into cultural and psychological impoverishment of the natives. Beside Folarin and Lutz, many other critics were interested in the symbolic potential of this metaphor and explained it in terms of the widespread materialism, corruption and economic dependency decried in Armah's novel. What all these critics fail to register is the textual provenance of the metaphor and the way Armah reprocessed it in a local fashion in order to create new meanings, consistent with his artistic and didactic designs.

The metaphor of the gleam is not the only conscious echo Armah sends to Wordrswoth's *Intimations of Immortality*. In the opening lines of Chapter Six, Teacher's reminiscences involve an idea which enters into intertextual relationship with the poem

> Why do we waste so much time with sorrow and pity for ourselves? It is true now that we are men, but not so long ago we were helpless messes of soft flesh and unformed bone squeezing through bursting motherholes, trailing dung and exhausted blood. We could not ask then why it was necessary for us also to grow. So why now should we be shaking our head and wondering bitterly

> why there are children together with the old, why time does not stop when we ourselves have come to stations where we would like to rest? It is so like a child, to wish all movement to cease. (p. 62)

The passage above contains overt allusions to the following lines from *Immortality Ode*

> Our birth is but a sleep and forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar:
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy,
> But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;(…)
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day (247).

The common themes of birth, growing up, and mourning that bind the two passages are more than incidental; they are wilful cases of a proverbial quoting process which yields into structural and thematic similarities. That Armah's text is associated with the *recollections* of Teacher, *the man of the cave*, strengthens further their intertextual bond, since Wordsworth, too, appealed to Plato's myth of the cave in order to explain his own estrangement from nature. The issue, now, is to know how Armah strategically selected his borrowing from Wordsworth's poem and activated it in a proverbial fashion that contains within itself insights, judgement and/or warnings, just like proverbs do. To understand some insight of this aspect of Teacher's reminiscences, a survey of the poem's meaning is needed.

Intimations of Immortality can be read as an ode which celebrates the child's communion with nature and mourns the loss of innocence that accompanies his growth. In the opening line of the poem, Wordsworth writes: "(t)here was a time when meadow, grove, and

stream / The earth, and every common sight, / to me did seem / Apparelled in celestial light." The celestial light stands for a sense of illumination and wonder, which resulted in a deep sense of the unity of the beings, and created a strong intimate bond between the child, i.e. the author, and nature. However, growing up erased the poet's childhood memories and broke his sense of harmony with the world of nature. At the end of Stanza IV, i.e. the elegiac part of the ode, the poem breaks into a pathetic tone, wherein Wordsworth pathetically wonders: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" What remains of the poem is an attempt by the poet at answering these two questions. His answer leads him to develop a theory of birth, growth and death inspired by Plato's myth of the Cave and his philosophy of the transmigration of the soul. This theory stipulates that life on earth is a dim shadow of an earlier, purer existence, dimly recalled in childhood, and then forgotten in the process of growing up. From this belief, Wordsworth invokes the joy and blessing of memory, which stands as no less than the remnant "ember" of youth's "visionary gleam". Its spark of inspiration is the light by which man can overcome his exile from the primordial world of perfection, and finds consolation in the "years that bring the philosophic mind" of adult life.

Read through Wordsworth's youthful revolutionary aspirations, *Intimations of Immortality* can be considered as his 'escapist' response to his growing disillusionment with the French Revolution. During his youth, he travelled to France, married a French woman, and both witnessed and supported the popular storming at La Bastille that led to the fall of the French monarchy and the establishment of the first French Republic. Like most of his contemporary intellectuals, such as Coleridge and Southey, he believed in the ideals of liberty, brotherhood and equality proclaimed by the French masses. And when the French King was dethroned, he composed a poem entitled "The French Revolution" (1805), and celebrated the event as a new dawn for mankind, wherein humanity will be redeemed from political tyranny

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive
> But to be young was very heaven! Oh times!
> In which the meagre, stale forbidding ways
> Of custom, law and statute took at once
> The attraction of a country in romance (131).

However, the bloody turn of events taken by the French revolutionary change and the rise of Robespierre to power, and all the cruelties that followed the political extremism of the Jacobists, profoundly shook his optimistic beliefs and led him to take his distance from all kinds of political commitment. And when he composed his *Intimations of Immortality*, he had already become a political and moral sceptic, whose philosophy was deeply confined within escapist and domestic themes of nature and childhood. His deep scepticism and utter disillusionment offer striking parallels to Teacher's reminiscences in *The Beautyful Ones.*

Both Teacher's and Wordsworth's memories are overwhelmed by a deep sense of estrangement from nature/society, and the isolation that ensue it. Besides, both are deeply disappointed with their present condition; a disappointment that is no less than the result of an enthusiastic commitment to a (political) ideal, deceived and betrayed. However, these surface parallels between Wordsworth life-experience and the figure of Teacher hide deeper meaning, since Armah's elevates the poet's experience and his poem's philosophy to a structural allegory[2] of Ghana's modern history. At the same time, he also deflates his 'splendid vision' of harmony and unity, by erasing every kind of joy and happiness and debunking both the 'visionary' potential of the gleam, and the soothing power of memory.

Armah's allegory of Ghana's modern history associates the country's independence with the birth of a child. However, this birth is described in scatological terms, which borrow from a grotesque mode of writing: 'not so long ago we were helpless messes of soft flesh and unformed bone squeezing through bursting motherholes, trailing dung and exhausted blood'. The grotesque bodily images of blood, flesh and motherholes play down the child's celestial birth in *Intimations of Immortality* and comments obliquely on Ghana's newly acquired independence"[3]. Initially, this event was a source of hope and joy for the people, who were happy to get rid of the English domination that lasted for many decades and drained a lot of the country's natural resources. But the enthusiasm generated by Independence rapidly faded, and the Ghanaian masses started to decry Kwame Nkrumah, the charismatic leader who led them through the path of freedom. Teacher illustrates well this popular disillusionment. His former passionate support for Nkrumah turned into a scornful

dismissal of the whole country's political elite, and his belief in the country's regeneration through freedom resulted into an anomic condition that intimates weakness, despair and disenchantment with life in general. Thus, his reminiscences, recorded in Chapter Six of the novel, voice his lost faith in modern Ghana, and express his melancholic sense of lost meaning.

In his reminiscences, Teacher does not dwell too much on the un-kept promises of Independence, because he sees it as an aborted birth. Instead, he lays the stress on the unnatural historical cycles of growth which hasten decomposition and decay: '[n]ow, whenever I am able to look past the beauty of the first days, the days of birth, I can see growth […] How horribly rapid everything has been […] There is something of an irresistible horror in such quick decay' (p.62). Here, the insight is that Independence was just a transient event, not worth too much praise. What matters is rather the 'quick decay'. Teacher illustrates well this idea when he stresses the unnatural length of the life-cycle that cripples the modern history of Ghana: 'let us say just that the cycle from birth to decay has been short. Short, brief. But otherwise not at all unusual' (p.63).

Teacher means his words to comment on the rapid decline of the Ghanaian society after Independence. This decline is given a metaphoric image through the grotesque story of the manchild, which completed all the natural cycles of birth, growth, and death in seven years and died a natural death. The weird story of this freak is also an overt allusion to Nkrumah's regime, whose rule lasted seven years, before a military coup ousted him from power. In the narrative, the manchild reflects the career of the socialist minister Joe Koomson, who started his life as a miserable man working at the harbour. Taking profit from the political muddle of Independence, Koomson joined the Party and became rapidly a man of power and influence within the government. Yet, not so long after his political and material success, Koomson is overtaken by the military coup and forced to escape from the country, leaving all his material possessions behind him.

In describing the natural processes of birth and growing-up as grotesque and scatological processes, Armah re-instates his borrowing from Wordsworth poem by creating new themes that fit his post-colonial allegory of disillusionment. His tendency to turn the unmarked quotations from *Intimations of Immortality* into proverbs and grotesque metaphors that comment on the country's history is

endorsed again with the metaphor of the gleam. In Wordsworth's poem, this metaphor stands for the celestial light that accompanies the child's growing-up, and which disappears with the advent of adult life. If Wordsworth associates it with the period of infancy, it is because, like most romantics, he believed that childhood is a lost paradise, an age of innocence and benevolence. Wordsworth's childhood in the rural area of Lake District might thus have appeared to him idyllic enough in order to be associated with an ideal primordial world of light, analogous to Plato's philosophy of pre-existence. But this is certainly not the case of Teacher, and through him Armah himself, whose mind 'is disturbed by memories from the past'; memories that convince him that 'so much time has gone by, and still there is no sweetness here□' (p. 67).

Teacher's dissatisfaction with his past memories is due to the fact that his is a past of both colonial violence and political struggle ending in betrayal and deception. The colonial trauma, together with the disillusionment with Independence, foster bleak images in the mind of Teacher and his friend, the Man. The two characters seem to have grown cynical enough to cast every kind of hope aside. But this is not the case of their fellow countrymen, who seem to have found their salvation in the gleam. For the majority of Ghanaians, the gleam is a symbol of hope; just like in *Intimations of Immortality* where it stands for the continuous positive interaction with the natural world. However, for Teacher and the Man, the gleam stands for the debased material promises that perpetuate the people dependence on Western imported products, and the corrupt means of cutting corners and eating the fruits of fraud.

Armah's appropriation of the image of the gleam from Wordsworth's poem and his refraction of this metaphor in his narrative create an ambivalent meaning that speaks of both the dream of independence and its betrayal. In other words, Armah refracts the metaphor of the gleam in order to draw a thematic line of continuity between the colonial past and the post-colonial present. The continuity between these two periods shows in the African fetishist interaction with the goods of the West, since the first days of colonial encounter. In the distant past, it was the ancient chiefs who had sold their people 'for the trinkets of Europe' (p. 149). But in the post-colonial present, it is the pursuers of the gleam who are selling their country's Independence for the same commodities. Hence, as symbols of

dependence and decadence, the Mercedes cars, sweet perfumes, high class hotels, etc are all avatars of the Western ‘trinkets’ that once enthralled pre-colonial tribal chiefs and kept them at sway.

Endnotes

[1] Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born.* 1968. Oxford: Heinemann, 1988. Further references will be included between brackets within the body of our text.

[2] One should not miss, here, the point that allegories are didactic narratives that can easily be equated with the same propensity contained within proverbs.

[3] The oblique reference to Ghana can be perceived through Armah's consistent use of the "we" pronoun instead of "I", all along the opening paragraph of Teacher's reminiscences.

[4] This sentence of the novel freely quotes the title of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *No Sweetness Here*, and is a further evidence of Armah's quoting mode of writing.

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