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Etsè Awitor

► **To cite this version:**

Etsè Awitor. The Aesthetic of Decay in Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Meja Mwangi's Kill Me Quick. *Acta Iassyensia Comparationis*, 2014, 2 (14), pp.47-54. hal-01171026

**HAL Id: hal-01171026**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01171026>**

Submitted on 18 Jan 2016

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# The Aesthetic of Decay in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*

FRANCIS ETSÉ AWITOR

*François Rabelais University, Tours (France)*

Through the analysis of the daily life of the protagonists, the ordinary people and events, this essay examines the socio-political, economic and moral decay/degeneration of post-independence Ghanaian and Kenyan society as portrayed in both novels. The postcolonial disenchantment and bitterness which are pervasive in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Kill Me Quick* are due to the gnawing corruption, embezzlement and nepotism that grip the whole society. To denounce these permeating evils, both authors turn to scatology, decay, putrefaction, filth and everything connected with human waste from the body such as odour, vomit, piss, blood, phlegm and spittle as literary devices.

**Keywords:** *decay; degeneration; scent; odour; corruption; misery; squalor; bitterness.*

Next to death [...] shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our beloved country.

Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*

**A**yi Kwei Armah and Meja Mwangi describe, in their novels, an environment polluted by smells, filth and decay. The protagonists, in their daily routine, are overwhelmed by the omnipresence of stench, rottenness, swear words, curses and insults.

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968)<sup>1</sup> depicts the daily life of an unnamed railroad clerk in independent Ghana who is torn between his family and his society. "The man," as he is called throughout the novel, witnesses the rot and the decay of his society epitomized by corruption, which becomes a "national game". The man refuses to take bribes and becomes a subject of disdain for Oyo, his wife, who is ready to give in, whatever the outcome. He is berated by his family for failing to provide for them and bring in the money to buy European 'gleam'. But how can he live without making compromises in a society where material comfort is synonymous with wealth and power? Teacher, another protagonist of Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, the man's friend, recoils

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, we refer to *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as *The Beautiful Ones*.

from his society because he refuses to take part in the “game”. Unlike the man and Teacher, Koomson and his wife, Estie, typify corruption and a gleaming life. “The gleam”, according to Kolawole Ogungbesan (1979: 95-96), “represents the luxuries of life, and carries with it the moral condemnation of comfort achieved at the expense of other people’s hardship”.

*Kill Me Quick* (1973) is the story of two young boys, two friends, Meja and Maina, in the Kenyan countryside who apply themselves at school in the belief that their diplomas will be very important for their success in a newly independent Kenya. After graduating from school they move to Nairobi, eager to secure jobs and personal success, but realise afterwards that their education has been a waste of time. They are shown living in supermarket dustbins, scavenging for food among the leftovers of the shops. Instead of earning a respectable place in society, they become gangsters and this will lead them inexorably to jail and to their doom.

Throughout *The Beautiful Ones*, Ayi Kwei Armah exposes the pervasive corruption of Ghanaian society and the failure of the economic and socio-political policy of Nkrumah’s regime by using filth, putrescence and excreta to present the insalubrious environment of the protagonists. The omnipresence of filth metaphorically shows the decadence of the system and literally the reality of a dirty landscape in Takoradi or Accra (the probable setting of the novel) and in most African cities. In a word, excremental language is used to depict the corrupt society as well as the stifling and dirty environment in which the characters live.

At the beginning of *The Beautiful Ones*, we see the main protagonist, the man, sleeping on a decrepit old bus on his way to work. Unfortunately, he dirties the seat with his spittle and has to clean it. But he does not have a handkerchief and he “leaned against the back leather and, moving his trunk sideways a few times, wiped the moisture off” (6). The conductor insults the man, and at the top of his voice asks him to “get out! [...] Were you waiting to shit in the bus?” (6) When we follow the man from the bus stop to his office at the Railway & Harbour Administration, we become aware of the filth that litters the street despite the waste receptacles “K.C.C. RECEPTACLE FOR DISPOSAL OF WASTE” which we are told are set up to keep the country clean because “the dirt was undesirable and must be eliminated” (7).

This campaign, presided over by a doctor, a Presbyterian priest, and a senior lecturer from the University of Legon, whose aim is to “rid the town of its filth” has brought hope at first but this hope is shattered in the end.

*In the end not many of the boxes were put out, though there was a lot said about the large amount of money paid for them. The few provided, however, had not been ignored. People used them well, so that it took no time at all for them to get full. People still used them, and they overflowed with banana peels and mango seeds and thoroughly sucked-out oranges and the chaff of sugarcane and most of all the thick brown wrapping from a hundred balls of kenkey. People did not have to go up to the boxes any more. From a distance they aimed their rubbish at the growing heap, and a good amount of juicy offal hit the face and sides of the box before finding a final resting place upon the heap* (8).

“This thing [the box] had been a gleaming white sign when it was first installed, and that was not so very long ago. Now even the lettering on it was no longer decipherable. It was covered over thickly with juice of every imaginable kind of waste matter” (7). The failure to implement this anti-litter campaign not only shows the ineptitude of the governing class to manage the public affair, but also the rootedness of corruption and decay. Here, Ayi Kwei Armah uses the image of the constant overflowing state of “receptacle of waste” and the omnipresence of filth and rubbish on the streets to expose and attack the corrupt system.

The description of the man’s office and especially the banister is truly repelling. The putrescence of the banister is obvious but nobody cares:

*Of course it was in the nature of the wood to rot with age. [But] apart from the wood itself there were, of course, people themselves, just so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course towards putre-*

faction. *Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister... Right-hand fingers still dripping with after piss and the stale sweat from the fat crotches. The callused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture... The wood would always win* (12-13, my emphasis).

In this passage, Ayi Kwei Armah uses the grotesque bodily imagery to allow the reader to picture the society the decayed banister typifies. The banister or the society is also compared to “a very long piece of diseased skin” (12). Apart from the natural rot and decay of the banister, it is men’s activity that hastens its putrefaction. The irretrievable decay of the banister is the image of the inevitable moral degeneration of society against which nothing can be done because “the wood would always win”. Ironically, corruption becomes a means of existence, and a value and ethic that everyone must embrace in order to find a place in society. The filth on the streets demonstrates the failure of development and the omnipresence of corruption because the money allocated to clean the city is squandered, misused and “in the end not many of the boxes were put out, though there was a lot said about the large amount of money paid for them” (8).

Likewise, in *Kill Me Quick* the reader is quickly exposed, in the opening chapter of the novel, to the realities of the backstreets of Nairobi where Maina and Meja are shown living in squalid conditions, eating the rotten leftovers. Meja almost vomits while trying to eat:

*There were various kinds of fruit in various stages of decay. There were also slices of stale, smelly bread and a few dusty chocolates. Some rock-hard cakes glared stonily back at them [...]. The oranges were no longer orange and beautiful but a deathly grey with mould. The cakes were no longer cakes but fragments of rock, and the chocolate looked like discarded shoe polish* (1, my emphasis).

Also, we are told that “the boys [Maina and Meja] fetched food from bins, slept in bins and lived in the backyards, in bins” (9, my italics). In these two passages, Meja Mwangi shows the filthy living condition of the boys. They are reduced to living in and from ‘bins’ and are condemned to eat rotten food. They are associated with bins, which govern and regulate their existence. To sleep at night, for example, Maina and Meja must wait “by the ditch behind the supermarket for the city rubbish collectors to come around. Until then they could not sleep without the risk of ending up in that rubbish dump five miles out of the city” (8). The fate of the two boys who may be found one day in a garbage dump is reminiscent of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s satirical novel, *The Wizard of the Crow* (2006), in which Kamiti, the hero, is reduced to begging on the capital’s streets. At the beginning of the novel, Kamiti wakes up on a top of a rubbish heap.

In portraying the sordid and inhuman conditions in which the two protagonists live, Meja Mwangi points to the incapacity of the independent Kenyan’s authorities to provide the basic needs (shelter and food) for their citizens who are forced to live in a polluted environment which manifests itself first and foremost by corruption, graft, poverty, squalor and robbery. The misery, distress, and the agony of the downtrodden are highlighted. In a word, social and societal problems are exposed.

The foul stench of the backyards and Shanty Land in *Kill Me Quick*, and the pervasive smell in *The Beautiful Ones*, are related to the general decay in which the characters live. The words “dirt”, “smell”, “excreta” and “odour” are referred to many times in both novels. In *The Beautiful Ones*, for instance, on page 3 and the second paragraph, the words related to smell occur more than ten times. The repetition of these words reinforces the idea of the pervasive and persistent decay of the characters’ environment. For example, in *Kill Me Quick*, Maina and Meja are “intoxicated by the foul smell of rotten vegetables” and the stench of the gutters becomes unbearable, and as a matter of fact they “became dehydrated and their bodies were covered in scales” (9). The stench, filth and waste pervade Mwangi’s other novels namely *Going Down River Road* (1976) which opens with the smell of Baby’s urine (Wini is the protagonist and her son is simply known as Baby), and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) in which Dacca House – the building in which the protagonists

live — is the epitome of an insalubrious and infectious tenement building.

The description of the Shanty Land in *Kill Me Quick* exposes the abject poverty of the dwellers, and their unbearable sanitary conditions:

*The shacks were built of paper, tin, mud and anything that could keep out the rain, thrown together in no particular pattern [...] They looked like a rubbish dump full of paper and shining tin. A humming noise floating from the shelters was the only sign that there were people within. Maina held his breath at a sight he would never have thought existed, out of the fiction books he had read at school... The air was heavy with the smell of smoke, urine and countless other odours (51, my emphasis).*

And during a merry-making in the Shanty Land, Crasher, a member of Razor's gang, drinks urine. "The Crasher [...] poured most of its content down his throat. Then suddenly he pulled the bottle from his mouth and spat furiously" (68). The rest of the group "screamed with laughter" (69). Sweeper, another member, tells him to fill his "tummy with stinking yellow urine". Finally, he "accidentally emptied the remaining urine over his head and body" (KMQ, 69). To drink urine or pour it over one's body suggests humiliation and debasement because in some primitive societies, the thief or the criminal is humiliated publicly by drinking another person's urine. And to chase her/him from the village where she/he has committed her/his crime, the villagers throw urine at her/him. The basic point of the scene is to give expression to a sense of inhuman debasement.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, one may wonder why Ayi Kwei Armah takes such great care to depict in detail the man's home bathroom on pages 101-102 and the man's office latrine on pages 105-106 where the man's nostrils "[are] assailed by something he is carrying with himself, the smell of the latrine", and where the marks of old smears of "shit" are still visible on the walls. Also, the walls are covered with obscene drawings and writings like "a small drawing of sex in an impossible Indian position, with the careful lettering: VAGINA SWEET" (BO, 106). Also, the description of the communal bathroom in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* (1996) is really repulsive: "the communal bathroom was dark, smelly [and] sinister" (1996: 25). In fact,

*the zinc roof of the bathroom was low and the compartment was small. The cracks on the walls widened at night and looked snake-like in the day. Slats of grey light filtered into the murky darkness. Slimy substances clung to the walls. The floor was covered in a stagnant pool of slimy water. As she [Ifeyiwa] stood there she was suddenly startled by the noise of something thrashing around in the water. It was a rat [that] swam in the bathroom scum (1996: 78).*

It is through the portrayal of the daily routine of the man that Ayi Kwei Armah presents every facet of Ghanaian society which is covered in dirt and even the air is "misty with the presence of familiar particles suspended in it" (105). During his journey on a bus from his office to his house, the man offers snap-shots of the malaise of his society in scatological terms:

*Past the big public lavatory the stench claws inward to the throat. Sometimes it is understandable that people spit so much, when all around decaying things push inward and mix all the body's juices with the taste of rot.[...] Hot smell of caked shit split by afternoon's baking sun, now touched by still evaporating dew. Across the aisle on the seat opposite, an old man is sleeping and his mouth is open to the air rushing in the night with how many particles of what? So why should he play the fool and bold his breath? [...] Here there is only the stale soapsuds merging in grainy rotten dirt from everybody's scum, a reminder of armpits full of yellowed hair dripping sweat down arms raised casually in places of public intimacy. [...] Here are waves of spice from late pots of familiar bones, spices to cover what strong meat? (40-41)*

The authors thus draw the reader's attention to the miserable conditions in which the "walking corpse(s)" (2) or the "living-dead" (22) are obliged to live, and the physical and moral rot of

Ghanaian and Kenyan society. The scandalous behaviour of the local comprador bourgeoisie and the profiteers is also described as stinky though the stench is more metaphorical than real.

Koomson, Ayi Kwei Armah's hero of "the gleam", is the epitome of corrupt leadership. In fact, Koomson used to live in an insolent luxury at the expense of the others when he was a minister. After the military coup which overthrows his Party, he is afraid of being killed and seeks refuge in the man's room. The stench that emanates from his body especially his mouth due to his decay is unbearable to the man:

*The smell was something the man had not at all expected. It was overpowering, as if some corrosive gas, already half liquid, had filled the whole room, irritating not only the nostrils, but also the inside, of eyes, ears, mouth, throat [...] His mouth had the rich stench of rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the new smell had gone down in the mixture with the liquid atmosphere of the Party man's farts filling the room. At the same time Koomson's insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder. The man thought he would surely vomit if he did not get out from this foul smell" (161-163, my emphasis).*

In the passage above, Koomson's decay suggests his moral corruption. And even Oyo, who always admires Koomson's success, whispers in her husband's ear "how he smells!" It is interesting to see that it is with the same mouth that now has the "stench of rotten menstrual blood" that Koomson used to "taste the world". Likewise, it is with the same body that is now decaying that the Minister enjoys what might be called the obscene bodily pleasures: "young juicy vaginas waiting for him in some hired place paid for by the government" (89).

The reversal of the situation foreshadows the unavoidable downfall of the Minister and the end of his malpractices. When he hears the military men searching for him, he has no other choice than to escape through the "shithole". It is worth mentioning that Koomson had refused to go to this latrine to relieve himself when he paid a visit to the man because of the smell. But now that he is running away to save his life, he goes through the "shithole" head first. Koomson's escape through the latrine is described in minute detail on pages 167-168: the reader is not spared the "old caked excrement" of the "shithole" and the stench of "dead mud" that evaporates from the hole and hits the man and Koomson in their faces. Also, "a very large cockroach, its color a shiny, deep brown, flew out from under the can, hit Koomson's white shirt front and fell heavily on top of the box seat before crawling away into a crack down the side" (167). Koomson ending up covered in "shit" is not only a metaphor for corruption, but also his downfall and the end of his fame. His underlying reality now becomes an apparent reality: the real personality of Koomson is revealed. It is grotesque because the scene marries the repulsive "shit" with humour and a sense of justice being done.

References to "shit", "latrines" and "lavatories" occur many times in *The Beautiful Ones* and tend to reinforce the prevalence of the olfactory sense in the novel. Koomson's smell and his decay which oblige the man to hold his breath and Koomson's struggle to flee through a shithole epitomize his fall from grace. Kofi Awoonor's handling of excremental language in his novel, *This Earth, My Brother* (1981) is reminiscent of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* and Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*. In Kofi Awoonor's novel, the environment is permeating with putrescence and decay and it is not unusual that a "shit truck" kills someone: "City nights, night soil vans scattering suburban excrement on the dual carriageway. One killed a young army officer one dawn, smashed him; they had to extricate his mangled body from among the pile of excrement (1981: 113).

The scatological features can also be found in acts, behaviour or manner, curses, insults, and expressions related to body or bodily orifices which some may call taboo words. Both novels contain many such words and at random, we could cite: "your mother's rotten cunt!", "bloody-fucking sonofabitch!", "fucked", "young juicy vaginas", 'ass' "arsehole" and "uncircumcised baboon". They are used in various expressions to insult, debase or simply to mock someone. The taxi driver insults the man's mother, "your mother's rotten cunt" (9) but the man does not react

and chooses to ignore him. Why does he not react? Is it a way to tell us there is nothing that can be done about moral decadence?

The recurrence of images related to putrescence, filth, faeces and vomit enable the authors to develop the themes of corruption and squalor and “show the author’s revulsion for the stifling and suffocating conditions in post-independence Africa, [...] They also indicate the author’s readiness to protest and call for a remedy of the situation through the crucible of social criticism” (Agho, 2003: 197). In the novels, corruption is shown to be the outcome of an obsession with material comforts: the desire to be surrounded with the “gleam”. Instead of bearing “the beautiful ones”, the new leaders turn to be “the dark ghost” of European masters and squander their country’s riches. Hence, it appears that the fight for independence “was not that the whole thing might be overturned and ended, but that a few black men might be pushed closer to their masters, to eat some of the fat into their bellies too. That had been the entire end of it all” (126). Indeed, the new national bourgeoisie which emerged after independence in Africa did not make any changes to the existing colonial social structures and it became clear that its interest was different from the masses who aspired to greater social change. In the words of Frantz Fanon, “[t]he national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement [...] its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism” (1968: 152). The new bourgeoisie as a class is closer to the ruling classes of the former colonial powers than to the majority of its peoples. Fanon warned against the formation of a new bourgeoisie which would, by all means, cling to power after they had tasted its privileges: “We must repeat, it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitely the birth of national bourgeoisie and a privileged caste” (200).

The resentment at being betrayed and the disappointment caused by the failure of real change after independence are omnipresent in both novels. It is not surprising that Maina remarks that none of his dreams and the dreams of the majority have become true. “We dream a great lot. [But] none of these things [dreams] will ever come true. [...] It is not good remembering. It only hurts. It hurts a bit” (35). The narrative voice in Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel describes the failure of the political elites, the leaders, and their collaborators in scatological and grotesque terms: “*We were ready here for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs... How were these leaders to know that while they were climbing up to shit in their people’s faces, their people had seen their arsehole and drawn away in disgusted laughter?*” (BO, 81-82, my italics).

Similarly, the praise singer is condemned for his cooperation with all “old-new” men. Because of the gain or the reward he might have, “he will no doubt jump to go and fit his *tongue* into *new arses* when new men spring up to *shit* on us” (89, my italics). Here we notice that not only the government or the state power is associated with smell or shit, but also the ordinary people who help the leaders to ransack their country’s wealth. The image of a person who licks someone’s arse is really degrading; his dignity is buried and he is considered less than an animal, ready for all despicable acts. He is an arse-licker. He is ready to sing praises of the leaders in order to get something from them.

While the leaders “shit on their people’s faces”, they fail to recognize the fact that in this process their people have unmasked their vileness. The majority of the people, therefore, who cannot but laugh at the open secret of their leaders, are genuinely disgusted. Through the use of satire, the author is turning on its head the appearances that the elite thrive on “gleam”: the “gleam” turns out to be “shit” and “arseholes”. It is interesting to point out the laughter or rather “disgusted laughter” in the quotation above. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, laughter is intrinsically linked to grotesque realism and is used to ridicule and debase someone or something. “The people’s laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism [...] was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes” (1984: 20). Through laughter, the writers ridicule officialdom and denounce the dysfunctions and vices of society. Note that the ordinary

people are not excluded from this mockery and they even laugh at themselves. What is comic and tragic at the same time here, is that the ordinary African derides the corrupt leaders, but he knows quite well that he would be the same if he had the chance. Everyone is in the same 'pile of shit'. Everyone is equally corrupted. Corruption in all its senses seems to be the basis of modern African reality.

The plight of the masses that are bitterly disappointed is echoed in these novels. Their dream of self-realization after the colonial era is far from being fulfilled. The images of decay, filth and putrescence that pervade the novels single out the failure of the new nations to provide for their people. For Joshua D. Esty, "shit [...] emerges as an index of moral and political outrage in new Ghana bedeviled (sic) by greed and bureaucratic corruption" (1999: 22). Moreover, "it [shit] draws attention to the failures of development, to the unkept promises not only of colonial modernizing regimes but of post-independence economic policy" (32). The use of these features is deliberate and the aim is to arouse the reader's disgust against the established institutions that do nothing to improve the living conditions of the downtrodden people. The reader cannot forget the image of the woman sucking the mucus from her child's nose: "At the end of it [long cough] his mother calmly puts her mouth to the wet congested nostrils and sucks them free. The mess she lets fall gently by the roadside and with her bare foot she rubs it softly into the earth" (35). As Eustace Palmer (1972: 135) puts it, "Armah forces us to feel disgust as the woman sucks her child's nostrils, not to arouse our indignation against her, but against the authorities who allow her to languish in poverty, squalor and ignorance, while they fatten themselves on their country's riches".

Through the pessimistic mood – the use of grotesque, obscene images and decay as literary devices – that pervades both novels, and which some critics do not hesitate to describe as an "excremental vision" and "Apocalyptic Vision" (Priebe, 1976) Ayi Kwei Armah and Meja Mwangi express their utter disgust about the socio-economic, moral and political decay and highlight the ailments that hinder the development of emerging nations like Ghana and Kenya. These novels alert us to the ills of the Ghanaian and Kenyan society. The exposure of the sources of Ghanaian ills, according to Virginia Ola, is "a step toward the awakening of his readers to the reality of depth of the self-abuse and self-betrayal [...] through greed and apathy" (1989: 129-136). But how will the hopes and dreams of the masses be achieved? How can these societies be healed? No wonder that Ayi Kwei Armah's fifth novel is entitled *The Healers* (1978).

*\*This essay is based on the author's unpublished Master's thesis entitled "Failure to live up to post-independence expectations in Africa: Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Meja Mwangi's Kill Me Quick".*

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