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Rising within Hegemonic Limits: A Study of Subtle Resistance in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones are not yet Born*

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Abstract
This study examines the subversive strategies of mimicry and proliferation employed by Ayi Kwei Armah in his novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to challenge hegemony in postcolonial societies. It argues that traditional forms of resistance often reproduce existing power structures, necessitating the adoption of tactics involving subtle narratives and non-totalising subversive actions. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on resistance from Achile Mbembe, Homi Bhabha, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault, this paper explores the narrative deconstruction practices utilised by Armah to create space for marginalised voices within the postcolonial public sphere. It contends that resistance involves challenging both physical and symbolic power structures, achieved through an aesthetic of subversion or perversion of the dominant order. Analysing the novel, the study reveals specific strategies of resistance employed by characters, such as the carnivalesque, humour, rumour and gossip, parody, etc. to challenge control. These strategies exemplify localised and strategic struggles against power, rejecting universal revolutions in favour of discreet actions and the breaking of smaller rules. The research contributes to understanding resistance in postcolonial power dynamics and emphasises the significance of diverse strategies in subverting the hegemonic order.

Keywords: Subtle resistance, Hegemony, Oppressed, Subversive strategies

Introduction

In the realm of postcolonial public discourse, the perpetuation of authoritarian power relies on practices that uphold State reason, national progress, national unity, and the indispensability of the ruler. These practices shape individuals who are socialised by dominant ideologies and are less inclined to dissent or resist. However, efforts of resistance often end up reproducing modes of hegemonic power. In response, authors employ strategies of resistance that employ subtle narratives and non-totalising subversive actions, which nonetheless pose a disruptive threat to the symbolic fabric of dictatorial power. In other words, these authors employ subtle means to challenge dominant ideologies and power structures without overtly confronting them. (Ndi 95) Drawing upon theoretical perspectives from Achille Mbembe, Homi K. Bhabha, Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, this paper examines the narrative deconstructive practices propagated by these authors. The aim of these practices is to create space within the postcolonial public sphere for the expression of marginalised voices, without imbuing literary texts with explicit political agendas.

State power thrives on a threatening hybridity and the juxtaposition of significations, such as profanity/mythology, banality/exceptionality, life/death, and laughter/lamentation. These signifiers, utilised within the context of overbearing and pervasive State power, generate a sense of subversion and resistance. The argument put forth is that resistance entails not only physically dismantling power structures, but also challenging the symbolic infrastructure that sustains them. The author suggests that this is accomplished through an aesthetic of subversion or perversion of the dominant order.

Theoretical Perspective

Foucault's analysis of power dynamics in postcolonial theory emphasises the pervasive nature of power as not merely repressive but also productive, enabling forms of resistance that are often subtle and indirect. This perspective aligns with Bhabha's notion of mimicry, which talks about how colonial subjects can subvert authority through imitation that is never complete, thus creating spaces for hybrid identities and resistance. Foucault's notion of power as 'relational' suggests that resistance is always possible, even within systems that appear to be oppressive (Tewari et al. 26). Foucault's work on the panopticon illustrates how surveillance and normalisation operate within society, leading individuals to internalise control mechanisms. This internalisation does not result in passive compliance; rather, it opens avenues for resistance through the very mechanisms of power that seek to dominate. For instance, Foucault posits that the act of being observed can lead to a form of self-regulation, but it also provides a context in which individuals can negotiate their identities and assert their agency in subtle ways. Molopyane et al. posit thus:

Answers to this question range from activities of banditry to complete subjugation and silence. Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits* is an example of insurrection and anarchy against imposition by the powerful while Michel Foucault's discussion regarding the panoptic is an example of being silenced and helpless in the presence of the powerful. (89)

This aligns with Bhabha's concept of "third space," where cultural interactions create ambivalence and hybridity that allow for new forms of identity and resistance to emerge: "Homi Bhabha's work, as Gillian Rose observes, renders space as a "central problematic of [cultural] politics" (Johnson 30). Bhabha's theory of mimicry is particularly relevant in understanding how colonial subjects engage with dominant cultures. He argues that mimicry is a strategy employed by the colonised to negotiate their position within colonial power structures. This mimicry is not a straightforward imitation; instead, it is characterised by a difference that disrupts the authority of the coloniser. The incomplete nature of mimicry creates a space for resistance, as it reveals the contradictions inherent in colonial power relations. Verma et al. say:

The concept of mimicry has been extended by Bhabha to suggest that colonial authority invites mimicry but that this mimicry is not perfect, leading to hybridity. This, in turn, can lead to resistance and freedom struggles, often led by those elites created by colonial authority (8).

Bhabha's emphasis on hybridity further complicates the binary of coloniser and colonised, suggesting that identities are fluid and constructed through cultural exchanges that challenge fixed notions of authority (Kholoussi 11). Also, the concept of "vernacular cosmopolitanism," as discussed by Bhabha, shows how local cultures can engage with global influences in ways that assert their uniqueness while also participating in broader dialogues (Luo 382). The hybridisation of cultures serves as a fertile ground for resistance, allowing marginalised voices to emerge and assert their agency (Elyasi 183). The notion of interstitial subjectivities emphasises the complexity of identity formation in postcolonial contexts. Bhabha's work suggests that these interstitial spaces are crucial for understanding how individuals negotiate their identities amidst cultural encounters (Khan et al. 38). This negotiation often involves subtle forms of resistance that challenge dominant narratives without overt confrontation. The interplay of mimicry and hybridity in these contexts allows for the emergence of new cultural practices that reflect both compliance and resistance, illustrating the nuanced nature of identity in postcolonial settings. Sambajee observes:

Edward Said's Mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity **…** acknowledged the pedagogical narrative informed by the idea that the West was morally and intellectually superior but also considered people as more than historical events capable of resisting the homogenising intent of the coloniser through various non-traditional forms. (390).

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which refers to the ways in which power governs life and death, provides a critical framework for understanding subtle or symbolic resistance in postcolonial contexts. Mbembe's work posits that necropolitics extends beyond mere physical violence; it encompasses a broader spectrum of social and cultural practices that dictate who is allowed to live and who is deemed disposable. This agenda can be applied to various contexts, including the experiences of marginalised communities, where symbolic forms of resistance emerge as a response to oppressive structures. For instance, in Mbembe's analysis of necropolitics, he highlights how the grotesque and the absurd often serve

as vehicles for resistance, as marginalised groups utilise humor, irony, and cultural expressions to challenge the narratives imposed upon them by those in power. Rafael says:
In his extended gloss on Foucault's work, Achille Mbembe has pointed out that in the context of the postcolony-whether sub-Saharan Africa or other formerly colonised countries-the imperative of asserting sovereignty points to the persistence of what he refers to as necropower: the power to put to death often accompanied by an "aesthetics of vulgarity"-the obscene display of violent excess that spills over and circulates between rulers and ruled. (146)

Mbembe asserts that the grotesque manifestations of power can create both submissive and subversive subjects (Pucherová 160). The use of symbolic language allows for a nuanced exploration of resistance that transcends direct confrontation, enabling individuals to articulate their struggles and aspirations in a manner that resonates with broader audiences.

The interplay between power and resistance often manifests through what Michel de Certeau describes as "tactics" employed by the oppressed. De Certeau's concept emphasises the everyday practices of individuals who navigate and subvert dominant power structures through subtle means. These tactics, which can be seen as forms of symbolic resistance, allow individuals to assert their agency in environments where overt rebellion may be met with violent repression. The relationship between necropolitics and symbolic resistance can be observed in various cultural productions, such as literature and art, which serve as platforms for voicing dissent. In the context of African literature, for example, authors often employ allegory and metaphor to critique the socio-political realities of their societies. The failures of leadership and governance in postcolonial Africa often lead to a sense of despair among the populace, yet this disillusionment can also catalyze forms of resistance that challenge the status quo (Agunbiade 3). Individuals utilise symbolic means to articulate their grievances and aspirations for a more just society.

Literature Review

Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a critique of postcolonial Ghana, encapsulating the disillusionment and moral decay that followed independence. The narrative reflects a broader sentiment of Afro-pessimism, a term that characterises the disillusionment felt by many African writers in the wake of colonial liberation. This sentiment is echoed in the works of contemporaries like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, who also grappled with the complexities of postcolonial identity and the failures of newly independent states. Adika observes thus:
Ayi Kwei Armah, writing just a decade after the publication of Nkrumah's *Autobiography*, gives vent to this change in outlook by calling his debut novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1967). Elsewhere on the continent, the disappointments engendered by the onset of the postcolonial epoch are marked by depressing titles such as Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru*, Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* as a general strain of what has been aptly referred to as Afro-pessimism by the likes of Hartman, Sexton, and Nsele took over the discursive landscape of the continent.…" (238).

Armah's portrayal of societal corruption and the struggle for integrity amidst pervasive decay resonates with the critiques of moral responsibility articulated by Hannah Arendt, emphasising the importance of individual accountability in shaping the future (Niemi 223). Armah's work has been labeled as excessively pessimistic, with an argument that it lacks a vision for a hopeful future. However, this interpretation overlooks the nuanced exploration of moral ambiguity and the potential for change that Armah embeds within his narrative. Rather than providing a messianic vision of the future, Armah features the necessity of confronting present realities, suggesting that the future remains open and contingent upon the actions of individuals in the present (Niemi 230). This perspective aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of Frantz Fanon's dialectic of master and slave, where the struggle for recognition and agency is central to the postcolonial experience. Also, the novel's thematic exploration of identity and existential crisis reflects a broader discourse within African literature regarding the impact of colonialism and the quest for authenticity in a postcolonial context. Armah's work can be seen as a response to the existential dilemmas faced by individuals in a society grappling with the legacies of colonial rule, where the quest for a new identity is fraught with challenges and contradictions (Adika 28). The narrative's focus on the internal struggles of its protagonist serves as a microcosm of the larger societal issues, illustrating how personal and collective identities are intertwined in the postcolonial landscape.

Subtle Resistance in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah

In Armah's novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the government does not directly attack citizens. However, the story portrays a corrupt and morally bankrupt society in an unnamed African country during a period of political turmoil. The narrative focuses on the moral struggles faced by the protagonist, an unnamed man referred to as "the man." He is a railway station clerk who is disillusioned with the rampant corruption and decay in his society. While the government is not depicted as physically attacking citizens in the novel, it is responsible for creating an oppressive and corrupt environment. The government officials are shown to be involved in embezzlement, bribery and other forms of corruption, while the majority of the population suffers from poverty and deprivation. The novel explores themes of moral decay, personal integrity, and the individual's struggle to maintain his moral compass in a corrupt society. Hence, the resistance is against corruption, both in public offices and as practiced by individuals or groups in the novel.

Scatology

The coarse language is used as an electroconvulsive tool to deliberately shock the reader to draw his attention to the decadence and corrupt behaviours Armah exposes and condemns in the novel. In other words, it is for a therapeutic purpose. Consequently, I will posit that Armah uses form to complement content in this novel. The novel is generally a satirical attack on the Ghanaian society during Kwame Nkrumah's regime and the period immediately after independence in the 1960s. Although in this novel Armah's language is sometimes humorous, it is very often unimaginably scatological, with a consistent tincture of vulgarity. Armah employs scatological and vulgar language in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in a manner that may be considered offensive and distasteful. This departure from the norm in African literature, including the works of previous writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, showcases Armah's distinctive approach in his first novel. The deliberate and artistic use of such language serves as a provocative tool, aiming to shock the reader and incite a contemplation of the deeply disturbing and repugnant aspects of society, including corruption, materialism, moral decay, filth, and the pervasive erosion of moral, spiritual, and physical values. The intention behind this approach is to bring about a transformative change by confronting the reader with the harsh realities that demand attention and action. (Alexander 319)

In *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah skillfully blends form and content, using scatological and vulgar language to mirror the crude behavior of the characters in the novel. This choice of language serves a specific artistic purpose and aids in the interpretation of the story. While the narrator is not the first to employ scatological and vulgarism in the novel, they often adopt an earthy tone when taking over the narration from the characters. For instance, the narrator shares an incident where someone has scribbled the phrase 'VAGINA SWEET!' on the lavatory wall at the man's workplace. This expression is rude and impolite, as openly mentioning the female genitalia is considered taboo in most African communities. Africans tend to use euphemisms to refer to such body parts, recognising their sensitivity. The narrator's act of making this private expression public by entering the lavatory further highlights the erosion of moral values and the prevalence of moral decay in society.

Gossip

Gossip, in this context, is a means of resistance as it challenges the official narratives and provides alternative perspectives and interpretations of events. The act of gossiping allows for the dissemination of information that may be concealed or distorted by those in power, enabling a form of grassroots resistance against oppressive practices. The junior staff members, by sharing bits of information, contribute to the construction of a collective knowledge that counters the dominant discourse propagated by the ruling elite in the following passage:

The other junior staff came one by one, adding little bits, some very wild indeed, to the news available. They said all big Party men were being arrested and placed in something called protective custody — already a new name for the old imprisonment without trial. New people, new style, old dance. (*The Beautyful Ones* 185)

The passage depicts a scenario where the junior staff members engage in gossip and spread news about the arrests of prominent Party members, who are being placed in "protective custody," a euphemism for imprisonment without trial. Through the act of gossip, the characters subtly resist the oppressive power structures and convey their skepticism towards the new regime. The mention of "new people, new style, old dance" suggests a skepticism towards the supposed changes and reforms introduced by the new regime. Despite the appearance of change, the characters perceive a continuity of oppressive practices reminiscent of the colonial era. They express their resistance to the superficial transformations and voice their doubts about the genuine intentions of the ruling elite by engaging in gossip.

Rumour

Rumor serves as a form of resistance because it challenges the official narratives and power structures of the society. Individuals engage in a form of subversion, subtly questioning the actions and motives of those in power by spreading these rumours. The rumors become a way for the community to express their suspicions and discontent, even in the absence of concrete evidence. The death of Fie and the mysterious circumstances surrounding it create a void of information and certainty, allowing rumors and speculations to emerge:

Fie was found dead, killed in his room by men for whom he seemed to have opened the door himself, and those who believe these things will tell you that at his wake his wounds bled clearly when certain of his friends came past; but Egya Akon was a solitary man, and there was no one to make anything but gossip out of what was so openly said. But that was not the end. It was whispered of Slim Tano that he was certainly the man who had got Egya Akon to open his door so early in the morning, because the man loved him and would do anything for him at whatever time it was he wanted that thing done. Egya Akon left no one to do anything to Slim Tano, but Slim Tano by his own self went mad, went completely mad, and the only thing he said that made any sense to people was what he shouted out every ten minutes or so:

"I didn't do it ooooo. I swear upon my father's foot I didn't do it ooooo!" (*The Beautyful Ones* 81)

The rumour implicating Slim Tano suggests a betrayal and manipulation, creating doubt and mistrust in the relationship between Fie and Slim Tano. Slim Tano's descent into madness further adds to the subversive nature of the rumor, as he repeatedly denies his involvement and asserts his innocence. The repetition of his plea for innocence serves as a form of resistance against the accusations, highlighting the refusal to accept the dominant narrative imposed upon him.

The Carnivalesque

The carnivalesque, a concept associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the overturning of social hierarchies and norms during festive celebrations (Elliot 130; Bayer 3). It represents a temporary suspension of the established order, where laughter, play, and subversion are embraced. In this passage, the celebration of Hasaacas' victory in the football match symbolises a moment of carnivalesque subversion in the postcolonial society. The passage below from Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, can be seen as illustrative of the use of the carnivalesque or celebration as an element of subtle resistance within a postcolonial context:

He turned on the set as soon as he entered the hall, and in a few moments he had caught the tail end of the news, all the ritual bits of praise that seemed to be all the news these days. Osagyefo the President bla bla, Osagyefo the President bla bla bla, Osagyefo the President bla bla bla bla. Finally the announcer gave the results of the day's football matches. The man waited until he heard the score that interested him most. Hasaacas one, Kotoko nil. Then he turned off the set. There would be a week of celebration because of this victory, and because of that the coming Passion Week would be severe indeed. (138)

The passage describes a man entering a hall and turning on the television to catch the tail end of the news, which consists of ritualistic praise for the President. However, the man's attention is drawn to the announcement of the football match results, specifically the victory of Hasaacas over Kotoko. This victory signifies a cause for celebration and sets the stage for a week of festivities. The mention of the upcoming Passion Week being severe suggests a contrast between the joyous and liberating atmosphere of the celebratory week and the upcoming period of religious observance, which may be marked by solemnity and religious authority. This juxtaposition further emphasises the transformative power of celebration as a form of resistance. The celebration depicted in the passage can be seen as a subtle act of resistance against the dominant power structures. It represents a moment of communal bonding, solidarity, and collective

agency. The people assert their resilience and resistance to the oppressive forces that surround them by engaging in festivities and celebrating small victories.

Parody

Parody is a satirical form that humorously imitates or mocks the style, conventions, or content of another work, artist, or genre. It employs techniques like exaggeration, irony, and comedic imitation to draw attention to the flaws, absurdities, or social commentary found in the original source. As a tool of criticism, parody proves to be highly valuable. It offers a playful and captivating means of exploring ideas, ideologies, and cultural phenomena. Parody effectively exposes and critiques societal issues, political ideologies, and cultural norms by utilising satire and humor. It provides a creative and accessible avenue to challenge and subvert established concepts, institutions, or figures, thus encouraging critical thinking and self-reflection. Through its comedic approach, parody stimulates thought, encourages dialogue, and offers insightful commentary on various facets of human existence and our world. This is an instance of its use in *The Beautyful Ones*:

There is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days. Men who had risen to lead the hungry came in clothes they might have been hoping to use at Governors' Balls on the birthday of the white people's queen, carrying cuff links that shone insultingly in the faces of men who had stolen pennies from their friends. They came late and spoke to their servants in the legal English they had spent their lives struggling to imitate, talking of constitutions and offering us unseen ghosts of words and paper held holy by Europeans, and they asked us to be faithful and to trust in them. They spoke to us in the knowledge that they were our magicians, people with some secret power behind them. They were not able in the end to understand the people's unbelief. How could they understand that even those who have not been anywhere know that the black man who has spent his life fleeing from himself into whiteness has no power if the white master gives him none? How were these leaders to know that while they were climbing up to shit in their people's faces, their people had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter? (96)

The author critiques the leaders' adoption of European customs and their failure to understand the disillusionment and mockery of the people they claim to represent. This parody of their language and behaviour stresses the leaders' lack of genuine connection to the concerns and needs of their own community. The leaders fail to recognise the skepticism and laughter of the people who have witnessed their empty promises and degrading actions. Through the use of parody, Armah critiques the leaders' hypocrisy and exposes the disconnection between their rhetoric and the reality experienced by the people. The description of the people seeing their leaders "climbing up to shit in their people's faces" accentuates the leaders' betrayal and the people's disillusionment. The parody employed in the passage invites readers to question the legitimacy of the leaders and to recognise the power dynamics at play within the postcolonial society. Through parody, Armah invites readers to question the legitimacy of power structures and to recognise the potential for resistance and subversion.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole, or exaggerated language, is employed in this passage to draw attention to the clerk's excessive and boastful characterisation of the country's wealth. Hyperbolic language serves to mock the rhetoric of those in power who exaggerate the benefits and wealth of the nation, often to the detriment of the majority of the population. Here is an example:

When the Time Allocations clerk came in, he greeted everybody loudly and added, in a highly satisfied tone, "Now another group of bellies will be bursting with the country's riches!" The reaction to that, like everything else this day, was a confusion of approval and insecure hesitation. (186)

The scene involves the Time Allocations clerk making a grandiose statement about the country's riches and the ensuing reaction of the people, which is described as a mixture of approval and hesitation. The clerk amplifies the image of abundance and prosperity to an extreme degree by describing the impact of the allocated resources as causing "bellies...bursting with the country's riches". The reaction of the people, characterised as a "confusion of approval and insecure hesitation," reflects their ambivalence and

skepticism towards the clerk's exaggerated statement. It reflects the erosion of trust in the promises and rhetoric of postcolonial governments, which often fail to deliver on their lofty declarations of progress and prosperity. The use of hyperbole, therefore, acts as a subtle form of resistance by exposing the hollowness and contradictions of the dominant discourse.

Humour

This passage from Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, showcases the use of humour as an element of subversive conviviality within the context of a postcolonial society:

One day they brought a man to give the Ministers and the Parliamentarians and the Party activists a lecture. That was during the Winneba days. The man had many degrees, and he was very boring. In the first place he was dressed like a poor man." Estella snickered happily. "And for a long time he spoke to us about economics. They say he was telling us how to make poor countries rich. Something called stages of growth. I have tried to find out what he really said, but it seems I wasn't the only one who slept that day. I woke up when I heard some clapping. The others also woke up, and we all clapped and said 'yeaah yeah.' Then the Attorney General, who is one of our Party scholars, got up to give the vote of thanks.
"'You have told us, Professor So-and-so, of the stages of growth. We thank you very much for having told us about your specialty.' The Attorney General swayed, being drunk as usual, and went on. 'Now we shall share our special knowledge here with you. We present . . . the stages of booze!' I tell you, no one was going back to sleep. The Attorney General opened his red eyes from time to time and chanted:
'Stage One — The Mood Jocose.
Stage Two — The Mood Morose.
Stage Three — The Mood Bellicose.
Stage Four — The Mood Lachrymose.
Stage Five — The Mood Comatose.'

"Then the Attorney General fell down. He was in the final stage himself. We all said 'yeaaaah yeah.' It was a fine day indeed."
Oyo and Estella were laughing, Oyo with a bit of a puzzled frown. Koomson was himself shaking with laughter.
"But the funny thing," he was saying, "the funny thing was that only the Professor stood there, not laughing even once. I hear he has left this country."

The old woman asked her daughter to explain the joke, and while she was trying, Koomson spoke once more. (157)

The scene takes place during a gathering where the Attorney General, who is known for being drunk, introduces his own version of "the stages of growth" by presenting "the stages of booze." This humorous twist disrupts the seriousness and formality associated with the Professor's earlier presentation. The use of humor in this passage serves several purposes. Firstly, it creates a sense of camaraderie among the attendees who are collectively amused by the Attorney General's antics. The laughter and joviality foster a temporary sense of unity, momentarily transcending the social and political divisions that exist within the postcolonial society depicted in the novel. The laughter and amusement mask a deeper sense of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the prevailing social and political conditions. The protagonist, Koomson, points out the absence of the Professor's laughter, indicating that he might have recognised the satire and the underlying critique. The Professor's departure from the country further reinforces the idea that those who question or challenge the existing power structures are often marginalised or forced to leave.

Conclusion

In Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a scathing critique of a corrupt society in an unnamed African country unfolds. Through the use of scatological language, gossip, rumor, the carnivalesque, and parody, Armah vividly portrays the moral decay and materialistic mindset plaguing the society. These elements function as tools of resistance, challenging oppressive power structures, questioning official narratives, fostering community solidarity, and stimulating transformative change. *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a compelling call to action, urging individuals to confront and rectify

the deep-seated issues of corruption and moral degradation. It features the importance of personal integrity, moral courage, and collective responsibility in striving for a more just and equitable society.

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