

# [First picture which the novelist presents of](https://assignbuster.com/first-picture-which-the-novelist-presents-of/)

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First published in Americain 1970 and later published in England in 1974, Armah’s novel, Fragmentseventually found its way to print in Africa. There are thirteen chapters in thenovel and each chapter has a subtitle of its own. What is amusing about thenovel is that it never becomes fragmented at all.

Armah deserves accolades forthe technical variations that he has employed in the novel. The narration isepisodic and the reader comes across cinematic techniques of spotlight andflashback. Coupled with these techniques is a tone of the mythical past which introduceswith great skill.

Armah gives a new dimension to the tempo of narration by introducingthe tone of the mythical past in the narrative. The picture which the novelistpresents of the novel is never lacking in unity. Even a critic of the statureof Robert Fraser is goaded to The theme and the structureof Fragments show a complexity which is worth analyzing.

Critic RandBishop in his evaluation of the first five novels of Armah notes withdisapproval how his first reading of Fragments disappointed him. But hewas candid enough to admit that his later reading of the novel made But a perceptive reader will find that Fragments ismore than the first novel both in its theme and structure. Gerald Moore is notswept off his feet when he regards Fragments to be more superior to TheBeautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. From the standpoints of its originalityand quality, to quote Moore, “ will eventually establish itself as superior to TheBeautiful Ones in quality, profoundity and originality.” (The Journal ofCommonwealth Literature, Vol. IX, No. 11 (August 1974), p. 69).

The protagonist of the novel is Baako but it is his blind grandmother Naanawho holds the center stage of attraction in the novel. Naana stands for thehoary wisdom of the past ages and her mythical experience underscores both theintroductory and the closing chapter of the novel. As Armah delves into thethought processes of Naana in the ultimate chapter, the significance of thestructural patterns and the title of the novel are made limpidly clear to us.

Some critics haveinterpreted the novel as a religious allegory. The most notable of thesecritics is Robert Fraser. He goes to the extent of saying that ‘ the thirtypieces’ of ‘ a thousand and thirty useless pieces’ is an emblematicrepresentation of betrayal of Jesus by Juda. Fraser’s interpretation of the novel from the religiousstandpoint is not tenable in this context.

It is not the religious implicationswhich impart to the novel a wholeness of effect. Armah draws the reader’sattention through the concerns of the individuals. The individuals are broughtface to face with the family that is demanding and a society that isfragmented. Armah shows a group of individuals that wishes to restore order anda sense of justice because they see the social order and moral vision shatteredbefore them. Such a shattering results in conflicts from within and without. Onthe one hand there are individuals who make concerted efforts to lead ameaningful existence; on the other hand there are members of a family who havean inimical attitude towards the efforts of the individuals. This is amplydemonstrated in the novel through the character of Baako, the protagonist.

Hisgrandmother Naana and his girlfriend, Juana, the psychiatrist girl fromPuertorico. The fragmentation which Armah portrays in the novel can be seen both atthe internal level and external level. Since there is no proper social order andproper ideology the society is fragmented.

There is one redeeming feature inthe novel. Just as the unnamed protagonist. preserve his moral valuesin the tide of corruption similarly Naana and her spiritual companion Baako carryon their relentless struggle to uphold their moral values against the tide ofmoral corruption. Small wonder, Naana and Baako see the conflicting tendencies intheir psychological thought processes. We see occasional fits of nervousbreakdown in Baako and Naana’s occasional desires of her wish for death. In thelast chapter of the novel we come across a totally shattered Naana and thispsychological shattering is the outcome of violence in many forms and shejustly feels that these violent forms could have been avoided. She thinks that herdeath could give her the final relief from this base situation. It is through Naana’s wide vision that the narrative of Fragmentsis woven into the novel.

Her vision of life is made whole by her blindness. Wehear the incantatory tone of Naana in the first chapter of the novel. Thisincantation serves as a prologue and close on the heels of the prologue we seethe point of view of Juana. Naana’s thought provoking comments on life and itsfuture portents can be likened to the epilogue in the last chapter of thenovel.

But before the epilogue, the novelist presents the pragmatic vision ofJuana. The feminine principle is advanced by both Naana and Juana and both givestructural and thematic coherence to the novel. The theme of the novel is setin the opening passage itself. The protagonist of Fragments, Baako is ayoung man of twenty six. He has already put in five years in New York where hewon his spurs in creative writing.

He is expected to return home after his fiveyear course in New York. His arrival in Ghana is unexpected as he has cut shorthis sojourn in Paris. Prior to his return, he had dreamt of a sinecure job inthe media industry and had contemplated of a cozy future both for himself andhis family.

His grandmother Naana also imagined the same for Baako. But afterhis return to Ghana he declines to fulfill the role of a ‘ been – to’. A ‘ been –to’ is defined as a person who is expected to bring great fortunes to thefamily. Since the fortunes of a ‘ been – to’ elevates his position in the socialcircle he is treated as a demi-god and he is given special treatment by themembers of the society. In order to clarify his ideas of a ‘ been – to’ thenovelist sketches the character of Brempong who is contrasted with Baako. SinceBrempong is a ‘ been – to’ both the members of his family and the members of thesociety celebrate his return to Ghana with much fanfare. The members of the family of Baako look upon him as an Osagyefo.

In theGhanaian language Osagyefo is a retriever of the fortunes of his family. WhenBaako sets his foot on the Ghanaian soil his mother Efua greets him with high andlofty expectations. Enquiringly she asks Baako about the car which she thinksmight be in transit. In a flashback Baako recollects how his near and dear oneshad assembled to celebrate the occasion of his home-coming. He also recalls the’fripperies’ that were arranged by the members of his family on the occasion ofhis arrival. He remembers the naïve crudity with which he told them that thereis nothing exceptional in his arrival to celebrate. On that occasion heremembers that his mother was sanguine that he would complete the unfinishedhouse.

She had always undertaken this because she kept in view the status of a’been – to’. The mother sees her illusion shattered and she speaks in a vain ofirony. from this, his profession will enable him to reach out tothe ignorant people. Baako was full of high hopes about the Ghanavision and itsway of functioning. Shockingly he realizes that the Ghanavision has become themouthpiece of the Head of State who indulges in corrupt practices.

The seniorofficers of Ghanavision show their slavish sycophancy to cover up theirinability to articulate ideas that were noble and constructive. Small wonder thesenior officers of Ghanavision who toe in line with the corrupt Head of State rejecthis scripts and throw his constructive ideas to the winds. Left with no alternative Baako resigns his job and throwall his scripts to the flames.

The members of his family and society look downat him as an utter misfit. As a creative writer he starts writing on men andthe contemporary situation in Ghana. It is his family that is responsible foraggravating his depression. He keeps on protesting against the establishmentthat has let him down miserably. He is kept in an asylum, and this ascerbatesthe process of the total shattering of his nerves. Naana becomes a witness to the violence that is perpetuated about her invarious forms. She makes a commentary in the last chapter of the novel which isin the manner of an epilogue. In this epilogue, we understand that herindividual position of loneliness has not undergone any change but thesituation about her has certainly changed.

We saw her waiting hopefully andthinking wishfully in the first chapter have not gone unrewarded. But somethingunexpected has taken place later. The novelist shows all that has happened bysketching her mental. Inthe passage quoted above the ‘ traveler’ is none other than Baako. The material aspirationsof the family crush him psychologically. The aspirations of the family are’filled with the mass of things here and of this time’ only. The passage abovealso refers to ‘ another spirit’.

This ‘ another spirit’ is a reference to thechild of Araba that is new-born. The members of the family have forgotten thatthe child can be likened to a fruit              ‘ a seedhidden in the earth and tended and waited for and allowed to grow.’  The members of the family are greedy and arehell-bent on collecting gifts. The members of the family look upon the child as’a gathered gift of the instant’.

So, the members of the family are notbothered about the past and the future of the child but are only concerned withthe immediate present.  In the novel we looked upon thestory of the child vis–a–vis the story of Baako. What holds the meanings of thenovel together is the child image. The child image haunts the conscientiousnessof the principal charcters in the novel. Thereby, the child image acts as anucleus that holds the meanings of the novel together. The child image alsoserves as an extended metaphor; this metaphor indicates the plight of Baako. Naana identifies herself with the child.

Addressing Naana, the mythical past andthe world of the ancestors particularly ‘ those who have gone before’she states:’A new child coming back to you’ (Fragments 286) She is at her wits endand cannot divine the reasons for the perpetuation of violence. The human drama enacted in the novel is one of greed and spiritualmutation. The silver lining to this grim drama is provided by none other thanJuana. It is her positive vision which brings a whiff of fresh air to thenovel. The positive attitude which Juana exhales in the novel is similar to thepositive vision of Baako. The Ghanaian society is full of the ‘ heavy dreams ofthings’.

But in the sordid society, Juana craves for the soothing touch whichis so tenderly human. To quote Armah, the hunger in Juana is ‘ the hunger forwhich continued in her inspite of everything’ (Fragments 19) Both Baako and Juana show their sustained search fora meaning in their surroundings. It is this search which ultimately unitesBaako and Juana. As a sequel to the tyrannical despotism at Ghanavision Baakois shattered both physically and psychologically. The psychiatrist Juana tries tocure Baako of his psychological and physical wounds. When Juana is not around hefeels as though he were forlorn, lost and miserable. Just as Naana waited forthe safe return of Baako from America in the opening pages of the novel, similarly Juana waits sanguinely for Baako’s recovery.

The opening and theconcluding passages revolve on the same idea of going and returning. In thefirst page, Baako’s going to America and returning from America are hinted inthe novel whereas, in the concluding passage Baako’s going to a state ofpsychological depression and his return from the state of dejection are hintedin the novel: All that goes returns. Hewill return. (Fragments 1) Baakoand Juana become the interpreters of the encompassing vision of Naana. It isNaana who initially paves the way for the return of Baako. It is surprising thatthe same Naana bemoans that all hopes have been humbled to the dust.

All theother characters in the novel have eyes but their visions are limited. Thoughgifted with the ability of speaking yet she speaks only when the occasiondemands. Perhaps, she believes in the strength of the adage that silence ismore eloquent than actual speech: “ If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence?” (Fragments 3) Her spiritual companion is Baako and she remains aliveto see the return of Baako and the birth of a moon child in the family. Shebegins to contemplate her death when she clearly sees her breakdown bothmentally and physically. The return of Baako raises the signs of hope and expectancy in herheart.

In order to ascertain the success of Baako’s travel, Naana invokes thewisdom of those persons who went abroad before Baako. She remembers the day ofBaako’s departure and is able to prognosticate his quick return. Her prayersindicate that she is able to forge a psychological union with a past that ispurely mythical