

First picture which the novelist presents of

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First published in America in 1970 and later published in England in 1974, Armah's novel, *Fragments* eventually found its way to print in Africa. There are thirteen chapters in the novel and each chapter has a subtitle of its own. What is amusing about the novel is that it never becomes fragmented at all. Armah deserves accolades for the technical variations that he has employed in the novel. The narration is episodic and the reader comes across cinematic techniques of spotlight and flashback. Coupled with these techniques is a tone of the mythical past which introduces with great skill.

Armah gives a new dimension to the tempo of narration by introducing the tone of the mythical past in the narrative. The picture which the novelist presents of the novel is never lacking in unity. Even a critic of the stature of Robert Fraser is goaded to The theme and the structure of *Fragments* show a complexity which is worth analyzing.

Critic Rand Bishop in his evaluation of the first five novels of Armah notes with disapproval how his first reading of *Fragments* disappointed him. But he was candid enough to admit that his later reading of the novel made But a perceptive reader will find that *Fragments* is more than the first novel both in its theme and structure. Gerald Moore is not swept off his feet when he regards *Fragments* to be more superior to *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. From the standpoints of its originality and quality, to quote Moore, " will eventually establish itself as superior to *The Beautiful Ones* in quality, profundity and originality." (*The Journal of Commonwealth 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 the hoary wisdom of the past ages and her mythical experience underscores both the introductory and the closing chapter of the novel. As Armah delves into the thought processes of Naana in the ultimate chapter, the significance of the structural patterns and the title of the novel are made limpidly clear to us.

Some critics have interpreted the novel as a religious allegory. The most notable of these critics is Robert Fraser. He goes to the extent of saying that 'the thirty pieces' of 'a thousand and thirty useless pieces' is an emblematic representation of betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Fraser's interpretation of the novel from the religious standpoint is not tenable in this context.

It is not the religious implications which impart to the novel a wholeness of effect. Armah draws the reader's attention through the concerns of the individuals. The individuals are brought face to face with the family that is demanding and a society that is fragmented. Armah shows a group of individuals that wishes to restore order and a sense of justice because they see the social order and moral vision shattered before them. Such a shattering results in conflicts from within and without. On the one hand there are individuals who make concerted efforts to lead a meaningful existence; on the other hand there are members of a family who have an inimical attitude towards the efforts of the individuals. This is amply demonstrated in the novel through the character of Baako, the protagonist.

His grandmother Naana and his girlfriend, Juana, the psychiatrist girl from Puerto Rico. The fragmentation which Armah portrays in the novel can be seen both at the internal level and external level. Since there is no proper social order and proper ideology the society is fragmented.

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

Her vision of life is made whole by her blindness. We hear the incantatory tone of Naana in the first chapter of the novel. This incantation serves as a prologue and close on the heels of the prologue we see the point of view of Juana. Naana's thought provoking comments on life and its future portents can be likened to the epilogue in the last chapter of the novel.

But before the epilogue, the novelist presents the pragmatic vision of Juana. The feminine principle is advanced by both Naana and Juana and both give structural and thematic coherence to the novel. The theme of the novel

is set in the opening passage itself. The protagonist of *Fragments*, Baako is a young man of twenty six. He has already put in five years in New York where he won his spurs in creative writing.

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

His grandmother Naana also imagined the same for Baako. But after his 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 the family. Since the fortunes of a 'been-to' elevates his position in the social circle he is treated as a demi-god and he is given special treatment by the members of the society. In order to clarify his ideas of a 'been-to' the novelist sketches the character of Brempong who is contrasted with Baako. Since Brempong is a 'been-to' both the members of his family and the members of the society celebrate his return to Ghana with much fanfare. The members of the family of Baako look upon him as an Osagyefo.

In the Ghanaian language Osagyefo is a retriever of the fortunes of his family. When Baako sets his foot on the Ghanaian soil his mother Efua greets him with high and lofty expectations. Enquiringly she asks Baako about the car which she thinks might be in transit. In a flashback Baako recollects how his near and dear ones had assembled to celebrate the occasion of his home-coming. He also recalls the 'frizzeries' that were arranged by the members of his family on the occasion of his arrival. He remembers the naïve crudity with

which he told them that there is nothing exceptional in his arrival to celebrate. On that occasion he remembers that his mother was sanguine that he would complete the unfinished house.

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 of irony. From this, his profession will enable him to reach out to the ignorant people. Baako was full of high hopes about the Ghana vision and its way of functioning. Shockingly he realizes that the Ghana vision has become the mouthpiece of the Head of State who indulges in corrupt practices.

The senior officers of Ghana vision show their slavish sycophancy to cover up their inability to articulate ideas that were noble and constructive. Small wonder the senior officers of Ghana vision who toe in line with the corrupt Head of State reject his scripts and throw his constructive ideas to the winds. Left with no alternative Baako resigns his job and throws all his scripts to the flames.

The members of his family and society look down at him as an utter misfit. As a creative writer he starts writing on men and the contemporary situation in Ghana. It is his family that is responsible for aggravating his depression. He keeps on protesting against the establishment that has let him down miserably. He is kept in an asylum, and this ascertains the process of the total shattering of his nerves. Naana becomes a witness to the violence that is perpetuated about her in various forms. She makes a commentary in the last chapter of the novel which is in the manner of an epilogue. In this

epilogue, we understand that her individual position of loneliness has not undergone any change but the situation about her has certainly changed.

We saw her waiting hopefully and thinking wishfully in the first chapter have not gone unrewarded. But something unexpected has taken place later. The novelist shows all that has happened by sketching her mental. In the passage quoted above the 'traveler' is none other than Baako. The material aspirations of 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 above also refers to 'another spirit'.

This 'another spirit' is a reference to the child of Araba that is new-born. The members of the family have forgotten that the child can be likened to a fruit 'a seed hidden in the earth and tended and waited for and allowed to grow.' The members of the family are greedy and are hell-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 not bothered about the past and the future of the child but are only concerned with the immediate present. In the novel we looked upon the story of the child vis-a-vis the story of Baako. What holds the meanings of the novel together is the child image. The child image haunts the consciousness of the principal characters in the novel. Thereby, the child image acts as a nucleus that holds the meanings of the novel together. The child image also serves as an extended metaphor; this metaphor indicates the plight of Baako. Naana identifies herself with the child.

Addressing Naana, the mythical past and the 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 end and cannot divine the reasons for the perpetuation of violence. The human drama enacted in the novel is one of greed and spiritual mutation. The silver lining to this grim drama is provided by none other than Juana. It is her positive vision which brings a whiff of fresh air to the novel. The positive attitude which Juana exhales in the novel is similar to the positive vision of Baako. The Ghanaian society is full of the 'heavy dreams of things'.

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

The opening and the concluding passages revolve on the same idea of going and returning. In the first page, Baako's going to America and returning from America are hinted in the novel whereas, in the concluding passage Baako's going to a state of psychological depression and his return from the state of

dejection are hinted in the novel: All that goes returns. He will return.

(Fragments 1) Baako and Juana become the interpreters of the encompassing vision of Naana. It is Naana who initially paves the way for the return of Baako. It is surprising that the same Naana bemoans that all hopes have been humbled to the dust.

All the other characters in the novel have eyes but their visions are limited. Though gifted with the ability of speaking yet she speaks only when the occasion demands. Perhaps, she believes in the strength of the adage that silence is more 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 alive to see the return of Baako and the birth of a moon child in the family. She begins to contemplate her death when she clearly sees her breakdown both mentally and physically. The return of Baako raises the signs of hope and expectancy in her heart.

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