

An Excerpt-based Approach to Thematic Identification and Patterns in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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Abstract

Recently, literary works have enjoyed global recognition, especially among scholars who are interested in both the language use and literary devices therein. Literary works thus have varying ideas and experiences which shape the outcome of the literary work or piece, and talk more about the background of the writer. Hence, African writers in their literature reflect their culture and experiences. Data for this study are sourced from three thematic statements that capture succinctly the three central themes in Armah's "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born." It is worth knowing that the three thematic statements are the same as the three selected sentence excerpts in the novel. With insight drawn from postcolonialism(literature) and Systemic Functional linguistics(grammar), the study avers that themes in both language/grammar and literature provide information. Findings show that thematic statements or sentence excerpts contain certain lexical items that, coincidentally, serve as yardsticks in determining the location of themes in grammar. This is the point of convergence between the theme in language/grammar and literature. The study concludes that themes in both language and literature are partly determined by the occurrences of certain lexical items, which may be thematised, especially in thematic statements/sentence excerpts that capture the literary themes to basically infer meaning.

Keywords: African literature; themes; *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born*

INTRODUCTION

People and literature, like people and culture, are inseparable. However, the way of life of people, which is the people's culture, may be shaped by certain events or happenings. This perhaps may reflect in the literature of the people. A classical instance is the novel of Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The novel, as well as the people's literature, captures the events in Ghana after colonialism. The people's ideology, way of thinking seems shifted to that of their colonial masters. In fact, the political class in Ghana relies heavily on its colonial masters for governance. The various shortcomings in the lifestyle of the ruling class in Ghana, as presented in the novel, share a connection with certain excerpts that capture the three basic themes in the novel. Remarkably, all works of literature have themes. A theme is a literary device. As a literary device, its purpose is to underscore and understand the writing and deeper meaning of a literary work or piece. Themes in any literary work thus convey universal ideas. The ideas may focus on human experiences, love, identity, and justice. While it has been remarked that certain continents, like Asia, have rich literary themes due to historical events, other continents, through events like colonialism, also have rich themes. Hence, the present study from the lens of the three central themes of Armah sets out to analyse and evaluate the selected excerpts that capture the three basic/central themes of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. This is necessary in order to unravel the connection that themes share in both language/grammar and literature. It should be noted that the central themes in the novel unveil the Ghana of the 1960s and its looming fears, which made it practically impossible to achieve successful governance. Sadly, similar occurrences are witnessed in most African countries/societies today. Before embarking on the review of literature, it is necessary to have a background knowledge of the author, Armah.

About the Author- Ayi Kwei Armah

Ayi Kwei Armah was born to Fante-speaking parents and from a royal family of the Ga tribe in the port city of Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana. Armah attended the

renowned Achimota School and left Ghana in 1959 to attend Groton School in Groton, MA. After graduation, he proceeded to Harvard University to earn a degree in Sociology. No doubt, the field of Sociology exposed him to know more about people and their society. Armah then moved to Algeria and worked as a translator for the magazine *Révolution Africaine*. In 1964, Armah returned to Ghana, where he was a scriptwriter for Ghana Television and later taught English at the Navrongo School.

Armah was editor of *Jeune Afrique* magazine in Paris between 1967 and 1968. From 1968-1970, he studied at Columbia University, obtaining his MFA in creative writing. In the 1970s, he worked as a teacher in East Africa, at the College of National Education, Chang'ombe, Tanzania, and at the National University of Lesotho. Armah lived in Dakar, Senegal, in the 1980s and taught at Amherst and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Armah, no doubt, toured the four cardinal points of Africa: North, South, East, and West Africa, which, no doubt, must have exposed him to the leadership problems in the Africa continent as a whole. The novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* is evergreen. The novel is still rated as one of the best in African literature to date. This leads to the novel's synopsis.

A Synopsis of *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born*

The novel is about the story of what obtains in Ghana after independence. Hence, a novel and a story based on the happenings in post-independent Ghana. As a satire, the novel showcases characters who are similitudes of both the rich and the poor in the African society as well as their corrupt practices, which shape the style and form of the novel. *The man, Kofi Billy, Teacher, Koomson, Estella* and others, represent characters in the novel who are equally partakers of the political system of Ghana. *The man, Kofi Billy and Teacher* represent the poor, while *Koomson and Estella* represent the rich. Hence, the identified iconic characters represent both the rich and poor as well as their shortfalls, which are exposed in the novel. For instance, in

the novel, *the man* struggles to reconcile himself with the reality of post-independent Ghana. *The man* attempts to hold out against the pressures of corruption in both his family and his country. While it appears there is hope, the hope is that which is ephemeral. As a result, the novel leaves every reader wondering if Africa will be set free from the bondage of corrupt practices.

Review of Studies on *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

The novel of Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, has enjoyed global recognition. This is because it captures not only the events in Ghana as an African society, but the generality of what obtains in most African societies. In other words, the same fate that befell Ghana of the 1960s still persists in most African societies, like Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, among others. Hence, with insight drawn from Armah's novel, different authors and scholars stood to the challenge of writing their minds on what prevails in their respective localities. The works include thus: Aderinto (2014), "The Socio-economic and political implications of the various episodes of Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*"; Mavis(2014) , "An evaluation of post-colonial African leadership: A study of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and Chinua Achebe's *A man of the people*"; Oduki(2014), "Reversal as desire for change in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*"; Niemi(2017), "Challenging moral corruption in the post colony: Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Hannah Arendt's notion of individual responsibility"; Jilani(2020), "The self and the world against which it had to live: Neocolonialism and the resistant subject in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*"; Nkansah(2021), "Corpus Assisted Approach to Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*" to mention few. The different articles have something in common; they acknowledge corruption as a vice that pervades the African continent and show possible ways out of the vice. Hence, in analysing Armah's novel, several authors and scholars employ different literary and linguistic techniques/approaches. The linguistic approach to the novel ranges from semiotics to stylistics wherein authors/scholars endeavour to bring out different linguistic

concepts and signs relating to the vice of corruption and its decadence in the African society.

RESEARCH METHODS

Though several research works have been carried out on Armah's novel, the present study is not an exception, as it intends to analyse and evaluate certain excerpts that capture the three central themes in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Since the study is interested in an excerpt-based data approach to themes, the study considers postcolonialism (literature) and the Systemic Functional Linguistics (grammar) as theories or approaches needed to unravel themes in literature and themes in language/grammar, respectively. Postcolonialism as a theory examines the political, social impacts, among others, of colonial rule (Elam, 2019). The same term, however, goes beyond the aftermath of colonialism to include practices of imperialism and European colonial rule (Kohn&Reddy, 2022). Postcolonialism thus changes its scope recently to make people think and try to produce better relations between different people (Gabunia & Drew, 2023).

As earlier remarked, the novel of Armah captures the aftermath of colonialism in Ghana. The approach of postcolonialism seems appropriate in analysing both the novel as well as the selected excerpts (the two now as text). It should be noted that postcolonialism is interested in unravelling the underlying structures of language. Interestingly, the structure of language is what Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) captures in English grammar. Hence, the choice of the Systemic Functional Linguistics appraisal theory or approach, which passes judgement on the emotions of the writer (Yang, 2016). The study, through the two approaches, is set to analyse and evaluate the selected excerpts that capture the three themes in the novel in order to shed light on the meaning of theme in literature and the meaning of theme in language/grammar. This is the vacuum the present study intends to fill.

Defining Themes in Grammar and Literature

In grammar and more so, in the school of thought of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the theme is perceived in a sentence as the first occurring element. However, since sentences of excerpts are considered, the same are likened to text, which creates patterns of meaning. The same text, which is the excerpts, has components of sentences interpreted in context (Fries, 1992). It should be noted that the theme in the sentences of the excerpts is considered both as the subject of the sentence as well as the agent (Hassan & Fries, 1995).

In literature, theme is generally perceived as the central idea that a writer explores in his/her literary work. The same idea is the message conveyed in the literary work. The difference between a theme and a plot is that, while a plot describes *what happens*, a theme delves into the reason of *what happens*. Hence, the theme aids the readers to interpret the intent(s) of the character(s) as well as the conflicts and resolutions in the literary work. Theme can emerge in a literary work through the action(s) of the character(s), the setting, and the symbolic elements. When this happens, the motifs of the literary work are unveiled. Hence, the theme is the central idea or message while the motif is the recurring element, like a phrase, a symbol, or an image in a literary work (Bookish Bay, 2024). With the theme as the first occurring element, the same is the subject of the sentence, which provides information. Hence, in grammar, themes are either unmarked or marked. The unmarked theme follows the usual SPCA (Subject, Predicator/verb, Complement/object, and Adjunct) structure in a sentence. The marked theme does not follow the usual order. Rather, it is the other way round. The following structures are possible in a marked theme: ASPC, CAPS, CASP, CSPC, and so on. The sentence below explains the discussion:

S P C

(i) *The old man/* is crossing/ the road. In grammar, the theme of the sentence is *the old man* which is the same as the subject of the sentence. Hence, the theme in (i), is unmarked since it has the usual SPC structure.

Invariably, the same sentence can be put as, (ii) *Crossing the road/ is/ the old man*. Although the same meaning is conveyed in both sentences, the subject of the sentence in (ii) has changed. The theme in (ii), is marked since it does not follow the usual SPC structure. Hence, the theme or focus is *crossing the road*. Interestingly, in both cases of unmarked and marked themes, the information to be understood by the reader or audience is fronted/focused or “thematised”; *The old man* and *Crossing the road*, are fronted in (i) and (ii) respectively.

On the contrary, theme in literature need not be the subject of the sentence. The theme in a literary work is seen as something abstract that emerges from the treatment of its subject matter. In other words, the theme emanates from the subject matter in a literary piece or work. For example, in the novel of Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; the subject matter is Huckleberry Finn’s adventures while the primary theme in the novel is the conflict between civilisation and natural life. This is the difference between theme and subject in literature. In literature, therefore, themes are seen as problems, issues and ideas dealt with in a literary work. Theme is also seen as the general vision of human life or experiences revealed in a literary work. It should be noted that every writer tries to communicate ideas in their work. This practice becomes achievable with the writer’s engagement of ideas as themes. With themes in every work of art therefore, information is meaningfully passed across to the readers as the audience. This shows that in both grammar and literature, themes are chiefly ideas containing information in a piece of writing, work of art or a speech (Bennett, 2021).

Hence, an analysis and evaluation of the sentence excerpts that capture the three central themes in the novel: First, *the theme of corruption*; Second, *the theme of the aftereffects of colonialism*; and third, *the theme of ignorance despite enlightenment*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses the analysis of the three thematic statements. The same statements are likened to sentence excerpts which, interestingly, capture succinctly the three central themes in the narrative. The analyses become necessary to pry into the meanings of the theme in both grammar and literature.

First, The Theme of Corruption

The novel of Ayi Kwei Armah visualises corrupt practices from two different perspectives: the concrete and the abstract. The concrete pertains to the way ordinary citizens in the novel mess up their latrines' walls with diverse designs of smeared excrement. The abstract pertains to the political leaders and their corrupt styles of governance. In whatever way it is perceived, corruption is considered a norm, that is, a way of life lived by citizens. Thus, Ghanaian citizens in the novel, either rich or poor, lived by the dictate of corruption. Below is the sentence excerpt that captures *the theme of corruption*:

S P A

Sentence Excerpt 1: "...the wall/ is/ thickly streaked with an organic brown,/each smear seeking to avoid older smears, until the dabs have gone all round the wall."

Analysis and evaluation of theme in grammar: Sentence Excerpt I

In grammar, the expression, "... the wall /is/ thickly streaked with an organic brown..." is an unmarked theme. This is because the expression follows the normal pattern of the SPA structure. Hence, the information passed across is anchored on the expression as well as the subject of the sentence, "the wall" (community latrine wall).

Analysis and evaluation of theme in literature: Sentence Excerpt I

In literature, the central theme in the novel = the theme of corruption. The thematic statement that captures the theme = *...the wall/ is/ thickly streaked with an organic brown, /each smear seeking to avoid older smears, until the dabs have gone all round the wall.*

Explanation: The thematic statement foreshadows the general vision of human life and experience in Ghana. Hence, “the wall”, conveys a similar meaning as explicated in grammar: the expression “the wall”, is a display of both the concrete and abstract corruption. As a depiction of concrete corruption, Sentence Excerpt I illustrate how the walls of the community latrine in Ghana is messed up. As a depiction of abstract corruption, Sentence Excerpt I illustrates the decadence of Ghana in a public space and a display of her terrible use and state of the community latrine. Sadly, both the rich and the poor in the novel are part of the dirty practices. In the novel, when Koomson comes to the man’s house for dinner, as a dignitary, he must be escorted by his host to a community latrine and much to the man’s chagrin, a drama unfolds there. As they wait outside for the man inside to finish, they hear his “agony” and “struggle,” and when he leaves the latrine, the two men outside are hit with “*a stench [that] came up behind him like a sea wave and hit the men directly in the face. Koomson let a small gasp escape him.*” The rotten smell of the latrine is enough to leave Koomson shocked and breathless with disdain. Sadly, Koomson shows no concern.

This non-chalant attitude of Koomson, a political leader, is evident in Africa today. In Nigeria for instance, political leaders created the problem of class disparity which has brought about the greed for money and power. They are not concerned about the problems of the masses in the public space like filling stations, where citizens experience long queues despite high petrol pump price; the market, where citizens encounter high price of food commodities due to hike in foreign exchange; the bank, where citizens could not withdraw due to lack of enough capital in circulation; and so on. Thus, the theme of corruption in the novel has made politics in Africa viewed as a game. It is a game of *who knows who* for job opportunities, *who possesses what amount of money* for electioneering campaigns, and so on. Invariably, money politics is the order of the day in a typical African society.

Second, The Theme of the After-effects of Colonialism

As already pointed out, the novel is a depiction of an independent Ghana. Ghana was ruled by its people; the ruling class as well as the elite in the society. Sadly, the ruling class (Ghanaians) depended on the white men for guidance and direction. Thus, there were cases of imitation of what obtained before independence in Ghana. In other words, Ghana witnessed an indirect rule despite being independent. This sad event, according to Armah, shows the looming fears of the ruling class in Ghana since there was heavy reliance on the European influence. The white men were considered superior. The superiority of the white men over the ruling class of Ghana as suggested by Armah, led to the failures recorded in Ghana and her society. In Ghana of the 1960s, dressing, an aspect of culture and an art, is not African but European in mode. This is because everyone wants to be European in both dress and speech styles. Below is the sentence excerpt that captures *the theme of the aftereffects of colonialism*:

Teacher tells the man,

C S P C

*Sentence Excerpt II: "And they who would be our leaders,/ **they**/ also had/ the white men for their masters, and they also feared the masters, but after the fear what was at the bottom of their beings was not the hate and the anger we knew in our despair. What they felt was love. What they felt for their white masters and our white masters was gratitude and faith."*

Analysis and evaluation of theme in grammar: Sentence Excerpt II

In grammar, the expression, "*And they who would be our leaders, they also had the white men for their masters...*" is a marked theme. This is because the sentence structure does not follow the usual SPCA structure. Rather, it has the structure CSPC. However, there is no distortion in meaning since the focal information is on the lexical item as well as the subject of the sentence, "they" which refers to the black leaders who had the white men for their masters.

Analysis and evaluation of theme in literature: Sentence Excerpt II

In literature, the central theme of the novel= the theme of the aftereffects of colonialism. The thematic statement that captures the theme = *And they who would be our leaders,/ they/ also had/ the white men for their masters, and they also feared the masters, but after the fear what was at the bottom of their beings was not the hate and the anger we knew in our despair. What they felt was love. What they felt for their white masters and our white masters was gratitude and faith.*

Explanation: The thematic statement captures human experience in Ghana. Hence, the idea as a theme in the excerpt is anchored on the expression, 'they', which points to the Ghanaian leaders' ingratitude to fellow Ghanaians; and gratitude to the colonisers. Interestingly, the juxtaposition in the excerpt recounts the helplessness of the ordinary citizens in the so-called independent Ghana. Conversely, the *Teacher* in the novel understands that those who value their own homeland and culture rather than pretending to be Europeans will be at the forefront of true change in Ghana. With the hope that Ghana will be better, the worst continues.

The theme of the aftereffects of colonialism at present applies to most African societies. For instance, after independence, Nigeria is left to depend heavily on international bodies and foreign relations for loans via the World Bank or (International Monetary Fund. This practice is still on. But for how long will this continue? What will be the fate of future generations if our African leaders, like Koomson in the novel, are adamant and show no concern for their citizens? Are we not self-sufficient enough to cater for our needs as a nation or continent? Where are and what happens to the nation's human and non-human resources?

Third, The Theme of Enlightenment versus Ignorance

Ordinary citizens in the novel who are educated or enlightened were able to perceive the Ghana of the 1960s from a positive end. Sadly, this prediction wanes given the set of people who occupied the seat of power. Hence in the novel, *Teacher* represents enlightenment and awareness. Through his interactions with *Kofi Billy*

and *Maanan*; his use of *wee*; and his political involvement, *Teacher* became awoken to truths in the world around him. However, he soon found that these truths were not just there. Rather, the truths are shrouded with a darker and less hopeful worldview. Below is the sentence excerpt that captures *the theme of enlightenment versus ignorance*:

As the *Teacher* relates,

S P C

*Sentence Excerpt III: "The destructive thing **wee** does/ is /to lift the blindness and to let you see the whole of your life laid out in front of you. . . . Its truth is the deep, dangerous kind of truth that can certainly frighten you into a desperate, gloomy act."*

Analysis and evaluation of theme in grammar: Sentence Excerpt III

In grammar, the theme of the sentence excerpt is unmarked. This is because the sentence follows the usual SPC structure. Hence, the information passed across in the excerpt is on the expression and subject of the sentence, "wee".

Analysis and evaluation of theme in literature: Sentence Excerpt III

In literature, the central theme of the novel= the theme of enlightenment versus ignorance. The thematic statement that captures the theme = *The destructive thing wee does/ is /to lift the blindness and to let you see the whole of your life laid out in front of you.... Its truth is the deep, dangerous kind of truth that can certainly frighten you into a desparate, gloomy act.*

Explanation: The thematic statement talks about certain truth, that is, truth relating to *wee*. Surprisingly, the truth about *wee* makes both *Teacher* and *Kofi Billy* relate to their awakening moments; to the fact that their country may not likely improve given the constant and worrisome ugly situations around them. In the novel, *the man* was silent when his co-workers are excited about the coup to replace Nkrumah. He “*felt completely apart from all that was taking place*,” despite a brief moment where his hope is potentially sparked. He soon realizes, though, that hope is ephemeral, “leaving only the sense of something forever gone, an aloneness which not even death might end.”

Hence, the theme of enlightenment versus ignorance has made Ghana and its future somewhat bleak. The bottom line is that there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel for Ghana of the 1960s. But is there any hope even now? In Nigeria and an African society, every coup and counter-coup has been unproductive. Advocacy for a civilian regime or rule makes the situation even worse. In the novel, just as being hopeful is bleak for Ghana, the same applies to Nigeria and any African nation of today. In fact, the assumed good-natured characters/people who are intentionally and artistically portrayed by Armah as *beautiful ones*, are indeed not yet born. This is because, as long as corruption exists, no good individual will be spared of its presence since it spreads to every nook and cranny of human existence, consciously and unconsciously. As a result, there will definitely exist *the ugly ones* who refuse to bequeath the corridor of power.

CONCLUSION

The study embarked on an excerpt-based data approach to thematic identification and patterns in both literature and language/grammar. Findings revealed that themes in both literature and language/grammar provide information. Interestingly, the supplied information as noticed from the selected sentence excerpts that capture the three basic themes, may be thematised. When this happens, the onus is on the reader to determine whether the theme is marked or unmarked in language/grammar. As a result, thematic statements (in literature) and thematic patterns/choices (in language/grammar) share a nexus. The connection is noticeable through the occurrences of certain lexical items in the thematic statements (as boldly indicated in the selected excerpts). The instance of “**the wall**”, in the thematic statement that captures the theme of corruption, showed both the pattern/structure of the sentence excerpt as well as the intended meaning of the lexical item. The lexical item, “the wall”, is thus remarked, an unmarked theme

in language/grammar. The same lexical item, “the wall”, also explicates in detail, the theme of corruption in the novel.

The study averred that in an excerpt-based data approach to thematic identification and choice in both literature and language, respectively, certain lexical items feature prominently. These lexical items no doubt, serve as yardsticks to determine the inherent meaning of literary themes as well as thematic patterns/choices. When this happens, readers are encouraged to link the intended meanings of such lexical items to the purported meanings of the literary themes. Hence, a grammatical and semantic evaluation of sentence excerpts (thematic statements) for the purposeful identification of themes in both literature and language/grammar.

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