

# The Prodigal Hero Returns to his Aboriginal Home: A Reading of Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*

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This critique takes a critical look at the environmental determinism which shapes and informs Kofi Awoonor's hero and other characters in *This Earth, My Brother*. Another major preoccupation of this critical analysis is to investigate how the corrosive fictional wasteland—Awoonor's bleak landscape—affects the protagonist's existential quest for selfhood and racial identity. How Amamu, the prodigal hero, 'became a stranger to his tribe, to his religion, to his traditions, and to himself' (Yetiv 1976:86) is, therefore, my central concern. *This Earth, My Brother*, which is structured around the traditional African ontology and aesthetics, in particular, the Ewe cosmology, has a riveting resonance. The fictional world of *This Earth, My Brother* is so realistic that any reader with intimate knowledge of the Ewe world-view will realise that all Awoonor has done is to cloak in fictional fantasy the real living world of the Ewes. To achieve his creative purpose, the novelist has clothed in fictional garb of illusion countless fragments of Ewe religious, cultural and mystical rituals and ethnohistory.

When Awoonor's method of dealing with and fictionalising inherited material is compared to that of Ayi Kwei Armah (1979), Armah's *The Healers* shows how art becomes reality cloaked in the illusion of fiction—a situation in which the real cultural living world of the Akans is masked in art. The reader who is uninformed of the Akan heritage (even being Akan) might perceive fantasy while there is none, because the cultural reality and history of the Akans are ingeniously enshrouded in a marvellously seductive fiction. Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* employs the same device—concealing facets of Ewe existential realism and ontology within the garb of fictional illusion. Some of the flamboyant and ravaged destitute who inhere the fictional world of this novel happen to be real men who either lived or are still living in Keta (Ghana), where I once lived. The author does not even bother to conceal the identities of Abotsi, and Betieza, whose real life situations are manipulated by the novel (68-74). But Armah enigmatises and veils his

sources in fictionality by refurbishing his inherited material and forms and by renaming the original sources through a creative process of abstraction. To translate his artistic and didactic aims into fictional realism, Awoonor manipulates the rural-urban dichotomy in which the untamed Ewe rural world is juxtaposed with the urban slum jungle of Nima, the notorious Accra shantytown. Awoonor's purpose in contrasting the rural Deme with the urban ghetto of Nima is to set the rural world, the home of traditional African culture and history, as the antithesis of the blasted urban setting, the realm of white culture and civilisation. Deme, the rural setting in *This Earth, My Brother*, is symbolised as 'a huge foul dunghill', where dead chickens and dead goats are salvaged for food by the colonial war-scarred ex-serviceman, (the madman) Abotsi. The second important environmental landmark is 'the Deme road', which epitomises the chaos and the decay of colonial Ghana.

The lorry road is a narrow track of red earth beaten together by many feet, and the few trucks that careered along it on market-days on their way to the coast. It was mainly built, if it was built at all, of mud, and gravel collected by women from the gravel pits beneath the Aka River. When it rained, it was closed to traffic. There was a road overseer, a fat drunken man who could be seen after the second day of rain in his army supply raincoat, carrying a large load of keys which he jingled with a great of feeling of importance (7).

The Deme road represents the fictional universe of Amamu, Awoonor's protagonist. The village of Deme, Amamu's aboriginal home, is an environment deprived of the basic necessities of life and where women are eternally exploited. That such a road is supervised by a fat corrupt drunken man, Attipoe, clearly reveals the moral bankruptcy of the society and more importantly the ruling elite class of Deme and the entire Ghanaian social order—from microcosm to macrocosm. Awoonor's preoccupation with abject poverty and squalor shows that the two scourges are the predominating fictional landmarks of Deme rural wasteland and the Nima urban slum. The dilapidated conditions of the houses and the regular diet of Deme villagers are clear indices of the poverty and the starvation which threaten to obliterate the inhabitants of this bleak fictional terrain. Awoonor maintains that most of the houses are leaking and the occupants are too poor to have them repaired. Thus when it rains and this happens very often, the owners of the leaking houses try to catch the dripping water with pans and pots:

If your house leaked, you gather together pans and pots in which the drip, drip, drip of the rain beat at first singular tattoos, and then changed to the drop, drop, drop of collecting water (8).

Poetic prose narrative not only evokes the stylistic patterning of Awoonor's novel but also conveys the futility of occupants of leaking houses trying to prevent the inevitable flooding of the houses on rainy days. This general index of grim poverty is heightened by a number specific individual deprivations which permeates this work.

Kodzo, the town crier is a classic example of grim individual destitution, which plagues the people of Deme. Drunk and tormented by an empty rumbling belly, the famous town crier is forced to spend the night near a stinking chickens-house in Attipoe's compound because his wife has deserted him and nobody cares for or offers the poor man any food. The town crier's 'damp mud and thatched hut in Ablome' (10) gives us a clear picture of the physical shape and rustic conditions of the houses of Deme. His extreme loneliness and personal wretchedness epitomise the general suffering and hopelessness in this harsh world. Kodzo's daily woes and troubles—'no water in the ducks' plate, no firewood in the fireplace' (10), existential worries compounded by perpetual rumblings caused by eternal hunger and chronic troublesome hernia—crystallise the enormity of his deprivation and destitution. Chronic physical deprivations and grim poverty which dog Tailor and Abotsi, two of the many outcast destitutes, who inhere Awoonor's fictional world, have added another dimension to the cosmic malaise which threatened to obliterate this denuded landscape. Awoonor thickens the murky portrait of his rural wilderness with harrowing details of human suffering and naked starvation:

'I am dying. Is there anyone with a pencil and paper?'  
Someone had a pencil.

'Write down the names I am going to call. They owe me money. Use it to buy a coffin for me'.

A few elders had gathered looking at him. They were sure he was dying. There was nothing they could do.

'Before I close my mouth, Gamadeku, go and tell your wife to cook me *akple*<sup>1</sup> and light soup. I can't die on empty stomach'.

The food was brought. He ate and burst into a big sweat. He didn't die (72).

Tailor is forced to resort to the above subterfuge—the survival strategy of faking his own dying moment—in order to get something to appease the life-threatening hunger. Though we are certainly going to laugh at the hilarious humour created by this humiliating situation, we are more likely to miss the implied deeper meaning of this passage. The hidden insight is that Tailor could easily have died from

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<sup>1</sup> *Akple* is a stiff pap prepared from a mixture of fermented mealie meal and cassava dough. It is normally eaten in Ewe land with soups like: palm nut soup, okra soup, peanut butter soup and spinach (palaver) stew.

hunger, completely ignored by a society which is blind to the agonised suffering of the dispossessed outcasts who salvage the dead and rotten animals from the foul Deme dunghill for food. It must be reiterated that Abotsi dies in a similar fashion, completely ignored by the hospital which feels that the life of a madman is not worth calling a doctor for.

Children are, perhaps, the worst victims of hunger and starvation in Africa. Awoonor paints a horrific picture of how school children have to go to with only roasted mealies/ corn, *gari*<sup>2</sup> and cubes of sugar and have to beg for drinking water, which is, often, denied them by heartless women who hawk their items of food to school children. The most revealing incident which unmask how innovative and dangerous a starving child can be is the event in which Amamu's brother risks the avenging anger of the Ewe gods in order to quench the hunger tearing inside his bowels. Amamu's brother's hunger is so overwhelming that he overcomes his fears for the gods and eats the delicacies offered to the deities—an act which is one of terrifying taboos among the Ewes. Awoonor brings his portrayal of inescapable hunger and starvation in Deme to a climactic height in his description of a macabre incident in which a brother kills his own brother over a miserable rat caught in a trap:

They were brothers .... The elder came first to inspect the traps. He saw his junior's had the good catch. His trap caught the worthless little mouse which cannot provide a meal. Then it occurred to him. Suppose, suppose he took the mouse and placed it in his brother's trap ... But his bother had climbed a tall tree and saw his brother exchanging the animals. Then he ran the run of deers and came. And clubbed his brother on the head to death. (51)

Awoonor completes his grotesque and horrific murder episode with more gory details. The reader is told that a hunter discovers his dog 'feasting on the rotten entrails of a man whose nostrils, mouth and eyes were choked with [green] houseflies'. The murder having been discovered, the younger brother is arrested and made to carry the decomposed remains of his brother for thirty miles for a post-mortem examination, and is finally hanged 'for killing his brother for a mouse'. The thematic and the creative purpose of the gruesome details of Awoonor's macabre and cocktail narrative might, perhaps, not only be to concretise the intensity of the destitution and starvation in Deme, but also to convey the state of moral decay and disintegration of final love in an environment where hunger and starvation have assumed cosmic proportions. The incident also reveals the ruthlessness and

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<sup>2</sup> *Gari*, which is like tapioca, is prepared by roasting dried and well-sieved cassava dough. *Egba*, which is frequently mentioned in Nigerian fiction, is cooked by pouring boiling water over *gari*.

insensibility of colonialism and the novelist's constant parodying of Christian mythology. Here, Awoonor is, no doubt, parodying the biblical murder of Cain by his brother, Abel. Perhaps the most moving testimony of what hunger could do to man is the event in which a Hausa man who is about to be buried protests loudly of being alive and only hungry!

The stereotyped image of traditional Africa as exemplified by the stinking Deme dunghill is effectively captured by the author in this novel. The pervasive squalor which envelops Awoonor's fictional world of Deme does not only represent the physically squalid Africa, but the monstrous moral decay, which Awoonor suggests, has accumulated through the process of history. The key sentence in the Empire Day speech given by the Deme spokesman before the colonial representative, the District Commissioner, is 'our people go to latrine in the bush'. Lack of conveniences in traditional Africa seems to be a consistent complaint in African fiction. When Awoonor writes: 'Bring a rag this child has passed excrement or when Amamu tells us that the caning his father has given him has made him defecate badly right inside the compound, our attention is just being drawn to the type of squalor which dominates Awoonor's landscape: SHIT. The moral rot and wretchedness of Awoonor's fictive landscape are symbolised by the constant repetition of shit and dunghill. The narrator relates a story

about the driver of the night soil van, who went on a one-man strike because he wanted a raise. Drove and parked the truck right in front of the Sanitary Inspector's office. Refused to move. He got his raise (37).

The use of night soil as a weapon in forcing the white colonial officer into complying with the night soil driver's demand for a wage increase shows not only the cheeky and the defiant outcasts who inhabit Awoonor's rural world but also underpins the view that excrement is a powerful ritual weapon in traditional Africa. The Deme rural world is steeped in so much filth that it is normal for a crawling child to eat animal droppings from the compound.

Another landmark which dominates the Deme rural environment is violence and brutality towards children. We are told that Awoonor's communal world is a corrosive wasteland where police violence, teachers' cruelty towards school children, and sexual immorality are rife. The violent repression of the Sasieme Riot in which traditional leaders are arrested, beaten and locked up, their wives seized and raped, the town looted and jewellery stolen, stray animals rounded up and ancestral stools seized just because the elders insist on performing the religious rites of cleansing the stools of their ancestors and deities graphically conveys the inherent violence and destructiveness of colonialism. It is sad to observe that children are, very often, the unwitting victims of violence perpetrated by callous and impotent adults.

After a bad school inspection report, whose root cause has nothing to do with the children, the entire teaching staff work out their anger and frustration on the defenceless children. 'That day', Awoonor reports, 'Deme Roman Catholic School went into mourning' (36). The desire to displace the anger aroused by the white school inspector is such that 'old offences were dug up' and 'teachers caned whole classes on the slightest provocation and pretext' (36). The brutality and the severity of the caning is vividly conveyed in Awoonor's own words:

It was a weary day of loud noises, of lashes, of screams, tears and no joy. A few of the little ones pissed in their clothes, and they had to rags to wipe the urine from the floor. As they searched for rags, they rubbed their buttocks with their left hand and strove to wipe tears away with their right hand. It was a weary day (36)

And if we compare Awoonor's portrayal of teachers' cruelty towards school children with Es'kia Mphahlele's (1959) in *Down Second Avenue*, it will be clear that although the aim of both novelists is to crystallise the harsh and the cruel experiences Africa's school children have to endure in order to master the alphabets—the first step towards westernisation—the pupil-teacher conflict always generates undercurrents of sardonic humour. Mphahlele's (1959:52) *Down Second Avenue* evokes this physical abuse of school children as follows:

You should've seen Kuzwi the day Pongose was on the bench under his cane! That was the day Pongose's trousers seat flew up. A whole patch. And the day Danie wet his pants, another added.

In an environment dominated by violence and powerlessness, the victims of the powerful white cast will, of psychological necessity, need weaker victims for working out or displacing their own frustration and impotent anger. If we juxtapose Awoonor's caning of school children episode with that of Mphahlele's it will be seen that both authors have captured the severe brutality of the thrashing and the underlying sardonic humour. The root cause of the cruelty of the colonial African teachers has been put down to the inherent violent structure of colonialism, particularly the hostile colonised-coloniser encounters.

The unusually large presence of mad characters in *This Earth, My Brother* needs to be scrutinised. There must be a thematic or creative purpose for making seven of the characters who inhabit Awoonor's fictional world insane or eccentric. Perhaps the author is suggesting that the Deme rural society has corrosive and nerve-wrecking conditions that unhinge man's rootedness with his milieu, leading to his mental breakdown and insanity. The most important madman who plays no small role

in the novel is Abotsi, who lives on dead chickens and goats salvaged from the famous Deme rubbish-dump. Immediately after Abotsi in the insane ranking is Dzesan, the madman who runs amuck and opens fire on a market full of people. Dzesan has one distinguishing feature: he constantly complains of being cheated of his discharge money by the colonial government—an accusation made by all the ex-servicemen. This reveals the authenticity of the allegation, suggesting the dishonesty of the British colonial government and its eternal exploitation of the colonised.. The third crazy man Awoonor presents in his work is Sule. This insane ex-serviceman has one preoccupation: to train his five-year son into a soldier. Thus he drills his son, who is always dressed in full military uniform, from dawn to noon. The above three crazy men are all ex-servicemen, who fought the in the World War II (1939-1945) for the British colonisers, who abandon them in their in the villages they have run away from in order to enlist in the British colonial army. Since their enlistment is disapproved by their parents and the community and no financial provision is made to resettle them back in the villages they had deserted, they are regarded as traitors and treated as outcasts. This hostile reception compounds the mental states of mind, pushing them to insanity.

The other characters afflicted by madness are the Kabre man who is reputed to be an expert in battle of stones with children. Also crazy is Masa, the short, strong woman who is a friend to the mad Kabre man, who belongs to the most stigmatised ethnic group in West Africa. Although the cause of the derangement of the outcast Kabre man and Masa has never been directly stated in the text, there is no doubt that the corrosive and debilitating conditions of Deme rural wasteland have played a role in their mental breakdown. The last but not one character plagued by insanity, is ironically a priest. Rev. Dumenyo's mind is shattered by what he considers to be the tormenting double standard of Christianity. Rev. Dumenyo has a mental breakdown because he deserts the Ewe traditional gods and becomes a preacher, who falls in love with a member of his congregation—a romance forbidden by his church. The forbidden love affair unhinges his sensitive religious mind. The deranged Rev. Dumenyo challenges the doctrine which preaches religious love, but forbids human love and passion—the type of human romantic emotions which Christianity stigmatises as evil. The derangement of Amamu, Awoonor's elitist lawyer protagonist, crowns the theme of madness in *This Earth, My Brother*.

The mad and the eccentric are not the only people who inhabit Awoonor's rural landscape. There are the poverty-stricken village folks, who constantly struggle to ward off the eternal hunger which plagues them. It is crucial to note that even educated Africans, like the headmaster and the teachers of Deme Roman Catholic School and the Benezas, who dominate the funeral wakes of the poor outcasts who are refused burial by the Christian churches, are not better off than destitutes like Abotsi, Tailor and others.

Awoonor's urban environment of the city of Accra, like his rural locale of Deme, is symbolised by huge dunghills and a foul smelling open gutter, which rule supreme over the entire urban wasteland by spilling rot and trash over and polluting the whole city of Accra. This view is conveyed as follows:

No river runs through Nima. Only a huge open gutter that stinks to heaven. The city itself grew with vengeance. Nima grew alongside it like an ever growing and an eternal dunghill (151f).

Awoonor paints a revolting picture of the Nima ghetto—an appalling squalid environment unfit for human habitation. The long pot-holed street which runs through Nima, we are told, is a dirt track sprayed with coal-tar. That a cafe which stands prominently in this urban jungle is called 'the Harlem Cafe' shows that the novelist is employing the ghetto's universal image, by alluding to the famous ghetto of Harlem in United States of America.

The nauseating and harrowing details of Awoonor's urban landscape, whose physical and moral demise is endlessly repeated, are, in many respects, similar to Mphahlele's revolting portrayal of the disgustingly ever full latrine bucket in his grandmother's house in Marabastad slum. The back of the latrine, we are told, is equally infested with thousands of maggots which wriggle lustily in the stinking, thick, black, rotten seepage which flows from the shit bucket. Awoonor's portrayal of the bucket latrines runs as follows:

Another set is the two septic latrines, a fitting memorial to Nima, the city within a city Nkrumah has said he would make it. These latrines are ever full. Near the septic latrines are huge dunghills which in the language of the Accra City Council are called refuse dumps. No one ever removes refuse in Nima (152).

The permanent landmarks of Nima are 'a long pot-holed street running through the ghetto', the ever full septic latrines, and 'huge eternal dunghills'. Like Mphahlele's urban jungle, Marabastad, the dispossessed inhabitants of the Nima slum live in tin shacks and mud huts. The nauseating conditions of Awoonor's urban ghetto of Nima make one wonder whether any human being could ever transcend its corrosive forces. To set the Nima slum people as the antithesis of Ghana's bourgeoisie and to stress the great divide in the Ghanaian society, Awoonor juxtaposes the beautiful posh estate houses occupied by members of the Ghanaian elite class with the dilapidated slum houses of the Nima shantytown. The novelist writes:

The houses stand, if they stand, precarious, hurled together by a drunken



builder. Mud, zinc, deal board, swish. All bent westward towards the valley and the gutter in the vulgar pose of a woman stripping and bending to take a piss. On the eastern side of Nima, fenced away in respectable seclusion, are the new estate houses of Kanda. Here, the politicians, members of Parliament, directors of public corporations, party functionaries (in those days, now civil servants moved in) and a community of well-to-do prostitutes—who ostensibly work for the national airline or the hotels—live (153).

Nima does not only dominate the plush area of Accra, inhabited by the cream of the society, but the centre of higher learning is also situated in its 'green and pleasant fields' (153). Why Awoonor further compares the 'red-top buildings that house the great university' (University of Ghana, Legon, with the slum rickety houses of Nima sewer dwellers is difficult to decode:

On the northern part of Nima, beyond the last dunghill, lie violet mountains far away ... On their sides, perched in intellectual arrogance, are the red-top buildings that house the great university. They lie there as if God put them there in His infinite art and wisdom. So that He will then better be able to supervise the building of His new Jerusalem in Nima's green and pleasant fields (153).

Perhaps Awoonor intends to castigate academics of the Ghanaian ivory tower, who are noted for their intellectual arrogance. The thrust of the passage suggests that the revolting slum wasteland of Nima is intended to exercise a supreme proprietorship and ownership over both the city of Accra, particularly the posh residential area of the rich and famous, and the proud University of Ghana, where arrogant intellectuals pursue their academic vocation. That Nima, one of the most grotesque slum landscape ever painted in fiction, dominates the entire urban environment of the city of Accra, looming larger than life itself, is the greatest affirmation of Awoonor's thematic and artistic purpose of making Nima gradually engulf the main city of Accra. The final outcome of this domination is the inevitable transformation of the city of Accra into a city of slum in which there is no difference between Nima and palatial residential areas. All will become one big sprawling mushroom of slums. What Awoonor has also conveyed by these juxtapositions is that the physical purification, the appalling squalor, the moral decay and the abject human destitution, which are permanent characteristics of Nima, obtrusively pervade the rest of Accra, transforming Accra into a sub-ghetto of the 'City of Nima'. That the sub-human sewer dwellers of Nima—the washerwomen, the garden boys, the steward boys, the cooks, 'the drivers who work in respectable houses', 'the hard working

community of women who sell on credit terms to workers koko, beans and *gari*, *kenke* and fish'—mostly work for the elite or hawk their wares in the street pavements in the city centre reinforces the argument the Nima ghetto has taken over the city of Accra. Commenting further on another important segment of the Nima shantytown and showing how low Amamu's society has sunk morally, Awoonor has this to say:

There are prostitutes, the night women of Nima, they work in the night clubs that skirt Nima like sorrow children on a dunghill, offering respite to its inhabitants, promising them joyous retreats from their earthly worries. Husky-voiced, these women are largely from the rural towns. Illiterate and quarrelsome, they add to the nobility of their profession a capacity to be tough when the occasion demands (154).

The above citation does reveal what is in store for rural women who desert the communal village protective environment for the glamorous life of the city. Few of the rural hopefuls turn to crime and prostitution and manage to 'amass a tidy wealth' and return to their villages, but the majority 'linger on, bored, bitter and disease-ridden, only to wobble to their home towns ill with consumption to die' (154). The rural failures who are ashamed to go home, according to the writer,

die in their soiled bed clothes in airless card and deal board shacks, to be hauled off and buried by the City Council Sanitation and Health Department in the pagan section of Awudome Cemetery (154).

Alive the socials destitutes are ostracised and abandoned; dead, their mortal remains are denied Christian burial in Christian cemeteries. Their contemptuous rejection and dehumanisation by the ruling caste and the society in general continues even after death. The fundamental feature which exercises a powerful control over *This Earth, My Brother* is the environmental determinism which seeks to destroy or reduce the inhabitants of Amamu's world to the level of animals. Man's day to day preoccupation is, therefore, how to survive or transcend the forces which threaten to obliterate him. It must be reiterated here that there is no difference between the wasted life led by Abotsi and Tailor in the Deme rural environment and the empty urban life endured by the rootless and fragmented inhabitants of the Nima urban slum.

Like the rural locale of Deme, where Abotsi, Tailor and Kodzo, the town crier, are perpetually tormented by cruel hunger, the physical destitution which gnaws the bodies and the souls of men and women in the blasted urban setting is more devastating. At least the villager can trap mice, rats, squirrels and birds, or defiantly eat the food offered to the gods, like Amamu's brother or be occasionally rescued

from death by starvation by few kind-hearted villagers. The abject poverty of the inhabitants of Nima is projected by the children's conditions: 'pot-bellied children, perfect studies in malnutrition' (152). The poor quality of human condition which affirms the debilitating effects of the denuded environment on the inhabitants, is ceaselessly repeated. By the water pumps, we are told that 'bare-chested women wheezing with consumption quarrelled over who came first in the long winding queue' (152). It is crucial to compare the revolting slum conditions of Nima with those of the main city of Accra, which is expected to be neat and tidy. If filth, moral decay, hunger, misery and wretchedness are the most prevalent landmarks of the Nima ghetto, then the city of Accra itself is merely an extension of Nima.

Awoonor manipulates excremental metaphor in conveying his vision of colonial Africa, which Ayi Kwei Armah exploits with devastating and eclectic effect in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. One important stylistic feature of Awoonor's text is the overwhelming preoccupation with the macabre, the pejorative and the excremental and the dystopian vision. It is, therefore, not surprising that Awoonor again exploits the image of shit to convey the squalidness of the environment of the main city of Accra:

The yellow lights of the streets paved with human excrement from flying trucks pronounce and witness it. Underneath them painted prostitutes are hawking their pussies to Lebanese merchants, a cedi a piece with the prospect of *dzara*, *ntosuo*<sup>3</sup>, and if you know where they sell penicillin you can buy and buy (84).

Prostitution and excrement are landmarks for spiritual decay and filth, and their preponderance in the city environment is a clear evidence which supports the thesis that Awoonor's rural and urban landscapes are plagued by the same socio-economic and moral diseases. The excremental image exploited in the novel is synonymous with the dunghill image of Deme and Nima. The sentence fragment, 'if you know where they sell penicillin you can buy and buy', is a warning which suggests that prostitution spreads venereal diseases. As if the squalidness and the moral disintegration of the urban setting is not enough, the novelist further loads it with images and symbols of spiritual putrefaction and physical wretchedness. The

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<sup>3</sup> In buying and selling foodstuffs in markets in West Africa, especially in Ghana, the buyer is given few of the items of food free of charge (*gratis*) after the buying. The Hausa word *dzara* and the Akan word *ntosuo* are used to express this commercial custom of taking a few food items free of charge. What Awoonor, however, is suggesting is that, like the customer in the market situation, the man who buys sexual pleasure in a brothel is also entitled to one or two free rounds of sex.

growth of prostitution in *This Earth, My Brother* has reached such an alarming proportion that it has become necessary for hotel managements to inspect 'a line of prostitutes' before the arrival of clients. Awoonor's disillusionment with the character of social forces in the society and his bitter revulsion against the emerging elite and middle class is captured by his choice of words:

Gay girls in tight silk clothes worn knee length chaperoned by garlicked Lebanese chattering animatedly in Arabic and Pidgin from huge American cars purchased with loans from the national banks and independent Africa. Some long-limbed like shy gazelles of the savannah, their lips coated in blood.

A man was caught behind the public latrine at the lorry park cohabiting with a ten-year old girl selling ground nuts. Statutory rape. When questioned he said it was a slip of the penis (113).

The sentence fragment 'painted prostitutes are hawking their pussies to Lebanese merchants, a cedi a piece' underpins one of Awoonor's stylistic modes: the manipulation of the profane. Like the African American LeRoi Jones (formerly known as Amiri Baraka), who uses obscene narrative style in dealing with physical and spiritual rot in the society, Awoonor exploits verbal rot in order to cleanse the physical and the moral murk in which colonisers and their heirs, the African nationalist leaders, have covered Africa. To achieve this didactic purpose, Awoonor tries to purify the physical and the spiritual rot with verbal rot, a stylistic patterning structured around the profane—a creative ploy akin to the ritualistic carrier motif in which moral and spiritual filth is carried ritualistically at the end of the year by a chosen victim (Horton 259).

Awoonor's urban locale is not only morally rotten, but also physically diseased. We know of the proud Colonel Letsu, whose foot is gnarled and deformed by guinea worm disease he contracted when he was a child and the wheezy tubercular woman. The most shocking portraits of diseased characters, however, are 'the fingerless leper woman clutching a baby into her bosom' and 'a man in the last throes of syphilis ... screaming in a public latrine: 'It's coming' (116). The question which easily comes to mind is whether any human being can survive the environment so far delineated?

The city environment, like the untamed rural world, has its own toll of hunger which definitely is a common feature in the Black African fictional milieu. Though the adult Amamu has never been plagued by hunger, the boy Amamu knows the pangs of hunger and starvation. He cannot forget the starvation which compels Abotsi to scavenge for dead animals from the rubbish dump or Tailor's faking of his own death in order to trick women into giving him some food nor can he erase from

his memory how his own brother is driven by hunger to eat food offered to the ancestral gods. The overwhelming wretchedness of Amamu's world dehumanises and debases man. Man has become a helpless victim of a locale in which human existence is meaningless and absurd.

What does Amamu say about the ruling caste of his society? They are, according to Amamu, a bunch of empty-headed intellectuals, whose sole preoccupation is their pensions and gratuities. In his usual powerful and spellbinding style, Awoonor paints the portraiture of the impotent caste. The first in status and importance is Alex, the Principal Secretary of Ministry of Agriculture—a self-confident forty-five old man, whose own intellectual emptiness is revealed by his impatience with college-trained, whom he regards as 'hair-brained snobs. His shallow-mindedness is further confirmed by the fact that he pushed his way to the top' through sheer doggedness. The novelist's second portrait deals with Bob, a failed scientist, turned banker, who has capacity for tomfoolery and jokes about female genitals. Amamu's next victim is a faceless dentist whose speciality is sleeping with his patients. There is also a portrait of the yaws-gnarled Deme kid, now a snobbish empty-headed colonel, who speaks neither English nor Ewe (21-23). The last group of elitist nitwits painted by Awoonor is made of 'the agriculturists planning the nation's agronomical salvation from moth-eaten desks filthy with old tattered files' and old executive and senior officers 'with failing eyes and a nagging and discomforting anxiety about how much their pensions and gratuities were going to amount to when they retired from service' (92).

The writer maintains that Amamu's fictional cosmos is a land devoid of all life's nurturing elements and ruled by a bunch of insensitive and empty-headed intellectuals. Commenting on Ghana's attainment of independence, Awoonor talks about the Ghanaian nationalist leader bringing the people 'from the dust of degradation' and then casting them back 'into degradation' (p. 28)—a paradox which is difficult to unravel. Later in the novel Awoonor provides a hint to resolving the paradox when he declares that we must 'return to the magic hour of our birth for which we mourn'. The 'magic birth' Awoonor refers to requires mourning instead of the usual celebration and rejoicing because it turns into a nightmare. In a single sentence, Awoonor unpacks the paradox: 'Nkrumah, Awoonor declares later, from all accounts, just continues the work of British colonialists' (92). What is being suggested here is the disenchantment which has come with independence—expectations of freedom which generated huge euphoria and is expected to create a paradise on earth. Like the American Dream or the Emancipation of Slaves in America, the African independence has turned into a nightmare. That Ghana's independence is not really an emancipation from colonialism but rather a different form of enslavement is repeatedly suggested by Awoonor's manipulation of ironic mode:

Where are you from? Ghana. Isn't that the Gold Coast? Yes, before independence, before emancipation. (55)

The implied deeper meaning of this quote is whether Ghana is independent. The changing of the colonial name, the Gold Coast, to Ghana and designing a national flag do not offer true freedom. These political manoeuvres offer only what cynics call 'flag independence'. In another heavily loaded caustic irony Awoonor castigates an NT, the symbol of the body politic, who pleads 'with tears that the use of contraceptives be spelled out and entrenched in the constitution'. The narrator tells us that this immoral plea wins the gratitude of the chiefs—the custodians of traditional African morality and cultural purity—who regard his plea as the highest form of patriotism. We are told that the immoral MP becomes a national hero when the chiefs send 'a telegram congratulating the Assembly for its sagacity, good sense and patriotism' (117). What Awoonor suggests here is that not only the MPs are thrilled about having clandestine sexual relationships outside their marital boundaries but also the chiefs. The National Assembly, the chiefs and indeed the ruling caste are being satirised here for their immoral attitudes and the chiefs indicted for either their metaphysical blindness or moral ineptitude. Whatever meaning we attach to Awoonor's ironic stance, the MPs and the chiefs, who rule the nation, are acting contrary to what is expected from them.

To highlight one of his thematic concerns—the absurdity and the futility of the struggles of the Blackman on planet earth—Awoonor employs a network of paradoxes and ironical reversals, which need careful textual examination. The empty promise by the head of state to make 'Nima a City within a City' produces the reverse. Instead of improving the ghetto created during World War II when an American military base was established at Cantoment residential area and providing it with better social amenities which will make it fit for human habitation, Nima is so neglected that it acquires the reputation of being the shabbiest and the filthiest shantytown in Ghana. This ironic inversion is further compounded by the paradox of Nima eclipsing the city of Accra and relegating it into a slum suburb of the Nima ghetto. Awoonor's virulent satire is also directed against the incongruity of the use of socialism as a label for a nation in which capitalism reigns supreme and in which the gap between the rich and poor widens instead of narrowing. Worse still, although the sons and the daughters of the soil are now in power, the economy continues to be controlled by Lebanese businessmen. The author conveys this view as follows:

The Lebanese merchants are bargaining away native lands, even a government that proclaims socialism—a confusion of ideas, beliefs and magic—cannot provide the answer. So children turn into beggars in the market place, as the eminent men play golf on the Achimota course (162).

Awoonor talks of children turning into 'beggars in the market place'. He should have added 'and adults wind up in mad houses'. That foreigners are land speculators in a society which shouts militant and bogus rhetoric from rooftops and whose fundamental constitutional and ideological law is public ownership of land, is indeed incongruous.

The Blackman's odyssey is dogged by huge contradictions and paradoxes. The ambiguity lies in the fact that as a prodigal hero, who has severed his primary ties from his aboriginal home in order to assimilate European ethos, Amamu must go back to the traditional communalism he had previously rejected as a child in order to achieve a restoration and redemption. To regain his lost native wisdom, he has to be reconnected to the Deme dunghill he has turned his back to when he began his quest for western education—the quest for the golden fleece which takes him to the UK. In order to re-create a new counter-image for himself and his race, he must embrace the rejected stigmatised African heritage with all its degrading shortcomings. For Amamu to be able to find self-illumination and redefine his selfhood and race, he has to lose or dissipate his African rooted past during a process of westernisation which will finally lead to self-consciousness, desecration of his gods, cosmic anomie, a severe state of marginalisation, and physical and metaphysical agony. Another classic example of ironic inversion which needs to be mentioned is the incident in which Kodzo, the Deme town crier, who has received for many years treatment for his chronic and troublesome hernia without success, discovers that the traditional medicine-man, who has been treating him, suffers from severe chronic hernia himself. Kodzo's reaction is how can the physician heal him if he cannot heal himself.

The ironic mode in this novel is also evoked by irony of characters. The central irony of character is revealed by the protagonist. Amamu is acclaimed to be a learned and brilliant lawyer, but his peers dismiss him as a madman. The incongruity arises from the fact that in a society derailed by immorality, poverty and corruption and ruled by blind shallow-minded intellectuals, the sensitive and the visionaries are called insane by the naive and the visionless. As a British trained and successful lawyer, Amamu is a member of the ruling class, but he is so upright and alienated from his class that he is a virtual alien in his own country. The fact that Amamu's bourgeois wife cannot give him what he needs most, peace and love, and that he has found what his wife is incapable of providing him in a whore, Adisa, is loaded with both irony and paradox. The most heightened form of contradiction invoked by Amamu's character is that he has found no harmony in his westernised environment—an ambition and odyssey which have taken him from local schools right to overseas. Amamu has to go back, shoeless and stripped of all the strappings of westernisation, to the degrading Deme dunghill, his aboriginal home, inhabited by village destitutes and mad people, and dominated by pagan deities and drumming. It is equally ironic that the prodigal protagonist can only achieve the self-illumination

necessary for rediscovery of self and race if he has passed through the agony of westernisation which induces extreme alienation.

The beliefs in the efficacy of departed ancestors—the fundamental component of Africa's cultural heritage—form the very core of Awoonor's novel. In order to transform his creative vision into fictional realism, Awoonor excavates and transmogrifies myriad fragments of Ewe icons, rituals, myths, legends, religion and cultural history into a tantalising, seductive, complex novel. Cannily concealed beneath this narrative structure is an impenetrable magico-iconographic forest of Ewe symbols—a fictive crucible which veils the magical secret grove of Ewe mysticism. In the Ewe cosmology the well-being of man, both materially and spiritually, is believed to be controlled by the deities and ancestors, who demand frequent sacrifices of food. Now that we have fully scrutinised the environment which shapes and informs the characters who inhabit Awoonor's fictive world, let us take a look at Amamu's character.

Why a talented, London-trained lawyer flooded with clients and married to a beautiful, bourgeois been-to—a man with an impeccable social position—runs mad is my last central preoccupation. Unlike the poverty-stricken madmen of the untamed rural world of Deme, Amamu's education and profession can help him climb the ladder of success to the very top if he so desires. The enviable social status open to Amamu if joins the visionless majority of Ghanaians and plays the immoral role of the dishonest and corrupt intellectuals like his colleagues is evoked by the reaction of the traffic cop when he discovers the true identity of Amamu. The traffic policeman's fear and unconditional apology when he realises that the man is about to charge for traffic offence is an 'untouchable'—a lawyer—supports the interpretation that Amamu can enjoy all the privileges of the ruling class if he submits to the rules of the game of corruption practised by his colleagues.

Amamu's personal character is, perhaps, the fundamental cause of his refusal to accept the type of life the elite class of intellectuals entreat him to lead. He is not only very learned, but also aloof, proud, and extremely sensitive. Not very unlike Albert Camus' Meursault in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Amamu is brutally distant and seems to have Meursault's passion for the absolute truth. A society which places a high premium on lying, pretence, corruption and self-interest is bound to silence any minority voice which threatens its existence. What is difficult to unravel is the fact that, although Amamu is pitched against the corrupt society of Ghana and is committed to defending and saving the outcasts and the dispossessed, he continues to enjoy the privileges the immoral elite class has created for its own protection. That Amamu enjoys these benefits is revealed in how he uses his social position as a lawyer to terrorise the poor traffic policeman, who is about to charge him for a traffic offence.

Amamu tries various ways of escapism from the harsh realities of his cosmic



ennui and alienation. Amamu's deliberate attempt to remain in drunken stupor seems to suggest that he is trying to flee from the depressing realities of life. The protagonist's frequent mental journeys to the sweet dreamy world of his childhood, which is symbolised by the magical woman of the sea (*mammy-watah*) and the fields of butterflies and the ancient almond tree near the sea could be seen an indication of escapism from realities. The deeper insight of this strange behaviour, however, is that Amamu is struggling to get reconnected to the racial umbilical cord he has severed when he went on a quest for the golden fleece—an odyssey which leads to his process of westernisation and dissipation of his African cultural heritage.

Awoonor's protagonists' dilemma is a complex one. The ruling caste he is supposed to belong to is composed of parasites who are bent on sucking dry the blood of the poor. As a lawyer, he is considered a god in his society and he knows that things have to change. He, however, also knows the body politic is plagued by corruption—a rotten state of affairs epitomised by the slogan 'chop make chop some' (22). Although a transformation can only be achieved through the destruction of the social parasites, it is impossible for a lone voice to effect the demolition of a powerful elite class supported by a silent voice of the majority. Amamu's initial attempts to transform his diseased society are confined to talking to his peers in the National Club:

He would go on and on. Suddenly he would realise that no-one said anything, no-one interrupted. So he would become silent, withdrawal was his immediate refuge. Then he would gaze to sea, his mind wandering away. After a while, his friends would pick up their conversation which had been interrupted ... Suddenly he would call Richard and ask for his bill. And without a word to his comrades, he would descend the creaky stairway and drive away into the evening. They would say he was mad. But very learned (25f).

It is clear from this citation that even before Amamu actually goes around the bend, his colleagues perceive him as a madman. This is not all. Amamu's alienated character trait has become his second nature. It is evident that Amamu discovers the only way by which he can evolve harmoniously with his peers is by adopting the attitude prescribed by the society: 'Chop some make I chop some'. The society insists on its members adhering to the rules of the game: making others steal from national coffers what you do not want to steal; confining criticism of the government and the society in general to verbal rhetorics and meaningless protest designed to achieve no concrete results.

Like the characters in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Amamu realises that his peers are only interested in spending their time and energy on meaningless

discussions on corruption and immorality which undermine the social and political fabric of the nation, and are opposed to any attempt to change the system. All actions must end on the futile debate: 'What went wrong in Ghana?'. Like Amamu's destiny, the destiny of Ghana leads to only one inevitable end: political and economic disintegration. The Deme road is the symbol of a race indifferent to its impending doom—a quest which leads to death. By manipulating a poetic prose narrative which weaves into its textual boundaries the agonising woes of Deme world—a world so denuded of social amenities that, instead of surgical scissors, Roman Catholic sisters are compelled to use sewing scissors for simple operations—Awoonor underpins the misery of the rural locale of Deme. The narrator intones the tale of woes as follows: 'The roads winds through tomorrows, for there are no yesterdays, and tomorrows they are wiped away by tears in the eyes of orphans, in the eyes of widowed women in the eyes of husbands who lost their wives in childbirth in the convent where white sisters in long gowns administer ether and cut open wombs with a pair of sewing scissors' (48). There is also the intimation that there is no hope for future redemption—a view which is projected as follows: we are told that the 'tomorrows are wiped away by tears of the eyes of orphans',

Amamu's environment provides a perfect atmosphere for the dissipation of sanity and its replacement by dementia. If Amamu were dim-witted and easily corruptible, he would have repressed his distaste for the empty barrels who rule his country, joined them and survived. Unlike the alienated protagonist who has managed, in spite of the overwhelming pressures of his environment, to stay on what could be called 'the right side of the fence'—the one who does not belong to the mainstream of the social order—a stranger, albeit a 'sane' stranger, Amamu goes overboard and becomes insane. Unlike Mphahlele, who despite the corrosiveness of holocaustic environment has managed to stay on the right side of the fence, though as a marginal man, ostracised by the white social order, Amamu fails to continue living as a marginal man and becomes insane. Mphahlele at least has an escape route—the route to exile. Amamu, however, has no choice. Since ideologically and didactically it be will unsound for a returnee prodigal to go back to Europe on exile, he chooses defiance, which leads naturally to insanity and death. The intense maniac depression that dogs Awoonor's hero and finally leads to madness and death stems from heightened self-knowledge, self-illumination fostered by a prolonged association with those who are doomed to agony and despair on the planet earth.

This self-knowledge dates back to Amamu's childhood. As a little boy running with his peers and throwing stones at the insane, whom the boys are trained by the 'wise adult community' to treat as social outcasts—the society's enemies—Amamu has learnt to perceive the 'wise majority' of his world as dumb 'sleep-walkers'. The boy Amamu is shocked to observe that the visionless silent majority, who train their children to become sleep-walkers regard the insane outcasts as

worthless beings fit to be thrown to the dogs or exorcised like evil spirits that they are. Amamu has warm relationship with the Deme's social misfits. The child Amamu's final decision not to hit the insane Rev. Dumenyo with the stone he has picked up for this purpose as his peers have expected and his silent rejection of the 'wise' adults' advice not to establish any relationship those whom the society has branded 'insane' can only be explained as an uncanny ability to recognise the absolute truth.

In Awoonor's fictional world-view, the only people equipped with mother wit are the children. This view is confirmed by Amamu's and his peers' decision to accompany Abotsi on his last journey to the pagan graveyard despite expressed orders from parents that no children should come to the burial ground. Amamu recalls vividly and painfully the extreme suffering the Deme social misfits are subjected to and the tremendous obstacles they have to overcome in order to survive physically. While Tailor has to feign death order to compel the women to give him something to ward off his nagging hunger, his friend Abotsi has to fight with vultures which rule the rubbish dumps that contain the dead animals. The most unforgettable incident concerning hunger is Amamu's brother's coming home, dripping with palm oil after eating the food offered to the Ewe gods. Amamu's world is not without brutalities meted out to the weak and the dispossessed.

The protagonist cannot help contrasting his own servant, Yaro's moral anguish, when his brother is beaten to death by the police of independent Ghana with the Sasieme durbar incident and its brutal repression by the colonial authorities of the Gold Coast. Amamu, the learned lawyer, associates himself with the suffering of the Deme outcasts, whom he cannot eradicate from his mind. Amamu cannot ignore the physical and moral decay of Nima: the prostitution, the inescapable suffering and the eternal dunghills of shit. Neither can he escape the artificiality of his wife and the emptiness of his own life—her artificial teeth and hair which symbolise the mockery and the hollowness of their very relationship. Amamu cannot transcend his destiny. Going back to Europe is not an option and neither can he go home because 'Home is my desolation, home is my anguish, home is my drink of hyssop and tears. Where is home?' (29). Amamu also makes a discovery which shatters all hopes for the future, leaving a personal ritual sacrifice as the only alternative. The ruling class of Black neo-colonialists, Amamu has discovered, are Blacks with white souls who faithfully continue the work left by their white masters. Amamu realises that the 'nation's agronomical salvation' is planned 'from moth-eaten desks filthy with tattered files' in 'forgotten edifices' by 'old men' with 'falling eyes' and a nagging and discomfoting anxiety about their retirement pensions and gratuities. Even the rat-infested National Club building patronised by Amamu and his peers is also a colonial inheritance, and the barman, Richard, is employed to work in the club because somebody remembers his colonial connection.

What is Awoonor trying to do by linking the colonial ruling caste with the contemporary ruling elite? Obviously, the novelist maintains that the moral decay, the disintegration, which besieges Amamu's world is a historical continuum dating from the past. The central evidence in support of this view is revealed by the following quotation.

Nkrumah, from all accounts, just continued the work of the British colonialists. Government by force of arms—*vis et armis*—government by chicanery, tricks, new tricks will be worked out with devastating logic for a one-party state ... (92).

The above citation suggests that the nationalist leaders who won freedom for Africa have either consciously or unconsciously sold their people back into slavery—an insidious servitude in which the slave-masters are all Blacks, who use the same old colonial subterfuges disguised with new names and faces. The Black leaders are forced to walk backwards into the colonial past for their political stratagems because 'seeing forward was denied them' (93). This view is further reinforced by Awoonor's symbolic use of the Christianborg Castle, the colonial administrative headquarters, which the nationalist government of Nkrumah and the military regime that toppled him use as the official residence for the Head of State. Awoonor suggests the nationalist government of Nkrumah is, like the colonial government, dominated by greed and self-interest and is not committed to the welfare of the masses. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that the Black Star Square, the symbol of nationhood and national heritage, is in total darkness while in the Castle, where the President lives, 'light was blazing ... as if it were on fire' (27). Awoonor suggests that Nkrumah's political antics are like those of the colonisers. Nkrumah who considers himself a national hero and a redeemer declares: 'Follow my laws my children, follow my laws for I am the one who brought you from the dust of degradation' (28)—a self-deification which rings hollow. What the national legendary hero has, according to Awoonor, done is to derail his people and send them plunging deeper into darkness.

Amamu is confronted with a huge dilemma. What can he do? His society is bent upon doing nothing about its impending doom. There is no future for a society dominated by the visionless majority who can only move backward. Amamu cannot go and live with his prostitute girlfriend, Adisa, because their love can only provide a temporary relief to the 'wounded' and 'fragmentary humanity that has suffered and continues to suffer the affront of a total immorality, the immorality that rejected and excluded all other possibilities' (Awoonor 168). Finally, Amamu has decided to confront death and sacrifice his life by committing suicide so that others can be saved. This is definitely a regressive step—an action which leads to loss of selfhood

and death. Awoonor suggests in his essay, 'Tradition and Continuity in African Literature', that Amamu's final journey back to his aboriginal home of Deme and death is not futile because 'He is, in fact, the Ogun essence through whom the restoration will be achieved' (Awoonor 1976:170). In his article entitled 'Kofi Awoonor as Critic' Obi Maduakor formulates one of Awoonor's four propositions articulated in his essay cited above. According to Maduakor's (1994:10) formulation,

African art aspires ultimately towards the condition of wholeness. It aims at evoking energies that make for restoration, renewal and integration; it does not provoke disintegration either within the individual or communal psyche.

The prodigal hero's arrival at Deme, the disappearance of his nagging headache and its replacement by serenity and happiness support the view that his final death is a triumph and not a tragedy. Awoonor suggests that Amamu 'should die so that the rest shall be saved' and sees his death as ritual sacrifice which will, perhaps, give a meaning to his meaningless existence. It is, however, difficult to brush aside the feeling that Amamu has sacrificed his life in vain. Although the termination of Amamu's odyssey in madness has puzzled many a critic:

Awoonor insists that the contradictions within the hero's psyche are resolved at that moment of his final embrace with the woman the sea (*mammy-watah*) (Maduakor 1994:10).

Perhaps we must add that the return of the prodigal hero to his aboriginal home, bare-footed and without the trappings of western civilisation, amounts to the restoration and redemption of his dissipated marginalised selfhood and racial wholeness.

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