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**Decadence in Post-colonial Ghanaian Society as reflected in
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Decadence in Post-colonial Ghanaian Society as reflected in Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments

Santosh Rade, Assistant Professor of English,
Anandibai Raorane Arts, Commerce & Science College,
Vaibhavwadi, Sindhudurg, Maharashtra- 416810

“Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.”

- Kwame Nkrumah (Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism)

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore various factors responsible for causing decadence in the post-colonial Ghanaian society and its impact on it as reflected in Ayi Kwei Armah's second novel, *Fragments* (1970). As like most of the post-colonial countries, Ghana has not achieved complete decolonization after independence mainly due to Euro-American dominance and corrupt native elites. The independence achieved after hard and long fought struggle, proved futile just within a decade for common citizens and even worsened their condition. Severity of their major problems like- poverty, enslavement, materialism, corruption, loss of values and alienation became more severe. The daily life of common citizens became extremely miserable and pathetic due to the decadent atmosphere in the country. It is also an attempt to study some possible ways of eradicating decadence proposed in the select novel.

Key words: Post-colonial, neo-colonialism, decadence, dominance, exploitation, corruption, resistance

Ayi Kwei Armah is considered as one of the major second generation African writers after Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiongo. He is a socially committed literary artist. He attempts to contribute to the development of Pan-African identity. He is well known for his revolutionary vision and uncompromising stance on severe problems of Africa in general and Ghana in particular. He mainly focuses on psychological impact of neo-colonialism on African people and attempts to decolonise it in his works. He is seriously concerned with sufferings of his fellow Africans in general and fellow Ghanaians in particular. He directly exposes and criticises all social evils, which hamper well-being of the common masses and tries to eradicate them.

His novel, *Fragments*, depicts decadence in post-colonial Ghanaian society through various characters and incidents and also offers feasible solutions to eradicate it. It is a story of a young man, Baako Onipa, who completes his higher education abroad and returns back to his mother country. He was initially confused about whether to return or not and doubtful about whether he would be able to survive and do something good in his home land. Somehow he determined to return. On his way back, he meets his fellow citizen, Bermpong,

who was also returning to the mother land. He got glimpses of the decadent Ghanaian society, from his conversation with Brempong.

Baaako encounters drastic changes in the society, on his arrival in the home land. Being a foreign return, he is over-burdened with never-ending demands and excessive expectations from his family members, relatives and other people around him in the society. Although he is educated in a foreign Western country, he has not forgotten his traditional native culture. He tries to lead a life of traditional values and principles and becomes a misfit in his own mother land among his own people due to the changed nature of the society.

Ghana achieved independence in 1957 from the British colonial rule, yet it has not achieved complete decolonization in all domains of the society. Initially, it achieved only political independence and not the complete independence. Like most of the postcolonial countries in the world, the true independence from the evil clutches of imperialism, capitalism and colonialism is still a dream for the nation. Edward Said argues-

“The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were ruled directly by European powers.” (Said 20)

The colonialism bounced back indirectly after political independence in many post-colonial nations, with more vigour and strength in various forms and with innovative tactics of dominance and exploitation which is known as neo-colonialism. Nyikal states-

“There is merely a new form of colonialism, by the same western countries, masked under the pretext of economic support for Africa, directly enforced in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) & World Trade organisation (WTO).” (Nyikal 01)

European and American imperial powers joined hands with native leaders and elites to indirectly control and exploit human and natural resources in several developing nations like Ghana in the Third World. Frantz Fanon aptly describes this new way of dominance-

“During the period of liberation, however, the colonialist bourgeoisie frantically seeks contact with the colonised “elite”. It is with this elite that the famous dialogue on values is established. When the colonialist bourgeoisie realise that it is impossible to maintain its domination over the colonies it decided to wage war rearguard in the field of culture, values and technology, etc.” (Fanon 09)

Nyikal rightly describes the evil nature of economic neo-colonialism:

“[I]t is evident that Africa’s wealth is being repatriated to the richer countries in the west, just as it was in the colonial days, but masked under “debt servicing” and thus my notion of economic colonialism. This economic colonisation of Africa has done and continues to do as much damage to the continent as the imperial colonialism and its after effects did.” (Nyikal 7)

The decadence in the post-colonial Ghanaian society is a combined consequence of colonialism, neo-colonialism and irresponsible and insensitive behavior of the corrupt native elites. The western dominance still continues even after independence in all domains which maintains and widens the rift between various existing inequities such as- black and white, rich and poor, common and privileged, etc. Edward Said argues-

“Conversely, the triumphant natives soon enough found that they needed the West and that the idea of total independence was a nationalist fiction for what Fanon calls the ‘nationalist bourgeoisie’, who in turn often ran the new countries with a callous, exploitative tyranny reminiscent of the departed masters.” (Said 20)

Prof. Fredrick O. Wanyama also admits the evil nature of neo-liberalism which is one of the tactics in neo-colonialism, even while explaining its positives- “Neo-liberalism has, therefore, not been a constant evil to African development; it has had its positive sides as well.” (Wanyama 145)

Materialism, corruption, exploitation, enslavement and various inequities have contaminated the social atmosphere in the society. These social evils have become customary in the country. Consequently, the morale of the citizens is down. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines decadence as- “behaviour, attitude, etc. which show a fall in standards, especially moral ones, and an interest in pleasure and enjoyment rather than more serious things”. (2000-391)

Materialism is all pervasive in the contemporary post-colonial Ghanaian society and it is one of the factors responsible for creating decadence. The citizens desire and attempt to get the material comforts and pleasures like- lot of money, bungalow, car, etc. They feel helpless, if they do not get these things. Ocran, a senior teacher, explains the mentality of his fellow citizens to Baako-

“Think again. Look well at all the people needing to have things to set them above people. Position, power, cars, wigs, houses, money. If they lost these things they’d get sick with their own emptiness.” (Armah 274)

Everyone who returns from a foreign country is expected to possess and also provide all these things anyhow to their family members. Their excessive expectations and demands overburden an honest person like Baako. He describes this change in the society to Juana-

‘It’s necessary,’ he said. ‘I can understand that. But it’s changed into something else, something very deeply set now, I think. The member of the family who goes out and comes back home is a sort of charmed man, a miracle worker. He goes, he comes back, and with his return some astounding and sudden change is expected.’ (Armah 150)

In pre-colonial Ghana, community or society was at the centre. All members used to think of and work for the well-being of the community. Due to colonialism, gradually the focus has been shifted from the community to the family. Everyone is just trying to make progress of one’s own family, even at the expense of the community. Baako clearly points it out-

“We have the old heroes who turned defeat into victory for the whole community. But these days the community has disappeared from the story. Instead, there is family, and the hero comes and turns its poverty into sudden wealth. And external enemy isn’t the one at whose expense the hero gets his victory; he’s supposed to get rich, mainly at the expense of the community.” (Armah 150)

Arowolo in his article aptly comments on the situation-“Extended family giving way to nuclear family. Traditional African values breaking down very rapidly.” (Arowolo npag)

Corruption has become rampant and a normal thing in the society. The citizens in public power and position use dishonest ways to amass wealth. They behave and also force others to behave in irresponsible manner to get more and more money. Ocran says to Baako-

‘That’s what they say when they want a bribe. Nothing works in this country. What can you expect? The place is run by this so-called elite of pompous asses trained to do nothing. Nothing works.’ (Armah121)

The citizens either must to be in contact with big people or must offer bribe to get their legal works done. Brempong says- ‘Well, these things are necessary. You have to know people. Big people, not useless people. Top officials who can go anywhere and say ‘Do this, do that for my boy!’ (Armah 73)

Western cultural dominance continues in the post-colonial era. The view that native culture is inferior and colonisers’ or western culture is superior is still held, even after independence. The native culture is looked down upon by natives themselves. Psychologically natives are still ruled by Westerners. Edward Said rightly points out-

“Westerners may have physically left their colonies old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually.”(Said 27)

The citizens blindly imitate and follow the foreign culture. The cultural enslavement is clearly seen in the country. Baako refuses to follow the Western clothing culture, when his mother tells him to wear coat on the day of ceremony. He says- ‘Why else would I wear tuxes and suits in this warm country except to play monkey to the white man?’ (Armah145)

Foreign return Ghanaians are expected behave like whites. The citizens who follow and imitate foreign Western culture of whites are respected everywhere in the society. There is no respect for the native blacks who follow indigenous ways of life. Brempong says to Baako: “If you were an expatriate, a white man, it wouldn’t matter. You’d have things easy, even without real qualifications. But when you present yourself with your black face like their own, there’s no respect. You’ll see”. (Armah74)

Well-educated, honest and socially committed citizens like- Ocran, Baako, Juana, etc. feel isolated and helpless, when they see that so many uncontrollable negative activities are happening around them. They always face strong opposition, when they try to correct and transform the society. Other educated citizens in the country just surrender to the situation. Juana tells it to Baako-

‘[T] he doctors here know things are a mess. But they accept it. Like some hopeless reality they can’t even think of changing, except to make the usual special arrangements for Senior Officers, friends, what you have. They told me I was wasting my time talking of a changed approach. A couple of them got very hostile and said I was wasting their time. Just like at the ferry.’ (Armah 192)

The failure of public organisations is also responsible for decadence in the society. The public organisations like- public works department, literary association, television corporation, etc. are established to address and resolve the burning issues of the citizens. Some of the insensitive and irresponsible officials in these organisations avoid these concerns and some others use their power and authority to amass wealth. Frauds in such organisations are routine in the society. Ocran tells to a junior artist-

‘All you do is think of that bloody Foundation money first. Suppose it didn’t exist? Look your attacks on Asouka Russel are just stupid. All she’s done is to find a way to make money without working. She’s no writer and she knows it. (Armah170)

There is no scope given to the concerns of the common citizens such as slavery, exploitation, survival, etc. in the various programmes organised by these organisations. When Baako, the protagonist, tries to address these issues in his creative writing, his scripts are rejected. The reason given to him is that these problems are not part of the native culture anymore. Baako harshly criticises the attitude of his boss- ‘So, this aggrey kind of attitude is important. The educated really thinking of the people here as some kind of devils in a burning hell, and themselves the happy plucked ones, saved.’ (Armah 212)

Literary activities in Ghana are indirectly controlled by Europeans and Americans. They fund these activities and control them. They force native artists to write from their perspective. They scrutinise the writings of natives and do changes as per their wish. Mr. Boateng, a native novelist says-‘I know. Everybody thinks I’m the editor of Jungle magazine. Secretly speaking, though, I’m only a kind of subeditor. The fools in London do what they like with my stuff before they print it. Ah, this life.’ (Armah156)

The corrupt native elites like Asouka Russel and Asante-Smith co-operate the Westerners to maintain dominance over their fellow citizens. Edward Said aptly comments- “An entire massive chapter in cultural history across five continents grows out of this kind of collaboration between natives on one hand and conventional as well as eccentric and contradictory representatives of imperialism on the other.”(Said 318)

The impact of decadence on the society is twofold. The citizens either succumb to the situation or they protest against it. Majority of the citizens surrender to the situation. They accept it and try to adapt to it. Only few sensible and honest citizens like Ocran, Baako and Juana do not surrender and even prevent others from succumbing to the negative situation in

the country. They advise others also to ignore the undue expectations and temptations and to contribute something positive and substantial to the development and well-being of the society. Okran, a senior artist, rightly advises to Baako-

‘The relatives, you keep talking about them. I suppose you’re right in not blaming them for wanting things. But it’s senseless to get sick because you can’t help them get what they want. There’d no end to these wants once you started destroying your life to satisfy them. They’re not interested in your hopes, have you thought of that? “You have something to do. Forget about the rest and get on with it.” (Armah274)

Conclusion:

Several inter-related causes of decadence are depicted through various characters and incidents in the novel. The dominance of Euro-Americans and corrupt native elites are the major root causes of the decadence in post-colonial Ghana. Armah has suggested feasible ways to eradicate the decadence and achieve true independence. The educated and sensitive citizens like Baako, Okran and Juana are shown as real fighters. They are always optimistic and behave honestly in all circumstances. They all try to bring about awareness among their fellow citizens by leading from the front and by walking their talk. They face opposition at family, workplace and community; however, they do not give up at transforming the society.

Ayi Kwei Armah gives the message that his fellow Ghanaians and Africans should follow their pre-colonial native culture and must strongly oppose any kind of foreign attempt of dominance and interference to exploit country’s natural and human resources. He aims at revival of indigenous culture. Armah suggests that every citizen of the country should contribute substantially to the mission of uprooting colonialism in all forms and achieving the dream of true independence.

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