Book Reviews

Derek Wright, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Ayi Kwei Armah.* Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1992. pp. 354. $16.00 pb

Ayi Kwei Armah's five novels, especially *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), have provoked much controversy and even hostile critical comment. Although less controversial, the other three novels, *Fragments* (1970), *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), and *The Healers* (1978), have also generated strong, and often unsympathetic critical responses. Derek Wright's collection gives a good sample of these critical responses and successfully demonstrates the provocative art of this brilliant Ghanaian novelist.

Of the 22 essays, more than half deal with *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Why Are We So Blest?*. The most satisfying are the short, trenchant but perceptive essays such as Joan Solomon's commentary on *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born.* Leonard Kibera's essay, which tries to expose Armah's prejudices in the same novel, is equally instructive. Kibera compares Armah and Swift and points out that Armah's vituperation is unrelieved by any device such as Swift's Houyhnhnms. Armah, Kibera charges, "cultivates a pessimism as meticulously as the undertaker touches up a dead face for the viewing procession" (99). Kibera also detects in the novel a disaffection with the people of Ghana that "seems to aim at total disassociation from them and which runs the risk of self-righteousness" (99). S. A. Gakwandi also takes Armah to task for allegedly dismissing Ghana's black elite as slaves of their own ambition to take over "the privileges of their former masters" (106). The merging of the first- and third-person narrators in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* leads, Gakwandi argues unconvincingly, to "confusing levels of response in the reader's mind" (105). Other essays—Gareth Griffith's and Derek Wright's perceptive analyses of the metaphorical and symbolic structure of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are good examples—are a good deal more sympathetic to Armah's craft, which both critics elucidate rather persuasively.

Wright has chosen five commentaries on *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*—Armah's "histories." Of these, Robert Fraser's and Bernth

Lindfors's are perhaps the most engaging. Fraser largely confines himself to *Two Thousand Seasons*, which, he suggests, might well have been "deliberately written as an answer" to the cynicism and "bleak version of African history" evident in Yambo Ouologuem's dark novel *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968). Lindfors's essay is a severe, candid, and at times sardonic examination of the histories. The core of Lindfors's argument is that Armah's conception of African history is simplistic and naive. He cites the theme of *The Healers*—Africa can be reunited "as the harmonious community it once was before the predators and destroyers came" (275)—as a case in point. Lindfors argues that Armah's version of African history assumes that "entire races can be reduced to the level of primal forces, and that one can be characterized as inherently predisposed toward good, another addicted to evil" (217). Armah's history "falsifies far more than it authenticates" (275), Lindfors claims. It is, furthermore, "comic-strip history" (275). Armah's oversimplification, Lindfors concludes, is the sort of xenophobia evident in B-grade Hollywood films of the Second World War. Other essayists —for example, James Booth in his discussion of metaphor in *Why Are We So Blest?*—charge Armah with other distortions. However illuminating Armah's exploration of destructive white-black relationships is, Booth suggests that it "cannot be said to give the whole picture," and he argues rather cogently that Armah "seems to insist that it does" (228).

Abena Busia's close examination of the role of women in Armah's fiction is to my mind the best of the General Essays. Busia follows the progress of Armah's women throughout the five novels and concludes that they are transformed from parasites to prophets. In the course of this transformation Armah's women become symbols of liberation; however, Busia emphasizes, the women are without a palpable individualism; they are largely *symbols* of womanhood. The parasites are either Westernized African women, or, like the notorious Aimée of *Why Are We So Blest*, both Western and white. Busia makes much of Armah's portrait of Aimée. Her spiritual and physical insensitivity is emphasized. Nor does she ever become human, "but remains the voraciously female entrance to Modin's private hell" (58). Aimée, Busia explains, carries "the burden of guilt for the whole of Western civilization in all its destructive energy" (57). Other essayists support Busia's treatment of Aimée. In "Personal and Political Fate in *Why Are We So Blest?*" Edward Lobb describes Armah's portrait of Aimée as "the most persuasive and most appalling portrayal of the ambiguities and contradictions of American liberalism to appear in fiction" (244). And Robert Fraser, explaining the American background in the same novel sees Aimée as an allegorical figure who exists "simply to demonstrate the rapacious main chord of her personality" (261). Busia detects an important shift in Armah's treatment of women in his last two novels. In *Two Thousand Seasons* women actually initiate action and have the

power to save the community. Women in *The Healers*, she points out, are "more complete, private and public persons" (65), and, indeed, in this final novel the female as parasite has vanished and has been replaced by a more positive, prophetic, and wholesome figure.

The essays Wright has compiled offer the reader a thorough exploration of Armah's fictional world, its genesis, its distinctive flavour, its multifaceted colours, its controversial themes, its metaphorical and symbolic resonances. The essays also offer the reader a wide range of styles, from the turgid, unpleasantly academic prose of Chidi Amuta's essay, "Portraits of the Contemporary Artist in Armah's Novels," to the simpler, lucid, and more concise prose of, say, Busia, Lindfors, and Griffiths. On the whole this is a worthwhile collection of essays. Wright has not confined his selection to commentaries that analyze and elucidate Armah's strengths; the other side is also represented, and the secondary sources and critical material, which include PhD dissertations, listed in the bibliography are a gold mine for explorers of Armah's admittedly controversial, but compelling, fiction.

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Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, eds. *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism.* London and New York: Routledge, 1993. pp. 271. $49.95; $15.95 pb.

It is difficult to get a handle on precisely what this book is supposed to be. The main title suggests a concern with that nexus of strategies called high theory, especially theory regarding shifting positionality and ideas of the self. The subtitle invites a Janus-like view of a way of working: "making" summons images of getting something started in the first place and it also names that ongoing process by which the something continues to get done. History and current operations both figure here. "Feminist literary criticism" is a big enough can of worms that whole books have been devoted to spelling out the myriad ways in which it can work.

But few of the writers involved in this project stick with any of the above issues for very long. All responded to a call for papers treating the experiences that had made them feminists and feminist scholars —exploring how feminism had affected their writing, teaching, professional associations, and personal relationships; considering where feminism intersected with race, ethnicity, and gender (how could "class" be left off a Routledge list?); discussing what differentiated first-generation feminist scholars from their younger colleagues; and speculating on the future of feminism in light of its current challenges.

The result is a curious kind of ethnography. With perhaps a half-dozen exceptions, none of these essays is unusually provocative or informative, except possibly for a wholly uninitiated reader. Few are representative of the kind of work on which these scholars have made