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# Politicizing Literature and Literalizing Politics in Alobwed Epies the Death Certificate and Anyi-Kwe Armahs the Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born

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## ABSTRACT

Volumes of literature and critical works have been written in an attempt to situate the place of politics in literature. Some postcolonial writers have argued vehement that it is practically impossible to write apolitical literature in the postcolonial world. This paper considers Alobwed 'Epie and Ayi kwei Armah as writers in "Postcolonial Politics". Their novels are considered here as political pamphlets designed to castigate specific political regimes which have transformed the lives of the citizens into a perpetual nightmare. It equally examines the novels as those that expose some of the most gruesome and nauseating realities of postcolonial leadership politics. Furthermore, this paper sustains the argument that in the novels under study, the masses are projected as people who have been politically, economically and socially deceived, marginalized, oppressed, persecuted...

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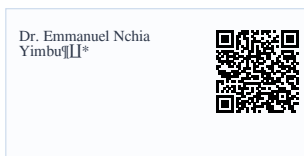
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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Politicizing Literature and Literalizing Politics in Alobwed Epies the Death Certificate and Anyi-Kwe Armahs the Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born

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## Abstract

Volumes of literature and critical works have been written in an attempt to situate the place of politics in literature. Some postcolonial writers have argued vehemently that it is practically impossible to write apolitical literature in the postcolonial world. This paper considers Alobwed' Epie and Ayi kwei Armah as writers in "Postcolonial Politics". Their novels are considered here as political pamphlets designed to castigate specific political regimes which have transformed the lives of the citizens into a perpetual nightmare. It equally examines the novels as those that expose some of the most gruesome and nauseating realities of postcolonial leadership politics. Furthermore, this paper sustains the argument that in the novels under study, the masses are projected as people who have been politically, economically and socially deceived, marginalized, oppressed, persecuted, enslaved, exploited and brutalized as a result of excessive greed, corruption, nepotism and tribalism. These ills are the major viruses that continue to deprive the pauperized masses from the benefits of independence as the transition from the colonial to the neo-colonial regimes was a mere change of political actors but the leadership tactics remained the same. From a Marxist and New Historicist theoretical paradigms, the analyses reveal that there is a thin line between the world of the novels and the social climate in which they resonate and adumbrate. Consequently, the novelists succeed in transforming political realities into eternal truths of the human condition in postcolonial Africa. The analyses further stress that the novels offer synthesis of the people's political experiences reconstructed in prosaic form. As such, the novelists consider the servant leadership and the moralization of political leadership as condition *sino qua non*s towards a free, fair and transparent society.

**Keywords:** *literalising, politicising, leadership, tribalism, corruption*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Independence in many African nations came with great hope, yet authors like Alobwed' Epie and Ayi Kwei Armah portray its bitter aftermath as one of disillusionment. Alobwed' Epie's *The Death Certificate* (2004) and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) are seminal postcolonial novels that project the nauseating realities of postcolonial leadership and serve as critiques to the failed leadership that inherited colonial rule. Both novels depict new African leaders who simply replicate the injustices of their colonial predecessors by indulging in corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, and moral decay. These novels highlight how independence, rather than bringing freedom and shared prosperity, became "a nightmare and an illusion" in which indigenous leaders betrayed the ideals of freedom. Instead of delivering good governance, the postcolonial elite turned to self-enrichment and autocratic practices that thwarted the people's hopes for collective progress and socio-economic development. This comparative analysis examines how Alobwed' Epie uses satiric realism and Armah visceral

symbolism to expose the excesses of leadership ills in postcolonial Africa which as the novels reveal, is characterized by rampant corruption, moral decadence, abuse of power, nepotism, disillusionment and the ultimate failure of leadership to meet the basic needs of its citizenry.

## 2 POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE AND POLITICS

Postcolonial literature over the years have enjoyed an intimate relationship with politics and no sane African writer can try to avoid writing about politics because as Karl Marx has insinuated, man is a political animal and "if you don't play politics, politics will play you"(12). This declaration only highlights the relevance of politics in literature and to better situate our topic in perspective, it will be useful preparation to first of all define what we consider as politics from both the political and literary perspectives. Politics is defined by *The Complete Reference Encyclopaedia* as: "Ruling by the consent of the govern, an activity whereby solutions to social and economic problems are solved and different aspirations are met by the process of

discussion and compromise rather than by the application of degree or force” (703). From this definition, politics will simply mean an activity for the resolution of problems. It can also mean a person’s attitude and the management of power relations.

George Nyamndi in his thought-provoking political diary, *Whether Winning Whether Loosing*, says “politics has to do with choices and your choice is determined by the interest you pursue at any given moment” (55). Nyamndi here considers politics as a game of interest and his view very much resembles that of a one-time-Prime Minister of Cameroon, Simon Achidi Achu, who concluded that politics is a game of “permanent interest” as he puts it “Politics nanjangi, you scratch my back I scratch your own” (*Cameroon Tribune* 11).

The above definitions can only sound absurd to somebody who is not versed with neo-colonialist political agendas. Nonetheless, a vivid reading of the works of Alobwed’ Epie and Ayi Kwei Armah, validate the assertion that politics, especially within the context of colonial and postcolonial leadership, is dominated by individual interest. Politics on the literary level means representing the whole setup of society. Ngugi in *Writers in Politics* explains that:

“Literature cannot escape from the class power structure that shapes our everyday life. Here, a writer has no choice. His work reflects one or more aspects of the intense economy, political – struggle in society. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is whose politics? (xvi)

Politics in this sense is not streamlined to the existence and militancy in political parties as is the case with Nyamndi and Achu. It does not mean the right wing or left wing government. It is a human activity that engulfs all of man but, since man is a “political animal” and not homogenous, there are bound to be many politics. Thus, Ngugi’s question of “Whose Politics?” becomes very pertinent and his advice is that whenever people are exploited and oppressed, the literary artist should take sides with the oppressed, thus, becoming “a writer in politics” (Ibid xvi). In almost a similar perspective, Soyinka in an online article perceives a writer’s resort to active politics as unavoidable because to him, “the artist should not be engaged with the exigencies of everyday life but the totality of the human heritage” (Par.4).

The politics these writers propagate is that of the masses, the downtrodden, the subaltern or what Fanon considers “the wretched of the earth”. A committed writer therefore has to be the eyes, ears and voice of the suffering masses and as Achebe reiterates, “It is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of protest ... in fact, I should say our writers, whether they are aware or not are committed” (Innes and Lindfors 40). Ngugi, Soyinka and Achebe all argue that a writer cannot be apolitical. The notion of politically committed literature is borne by postcolonial Novelists like Alobwed’ Epie and Ayi Kwei Armah, who see themselves not as mere passive entertainers but also as firebrand activists and social critics in their various societies.

Enormous debates have arisen as to the relationship that literature shares with politics (let us posit unequivocally that the novel is rightly literature and most often, we shall relate to it as literature). Chidi Amuta has given due prominence to the relationships that literature shares with politics and his opinion deserves quoting here at length. To him:

“From the Homeric epics to the medieval morality play: from Elizabethan theatre to romantic poetry: from the literature of the Chinese culture to Russian socialist realism: from the literature of negritude to that of the Harlem renaissance: from African cultural nationalist literature to the contemporary anti-imperialist writings, literature has never parted company with politics. (ibid 43)

Amuta ends his discussion in an affirmative note by stating that any “artistic naturalism without political content is anachronistic and tragic” (43). Ngugi in *Writers in Politics* validates the assertion that literature and politics both deal with man and his environment as he states that “Literature and politics are about being men, women, children breathing, eating and crying ... men in history of which they are products and makers” (72). Similarly, Bate Besong argues that politics enters literature when the writer’s concern with the public is dominant. It is the most obvious subject for him to demonstrate that the cultivation of humanizing values is a permanent coda of his art” (ALA 96). Intimating the relationship between politics and literature, Ngugi further states that “The relationship has taken various forms. Often the writer and the politicians have been the same. In the very process of articulating a people’s collective consciousness, the writer is led into active political struggle” (73).

Likewise, Chinweizu et al in *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature* conclude that:

“Literature and politics influence each other and writers are deluded who draw from absurd pretensions of art for art’s sake put on this airs of artistic elect who must keep their works unsullied by the political concerns of their fellow citizens. (Chinweizu et al, 1980, 251)

Furthermore, Barbara Harlow emphasizing the place of politics in a literary work states that “Politics in a work of literature is like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention” (*Resistance* 161). From the above, one realizes that it is extremely difficult to separate literature from politics because as George Orwell says in “*Why I Write*”, “... no book is genuinely free from political bias. The attitude that arts should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude (Ibid, 68). Consequently, politics becomes so important to literature to the extent that Chinua Achebe insists that:

“... any African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary African (societies) will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (*Writers*, 1982, 74)

In the same line, Bole Butake in “*A Writer as a Combatant*” opines that “those who say literature has nothing to do with politics do not know what literature actually means” (*WEKA*, 27). Similarly, Chidi Amuta insists that African literature and literary discourse must shed its prodigal Western heritage and reintegrate with political discourse, which to him, is “where it rightly belongs” (*Theory*, 84). Consequently, it would be the height of academic oversight to underestimate the place of politics in literary discourse. Politics from a literary perspective thus refers to all

that involves man and his society and our interest in this paper is to show how the two novelists creatively manipulate their societal happenings into novels that are politically engaging and artistically profound.

## 2.1 TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND POSTCOLONIAL DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE NOVELS OF ALOBWED'EPIE AND AYI KWEI ARMAMAH

The novels of Alobwed' Epie and Armah project neo-colonial sycophants whose leadership tactics are design towards satisfying their personal needs and interest. One is therefore not surprised when Nuruddin Farah concludes that "The African politician is a blind man: he moves only in one direction towards himself". (22) Their leadership politics are characterized by endemic corruption, exploitation, marginalization, tribalism, squandamania amongst many others. A close look at the nature of leadership in Alobwed' Epie's and Armah's novels validate Farah's claims that African politicians are greedy, self-centered, malicious and egocentric. Their leadership politics are designed for their personal satisfaction and self-aggrandizement with little or no concern for their masses. The major theme in the African novel as exemplified in the novels under study is the excesses of political leadership.

Olusegun Adegoya in a thought provoking paper entitled "Psychopaths in Power: the Collapse of the African Dream" posits that most postcolonial leaders' obsession to power have "breed moral corruption, dictatorship, derision, economic distortion and ruination, megalomania, perversion and desecration of all that is good in Africa" (1). The taking over of power by the neo-colonialist from their colonial masters, led to the evaporation of all dreams of greatness, nationalism, liberation from the colonial thralldom and poverty. As soon as the neo-colonialists took over power, they suddenly became worse than their colonial masters. The transition from the Colonial to the Post-colonial period has been described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *I Will Marry When I Want* as a journey from "Cold land" to "Frost Land" (12) Ngugi's views are very similar to those of G.E Okereke who has also commented on the relationship between the colonialist and their emergent neo-colonial counterparts in her illuminating study of the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. According to her:

“

The African predicament is compounded by the emergence of colonialism in new robes bearing a slightly different name, neo-colonialism. This is a new kind of colonialism because Europe is now controlling Africa not directly as in the colonial era but indirectly through the new African leaders whose aspirations are to perfect themselves in the art of oppression and exploitation, an art at which the European colonizers were adept. (Okereke, 1989, 132)

From the colonial to the neo-colonial period, there was little or no improvement in the lives of the masses who fought together with their enlightened elites to send away the colonialists. This is because the new third world elites simply fitted into the shoes of their former colonial masters. The departure of the colonizers and the attainment of independence by many once colonized countries was not a panacea for political, economic social and cultural freedom Ayi Kwei Armah, describes the journey from the colonial to the neo-colonial period as a change in "dancers" but the "dance" remained the same. As he puts it in *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, "New people, new style, old dance" (23). The old dance of oppression exploitation and marginalization of the colonized masses was intensified in a more intense and traumatic manner by the neo-colonialist. The relationship between the masses and the neo-colonial elite has been described by Fanon, as a pitfall of national

consciousness. In his thought-provoking review of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o highlights the relationship between the neo-colonialist and their masses in the following lines:

“

We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us- the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best-had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loud speakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that the next phase-the extension of our house-was even more important and called for new and original tactics, it required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house. (*Homecoming*, 1982, 53).

Independence thus did propel a new set of leaders in most of the newly independent states. These leaders did not only fail to fulfil their pre-independence promises but presented their peoples with a series of betrayals and catastrophes. As Hilarious Ambe makes us understand, quick and rapid alliances and negotiations were forged or imposed by the new leaders as "a means of cementing and consolidating their new position: and then they settle down to a systematic and shameless looting of the collective wealth" (94).

Ambe further argues that either through improved legislation, presidential decrees/ ordinances, political manipulation or outright totalitarianism, the new leaders continued trampling on their citizenry, who remained dispossessed and incapacitated. Any attempt to protest or question the neo-colonial status-quo was silent by brute force. Describing the situation in most post-independence societies shortly after independence, Romanus Muoneke had this to say:

“

The departure of the colonial master had created a vacuum, which the politician had neither the wit nor manner, nor even the goodwill, to fill up. During the struggle for independence, he had created great expectation in the minds of his people with promises of freedom, equality and peace. When he came to power, he gave the people greed, corruption, graft, thuggery, election rigging and despair. The people were totally disillusioned and disappointed and felt betrayed. Many joined hands with the politician to rape the country, while others expressed anger, cynicism and despair... (Muoneke, 1994,41)

In almost the same mannerism as their colonial predecessors, the neo-colonial regimes were characterized by oppression, exploitation, power abused, marginalization and religious hypocrisy. The excesses of neo-colonial leadership politics inform and continue to preoccupy most postcolonial writers including Ayi Kwei Armah and Alobwed' Epie.

## 2.2 CORRUPTION, MORAL DECAY, ABUSE OF POWER AND NEPOTISM IN ARMAH'S *THE BEAUTIFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*

“

Fascinated, he breathed it slowly into his lungs. It was a most unexpected smell for something so new to have: it was a very old smell, very strong, and so very rotten that the stench of it came with a curious, satisfying pleasure [...]. He felt reasonably contented with the smell of the cedi's marvelous rotteness. (3)

Very few African novelists have been able to paint in such a provocative and nauseating manner, the extent to which social and moral decadence has eaten deep into the fabric of African society like Ayi Kwei Armah does in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Though made with specific reference to postcolonial Ghana, the quotation above x-rays the nauseating realities that characterize most post independent African societies.

Corruption, moral decay, power abuse and nepotism pervades the entire universe of Armah's novels as a central theme. They are depicted as the cancers eating away the post-independence society's moral fabric. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah presents a bleak portrait of a newly independent Ghana rife with endemic corruption at every level. The author employs striking imagery of filth, decay, and excrement to symbolize how deeply corruption has polluted the nation. The very environment is described in terms of waste and rot, mirroring the moral decay of public life. For example, a bus journey early in the novel becomes an allegory for the state as the sleeping passengers represent ordinary citizens, while the driver and conductor (figures of authority) collude to cheat them and then attempt to bribe their silence with a cigarette. As one critic observes, "the bus is like a country or a nation, which is in a state of decay... the driver and conductor are authorities conniving to defraud the citizens" (12). Such scenes underscore that corruption has seeped into everyday interactions, creating a social climate in which dishonesty is normalized.

Also, Armah's protagonist, an unnamed everyman simply called "The Man" struggles to maintain his integrity amid this rot. His honesty makes him a pariah in a society where bribe-taking and fraud are the norm. Indeed, "the social environment is rendered uncongenial for honest living by the prevalent dishonesty and selfishness", and anyone who refuses to join the corrupt system is derided and economically marginalized. An often-cited line from the novel crystallizes this moral decay: the society believes that "only two types of men" remain honest, "the cowards and the fools" In other words, upright characters like "The Man" (and his confidant, Teacher) are viewed as naive or stupid for rejecting corruption. This bitter cynicism reflects a collective moral decline where public values have inverted such that virtue is scorned and vice rewarded. Armah reinforces this through the character of the man's wife, Oyo, who chastises her husband for spurning a bribe. Oyo, tired of living in poverty, mockingly asks why he did not take a kickback at work, exclaiming that "maybe you like this crawling that we do, but I am tired of it" and scoffing that "we don't care" how corrupt officials like Koomson obtained their wealth (Armah 1968, 44) Her stance, preferring ill-gotten comfort over principled hardship exemplifies the moral erosion afflicting ordinary citizens under a corrupt regime. Even personal relationships are tainted as Oyo's moment of frustration highlights how systemic corruption pressures families to forsake ethical ideals for material gain.

## 2.3 ABUSE OF POWER AND NEPOTISM

Another major leadership ill critiqued in Armah's novel is the abuse of political power for personal gain, often manifesting as nepotism and cronyism. In Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the emblem of corrupt power is Joseph Koomson, a former dockworker turned powerful minister in Nkrumah's government. Koomson's meteoric rise from humble origins to lavish privilege is portrayed as a case study in how postcolonial leaders enrich themselves at the nation's expense. Publicly lauded as a success, Koomson is in fact "a public official who embezzles government funds to enrich himself", owning posh cars, luxurious houses, and even a well-stocked liquor cabinet far beyond what his salary could afford. His wealth plainly comes from corruption. In the novel, we are made to understand that Koomson has arranged foreign scholarships and perks for his relatives. For instance, securing a study-abroad opportunity for his wife's sister, a clear example of nepotism in practice. In one scene, the protagonist and Oyo visit Koomson's opulent home and marvel at "things of intricate and obviously expensive design" that signal the "power of their owner" (144). The irony is that the very anti-colonial firebrands who once decried the luxuries of Europe now use their power to chase those same luxuries for themselves. As one character cynically observes, "New People, New Style, Old Dance" (Armah 1968, p.157). Only the style of leadership has changed with independence, not the exploitative dance of corruption. This epigram encapsulates Armah's critique where the African elite are simply mimicking the colonial masters' abuse of power, lining their pockets and indulging in excess while the masses languish.

Furthermore, Armah details how Koomson abuses his office through schemes like the fishing boat scandal, which doubles as a nepotistic favor and financial racket. Koomson promises Oyo's family a fishing boat (to appease Oyo and her mother), but procures it under his young daughter's name which is a ploy to get around restrictions and effectively claim the asset for himself. He assures them that "the money is not the difficult thing. After all, the commercial bank is ours, and we can do anything" (136). This stunning admission lays bare the regime's mentality that state resources are treated as personal property ("ours") for those in power. Koomson's use of a government-controlled bank to finance a private venture illustrates embezzlement and crony capitalism, and his words bristle with the entitlement of a man who believes rules do not apply to him. Through Koomson, Armah exposes how postcolonial leaders hijacked public institutions for personal enrichment and patronage. The novel also shows that this abuse of power trickles down through every rank from the policemen on the road routinely extort bribes from drivers ("petty corruption") to low-level clerks who demand kickbacks for services rendered. Thus, from cabinet ministers to traffic police, authority is perverted into an opportunity for illicit gain. Those like Armah's protagonist who refuse bribes are castigated as obstacles in this system and this further proof that abuse of power has become institutionalized.

Furthermore, Armah's novels exposes how power abuse often extends to the personal sphere in the form of sexual exploitation. Armah show how lecherous leaders view women as perks of office. In *The Beautiful Ones*, it is casually noted that men like Koomson habitually keep girlfriends as a cynical villager asks, "Have you ever seen a big man without girls? Even the old ones?" Koomson and his colleagues in crime use their wealth and influence to seduce young women with gifts like imported European wigs, perfumes, blouses, and a sign of cultural decay where officials trade trinkets for sexual favors. Through this depictions, Armah makes it abundantly clear that postcolonial leadership has betrayed the populace's trust in every arena-economic, political and personal-in pursuit of self-aggrandizement.

## 2.4 POSTCOLONIAL DISILLUSIONMENT AND THE FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE BEAUTIFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN

The ultimate message in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is that postcolonial African leadership, marred by greed and corruption, has utterly failed its people. Instead of the prosperity and justice hoped for at independence, the masses are left disillusioned and destitute under a new indigenous elite that behaves much like the colonial masters. As Macheke writes, independence proved to be only a boon for the elite, who “grabbed all [the] goods” under the banner of Africanization while the majority saw no improvement. Armah portrays this betrayal as the central tragedy of the postcolonial condition. The lofty rhetoric of nationalist leaders is exposed as hollow once they assume power. Armah’s title *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* bitterly suggests that the truly virtuous leaders, the “beautiful” ones have yet to emerge in a society cursed with crooked officials. Through cynically drawn characters and situations, the author concur that the initial euphoria of independence quickly curdled into “mass apathy and despair” as citizens realized they had traded white colonizers for black oppressors. The hopes of freedom, equality, and good governance were dashed by cynical leadership and endemic corruption, leading to what one critic calls “socio-economic disillusionment” in the newly independent nations.

A significant incident in this novel is how this failure of leadership leads to violent catharsis in the form of a military coup. Armah ends their narrative with the overthrow of the civilian regimes, implying that the rot had become so deep that only forceful removal could reset the polity. Indeed, as one comparative study notes, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the military coups is caused by the mismanagement of the leaders”, essentially a last-resort reaction to rampant corruption and “misleading and mismanagement” by those in power. Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* culminates in the 1966 coup that toppled Kwame Nkrumah’s regime in Ghana. The event is presented through the eyes of the protagonist, who witnesses the sudden collapse of the corrupt order which he has long resented. The coup in Armah’s story is portrayed as a kind of dark poetic justice where the once-untouchable Koomson is reduced to a trembling fugitive. In a memorably grotesque scene, Koomson, so bloated by privilege and vice must crawl through a latrine hole to escape capture, literally swimming through filth to save himself. This imagery symbolizes the fall of the might into the muck they themselves created. In the coup’s aftermath, the novel offers a fleeting glimmer of vindication for honest individuals. The man’s wife Oyo, who earlier chastised his uprightness, now looks at him with newfound “respect and trust”, saying she is “glad [he] never became like [Koomson].” It is a small personal triumph as integrity is finally honored amid a larger societal upheaval. Armah thus suggests that while the immediate purge of corrupt leaders may cleanse the air, the deeper problem of finding incorruptible leadership remains. The title’s meaning resonates strongly even after the coup, the truly “beautiful” leaders are still “not yet born,” and Ghana (like Africa at large) must continue to wait for genuine change.

In the novels, the military coup is depicted as the drastic outcome of sustained leadership failure. Armah does not glorify military rule but rather, the coups underscore how grievously civilian leaders betrayed the public trust that armed intervention appeared preferable to the status quo. Critics have noted that this narrative pattern with the novel ending in a coup became almost a trope in African literature, reflecting the real-world political pattern of the 1960s–1980s. Armah’s works stand out for capturing the frustration and despair that drive such drastic measures. As one scholar observes, his fiction suggests that by the mid-1960s “the only solution... to remove [corrupt] African leaders” was

seen to be “through military forces. This bleak conclusion is a damning verdict on postcolonial leadership. Through his vivid storytelling, the author ultimately agree with Frantz Fanon’s harsh assessment of the new national bourgeoisie as “incapable of bringing national unity” or real progress, being “strung to defend its immediate interests” only. The collective tragedy portrayed in the novel is that the end of colonialism did not usher in the hoped-for era of justice and prosperity but instead, it unleashed homegrown rulers whose reigns were characterized by the same oppression, greed and decay.

## 2.5 CORRUPTION, EMBEZZLEMENT AND INSTITUTIONALIZED TRIBALISM AS LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES IN ALOBWED 'EPIE'S NOVEL

Corruption and embezzlement of state funds become a leadership strategy in Alobwed’ Epie’s novels. A case of the misuse, and the diverting, of aid and loans is noticeable in *Death Certificate*. In the novel, loans granted for agricultural projects never reach the farmers who are the beneficiaries. A loan given by the World Bank in conjunction with the European Economic Community Bank to the tune of 8.4 billion francs CFA, together with another one amounting to 1,620,000,000 FCFA, granted by the Canadian Cooperative Assistance to Third World countries meant to pay farmers’ arrears is never paid. The reason for the disappearance of this money, Alobwed’ Epie tells us, is that “Each big gun of the clearing house of the sums pocketed a large chunk of the money” (48). It is evident that with such a situation at hand, people sideline state interests and think more for their personal interests first. When such is the case, the economy is bound to suffer.

Besides siphoning money meant for investment purposes, food stuffs and other gifts which the government receives, does not reach the intended recipients. A good case in point is found in *The Death Certificate*. In this novel, foodstuff destined for victims of the Lake Dos disaster is diverted for private use. Rather than send these foodstuffs to the victim, they are diverted to Mongo Meka’s village to entertain guests during his burial. We are told in this light that:

“

The Director General of Customs said a ship load of rice, stock fish and a host of other provisions destined for the victims of the Lake Dos explosions had been diverted from the Tuada port to the small Badanga port where they would be transported to Meka’s village. (84)

In a similar fashion, another loan acquired from Canada meant for the improvement of urban roads has also been diverted for use to embalm the (supposed) dead Meka. All of this, we are told, is with favourable auspices from Jacqueline Diwona, Mongo Meka’s sister, who “As wife of the Minister of Territorial Administration [...] handles all foreign aid, be it relief supply, or aid for development” (123).

From the foregoing quotations, a couple of issues are raised. Being a member of the First Province, therefore of the ruling clan, the Director of Customs uses his authority to endorse acts which are contrary to those of state interest. By this, the novelist is castigating rulers for handling state matters as though they were family matters, or as though family matters supersede state matters in importance. Nepotism is also exposed. A similar case is the handling of relief supplies and developmental aid money by Jacqueline Diwona, simply because she is the wife to a government minister, who is also a person from the ruling clan. Despite her reckless handling of the job, she is never sanctioned. By this, we are hinted at the impunity which is the order of the day in this state. It is with these prerogatives in mind that she misappropriates resources meant to serve the entire country for the burial of Mongo Meka. With

this is mind, we are therefore not surprised that "money destined for the nation [ends] up in the pockets of the signatories" (51). Unfortunately, those public servants who ought to be on the lookout for the perpetrators of crime are rather the ones championing the course of corruption and embezzlement. We are not surprised that Mula, in utter bewilderment, asks Musa, his informant: "In this situation, who will raise the alarm?" (*ibid*). By this rhetorical question, Mula indirectly laments the fact that some criminals seem to be enjoying the protection of the state, and therefore are above the law.

As a far as tribalism is concerned, *The Death Certificate* projects a society where institutionalized tribalism has become the order of the day. As far as state events in the country are concerned, those in power rather tilt their importance and make it a sort of tribal affair. Or, better still, whenever an event of tribal character coincided with a state one, priority was given to the tribal event, disregarding or undermining the value of the events of state significance. We are told in *The Death Certificate* in this light that Labour Day celebrations are completely disrupted in order to receive the corpse of Mongo Meka at the airport. Alobwed' Epie points out that "All members of government and members of parliament were at the airport. Labour Day manifestations were completely disrupted" (91). It is hard to believe that events in state offices are grounded simply because the remains of an individual are to be received at the airport. Granted that Mongo Meka was a state functionary of high standing, a selected number of persons could form the state envoy which will receive his remains, after which a funeral shall be properly scheduled for every well-wisher and sympathiser. In a similar vein, the Minister of Territorial Administration gives orders that the Commissioner for the 8<sup>th</sup> District should be arrested and a tape bearing the confessions of Major General Mbaneko, caught operating in a gang of armed robbers, be seized. It is worth pointing out that the Minister stresses the fact that the said Commissioner is above all, not a son of the First and Second Provinces, but of the 8<sup>th</sup> Province. This hierarchization of one's belonging to the state is on the one hand, a form of protectionism by the elite in power to their kin and kind, and on the other, a form of exclusion and maltreatment of those who are considered as not belonging to the ruling family. The lines below justify the fact that tribalism and other vices are leadership tactics in Ewawa:

“The nation has to be worried because a few days earlier, the president of Ewawa in an address to the nation had condemned embezzlement of public funds, tribalism, nepotism and the untoward behavior of his ministers and senior civil servants. In the same vein, he had lashed out against the brutality and uncouth conduct of the forces of Law and Order and promised stern disciplinary actions against any Ewawaian found guilty of misdeeds.... But what has gone wrong now? Have the looters conspired to dethrone the president? How could that be? The head of the army was his younger brother; the head of the gendarmerie was his nephew; the delegate general of national security was his brother-in-law. Furthermore; three quarters of each of these security units were made up of people from the first province... (13-14)

The foregoing lines lay bare the nature of leadership in Ewawa. Leaders are portrayed as corrupt and brutal, prone to embezzlement and looting, and, above all, deeply tribalistic. This entrenched tribalism fosters nepotism, since appointments are made not on the basis of merit or competence but simply because individuals hail from the so-called "First Province."

Fairly on in the novel, a more nauseating picture of the tribalistic nature of the Ewawa society is projected during arrangements for the funeral of Mongo Meka. The declarations of Emda Odu show clearly that the society presented in *The Death Certificate* is highly tribalistic as almost every sector of the society is headed by a son or daughter from a particular area referred to in the novel as the "First Province". The following lines from Emda once again highlight not just the theme of tribalism and nepotism but equally emphasize the extent to which the Ewawa society has morally degenerated in terms of leadership politics. As she says:

“My brother's house in the village was built as a weekend resort. It can only house 250 people. It has to be reconditioned. That work can be handled by E.S.I.U engineers. The director of E.S.I.U is one of us...The road leading to the house is 2km off the main road. It is Newly bulldozed and therefore bumpy. Shall we drive Meka's body on a bumpy road thereby completing what the accident left undone? Is the Minister of Public Works not one of us? The marbles for the grave and tomb are yet to be ordered for. We can get both from Gargini Funerary Home in Paris. We can use one of our cargo planes to transport the things. This too is easy. Is the Director of Ewawa Airways not one of us?... (44-45)

The expression 'one of us' consistently mentioned by Emda in the lines above refer to members from the First Province who occupy almost all the important ministerial positions and misuse state funds and resources with impunity. Alobwed' Epie in the lines above shows the extent to which the Ewawa society has degenerated as a result of tribalism. State funds and state properties are squandered indiscriminately by members of the First Province who constitute the ruling class.

The analyses above expose the tendency of post- independence elites to denude their state coffers and stash the money in safe, private bank accounts in Europe. As a consequence, the citizens suffer because there is little or no liquidity left in the handling of government business. It is a betrayal by the elite because they were expected to take over from where colonial rapacity ended, and then attempt to re-assemble what was left for the purpose of reconstruction, but the desire to get rich quick, as well as the lure to lead luxurious lifestyles, led to their dipping their hands into state finances. Tribalism gives rise to Nepotism and Alobwed' Epie decries the tendency to give opportunities like job openings to friends and family members while those who merit these jobs are sidelined simply because they have nobody to rely on. It breeds mediocrity and this seriously negatively affects the state. Nepotism breeds exclusionism and division as some are given preferential treatment while others are discriminated against. This is all due to tribalism which makes leaders not to see and act in terms of collective state interests, but from the parochial prism of tribalism. They are leaders who accord favours only to those from their areas while outsiders are totally excluded. The analyses above also give us an idea of how the economy of the state, after the granting of formal independence and the taking over of power by the Africans, looks. Rather than improve upon some of the issues which the Europeans intentionally did wrong, like the exploitation of Africa's human, financial, and natural resources, the Africans did much worse. They rather perpetuated these crimes which made the state and individuals suffer immensely.

Furthermore, Alobwed' Epie projects a society where even the church has become an advocate of corruption, embezzlement and tribalism. In *The Death Certificate*, Alobwed' Epie constructs a devastating satire of

the African Church as the modern inheritor of colonial domination. His fiction reveals a continent where the pulpit has replaced the governor's mansion and the priest has become the new administrator of fear. The Church, which once preached deliverance from sin, now colludes with the state to perpetuate social and economic exploitation. The novel exposes how religious fanaticism, once a missionary import, mutates into a postcolonial epidemic, sustained by ignorance, greed, and moral paralysis. In this transformed landscape, faith becomes a political language, and religion, once a refuge, becomes a predatory system. Alobwed' Epie dramatizes this through his most infamous clerics, Father Cosmas and Archbishop Boa in *The Death Certificate*. Each of them represents a stage in the degeneration of stewardship as their activities move from bureaucratic corruption to charismatic manipulation. Both men claim divine authority yet embody moral rot. Through their stories, Alobwed' Epie portrays the African Church not as the light of postcolonial liberation but as the lingering shadow of colonial control.

In the novels of Alobwed' Epie, there is a sustained critique on religion, particularly Christianity. The novel presents a society where even religion cannot savage the community and the church cannot guarantee the salvation of the pauperized masses. The church and its leaders are pathetically as corrupt as the state. In a heated debate between Mr Emda Odu, Arch Bishop Boa and Madam Jacqueline Diwona, we are made to understand that the Catholic church in Ewawa is part of the corruption conspiracy and highly involved in the waste and squandering of the state resources. The Arch Bishop's utterances and his actions are part of the many ills that Alobwed' Epie sets out to satirize in his novel and his words deserve quoting here at some length:

“...brothers and sisters in Christ within the flick of the fingers, we've lost two illustrious sons. As if that is not enough grief, we have also lost the Cardinalship that rightfully belongs to us...I thought the Arch Bishops and Bishops of a country make recommendations in conjunction with those of the government and the Holy See simply executes their will...Several people express their surprise at what the holy see had done-depriving the son of the soil and the head of the ecclesiastical wing of the ruling party, of the eminent appointment. Some opted for a break with Rome...Others suggested that a protest letter be written to the Pope. (63-64)

The lines above justify the fact that the church in Ewawa and its leaders are tribalistic, egoistic and corrupt. The Arch Bishop and the church were even referred to as 'the Ecclesiastical Wing of the ruling party' (64). Meaning just as the state, the role of the church is to exploit and oppress the masses and this justifies my claims in this paper that religion especially Christianity serves as an instrument of oppression, exploitation and the promotion of tribalism in Alobwed' Epie's *The Death Certificate*.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Alobwed' Epie's *The Death Certificate* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* offer searing comparative portraits of postcolonial African leadership gone awry. Both novels explore how the promises of independence were undermined by corruption, moral decay, abuse of power, nepotism, and a general failure of governance. Through direct narrative and potent symbolism, the authors critique leaders who, rather than lifting their nations, enriched themselves and perpetuated backwards injustice, corruption and tribalism. Alobwed' Epie employs

satire, vivid descriptions and irony to lay bare the absurdities of Cameroon's political class, their corrupt and tribalistic nature and lavish lifestyle and to show how an uncritical populace can be complicit in its own exploitation. Armah, in turn, uses unflinching realism and metaphors of decay to depict Ghana's slide into cynicism, making the reader almost smell the rot that accompanies moral decline. Despite differences in style, the two writers' visions converge as they both hold strong to the thesis that postcolonial misrule is a betrayal of the people's trust and one that replaced colonial domination with indigenous tyranny. Both novels end in the dramatic end of the corrupt regimes, yet these endings are cautionary rather than celebratory. They underscore a central theme which is that the true "beautiful ones", honest, selfless leaders with integrity are yet to emerge on the postcolonial stage. One can say therefore that Alobwed' Epie and Armah "denounce the highest echelons of society" for commandeering power and wealth at the expense of the masses. Their works collectively call for reflection and change, implying that only through accountability and ethical leadership can the postcolonial African nations realize the freedom and prosperity that were promised. In sum, *The Death Certificate* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* remain powerful literary testaments to the ills of leadership in their era where corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, and moral bankruptcy become the other of the day. The novels also continue to resonate as grim reminders of how hard-won political independence can be squandered when those in power forsake the common good for personal gain.

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