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**Modern African Novel, The Biblical Lamentation of a Continent: A Critical Perspective on Ayi Kwei, Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born.**

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**Keyword:**

*Modern African Novel, Biblical Lamentation, Critical Perspective*

**ABSTRACT**

*The paper is my genuine attempt to demonstrate that there is a great similitude between the biblical lamentation of the prophets of old and our literary prophets of the now in Africa. The Isaiah's, the Jeremiah's, the Elijah's and the Micah's of the Christian creed, and the Ayi Kwei Armah's, the Ngugi wa Thiong'o's, the Clement C. Idegwu, the Richard Mosagbor's and the Olu Obafemi of our time are prophets whose call to repentance are, and will remain irresistible for as the biblical prophets changed their societies through their consistent and persistent call to repentance so their archetypes in modern Africa are doing and will continue to do until the continent is devoid of all forms of evil. This is why Ayi Kwei Armah's unrelenting effort in his condemnation of the unimaginable degree of corruption in Africa is worth our commendation.*



*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, his very first novel in his prophetic ministry is our anchor.*

---

## **Introduction**

*Never to have seen the truth is better than to have seen it and not acted upon it, (P. 856).*

- *Anonymous*

Dr. Francis S. Onderdonk (1997) in his book 1144 paths to happiness The Emerging Science cites an anonymous speaker when he postulate it is morally wrong for one to see the truth and fails to act it. To see it is fine but to know it is better. The best is to act it.

Confucius as cited by Francis S. Onderdonk (1997) takes us further when he opined that “A stalk may grow and yield no blossom. Or it may blossom and yield no fruit. Those who know the truth are not as great as those who love it; those who love are not as great as those who loving do the works of truth”.<sup>22</sup> (Tolstoy, Circle of Readings, No. 2 Page 270.)

Modern African novelists like Achebe, Ngugi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ifeoma, Okoye, Clement Idegwu and Richard Masagbor, are those who have seen the truth, known same, and have acted it like biblical prophets of the old testaments. And like the Prophets of old daily laments the destruction of our modern Jerusalem. They, the Isaiah's and Jeremiahs of our time bemock the wastage of life and property that have today become our second self. In their arts or novels they meticulously articulate various pitiable situations we find ourselves, analyze same and prophetically project into the unparallel consequences of our continuous pursuit of self-destruct.

Joseph Frank (1963) in Literature from the Bible helps in advancing our course thus:

*Law did much to mold the form of Judaism; the prophets did much to shape its spirit, as well as the spirit of Christianity. Far roughly three centuries beginning from about 750 B.C. a series of inspired men preached a religion of righteousness, and their words established much of the foundation of Western morality. These men are here represented only by the writings of two authors, first and second Isaiah. Since, however, all these prophets were explicitly concerned with moral problems, and since they deliberately mingled gloom and hope – even if in varying ratios – a small sample can illustrate the impact and fervor of their combined message. (P. 223.)*

The same could be said of the accuring effects or impacts of the efforts of modern African novelists, who as our great modern prophets, are doing much to shape the spirit of the neglected law as well as the temperament of the moment. This is because “the Africa from which Armah writes is an Africa that has been in crisis for over a millennium” as Drayton Arthur D., Omofolabo Ayaji, Soyinka and I Peter Ukpokodu (2007) would put it. They move on to say that;

*Armah writes from an Africa that is politically independent' from its colonizers but substantively dependent on all aspects of the global market place. It is an Africa that is ruled (in name at least) by Africans. This is an Africa where the dichotomy between the rich and the poor is an insurmountable gulf. It is an Africa in which its most brilliant minds give their resources to other nations for the dollar, pound, France and Yen. (P. 39)*



The above brings our cause to the fore, and serves as an anchor or premise on which to establish our argument: that modern African novel is the biblical lamentation of a continent where “everyone is waiting for a chance to commit murder (P. 944) as Prophet Micah a contemporary of Isaiah, puts it, and the “streets are lined up with the young people, who must suffer the indignity of begging for a living... a lot of young people, some of them highly educated, have been mentally crushed by corrupt and oppressive system. They now live on and off the streets, mentally deranged utterly destitute and lunatic... there is no difference in appearance between the homeless and the lunatic (P. 8) as George Omake Ehusani (1996) sums it up in his book *A Prophetic Church*. This is indeed the state of our continent. It is an eye-sore.

#### **THE NOVELIST’S LAMENTATION OF THE PEOPLE’S SHAME**

*Our continent has remained backward, static and decaying ... And the principal reason for our backwardness are still very much the same – that is a treacherous leadership and elite which very frequently is in collusion with neocolonial interest. The elites and their allies still gobble up with, the wealth of the land, leaving the vast majority in abject poverty. It is pathetic to find that at the stage of world development, we in Africa have not solve even the basic problems of modern living – we do not produce enough food to eat, we cannot supply sufficient drinking water, electricity supply is still erratic. The majority of our citizens live in condition of primitive barbarity... (P. 17-18).*



The above is Ossofisan's (2008) graphic description of the plight of his people, THE African continent in the twenty-first century. "our continent has remained backward, static, and decaying... The elites and their allies still gobble with the wealth of the land leaving the vast majority in abject poverty. (P.17). Ossofisan here wails over the state of things in Africa, a place and people that were once the pride of the world, the cradle of civilization. The prophet... 's lamentations of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC posit:

*How lonely lies Jerusalem, once  
so full of people! Once  
honoured by the world, she is  
now like a widow; the noblest of  
cities has fallen into slavery.  
(P.831).*

*8. We are ruled by those who  
are no better than slaves and no  
one can save us from their  
power*

*9. Murderers roam through the  
countryside; we risk our lives  
when we look for food...*

*Our wives have been raped on  
mount Zion itself; ...*

*15. Happiness has gone out of  
our lives. Greif has taken the  
place of our desires.*

*Nothing is left of all we were  
proud of. (P. 838).*

Prophet Jeremiah who lived between the latter part of the seventh century and the first part of the sixth century BC. In his text and, lamentation chronicled the ugly state of things in Jerusalem, its fall and

how they were ruled by those who were “no better than slaves.” (P. 832). Which country in Africa is the leader or head of state not an archetype of the cause of the biblical lamentation above? Today murderers roam the streets unhindered. Boys and girls between sixteen and thirty terrorise the people stealing from the people and killing them in the name of armed robbery and cultism. Boys of this age go to churches disrupt their terry nights of prayer and praise and rape the girls. Today Boko Haram is a household word. All these are the evils of our time, our collective shame. These prophets were responding to their social environments in which they lived. Ngugi (1982) sets the record straight when he postulates that:

*A writer responds, with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy, and success; the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. This the same writer will produce different types of work, sometimes contradictory in mood sentiment, degree of optimism and even world-view. For the writer himself lives in and is shaped by history.*

The writer’s response to the socio-political issues of his country is his keening or grieving about the deplorable state of things. Armah from his first novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to his latest has mourn the way things are, and the fact that our leaders are inexcusable for the only change we have noticed is their advancement in technology in their ways of exploiting the masses and their reigns of tyranny. Armah like the biblical prophets of old has been angered by the wanton display of tyranny that he graphically explains the irredeemable nature of the masses thus:



*Somewhere, young men sigh in the night and dream of following these, but they certainly do not know the end of the journey. Quiet, anyway. These may be envied men, not to be pitied, not to be wept for by people uncertain of themselves. On the way, other night figures are encountered, like the latrine man just coming round the corner for the downstairs lavatory, the junior men's latrine. There is not much light but not much light is needed to tell that the man with the shitpan heavy on his head has an unaccustomed look of deep, angry, menace on his face, and his eyes are full of drunken fury. Perhaps the smell of akpeteshie would be bating if he were not carrying this much stronger stench with him. Surely that is the only way for a man to survive, carrying other people's excrement; the only way you must kill the self while, the unavoidable is being done, and who will wish to wake again?*

Armah's anguish about the once rainforest region of the world turn an arid desert could easily be seen from his choice of words in his presentation of the oppressed above. That young men sigh in the night instead of sleeping peacefully to regain the energy lost in the day shows that their day was unproductive and highly wasted. That they are uncertain of themselves their abilities and inabilities, which portends the uncertainty of their journey and stress the degree of anarchy. And as they live their lives as night walkers – other night figures such as the latrine man remain their companion. "The man with the shit pan heavy on his head", and with "an accustomed look of deep, angry menace on his face, and his eyes" which "are full of drunken fury" (P.103) are



indisputable explication of men and women in African continent. Men and women in African walk the streets of their various country with heavy shitpan on their heads. Tell me, perhaps, you could show me, if any, where in the world a young man bathing with the smell of akpetashie and carrying this much repugent smell or stench of human excrement in a shitpan on his head will be highly admired, and said to live a fulfilled life. Certainly NOWHERE, EXCEPT IN AFRICA. This accounts for Armah's fulminate against this order in Africa where "the only way for a man to survive," is "carrying other people's excrement: the only way you must kill the self while the unavoidable is being done", (P.103). And Armah grieving ask "who will wish to wake again?" (P. 103). Certainly none, for

*The policeman who had spoken raised his right hand and in a slow gesture pointed to his teeth... The driver understand. Without waiting to be asked for it, he took out his license folder from his shirt-pocket, brought a Cedi note from the same place and stuck it in the folder. Then with his back turned to the people waiting in the bus, the driver gave his folder, together with the bribe, to the police-man.*

*The policeman looked with long and pensive dignity at the licence folder and at what was inside it, with the left hand he extracted the money, rolling it up dexterously into an easy little ball hidden in his palm... (P. 182).*

If the police, an organ meant to put things in proper shape could be so corrupt, it becomes very imperative that there is no other song left than a dirge for failed humanity. The question that pierce into ones heart is, is there any one in position of governance that is not corrupt? Sonala

*turn and a deep, softly insistent bass on a high life tune replaced the first meaningless sounds. The steward came in with all the different bottles and ice and the glasses on the trolley, pushing it before him with reverent motions, and served the man and his wife some whisky. Mrs. Koomson descended the stairs, wearing a dress that seems to catch each individual ray of light and aim it straight into the beholding eye. She, like her husband did not take a drink. She sat languidly in her chair and for some time she did nothing but stroke her wig from front to back in notions that were long, slow, and very studied. (P. 148).*

That's the minister and the wife priding themselves in a show of affluence. Sometimes one wonders whether it is the same God that made Koomsom and his wife Estie well, so well arrayed in this wonderland, made the young men who sigh at nights instead of resting, and the latrine man with shitpan, human excrement heavy on his head. And the scripture says God made man in His image and likeness. Could Koomsom and his wife, the man and the teacher, the young men who sigh at night and the latrine made be the image of God? Could they be really God's image?

Izevbaye (1998) authenticates Prophet Armah's lamentation like that of his progenitors in the bible by saying that

*What poses the social problem in The Beautiful Ones is however, not the inability to purchase foreign trinkets but the ordinary question of daily bread. The economic gap between Koomson, the minister, and "the man" – between ruler and ruled, that is –*



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*prepares the way for class conflicts... (P. 242).*

This unnecessary economic gap is the lamentation of our prophets, the African novelists. As Maduka Chukwudi T. (1981) puts it: "there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticise these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society". (P. 11). The ability of the writer to criticise like the prophets of old who in spite of their lives becoming an endangered species by their criticisms of rulers like king Dairus and Nebuchadnezzar came out and in very strong terms perfect their callings as prophet; makes the modern African novel an archetype of the biblical lamentation. Hence one could see prophet Armah challenging the prophets of Baal for a battle.

Armah's novel or literature is that of the people, the oppressed and exploited for he explains how much they are deprived and why they remained deprived. Armah from his novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* through *Fragments*, *Why Are We So Blest?* *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers* and *Osiris Rising*, laments the plights of the down and out of society. He frowns at the ways and manner in which they are made helpless and incapacitated by their leaders. Today Armah lives in Senegal far away from his country – Ghana. He has been on self-exile very much like the biblical prophets of old, who left their countries because the tyrants who were kings, then sought to kill them.

### **ANY RAY OF LIGHT?**

Each time one sits down to analyse our problem as a continent one feels very bad that a great deal has been done by the ruling class to keep the people ignorant of the Peoples Power to change the course of events. A discussion with fellow countrymen, perhaps randomly done confirms one's fear, that the mass of humanity in Africa do not know how much

*"Haven't made up my mind yet.  
Why?"*

*"Scarce unless you're willing to sleep  
with a minister or a permanent secretary."  
(P. 69)*

Things have not changed. The people are so exploited that Marie Corelli description of poverty in her opening chapter of *The Sorrows of Satan* becomes the exactitude of African condition. She sees it as that which:

*Robs you of your own self-respect, and causes you to slink along the street vaguely abashed, instead of walking erect among your fellow-men in independent ease – this is the sort of poverty I mean. This is the grinding curse that keeps down noble aspiration under a head of ignoble care; this is the moral cancer that eats into the heart of an otherwise well-intentioned human creature and makes him envious and malignant, and inclined to the use of dynamite. (P. 1)*

That was Marie Corelli of blessed memory. What we have in Africa is the grinding curse that makes the people too helpless to think for themselves. And until it a man's begins to think his thought by himself he cannot walk out on servitude. Everyman who must break the gate of brass.... must think for himself, understand himself and act his understanding. This is the dilemma of the Man in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*. Hear him;

*'I wanted to come and see you', the man said*



*"Haven't made up my mind yet.  
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*'I wanted to come and see you', the man said*



*"is there anything I can do? The man asked.*

*Koomson seemed not to know, but at least he said, 'Go and see her sometime.' And then in answer to nothing, he added 'there are friends who will look after her?...*

*'You are going then said koomson, coming forward to the man.*

*'Yes?*

*The party man took his hand. Thank you? The man heard the words, but he felt nothing for Koomson*

*'We shall meet again,' Koomson said To the man the words sounded funny and childish, but, as if he were not himself but someone completely different, he heard himself repeating 'we shall meet again'*

*'Yoo, farewell!' the boatman shouted to him. (Pp. 177 - 178).*

There is no difference between the man and those he calls thieves for if he could help them escape the long arms of the law, and had to depend on their gifts from the proceeds of their thieving from our collective purse – state treasury - he is a thief. And should be treated as such. And this diminishes us as humans for it makes everything meaningless as it extinguishes the flicker of hope or light which the incurable optimist might feel will finally glow to light the environ. Armah even tells us that:

*The green paint was brightened with an inscription carefully littered to form an oval shape: .*

*THE BEAUTYFUL ONES  
ARE NOT YET BORN*

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*The green paint was brightened with an inscription carefully littered to form an oval shape: .*

*THE BEAUTYFUL ONES  
ARE NOT YET BORN*

Armah's conclusion here is that the beautiful ones are yet to be born. Armah's posit above could mean that those who will change the society are yet to be born in terms of a woman birthing a child as it were. It could also mean that in terms of procreation by the humans in Ghana, in particular and Africa in general, these beautiful ones have been given birth to, but are too docile to challenge their oppressors – which is the birthing Armah talks about. Whichever one, Armah attaches his cord, the single flower at the centre of the oval which I shall explain before drawing my curtain upon this theatre might make the disillusioned sanguine.

Frank Joseph (1963) in *Literature from the Bible* tells us the essence of Prophets prophetic utterances and lamentation. According to him:

*Isaiah... preached repentance and complete reliance on God. If one trust wholly in God, then he will be saved, and thus a small remnant can survive. This remnant, interested not in wealth and ritual but in righteousness, will restore Israel; and this potentially regenerated nation is the only hope amid a dismal present. One of the reasons for the immediate popularity of Isaiah was this hope of a collective messiah, of a purified remnant – a hope that could offer some dispersed people. Even so the major burden of First Isaiah's message is one of Pessimism; the political and religious regeneration of Israel is a remote event that will affect only a few, and before it occurs the vast majority must be scourged and afflicted.*  
(P. 224.)



The similitude between the Prophet Isaiah's and Prophets Armah is the pessimism of their first messages, their 'kind of message, and this believe in collective messianic redemption which Armah calls THE WAY in his subsequent novels.

Every message of repentance is purposefully and goal directed. The same with Armah's literary call to repentance. As a wordsmiths his characters are woven in a way to achieve such goals. That is the freedom of the people, his own people.

Izevbaye (1998) in talking about the plight of the people of Africa, and the possibility or otherwise of a day of freedom explains that Armah in his text *The Beautiful Ones*, presents his characters in a way that the economic gap between them:

*Prepares the way for class conflict prescribed by Marxists as a solution to the social inequality. The language in which the plight of the poor is described suggest the capacity for endurance and hope rather than their redness for confrontation (P. 243.)*

This accounts for our disillusionment for even when the oppressed masses seem to know the truth, they seem too docile to act the truth for knowing the truth is good, and acting the truth known is better. Until a man acts the truth he knows he remains in bondage. This is why *The Man*, the main character in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* had his body, soul, and spirit chained from the outset of the novel to the end signifying man's inability to free himself. As earlier mentioned in this section, the fact that Armah's *The Man* assisted Koomson, one of those who are the architects of their misfortune to escape being punished for his atrocities leaves much to be desired. It shows that man after all may not be free.

The fact that the Armah's will live forever, the fact that there is an increasing number of prophets whose calling is the preaching of repentance, and the fact that some of these emerging literary prophets

are becoming more explicitly concerned with moral problems and man's dilemma, makes the consol point to the fact their preaching will shape the spirit and temperament of the people thereby establishing the foundation of a sound morality which modern African can be built on. This accounts from the fact that since "all the prophets were explicitly concerned with moral problems, and since they deliberately mingled gloom and hope – even if in varying ratios – a sample can illustrate the impact and fervor of their combined message" (P. 223) as Joseph Frank (1963) puts it.

## CONCLUSION

*I tumbled forth into the world. There were gaps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in the benighted moment,... I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country... There was no escape. (P.3)*

Saleem Sinai, Salman Rushdie's narrator in his *Midnight's Children* in the perforated sheet, of Book One, explains, perhaps inadvertently in very unequivocal terms the burden of being an African. It is akin to a child crippled at birth, and had a trailer load of Dangote Cement well balanced on his head, and compelled to undergo a journey from the genesis of the South to the Revelation of the North or vice versa on foot. The degree of progress such a child, well endowed with such burden will make can be well imagined by all and sundry.

The Armah's and other prophets of like minds, see the above as their load of care just as the Isaiahs, the Jeremiahs, the Elijahs and Micahs of old in their biblical lamentation saw to it that a positive change was made in the history of their people and country. There is something



very unique about these prophets of old, their lamentations and manner of it, and our modern literary prophets like Armah, our main concern in this paper, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Kole Omotosho among others. That peculiarity is their dogetness and commitment with which they pursued their aims and aspirations. Elijah for instance had cause to embark on self-exile when his prophetic utterances made him an endangered species. Ayi Kwei Armah had been on self exile for decades. The similitude is there.

Their exile is their commitment to the struggle for justice. Just as Joyce (1988) posits; "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it called itself my home, my father-land or my church. (P.222)

A prophet worth his calling does not serve in what he does not believe in. This is why Armah could tell us bluntly that:

*In the office it is hard not to see that even this little peace of mind is an illusion. Hard work. As if any amount of hard work could ever at this rate bring the self and the loved ones closer to the gleam. How much hard work before a month's pay would last till the end of the month? Rent going up and up. In the man's area the landlord is the uncle of the rent control man, and both call themselves party activist. One man tried to get his rent reduced, wiring to the party secretary in Accra. Poor fool, he still believed. He was called a saboteur, a nation wrecker, and many other party words, and then in the end, since he would not stop his talk of justice he was taken by the police to Accra. ... There would always be only one way for the young to reach the gleam. Cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud. (p. 95).*



And Micah, Isaiah's contemporary, a prophet who hailed from Judah, the Southern Kingdom had the conviction that Judah was in great trouble just as Armah demonstrates the problems of Ghara in the Beautiful Ones, Micah tells how hopeless things were in his time in the following words:

*It's hopeless! I am like a hungry person who finds no fruit left on the tree and no one grapes on the vines. All grapes and all the tasty figs have been picked. There is not an honest person left in the land, no one loyal to God. Everyone is waiting for a chance to commit murder. Everyone hunts down his own people. They are all experts at doing evil. Officials and judges ask for bribes. The influential person tell them what he wants, and so they scheme together? Even the best and most honest of them are as worthless as weeds, (Pp. 944 - 945). Micah 7 v. 1 – 14.*

Armids these hopelessness that our biblical prophets of old, and their modern literary archetypes lament, is their posit of a way out. Micah says what the Lord's requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love and to live in humble fellowship with our God" (P. 944). That's the solution. Micah like Armah explained how the house of the evil people stinks:

*In the house of evil people are treasures which they got dishonestly. They use false measures, a thing that I hate.... The rich people exploit the poor and all of you are liars. So I have already begun your ruin and destruction because of your sins. You will eat but not be satisfied – in fact you will carry*

*things off, but you will not be able to save them; anything you save I will destroy in war... (P. 944) Micah 6 v 8 – 14.*

The harvest of evil by those who are unjust Armah's explains thus:

*Koomsom walked like a man without a will of his own. The man had almost to pull him, past the other doors and the wet area around the bathroom, into the latrine. Again the powerful smell, making the man think of particles of shit doing a wild mixed dance with drops of stale urine in the small space of latrine.*

*The man shut the door and pulled the bolt behind it. Then switched on the little light... The man saw Koomson lower his stare and look left at the window above the latrine seat. ... Koomson, sweating all over the fabric of his clothes, looked pathetically into the man's face. (PO. 166.)*

One can see that as prophet Micah said in 450 BC our literary guru prophet Armah authenticates when Koomson ate his share of the Ghana national cake and that of the poor peasants like the man, whom they denied of their fair share, and still hunger. Or how else can one explicate a situation where a whole Minister of Culture of a very corrupt regime, in a bit to escape the long arms of the law occasioned by military coup run into a latrine, stay there for hours and pass through the shithole,. Armah puts it mockishly thus:

*It took Koomson some time to make up his mind, but in the end, like a man at his own funeral, he stuck his head on the other side of*

*the hole and touch the can. Together they shifted it to one side...*

*'we'll have to go through the latrine man's hole,' the man said...*

*'You go first,' the man said...*

*'Go, man,'*

*The shout seemed to have awakened Koomson from some faraway place. He look at the hole waiting for him with powerless loathing of a defeated man, then he put his lords against the box, getting ready to push his feet down the hole. The man shook his head. (P. 167.)*

For a Minister of Culture to pass thought the shit hole of a latrine with his body soaked in human excrement both the dry and the very wet brings the prophets words to pass: "You will eat but not be satisfied – in fact you will still be hungry".

Our hope lies on the fact that as the lamentation of the biblical prophets brought the desired changes, though it took time that of our literary prophets will be the magic wand that will change things for good.

Armah on the last page of *The Beautiful ones* notes:

*THE BEAUTIFUL ONES*

*ARE NOT YET BORN*

*In the center of the oval was a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful.*

*(P. 183)*

Though the beautiful ones are not yet born, the fact that there is a single flower very beautiful though solitary at the centre of the oval drums it hard on any doubting Thomas that salvation is a certainty. The sureness becomes very glaring, when the man though highly enmeshed in his



crime of letting the criminal escape, walked home, very slowly critically examining himself in preparation perhaps for a regeneration. In conclusion, therefore, the lamentations of our literary Prophets such as Prophets Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugui wa Thiong'o, Clment C. Idegwu, Kole Omotosho, Professor Wole Soyinka, Richard Masagbor and Olu Obafemi are archetypes of biblication lamentations. And like the biblical lamentations brought the desired changes so, that of our literary prophets have brought and will continue to bring the much need change for our societies for good. I could say without fear of contradictions that the good things that could be seen in modern Ghana are products of Armah's lamentations and that of other African literary artists.

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