The Time of Imperialism or a Postcolonial Determinism: A Study of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Tefsaye Woubshet Ayele
Master’s thesis
Literature
Fall term, 2016, ENLIT3
Supervisor: Stefan Helgesson
Abstract

Time and history feature prominently in debates on imperialism in the humanities and literary scholarship, with contrasting positions taken up by different theorists. In this paper, I aim to scrutinize critically one such position that has come to dominate postcolonial scholarship, the position that advocates anti-historical temporal difference. This position, taken up and articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty, states that the transition temporality of modern historical consciousness is derived from European culture and is imposed on and exported to the rest of the world, thus making it inherently a projection of European cultural imperialism (i.e., Eurocentrism). Following this position, many postcolonial theorists have interpreted key canonical texts along similar lines, that is, as challenging the transition time of modern historical consciousness and as portraying time as non-transitional, cyclical, repetitive etc., in other words, highlighting temporal difference by showing the inadequacies of historical time and/or by portraying traditional forms of temporal consciousness in the Third World.

By focusing on one of these canonical texts, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, I critically analyze and challenge this postcolonial reading of the novel as well as its more general theoretical positions and assumptions on two levels. Firstly, I question the assumption that transition and non-transition/cyclical/repetitive time are externally related, the former being in the realm of modern historical consciousness and the latter outside of it. I argue that modern historical consciousness is better thought of as being constituted by the contradictory unity between transition and non-transition/repetitive temporality. Secondly, I question the assumption that Eurocentrism is ultimately a temporal relation. This assumption leads to theories that reify time as an a priori civilizational given and posit temporally deterministic arguments regarding imperialism. I argue instead that temporality has to be contextualized in social and power relations and the narratives that justify/mystify and challenge such relations. In questioning these assumptions, I propose a radically different interpretation of Armah’s novel: one that views the novel’s production of time as embracing (not going against) historical consciousness, thereby engaging imperialism as a primarily social and power relation (not a temporal one).

**Keywords:** Eurocentrism; imperialism; postcolonial theory; historical time; temporal difference; temporal determinism; Dipesh Chakrabarty; Ayi Kwei Armah
Introduction

The connection between temporality, history and imperialism\textsuperscript{1} has been an issue of numerous debates among postcolonial scholars and critics of imperialism\textsuperscript{2}. In this essay, I aim to scrutinize a particular position in this debate that has come to dominate postcolonial theory, especially poststructuralist postcolonial theory; that is, the position that promotes the idea of \textit{temporal difference} as challenging Eurocentric thought, and imperialism more generally. A central binary distinction made by proponents of this position is the distinction between transition and non-transition time.\textsuperscript{3} This distinction, though present for decades in postcolonial theory\textsuperscript{4}, is most clearly and influentially articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Transition time is thought, by such theorists, to belong to modern, European historical consciousness whereas non-transition time is thought to belong to traditional Third World and/or non-Eurocentric forms of temporal consciousness. Moreover, the transition time of modern history is thought to be Eurocentric. Following such a line of reasoning, many literary theorists have put forth interpretations of Third-World literary works as resisting historical discourse, historical consciousness and their accompanying “Eurocentric” transition time.

\textsuperscript{1} By imperialism, I refer to European and Western imperialism in the modern period. There is an enormous reservoir of theories and debates on this matter. One of the aims of my study is to contribute some insights into the relation between spatio-temporal aspects and social relations aspects of imperialism. Whereas this debate has been largely structured by an opposition between those who view imperialism primarily as a territorial relation and those who view imperialism as a social relation, I draw on scholars such as Justin Rosenberg who argue that the spatial aspects of imperialism have to be contextualized within the social relations aspects of imperialism. Drawing on that approach, I argue in this paper that the \textit{temporal and temporal relations} aspects of imperialism also have to be contextualized within the social relations of imperialism.

\textsuperscript{2} See, for instance, Johannes Fabian, Homi Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Robert Young, Gyan Prakash, Keya Ganguly, among many others.

\textsuperscript{3} This distinction between temporalities is connected to the presence or absence of change and/or progress. Transition time is the time of linearity and/or non-repetitive, sequential change or progress. Non-transition time is the time of cyclicality, repetition and continuity; i.e., the lack of progress. The debates between scholars on the connection between temporality and imperialism has largely centered around the issue of temporal difference vs. temporal unity, the debate being between the position that emphasizes and advocates thinking in terms of multiple/different temporalities and the position that advocates thinking in terms of temporal simultaneity/unity. The former position is associated with Chakrabarty and the latter with Fabian. An additional antinomy, however, that has not received much attention is the one between transition vs. non-transition time, a key distinction for my own argument below.

\textsuperscript{4} Transition time of history is also referred to by Chakrabarty and others as “historical time”, “diachronic time”, “linear time” and the like. This is contrasted with non-transition time, which is also referred to as “transitional time”, “synchronic time”, “cyclical time” and so on (see for example, Young, Wright). The key to this distinction is the presence or absence of progress, or non-repetitive sequential change.
Through the examination of a literary work that has been interpreted in such a way, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, I not only argue that such a reading of the novel is unconvincing, but also point out that the novel pushes us to reexamine the central assumptions made by such postcolonial theorizations about historical time and imperialism. Indeed, though the novel was first published in 1968, in the wake of Ghana’s independence and the fall of Kwame Nkrumah’s government, and before the rise to prominence of anti-historical postcolonial theories, critics such as Derek Wright and Bonnie J. Barthold have made such readings of the novel. Although these critiques would most likely not have been identified with the term “postcolonial” in the 1980s, their anti-historical arguments are certainly rooted in and in agreement with the temporal difference school of postcolonial theory; they are in fact among the first theorists to pursue this line of thinking. What a consideration of these earlier theorists show is that there is a high degree of continuity and similarity between their arguments and anti-historical “postcolonial” arguments that appear after them, such as Chakrabarty’s, though these arguments were articulated in a clearer and more detailed manner in the latter’s works. Through the examination of a series of literary tropes and the thematics of the novel as well as the novel’s portrayal of time and imperialism, I show that Armah’s novel not only ascribes to a non-Eurocentric transition time of modern historical consciousness but also views imperialism not as a temporal relation but primarily as a social and power relation.

**Postcolonial Theory and Temporal Difference: Two Fallacies**

In this section I discuss some of the main assumptions of Chakrabarty’s arguments about imperialism and temporal difference. I do this in an attempt to highlight some of the main underlying assumptions of anti-historical postcolonial discourse on imperialism. I put detailed focus on Chakrabarty not because these underlying assumptions in his arguments are something new or characteristic of him alone. Rather,

---

5 Henceforth, referred to as *The Beautyful Ones*. All parenthetical page references will be to this novel unless otherwise indicated.

6 I refer to postcolonial theorists that criticize historical consciousness as such not as anti-historicist (which is the term Chakrabarty uses) but rather as anti-historical. This is to avoid conflating this postcolonial perspective with, for example, Walter Benjamin’s “anti-historicism”. Moreover, since the former goes after history as such, it seems fair to characterize it as anti-historical.

7 In other words, it is not the term used to describe this perspective that matters. A certain perspective could be called by more than one name over the years. It is rather the perspective itself that I examine here.
I do this because he articulates them in a clearer manner, something that will not only show the presence of these assumptions in earlier anti-historical postcolonial arguments but will also enable us to analyze them more thoroughly. I then identify what, in my view, this discourse misses and argue for my own position. I contend that Chakrabarty’s and similar postcolonial theorizations rest on two fallacies. The first is their understanding of modern historical consciousness as simply being based on the linear time of change/transition. Following this line of reasoning, Chakrabarty, Wright and Barthold view the cyclical time of continuity, repetition and/or simultaneity (in other words, the time of non-transition) as being external to modern historical consciousness. This conception leads to Wright’s and Barthold’s (mis)readings of Armah’s novel, more of which later. This understanding, and the readings of Armah that are based on this understanding, seem to me to reduce the complexity of modern historical consciousness more generally and as it is presented in the novel. To this I ask the questions, what is historical consciousness and is it simply a matter of linearity and transition? Moreover, does the historical consciousness presented in Armah’s novel fit this postcolonial model? The second fallacy involves how that model of Eurocentrism and imperialism treats temporality and temporal consciousness as an a priori given, a civilizational/cultural abstraction where modern historical time of transition dominates and elides other temporal modes and consciousness. Thus, Eurocentrism/imperialism is seen to be produced by the historical time of transition. This conceptualization, in my view, decontextualizes from social context and social relations. This is what leads Chakrabarty to characterize “all histories” as Eurocentric because of their temporality of transition, and leads Wright and Barthold to argue that the temporality of non-repetitive change is Western. To this I ask, is the presence of the time of transition and non-repetitive change enough to characterize a certain literary or historical narrative as Eurocentric? Is Eurocentrism (and imperialism more generally), a temporal relation, posited by the transition time of modern historical consciousness? Moreover, in what ways does Armah’s novel present Eurocentrism and imperialism and does this fit the above model of imperialism as a temporal relation?

In the following I give a detailed outline of these fallacies. With regard to the first fallacy, I argue that instead of thinking about historical time as simply being about linearity and transition that excludes non-transitional temporality, we need to think of it as being constituted by the contradictory unity between the time of transition/linearity and the time of continuity/cyclicality (though there is tension between them one does
not necessarily exclude the other). I draw from Walter Benjamin’s and Marx’s dialectical conceptions of history to argue this point. Moreover, it is only through this dialectical conception of history that we can begin to understand Armah’s novel and the critical historical consciousness that it presents us with. With regard to the second fallacy, I argue that instead of discussing temporality in such decontextualized terms which reduce the concept of imperialism and Eurocentrism to a temporal relation and the mere presence of non-repetitive change in historical and literary narratives, we need to think of temporality as being contingent on social context and (imperial) social relations. Again, it is only then that we can understand the link that Armah draws between temporality and imperialism in *The Beautiful Ones*.

**Postcolonial determinisms: the centrality of time**

In his book *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty proposes a certain understanding of imperialism that highlights the centrality of cultural formations and conventions of the imperialist center, in this case Europe. He argues that what he calls Europe determines the character of modernity. For Chakrabarty, Europe remains central to modern consciousness, a consciousness that universalizes, generalizes, and homogenizes. This, he argues, has the effect of eliding the difference and specificity of non-European experiences and forms of consciousness. He presents this argument in relation to the modern discipline of history, claiming that the category of history, whether focused on former colonial centers or peripheries, is constitutively “European”. His proposition is that insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian”, “Chinese”, “Kenyan”, and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe”. In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history. (27, my emphasis)

This is not an argument that solely targets a particular historical narrative that is thought to be Eurocentric. This may appear to be the case since Chakrabarty discusses what he calls the transition narrative, which he identifies as a colonialist historical narrative that was later appropriated by third world nationalists. He writes that this narrative is marked with “[t]he tendency to read Indian history in terms of a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into ‘inadequacy’ … As a trope, however, it is an ancient one, going back to the hoary beginnings of colonial rule … The British conquered and
Ayele 5

represented the diversity of ‘Indian’ pasts through the homogenizing narrative of transition from a medieval period to modernity” (32). In this narrative, which was “shared by imperialist and nationalist imaginations”, he continues, “the Indian was always a figure of lack” (32). He criticizes this narrative and mode of thought regarding the trajectory of history and modernity as imperialistically teleological. Rather than being about particular historiographies, however, Chakrabarty’s arguments are aimed at modern historical consciousness as such, which he often refers to as historicism, which, he argues, emerged out of Europe in the nineteenth century.

If, indeed, his arguments were targeted at a historiography, that is, a particular historical narrative, there would be nothing necessarily problematic or remarkable about them. Rather, what makes Chakrabarty’s arguments problematic is that they are aimed at modern historical consciousness as such. In other words, the “transition narrative”, as he calls it, is rooted in particular historiographies, which distort the real history of the postcolonial world due to their normative assumptions that Europe is the model to follow, as well as in history in general, which can never get rid of assumptions that make Europe the central model. Thus, all Third World histories are comparative, either explicitly/historiographically or implicitly/historically “mimicking” (to use Homi Bhabha’s term) Europe. Chakrabarty does not just criticize particular historiographies for being Eurocentric but rather criticizes the conception of history itself for being constitutively “European”.

This two-fold argument about the general and the specific nature of historical narratives and consciousness has another duality that underpins it and that is the insistence not just on the centrality of Eurocentric cultural and discursive formations in modern imperialism, which to my mind is not problematic, but also the insistence that European culture and categories ultimately determine the nature of modern imperialism and modernity itself.

Neil Lazarus, in his criticism of Chakrabarty and dominant culturalist trends and theorists in postcolonial studies and other fields, argues that the way Chakrabarty uses terms like “the West” and “Europe” is problematic. Lazarus argues that they are fetishized “ideological categor[ies] masquerading as geographic one[s]” (Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies 44). They are transhistorical constants that replace political economic categories such as class and the role of capitalism in forming imperial social relations. As Lazarus puts it, understandings of the West as a civilizational abstraction “can only present modernity under the sign of culture” (52)
(which is what Chakrabarty does) “neglecting the material basis upon which Eurocentric thought has rested” (53) thus “bracketing, … [displacing, or euphemizing] the specific agency of capitalist social relations in imperialist development” (54). This is substantiated by Chakrabarty’s proposal that for Marx’s words “capital and bourgeois” in Capital, we should “read ‘Europe’ or ‘European’” (Chakrabarty 30), a claim that disregards Marx’s insistence on the globality of capitalism as a historical formation (Lazarus 63).

I want to build on this argument by Lazarus about Chakrabarty’s dematerialized and culturalist understanding of the West and of imperialism by examining the temporal discourse of these anti-historical arguments put forth by Chakrabarty (and others); for temporality features prominently in Chakrabarty’s claims about the “Eurocentrism” of historical consciousness. By doing so, I argue that not only do these arguments entail a culturalism (which from here on I refer to as cultural determinism) but also, I submit, a temporal determinism. Indeed, they treat time and the temporality of transition as a priori givens, as opposed to treating them as contingent on and variable according to different social perspectives and contexts. Let me explain.

**History as transition**

In Chakrabarty’s book Provincializing Europe, the Europe (and the West, as these two terms are used interchangeably) the title refers to is both a geographical as well as a cultural entity, and thus quite relevant to the culturalist and spatio-temporal concerns raised above. The West/Europe is thought of as a geographical entity where modernity and modern categories and concepts emerged. Chakrabarty writes that the “phenomenon of ‘political modernity’ – namely, the rule of modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy and capitalist enterprise – is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe” (4). Here he includes concepts such as the state, civil society, the individual, democracy, social justice, scientific rationality and so on (4). I interpret this use of the term Europe to mean a cultural/civilizational space whose particular history and the concepts and developments associated with that history have been universalized under the sign of modernity. This universalization, whose inevitability is written in the very logic of modernity itself, elides other regions’ particular histories, cultures and experiences.

He complicates this usage of the term, however, by stating the following
“Europe” and “India” are treated here as hyperreal terms in that they refer to certain figures of imagination whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate. As figures of the imaginary they, of course, are subject to contestation, but for the moment I shall treat them as though they were given, reified categories, opposites paired in a structure of domination and subordination. I realize that in treating them thus I leave myself open to the charge of nativism … True but … a certain version of “Europe”, reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history. (27, my emphasis)

This simultaneous avowal and dismissal of Europe as a contested ideological category is reflected in Chakrabarty’s treatment of the discipline of history as being inherently “European”, as opposed to arguing that particular historical narratives are Eurocentric. The latter assumes that Europe is a contested ideological category that can be transcended within the field of history. The former assumes that Europe is a category that cannot be transcended within the field of history since the field itself originates from Europe. Hence, Chakrabarty’s claim that “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Kenyan’, and so on” (27, my emphasis). By going after history as such, he dismisses Europe as a contested ideological category in favor of Europe as a transhistorical cultural constant. Europe becomes a cultural space whose particular history is inevitably universalized and made dominant in modern thought, since modern and historical consciousness originated in Europe. Thus, imperial domination is an inevitability of European/modern thought and culture. This is the basis for my view that these are cultural determinist arguments.

With regard to Chakrabarty’s arguments about time he states that modern historical consciousness is marked by a temporal logic of transition and progress. He highlights this by discussing what he calls the transition narrative, which he identifies as colonialisit discourse that was later appropriated by third-world nationalists. He writes that this narrative is marked with “[t]he tendency to read Indian history in terms of a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into ‘inadequacy’ … As a trope, however, it is an ancient one, going back to the hoary beginnings of colonial rule … The British conquered and represented the diversity of ‘Indian’ pasts through the homogenizing narrative of transition from a ‘medieval’ period to ‘modernity’” (32). He criticizes this narrative and mode of thought regarding the trajectory of history and modernity as imperialistically teleological. In his words, this narrative is informed by
“the higher purpose of making Indian history look like yet another episode in the universal … march of citizenship, of the nation state, or themes of human emancipation spelled out in the course of the European Enlightenment and after. It is this figure of the citizen that speaks through histories. And so long as this happens, my hyperreal Europe will continually return to dominate the stories we tell” (39). He further asserts the impossibility of “provincializing” this historical narrative since “the globality of academia is not independent of the globality that the European modern has created” (46).

Again, these arguments may seem as though they are aimed at particular historiographies, especially ones that are teleological. However, Chakrabarty is attacking the phenomenon of historical consciousness, of modern history, as such, as it emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, and making this phenomenon central to imperialism. He emphasizes that Marxism and liberalism are both steeped in this view of history as a matter of transition, change and development and argues that there is little of this in the longstanding intellectual traditions of India and the Third World. As he puts it, “[h]istoricism does not entail any necessary assumptions of teleology” (23). “But”, he adds, “the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to [historicism]” (23). He further states that “this passage of time that is constitutive of both the narrative and the concept of development is … the secular, empty, and homogenous time of history … [the historicist narrative] takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time” (23). In other words, Chakrabarty is not only attacking particular historical narratives; to do so and then to characterize all histories as Eurocentric would be an unwarranted generalization. He is, at base level, also attacking a conception of modern historical time, the idea that entities in the world change and develop over time. Thus, Europe and European consciousness is associated with the temporal logic of transition while India is associated with temporal logics other than transition. In this way, Europe and India become desynchronized cultural spaces.

Let us examine some of these assumptions briefly before delving into them more deeply in the following subsections. Historical consciousness is thought of as being based on the “secular, empty, and homogenous time … [which] takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time”. This conception is echoed by other anti-historical postcolonial theorists. For example, Robert Young, in his White Mythologies, draws on Lévi-Strauss and characterizes
history writing as “[t]he use of chronology … [which] gives the illusion that the whole operates by a uniform, continuous progression, a linear series in which each event takes its place. History is thus a process of a continuous unfolding [or development]” (80). Young characterizes this history as Eurocentric, one reason cited being its temporality. Arguing instead for a more desynchronized approach, Young favorably looks upon “the conceptualization of forms of heterogeneous temporality that consistently elude and trouble all theorization of history as a homogenous diachrony” (81). This approach, like Chakrabarty’s, associates history with the unfolding time of transition and with Eurocentrism. Similarly, in Wright’s arguments, history is seen as an evolutionary concept based on Western linear time. Indeed, he looks at *The Beautiful Ones* through this theoretical lens.

Is this a satisfactory way of characterizing history and Eurocentrism? Is historical consciousness simply a matter of transition? What is more, is Eurocentrism and by extension imperialism something produced by temporality and transition time? I deal with these questions in the next subsections and in my analysis of Armah’s novel. With regard to the third question, I wish to highlight here the assumption that history is Eurocentric because of its time of “transition” or “development”, the time of non-repetitive change. Is this enough for a narrative to be characterized as Eurocentric? Does it not matter what type of transition is occurring, who benefits from this transition and who loses? Indeed, the treatment of all transition temporalities as though they were the same, as shown by Chakrabarty’s treatment of liberal and Marxist “transition narratives” and their categorization under his normative umbrella term of “historicism”, betrays the assumption that all transitions are Eurocentric regardless of whose interest and agency they represent. If one is to equate bourgeois transition narratives with socialist transition narratives in this way, then does this mean that both imperial and anti-imperial transition narratives are also Eurocentric because they both advocate transition? Instead of these conflations that result from viewing time and transition as civilizational abstractions, temporality and transition should be viewed in the context of the material and cultural struggles between social groups. It is only then that we can understand the link between transition temporality and imperialism. Moreover, it is precisely this treatment of time as a civilizational abstraction that has led to the misreadings of the novel produced by anti-historical postcolonial theory. Indeed, Armah’s novel does not present time in these terms but rather situates it in the context of power relations and struggles.
I now delve deeper into these questions in the next two subsections.

*Is historical consciousness simply a matter of transition and homogenization?*

Much of Chakrabarty’s argumentation is premised, in my view, on a view of historical consciousness as simply being about transition and homogenization. His castigation of the liberal and Marxist traditions is based on this assumption. His interpretation of Marx’s arguments and concepts along the lines of his “History 1” and “History 2” is also based on this assumption. Marx’s arguments, however, are better understood, in my view, if one interprets them as not being based on this postcolonial understanding of historical consciousness. They are based, instead, on the contradictory unity of and the dialectical relation between continuity and change as well as universality and specificity, in their depiction of historical development.

The distinction between History 1 and History 2, introduced by Chakrabarty in relation to Marx’s thoughts on historical narratives, is based on the argument that History 1 is the narrative of transition to and universalization⁸ of capitalism while History 2 is made up of elements that are pre- or non-capitalist that do not signify a transition to capitalism or a reproduction/universalization of its “logic”. As an example of the former he cites Marx’s account of free labor as an antecedent posited by itself, which means it is a “past posited by capital itself as its precondition”. He states, “[t]his is the universal and necessary history we associate with capital. It forms the backbone of the usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production” (63). His examples of the latter are Marx’s concepts of commodity and money. This may “take the reader by surprise”, states Chakrabarty, since these are “two elements without which capital cannot even be conceptualized”. “Yet” he adds “Marx appears to suggest that entities as close and necessary to the functioning of capital as money and commodity do not necessarily belong by any natural connection to either capital’s own life process or to the past posited by capital” (64). He further states that “Marx recognizes the possibility that money and commodity, as relations, could have existed in history without necessarily giving rise to capital. Since they do not look forward to capital, 

---

⁸ By which is meant the homogenization of the social and conceptual world by “the logic of capital”, which in turn means, according to Chakrabarty, not only capital’s self-valorization but also categories of Enlightenment thought “that inhere in the logic of capital” (71). The notion that capitalism homogenizes the world is a highly debated one and far from obvious. See, for example, Vivek Chibber’s critique of it. Notice here, however, that Chakrabarty’s categories are both ontological and epistemological ones.
they make up the kind of past I have called History 2” (64). He asserts that this points to “the heterogeneity Marx reads into the history of money and commodity [and] shows that the relations that do not contribute to the reproduction of the logic of capital can be intimately intertwined with the relations that do” (my emphasis) (64). He means by this that “[c]apital has to encounter in the reproduction of its own life process relationships that present it with double possibilities. These relations could be central to capital’s self-reproduction, and yet it is also possible for them to be oriented to structures that do not contribute to such reproduction”9 (64). He further argues, citing Marx, that capital “has to destroy this first set of relationships as independent forms [i.e., pre/non-capitalist forms of money and commodities] and subjugate them to itself” (64). Thus, History 1, the history of transition and universalization, “has to subjugate or destroy the multiple possibilities that belong to History 2” (65). He further claims (and this is the crucial point) that “History 2 does not spell out a program of writing histories that are alternatives to the narrative of capital. That is, History 2s do not constitute a dialectical Other of the necessary logic of History 1. To think thus would be to subsume History 2 to History 1. History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1” (66). I want to emphasize here, before moving on, that there is a continual rejection of dialectical thinking in much of anti-historical postcolonial thought, citing its supposed Eurocentrism, a view also ascribed to and expanded on by Young in his White Mythologies. This anti-dialectical mode of thinking is followed by Chakrabarty.

This binary distinction between two histories, one a history of transition and universalization/homogenization, the other a history of non-transition and specificity/heterogeneity, is, in my view, a highly problematic reading of Marx. For Marx’s dialectical method of presentation simultaneously points to the transitory and non-transitory as well as the universal and specific nature of various concepts he uses. Central concepts such as the labor process, social relations, money, and commodity are transitory (i.e., they change in different historical epochs). But they also have non-transitory and general qualities that do not “necessarily look forward to” or “necessarily give rise to” capital in Chakrabarty’s words (62). Moreover, they assume particular forms in the bourgeois epoch and other forms in precapitalist epochs, but they are not

9 “Difference is not something external to capital. Nor is it something subsumed into capital. It lives in intimate and plural relationships to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality” (66).
Reducible to the capitalist or other epochs. They are presented as continuous and transitional, universal and specific, at the same time. And they are transformative.

We can take the labor process as an example. Marx argues that the labor process has both universal and historically specific features and is both natural and social. “The labor process … in its simple and abstract elements” he states, “is purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values. It is an appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements of man … the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of … [or common to] all forms of society in which human beings live ” (290). At the same time, however, in certain historical epochs, the labor process exhibits certain characteristics. Under capitalism, for example, “the worker works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labor belongs” (291) and the product produced by the worker “is the property of the capitalist and not that of the worker” (292).

Moreover, when it comes to historical change, Marx argues that the form that the labor process takes differs in different epochs. However, these transitions do not completely rule out continuity with the past. Regarding cooperation and power relations embodied in labor processes, for example, Marx argues that “the colossal effects of simple co-operation are to be seen in the gigantic structures erected by the ancient Asiatics, Egyptians, Etruscans, etc... This power of Asiatic and Egyptian kings, of Etruscan theocrats, etc. [which arises out of their control over the revenues which feed the laborers that construct these structures] has in modern society been transferred to the capitalist, whether he appears as an isolated individual or, as in the case of joint-stock companies, in combination with others” (451–452). But this identification of continuity is also accompanied by a description of the historical changes that took place from one historical epoch to another; “[t]he sporadic application of co-operation on a large scale in ancient times, in the Middle Ages, and in modern colonies, rests on

10 In criticizing Bentham’s theory/principle of utility, Marx states that “[a]pplying this [principle], he that would judge all human acts, movements, relations, etc. according to the principle of utility would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch. Bentham does not trouble himself with this. With the dryest [sic] naivety he assumes that the modern [English] petty bourgeois … is the normal man … Whatever is useful to this particular kind of man, and to his world, is useful in and for itself. He applies this yardstick to the past, the present and the future” (759). This quote illustrates Marx’s thinking on the historical vs. the natural distinction.

11 Notice, here, modern colonies. Marx’s framework is able to include relations of direct domination even in the capitalist historical period. It also has to be noted, however, that Marx, in Capital, theorized about capitalism largely under the assumption that capital accumulation occurs under the conditions of competitive markets, private property, freedom of contract, juridical individualism and so on, in other words, under conditions that exclude direct domination. Methods of capital accumulation that include
direct relations of domination and servitude, in most cases on slavery. As against this, the capitalist form presupposes from the outset the free wage-laborer who sells his labor-power to capital” (452). Moreover, cooperation becomes more fixed in the capitalist mode of production than in previous ones (453–454)\textsuperscript{12}.

Even when Chakrabarty’s own examples of “History 2”, money and the commodity form, are examined, we find that Marx’s analysis of these forms, \textit{themselves products of historical changes}, also points to their transitional and continuous qualities. “In order to become a commodity,” Marx argues, “the product must cease to be produced as the immediate means of subsistence of the producer himself” (273). He further states that the existence of commodities “requires a level of development of the division of labor within society such that the separation of use-value from exchange-value … has already been completed” (273). “But”, Marx continues, “such a degree of development is common to many economic formations of society … with the most diverse historical characteristics” (273). He continues by stating that “[h]ad we gone further, and inquired under what circumstances all, or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we should have found that this only happens on the basis of one particular mode of production, the capitalist one. Such an investigation, however, would have been foreign to the analysis of commodities. The production and circulation of commodities can still take place even though the great mass of the objects produced are intended for immediate requirements of their producers … so that the process of social production is as yet by no means dominated in its length and breadth by exchange-value ” (273). More, he makes similar arguments about money; “we know by experience that a relatively feeble development of commodity circulation suffices for the creation of … [money forms]. It is otherwise with capital. The historical conditions of its existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities” (274). “It arises”, he continues “only when the owner of the means of

\textsuperscript{12} Marx makes the general comment further on, when providing an account of the industrial revolution and the conversion of tools to machines, that “epochs in the history of society are no more separated from each other by strict and abstract lines of demarcation than are geological epochs” (492). This illustrates quite well Marx’s thinking on historical change.
production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his labor-power. And this one historical pre-condition comprises a world’s history. Capital, therefore, announces from the outset a new epoch in the process of social production” (274). In other words, the commodification of labor power and the exploitative capital–labor class relation in production is an essential precondition for the rise of capitalism and the accompanying dominance of the commodity form in social production.

Thus, Chakrabarty’s History 2, in relation to Marx, remains a history about chronological succession and change but in a more complicated way than anticipated by the former. Marx, in my reading, does not simply posit that elements that make up the material and ideal world change and are completely assimilated into the capitalist epoch. They do change and are incorporated into particular historical periods differently but this does not completely rule out continuity with the past. This dialectical conceptualization of historical change that simultaneously points to continuity and change (there is tension between the two but one does not necessarily rule out the other), is what Chakrabarty misses. For him, historical consciousness presents us with one-sided narratives about transition and homogenization. Moreover, this dialectical conceptualization will prove crucial in not only deepening our understanding of historical consciousness but also in helping us make sense of the novel of this study.

As I show further on in my analysis of Armah’s novel, the anti-historical readings of *The Beautiful Ones* have a tendency to read the novel on the same binary lines as Chakrabarty’s application of his History 1 and History 2 distinction on Marx. In other words, they view transition and continuity as externally related concepts, as opposed to reading them along dialectical lines as being in contradictory unity. The formal and thematic features that are seen to point toward cyclicality, continuity and the like are completely separated from and are seen to militate against transition time and, by extension, modern historical time. This reduction of historical consciousness as merely being about linearity and change, leads to similar misreadings of Armah’s novel as the ones put forth by Chakrabarty of Marx.

I return to the novel further below. But, for the moment, I turn to the second fallacy of anti-historical postcolonial theory.
Imperialism as a temporal relation?

Much of what Chakrabarty argues about temporal difference and Eurocentrism rests on the assumption that the empty, homogenous, secular time of transition forms the ultimate crux of European imperialism. Now, I do agree that certain temporal modes have been central to the project of European imperialism. However, these temporal modes have to be contextualized in the larger context of imperialism as a process of forming social and cultural relations of exploitation and domination. In other words, imperialism is not ultimately determined by temporal modes and temporal relations. One needs to ask sociological questions about the social relations that lie behind certain temporal modes. Chakrabarty treats “transition time” as an a priori given that determines imperial relations.

As indicated earlier, temporal difference\(^{13}\) informs much of this discourse on Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism and imperialism are not only posited and reinforced by historical narratives, but also, at base level, historical time; that is, the idea that entities change and develop over time. This understanding of Eurocentrism as a temporal relation posited by transition time is shared by other anti-historical postcolonial theorists such as, for example, Young and Wright. Moreover, it also forms the basis for Chakrabarty’s distinction between History 1 and History 2. History 1, the history aligned with “historicism”, is associated with futures that “will be”, a future “of which we know at least the constitutive principles, even if we do not have a blueprint for it” (250). This is contrasted with History 2, the history that interrupts the totalizing Eurocentric thrusts of History 1. History 2 is associated with futures “that already are” (251). A key element in this distinction is transition time. Thus, according to this formulation, advocating for temporal difference, that is, for temporalities that are non-transitional, becomes central to any anti-Eurocentric project, the implication being that transition time, the time of historical succession/development is Eurocentric.

Temporality and temporal difference, however, are still mediated and constructed by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Such arguments, however, would strike postcolonial thinkers such as Chakrabarty as Eurocentric because they would entail for them a historicist understanding of time, that is, “the idea of single, homogenous, and secular historical time” (15). He argues:

We need to move away from two of the ontological assumptions entailed in secular conceptions of the political and the social. The first is that the

\(^{13}\) I.e., transition/Western time vs. non-transition/non-Western time
Ayele

human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time. I argue that the task of conceptualizing practices of social and political modernity in South Asia often requires us to make the opposite assumption: that historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself. The second assumption running through modern European political thought and the social sciences is that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end “social facts”, that the social somehow exists prior to them. I try, on the other hand, to think without the assumption of even a logical priority of the social. (15–16)

I am with Chakrabarty to the extent that he is arguing that modern empty, homogenous, secular time is not a pre-social natural given and that it coexists with other kinds of temporality and temporal consciousness. However, he seems to resist sociological questions and understandings regarding these temporalities and their socio-cultural contexts on the grounds that such an endeavor inevitably reproduces the Eurocentric temporality of the “transition narrative” and modern history more generally. Nevertheless, spatio-temporal forms are produced and reproduced by certain social and cultural contexts and relations and even “empty, homogenous, and secular time” is linked to particular social contexts from which it arose and which it helps to define. It seems to me that Chakrabarty’s anti-sociological arguments about temporality, including empty, homogenous, secular time, for all their anti-naturalizing drive, end up reifying their temporal categories. In other words, Chakrabarty isolates and inserts temporality into his analysis in a way that over-magnifies and over-generalizes its role in creating imperial social and cultural relations. I take issue with this approach. In my view, it is, rather, social and cultural contexts and relations that give rise to specific spatio-temporal forms, forms which then help to define social reality. Boiling down Eurocentrism and imperialism to temporal relations (posited by European empty, homogenous, secular time of transition) mystifies this process.

Justin Rosenberg, in his critique of globalization theory, astutely warns against this theoretical move, which he calls, creating “a spatio-temporal problematic per se” (6). This kind of problematic “reverse[s] the normal relation of explanans and explanandum – … [it] make[s] space and time themselves into the fundamental basis of explanation” (6). Instead, what the first move of specialized studies of space and time should be is “the sociological and phenomenological deconstruction … of modern space and time, by reference to the specific social and cultural relations which produce and reproduce them in this form. In this way, the emergence of a spatio-temporal problematic per se is effectively ruled out” (6, my emphasis). Indeed, it seems to me
that Chakrabarty and the temporal difference school of postcolonial theory, in treating
time as a civilizational abstraction, are creating a temporal problematic *per se* in which
temporality and the modern historical time of transition, which were initially in the
position of the *explanandum* – temporal consciousness (say, transition time) as the
developing outcome of historical processes, such as, for instance, the formation of
Eurocentrism, imperialism, and imperial social relations – are turned into the *explanans*
– temporal consciousness (transition time) explains the formation of Eurocentrism,
imperialism and imperial social relations.

Another pitfall of Chakrabarty’s approach is that in disavowing the historical
consciousness of transition as inherently Eurocentric he, arguably, undermines a crucial
cultural resource in challenging and changing imperial relations. Indeed, a temporal
consciousness which is open to thinking about social change, progress, and revolution
has tremendous anti-imperial and anti-Eurocentric potential and seems to me to be
indispensable for any anti-imperial project. This pitfall can be traced to the one I
highlighted above, that is, the reduction of Eurocentrism and imperialism to a temporal
relation, that is, something that is the outcome of transition time. Now, it has to be
granted that the historical consciousness of transition of course can be a force for
consolidating imperialism and Eurocentrism through the production of racist, social
Darwinist and/or teleological narratives justifying/mystifying imperial rule and so on.
What is more, these types of narratives tend to embrace particular temporal structures
of social change. Johannes Fabian’s analysis of time in anthropological discourse in his
*Time and the Other*, for instance, critiques the temporal mode of “evolutionist” (and
other schools of) anthropology as a mode that creates temporal scales of classification
and hierarchization whereby different societies are placed at different points on this
scale, laying the ideological grounds for claiming Western supremacy and justifying
Western imperialism. This critique of evolutionism, firstly, contextualizes it in relation
to the larger project of creating imperial social relations; it thus avoids creating a
temporal problematic *per se*. Secondly, it identifies a particular temporal mode of
transition with this project and does not attack the more general notion of “historical”
or “transition” time; in other words, his critique is aimed at transition temporalities that
produced “allochronic distancing” and hierarchization and not at the idea of
historical/chronological succession or change, as such (159). Indeed, Fabian states his
support for “dialectical” and “totalizing” approaches to history and historical change.
To be fair, Chakrabarty also carries out this kind of criticism, particularly in the
historiographical instances of his critique. He approvingly cites Fabian’s arguments about allochronic distancing and “the denial of co-evalness”, arguing that Eurocentric and imperial discourse and their teleological narratives portrayed the West as having reached the highest stage of civilization and viewed the rest as having not yet reached that stage, thereby justifying/mystifying colonization by assigning colonized societies to “an imaginary waiting room of history”, the temporal horizon of the “not yet” (8). However, his attack on “all histories” and on historical time of transition as such remains unwarranted, in my view. It remains to be shown that the historical time of transition can be reduced to its connection to Eurocentrism or imperial relations since it can be and is also linked to anti-imperial transformation narratives. Hence, when discussing temporality in relation to imperialism and Eurocentrism, one needs to keep in mind, and put to the fore, the social and cultural relations that inform and are in turn informed by certain temporal modes.

Transition and progress time are not reified a priori givens. They have to be contextualized and understood in relation to power relations. One needs to ask questions such as the following: what type of transition, and transition in relation to whom? After all, what is progressive for some can mean regression or stasis for others. This example shows that the question of temporality and temporal modes is not only mediated by culture but also by political economy. Moreover, transition time is not, in and of itself, the basis of imperialism and Eurocentrism. One needs to examine the social relations that shape and are in turn shaped by certain temporal modes. Reifying temporal difference in this way not only risks misunderstanding the world; it also risks forfeiting a field of debate and conflict where opposing social forces are attempting to appropriate central concepts such as transition and progress for their own gain. It also risks falsely equating them on normative grounds.

An example of this kind of debate in political economy is conducted over the so called informal economy, particularly in the Third World. The informal economy has been traditionally viewed as a waiting room that migrants from the countryside occupied as they became skilled enough to join the formal sector in the urban economy. It is seen by leftists (such as, for example Jan Breman) as being regressive for labor since it is detrimental for labor rights and security. It has also been seen as progressive by neoliberal policy makers (see, for example, the World Bank in its Report of 1995) since it is seen as promoting the welfare of the working class in the long run. If one assumes a temporal difference postcolonial perspective and argue, as Partha Chatterjee for example does, that transition time is external to the informal economy, one risks falsely and normatively equating and dismissing all these opposing narratives as “transition narratives” and thus forfeit the field of debate.

14 An example of this kind of debate in political economy is conducted over the so called informal economy, particularly in the Third World. The informal economy has been traditionally viewed as a waiting room that migrants from the countryside occupied as they became skilled enough to join the formal sector in the urban economy. It is seen by leftists (such as, for example Jan Breman) as being regressive for labor since it is detrimental for labor rights and security. It has also been seen as progressive by neoliberal policy makers (see, for example, the World Bank in its Report of 1995) since it is seen as promoting the welfare of the working class in the long run. If one assumes a temporal difference postcolonial perspective and argue, as Partha Chatterjee for example does, that transition time is external to the informal economy, one risks falsely and normatively equating and dismissing all these opposing narratives as “transition narratives” and thus forfeit the field of debate.
I want to emphasize before moving further, however, that my aim here is not to dismiss Chakrabarty’s arguments and anti-historical postcolonial arguments purely on the a priori grounds of logic and theory. It is rather to explain that if the simple presence or absence of the temporalities of transition and non-repetitive change are seen as signs of Eurocentrism and the continued domination of Europe, one can lose sight of the power relations and struggles that constantly inform transition narratives. This point becomes clearer when reading Armah’s novel. Indeed, as I show in my discussion of *The Beautiful Ones*, this understanding of time as a civilizational abstraction is at odds with Armah’s own conception of historical time. For in his novel, he presents the characters’ sense of time and historical progress as being contingent on imperial power structures and relations. This is, however, misunderstood by anti-historical postcolonial proponents of temporal difference such as Wright and Barthold, whose temporal determinism and their view of time as a civilizational abstraction leads to their reading the novel as militating against “Western/transition” time and, by extension, historical time.

**Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones* and Time**

“History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [Jetztzeit]. For Robespierre, Roman antiquity was a past charged with the here-and-now, which he exploded out of the continuum of history... [The French revolution] cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a past costume. Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the jungle [Dickicht: maze, thicket] of what was. It is the tiger’s leap into which has gone before.” (Walter Benjamin\(^\text{15}\), “On the Concept of History”)

---

\(^{15}\) I realize that Benjamin has been interpreted and appropriated by different schools of thought for different ends, including by “anti-historicist” postcolonial theorists. One question that needs addressing is, is the “historicism” Benjamin refers to the same “historicism” that Chakrabarty, for example, refers to? In my view, Ganguly’s commentary on these appropriations and her own interpretation of Benjamin are compelling. After critiquing Bhabha’s interpretation as missing the dialectical aspects of Benjamin’s view of history (which is reminiscent of Chakrabarty’s and Young’s anti-dialectical conception and critique of history/historicism), she argues that Benjamin’s “critique of rationalized societies (in both their capitalist and socialist variants) … concluded that the concept of progress implied by what he called ‘historicism’ was complicit in reproducing past power structures and forms of thinking because it reduced historical time to an instrumental matter of moving through the continuum of history – from barbarism to civilization, from primitive to the modern, from the bad old days to the good new ones [and, one could add, from the colonial period to the postcolonial period]. Against this ‘historicism,’ Benjamin formulated his concept of historical materialism in which time was seen not as homogeneous, simultaneous, or continuous, but shot through with the ‘shards’ of the past and redirected to the future of a ‘redeemed humanity’”. “For Benjamin”, Ganguly continues, “the
There have been numerous debates regarding historical time and imperialism/Eurocentrism within literary studies over the past decades. This can be partly put down to the specificities of literary works, that is, their ability to project fictional worlds that present time, through formal and thematic means, in differing and contradictory ways. For example, as we shall delve into later on with regard to the novel of this study, they can present time as cyclical, static, and linear; they can present the reader with flashbacks, flash-forwards, and what Spivak terms as the “future anterior” (21); they can also differentiate between how time is perceived by exploring, for instance, phenomenological time, how time is experienced on a daily life basis, and the more abstract time of sociopolitical history. Indeed, this points to the “heterochronicity”, to use Stefan Helgesson’s term, of the literary-fictional mode, its formal and thematic capacity to produce and even straddle multiple temporalities within the fictional world (4). Moreover, this multiplicity is not limited to “magical realist” and “non-mimetic” fiction. It is true that magical realism, through the use of supernatural devices and through the manipulation of literary space and time, can be seen as explicitly heterochronic, as combining multiple temporalities. And it is true that this form of fiction contrasts highly with the mimetic prose of sociology and history, particularly in spatio-temporal terms. But the same holds true for “mimetic” and “realist” forms of fiction. Indeed, as I show below, Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones*, although it retains a mimetic style, produces time in quite complicated and contradictory ways.

It is important to recognize, however, that this specificity and heterochronicity of the literary-fictional mode is also mediated by ideology and dominant forms of understanding historical time. These temporal ideologies appear not only in literature but also in extra-literary discourse (such as academic discourse); they condition the production and reception of literary works. Thus, the heterochronicity of literature has to be understood in relation to ideology, and, for the purposes of this essay, postcolonial theories and their assumptions about historical time. For example, the combination of
multiple temporalities in West African magical realist fiction is viewed by Brenda Cooper as hybridizing time. “Magical realist time”, she states, “tries to be neither the linear time of history, nor the circular time of myth”; she calls it an “in-between time” (33). What are the assumptions, here, about historical time? Is it that historical time is linear? In what ways are literary texts seen to complicate this linearity? Is this “in-between time” a reaction to the Eurocentrism of historical narratives or the Eurocentrism of historical time? These are some of the questions I grapple with in relation to Armah’s portrayal of time in *The Beautyful Ones* and how it has been received.

**Brief review of scholarship on The Beautyful Ones**

*The Beautyful Ones* is a novel that has attracted a great deal of debate. Many have characterized it, in the words of Arthur Ravenscroft, as belonging to the genre of the “novels of disillusion” – novels that are written by African writers and that question the euphoria of the post-independence period by examining the realities and inheritance left to former colonies by imperial powers (120). Moreover, the critical reception of the novel has been dominated by the debate about the novel’s pessimism and historicity. Literary giants such as Chinua Achebe and Kofi Awoonor have attacked the novel as having a historically unrealistic and an overly despairing outlook on Ghanaian society. Other literary critics have echoed and developed these criticisms (see Nnolim and Kibera, for example). Charles E. Nnolim’s statement that Armah “is a writer whose philosophic pessimism is undisguised” (79) and Achebe’s assertion that the novel “is a sick book … [s]ick, not with the sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of the human condition” (624), succinctly summarize the overall thrust of these criticisms. This interpretation views the novel as naturalizing and universalizing the social degeneration and corruption presented in the novel. Wright also seems to adhere to at least some aspects of this view when he states that “[h]istory in Armah is an encycled continuity (“Motivation and Motif” 130), a view which sidelines the presence of social change and

and text. My view on this matter is that literature, though possessing specific features, is not externally related to extra-literary discursive modes. On the contrary, through their own specificities, literary texts express, respond to, and are a part of social and ideological contexts. As Fredric Jameson notes, “we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretation” (IX-X). We also apprehend texts through sedimented layers of previous ideas and categories (X). These ideas and interpretations, (particularly the postcolonial and temporal difference ideas about historical time) is what I intend to examine here, in relation to Armah’s novel.
desire for historical progress in the novel. Still, others contend that the novel, despite its degraded and despairing outlook, portrays contemporary Ghana in historically accurate ways and retains a promise of a future that is far better, a future where “the beautiful ones” are born (see, for example, Onweme and Lazarus). Lazarus argues that the novel “is formulated upon the premise that it is only by knowing one’s world, by seeing it for what it is, [and by describing the preconditions of and prevailing constraints to change], that one can ever genuinely aspire to bring about its revolutionary transformation” (“Pessimism” 139). This view acknowledges the historicity of and even the desire for change and progress in the novel. Despite these critics, however, it is the pessimistic school of thought that seems to have dominated the debate. Although these debates deviate somewhat from my primary concern, that is, the temporal mode pursued in the novel as it relates to imperial critique, they are relevant in certain respects, particularly regarding the issues of historicization and socio-historical change, and so I will be marginally returning to them.

Other areas of discussion and debate include the novel’s use of symbolic imagery. With regard to the former subject, critics such as Nnolim have been quick to point out the novel’s symbolic imagery in an unsparingly critical fashion. Nnolim claims that “Armah, who seems to be unusually excited by images of decay and corruption, never fails to focus on the wetness that accompanies corruption and decay (to everyone’s disgust)” (79). Notwithstanding Nnolim’s disparagement of this use of imagery, however, he does seem to sense the complexity of how these images are deployed: “I shall try to highlight several linguistic clues that eventually converge to mean, in a way that structures each work and lends it form” (79). Similarly, Terry Goldie writes that “most [critics] have been decidedly uncomfortable with Armah’s obsession with filth and decay”. “Yet,” he continues “it is precisely this obsession which shows Armah’s technical abilities and which helps to define the full meaning of the novel. There is a depth to the work which can only be plumbed by an extended analysis of the novel’s imagistic structure” (94). Indeed, as I elaborate below, my reading of the novel’s central tropes is very much informed by this idea that these tropes are not only deployed in quite skillful and intricate ways but are also used to further the

---

17 Particularly, Achebe’s commentary on universality and specificity in the novel (i.e., the lack of historicization and historical specificity) and Lazarus’s dialectical reading of the novel. I criticize the former and agree with the latter. Indeed, as I argue below, contrary to the pessimistic school of thought, I view the novel as presenting us with a revolutionary historical consciousness.
novel’s thematic concerns. However, contrary to Goldie’s naturalizing arguments, by which I mean his reading of the tropes he examines as signifying “natural processes”, I approach these tropes from phenomenological and socio-political angles that historicize them in the immediate postcolonial period of Ghanaian history.

Another area of significant scholarly attention has concerned national liberationist politics in the novel. As Kwadwo Osei–Nyame Jr. argues, “The Beautiful Ones is … an exploration of the unhappy circumstances which generate the kind of ‘national consciousness’ which Frantz Fanon criticizes as detrimental to the liberation of the nation in Africa” (98). Indeed, Armah’s novel can be seen to be rooted in a national liberationist tradition of thought that has parallels with Fanon’s thinking on the subject. I will return to these issues below.

Moreover, there has been some debate, for instance between Osei–Nyame Jr. and Abena Busia, about the representation of women in the novel. While the former explores the relations presented in the novel between concerns regarding women and nationalist politics, and argues that the novel’s story is also foregrounded as a narrative of gender (99), the latter argues that the novel represents women as having “essentially secondary” roles in relation to the men characters (48). Though I do not analyze the novel from a gender perspective, I wish to refer the reader to this important debate.

There has, however, been a debate that is explicitly about time in the novel and whether it can be categorized as an anti-historical postcolonial response to historical time. I will deal with this debate, primarily between Wright and Barthold, on the one hand and Adam Barrows, on the other, in more detail and argue for my own take of the novel on this matter. Moreover, by reexamining the central assumptions about historical time in the novel I link my literary analysis to my theoretical analysis, arguing that dominant postcolonial assumptions about history, time and imperialism have to be reexamined.

**European transition time vs. African cyclical time?**

*The Beautyful Ones* is a novel that is highly pertinent to questions about history, temporality, and imperialism. Set in the early, postcolonial years of Ghana’s history, the novel offers a sharp social critique of the state of Ghana. Moreover, as the “not yet” of the title indicates, the concept of time and temporal transitions are central to this critique. As I will show further on, the passage of time in the novel is presented mainly through a phenomenologically dense narrative style. Yet, larger questions regarding
socio-historical context, historical time, and imperialism are also foregrounded in a variety of ways. Indeed, *The Beautiful Ones* is a novel that self-consciously deals with temporality, as experienced both on the personal and politico-historical levels. This makes the novel interesting in regard to the method in which it deals with temporality as it relates to postcolonial temporal difference theorizations. This method has not only been the subject of debate but has also been interpreted as adhering to such postcolonial theorizations, something which makes the novel even more interesting in relation to the issues raised above.

Let me elaborate a bit further on the points raised above about the novel’s treatment of temporality. The reader is immersed in the main character’s, that is, “the man’s”, life-world and his sense of time and morality, his sense of cleanliness and dirt, movement and stillness. Let me illustrate this point with the following excerpts, the first a scene where the man wakes up from bed to get ready to leave for work.

Before the clock’s alarm could ring, the man’s hand reached out and smothered it. He had been half awake for some time, and the chill before the awakening had yet to leave him. These days it was as if there were an inner system, alerting him with his own anxiety, making him wake even without the mechanical help of the clock … From the head of the bed he took the large towel and wrapped his body in it … When the man had switched on the light within the bathroom and shut the door, he could not for a time take his eyes off the door where it was rotten at the bottom, and the smell of dead wood filled his nostrils and caressed the cavity of his mouth. (101)

Or consider this passage describing the scene where, having been let off early from work, he takes a walk to the sea coast.

One always wonders why the sea is not much dirtier than it turns out to be. In the afternoon sun it is very calm. Even the motion of it is quiet, ending by adding to the general sense of stillness. There is a feeling like the one that comes when one rides at the back of a motorcycle, or moves in any open way at great speed. Thoughts of the past and the present, hopes and fears for the future, all come with the speed of the vehicle, and at the end a man is quite exhausted, having gone again into parts of himself not often visited. (112)

Both these passages are indicative of the novel’s tight focalization, which gives us access to the interiority, subjectivity, and daily life of the man. The reader is immersed in the man’s sense of time, his “inner system” that wakes him in the morning and his “[t]houghts of the past and the present, hopes and fears for the future”. The latter quote also reveals the man’s sense of self-development. We are also immersed in the man’s sense of dirt, decay, and cleanliness. We are told of the rotten “smell of dead wood
[that] filled his nostrils and caressed the cavity of his mouth”, and of the cleanliness of
the still sea. His sense of motion is also relayed in quite a subjectivist manner.

This highly sensuous and intimate style is, nevertheless, of social and historical
value since it is intertwined with the socio-political environment of the main character
and the novel’s theme of critique and resistance to imperialism. This provides fertile
ground for testing theories regarding imperialism and time. Indeed, the man’s interior
senses of time, morality, cleanliness, movement, and self-development are intimately
connected with larger socio-historical and political movements, trajectories and
continuities.

Several critics have interpreted the novel’s take on time and imperialism along
the lines of Chakrabarty’s arguments, that is, along the lines of the anti-historical,
temporal difference school of postcolonial thought. Barthold, for example, argues that
the novel champions the time of cyclical continuity, embodied by the man and his vision
(53–56). She presents this celebration of cyclical time as a rebellion against historical
time in favor of traditional African time – “the murder of history the celebration of
myth” (69). Similarly, Wright argues that the temporal mode pursued by Armah is not
one of progress or transition but rather cyclicity. Wright asserts that “[i]n the modern
urban Africa of Armah’s early novels the adopted time-mode is … a westernized
chronometric and uni-calendared one” (66). He claims, nevertheless, that there are
cyclical temporal structures more in line with traditional African time-consciousness
that play against this linear and diachronic conception of time (“Flux” 66). He cites the
eventless static time of the man’s workplace, that is, the railway station, as a site where
traditional cyclicity and Western linearity merge in a way that perverts or stops the
function of traditional time-consciousness. He argues “[t]he absence of change in this
static, merely produced mode of time leads to Rama Krishna’s obsession – partly shared
by Teacher – with the one and only change that is taking place: the slow irreversible
decay of the ageing process. The result is an uncharacteristic linearity of view which
fails to see this change as a stage in a cycle of renewal and perversely speeds up the
cycle” (“Flux” 68). Further citing the linguistic style of the novel, he argues that “[t]he
suspension of events in the present tense, the incantatory repetition and the cumbrously
adjectival, prepositional and verb-restrictive syntax all militate against motion and
arrest time” (“Flux” 70). He also cites the novel’s symbolism, such as “the freak man–
child”, to illustrate this point that history has come to a standstill and the old colonial
(and even precolonial, as argued on page 76) evils continually exist in and pollute the new (“Flux” 69). Wright summarizes his arguments by stating:

It has been noticed that the idea of the slow accumulation of time into a visible permanence, in which everything which has ever happened is apprehended with a static simultaneity as if it were all happening at once and were somehow perpetually present, leads to a “descriptive” or “physical–objective” treatment of time: this pushes Armah’s thinking towards traditional rituals for the disposal of time, conceived in patterns of cyclical renewal or replacement. This concept of time, placing ends and beginnings side by side as in the man’s vision of the sea, is, in Sunday Anozie’s words, “largely informed by a sense of synchrony, the static principle of time, and the dynamic permanence of states.” Close as it is to traditional African thought, it is opposed to western-technological time which “is based upon a sense of diachrony and of history seen as an evolutionary concept of linear or sequential time …” …what appears to those [eg. Teacher] trapped in the history of the period to be a straight line’s diachronic severance of the past is more likely to redefine itself, on the panoramic canvas of Armah’s time-theory, as the wall of a huge circle moving back into contact with the past. (“Flux” 75–76)

This kind of critique that takes issue with transition time and history as such is characteristic of postcolonial literary analysis that assumes that change and continuity, diachronic severance and cyclicality are externally related concepts, the former term of each pair being the realm of historical consciousness and the latter being something external to it. This kind of literary analysis can be carried out more convincingly on literary texts such as, for instance, J. M. Coetzee’s novels Waiting for the Barbarians and Foe. These novels deal explicitly with the theme of the translatability of the (colonized) Other into historical discourse. The former, for example, can be seen as refusing to translate the suffering and experience of the barbarians to historical discourse, as seen, for instance, in the magistrate’s inability to “translate” the “barbarian girl”, “casting”, as he does, “one net of meaning after another over her” (89) but ultimately failing to interpret her, and as seen in his inability to decipher the text on the ancient archeological wooden slips. This is enhanced by the novel’s ambiguity of the historical and temporal setting and its conceptualization of the cyclical logic of Empire (112). The latter novel can also be read along similar lines. The last section that Friday authors (if indeed we can say he authored it as the novel is very ambiguous on this matter), a world filled with contradictions and discontinuities, very much a reflection of Foe’s larger fictional world structure, seems to be wholly inaccessible to the reader, or at least to the “mimetically conditioned reader” as Doležel puts it (222). By positing
a world (or worlds) whose ontological status and accessibility is wholly dependent on epistemic preconditions, the novel projects a world that authorizes and places the inaccessibility of the Other, symbolized by Friday. Moreover, many magical realist novels can be enlisted as evidence for this kind of postcolonial literary analysis. As Chakrabarty puts it, a non-sociological (that is to say non-historicist) mode of cultural access and translatability “lends itself more easily to fiction, particularly of the non-realist or magic-realist variety practiced today, than to the secular and realist prose of sociology or history” (86). An example of this kind of literary analysis would be Christopher Warnes’s take on, for example, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*. Warnes interprets the chronology of Okri’s novel as “gesturing towards the possibility that behind the objective façade of linear conventional time lies a mythical time of return, recurrence, cyclicality”. Such literary texts and interpretations, through various formal and thematic methods, assert the cultural and epistemic difference of the Other through ontological means.

That being said, interpreting Armah’s novel along these lines is, in my view, unconvincing. Indeed, Wright’s arguments that the *The Beautiful Ones* resists modern historical diachronic time in favor of “traditional”, synchronous and cyclical time is quite surprising since there is very little in the novel that alludes to “traditional” time. Sensing this, Adam Barrows writes:

Attempts to apply an anti-historicist, postcolonial framework to African fiction … have led to fundamental misreadings of key African texts produced in the early decades following decolonization. As an example of one such misreading, we might consider the case of the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah … While Derek Wright and Bonnie J.

---

18 There is a great deal that could be said about and admired in this kind of non-mimetic literature. Indeed, they point to specifically literary and fictional ways of telling stories, of cultural access, and of depicting the world, especially in comparison to sociological/historical prose. I would assert, however, that if these novels are read as refusing the translatability of the experience of the (colonized) Other, as insisting that the Other is on an inaccessible ontological plane delimited and determined by specific cultural/cognitive paradigms, then we are under the ideological presupposition of the cultural determinism of imperialism. This presupposition is also found in theoretical works, particularly in the Chakrabartian postcolonial vein, as shown previously (see the debate between Chakrabarty and Lazarus alluded to above).

19 Wright’s only example of such an allusion comes from a scene towards the end of the novel, where the time organization of the office work of civil servants, in which work time can be idly wasted if there are not enough events and work to fill the time (while it still remains work time), is contrasted with the time organization of the village, in which work time is filled with and related more strongly to work and events (66). According to Wright, this contrast shows that time, in the urban office context, becomes abstracted and detached from events and becomes mechanized (clock-time) (67). I explore this abstracted, linear clock time of the office below. Wright rightly identifies the contrast between the temporality of the urban office and the village. However, this allusion to traditional village time is marginal and cannot be seen, in my view, as militating against modern historical transition/sequential time.
Barthold have interpreted Armah as a champion of synchronic or mythic temporal organization, such a reading is belied in ... [The Beautiful Ones] by Armah’s far more ambivalent attitudes about linearity and non-repetitive change, as well as by his representation of the disenfranchisement and drudgery that come with ceaselessly repetitive cycles. (639)

As Barrows points out here, the novel has a much more complex depiction of time. This complexity is worth reexamining and interpreting in detail (something that Barrows does not do), as it points toward an alternative analysis of historical time in the novel that anti-historical postcolonial theory misses.

Time is presented in a rather complicated way in the novel. It is first presented as the linear clock time of the railway office used by the clerks to register the comings and goings of trains between their station and other stations, and their own comings and goings as they begin and end their shifts. This kind of passage of time is especially abundant in the second and third chapters.

The control telephone rang. “Control, Kansawora,” the man said into the mouthpiece.

“Ah, you’re there,” said the voice at the other end. “Station-master, Angu, here.”

“Yes.”


“Fine.” The man put the receiver down. (18)

The arrival and departure of trains and the switching of the night and day shifts provide the man with the rhythm of his working day. This passage of clock time is internalized by the man, as we have seen above (101). Moreover, this mechanical movement of clock time seems to be echoed by the rhythm of the prose in this passage. The staccato sentences and particularly the sharp and rapid exchange between the two station clerks mimics the passage of the clock time they are booking.

---

20 This allusion to the clock and clock time is another way in which the novel can be seen to problematize the conception of time as a civilizational abstraction. Indeed, this passage highlights the interaction between technology and mental conceptions, where ideas are influenced by technology, in this case the clock’s influence in understanding time as homogenous, abstracted and mechanical (what Wright refers to when contrasting urban office time with village time). This being said, however, the man’s sense of time is also influenced by social context and relations. As I show further on, the man’s sense of time is informed by his arrested sense of self-development due to the conditions at his workplace and his life more generally as well as his powerlessness in relation to the political and economic elite. This complicates the production of time in the novel. The resulting temporal and historical consciousness of what I call dynamic permanence can, in turn, produce the ideological preconditions necessary to change the imperial social relations that the novel depicts and condemns, more of which later.
However, this linear passage of clock time is experienced by the man not as progression or growth but rather at best a kind of stasis. Consider the following passage where the man’s shift comes to an end.

Behind, the fan continued its languid turning and the light began again to weaken into an orange yellow color and then swell into whiteness in long, slow waves of time. A few minutes before seven the night relief came in. He was a new man just out of Secondary, very young, and he was whistling in his cheerful mood this terrible night. No doubt, being only new, he was calculating in his undisappointed mind that he would stay here only a short while and like a free man fly off to something closer to his soul. What in his breeziness he had yet to know was this: that his dream was not his alone, that everyone before him had crawled with hope along the same unending path, dreaming of future days when they would crawl no longer but run if they wanted to run, and fly if the spirit moved them. But along the streets, those who can soon learn to recognize in ordinary faces beings whom the spirit has moved, but who cannot follow where it beckons, so heavy are the small ordinary days of the time. (33)

The contrast between the man’s sense of slow or arrested time, weighed down by the lack of change and development in his daily life, and the young man’s naïve and hopeful expectations of his future, is depicted from the angle of phenomenological time, the passage of time as experienced by the characters in their daily life. This brings to mind what Achille Mbembe calls “the time of existence and experience” or “the time of entanglement” (16). He writes that this concept sheds light on phenomenological temporality, where “the present as experience of a time is precisely that moment when different forms of absence become mixed together: absences of those presences that are no longer so and that one remembers (the past), and absences of those others that are yet to come and are anticipated (the future)” (16). Indeed, the man’s sense of the static present can be said, with regard to the above passages, to be imbued with the absence of any sense of future development, a sense of stasis which is thrown into sharp relief against the continuous passage of clock time and the yet unabated hopes of the young man. The tension between this sense of arrested and forward moving time is embodied in the “slow waves of time” created by the languid motion of the fan and the “weakening” of sunlight and “swelling” of artificial light in the room as night comes. It is also embodied in the rhythm of the sentences. The lengthy sentences contrast with the staccato ones of the previous passage and are laden with numerous adjectives, verbs, and prepositions, syntax that produces and mirrors the slow and near-arrested movement of time depicted in the passage. What is more, this tension is shown in the
clash between the wish for a different future – “the ordinary faces … whom the spirit has moved”, “dreaming of future days when they would crawl no longer but run if they wanted to run, and fly if the spirit moved them” – juxtaposed with the inability to attain such a future due to circumstances in the present, “so heavy are the small ordinary days of the time”. This phenomenological temporality of absence, of near-stasis, as we shall see later, is complemented by the novel’s depiction of politico–historical temporality. But for now I return to the novel’s presentation of experienced time.

This unhopeful view of the passage of time, as the above quote suggests, is not limited to the man’s workplace. His daily life more generally is filled with this sense of hopeless stasis. His refusal to take bribes at the railway office, where for example a timber contractor attempts to bribe him to get his timber delivered faster, creates a conflict at home between him and his wife Oyo; she wishes that he would take those bribes. The narrator portrays the “reproach of loved ones”, that is, the man’s family, as having an immense impact on the man. This reproach of his “failure”, when it comes in resentment-filled silences, leads to the man falsely hoping that “the difference between the failures and the hard heroes of the dream is only a matter of time … Time to sail with a beautiful smoothness in the sweet direction of the gleam, carrying with easy strength every one of the loved ones”. “But”, the narrator continues, “when the reproach of the loved ones grow in sound and pain is thrown outward against the one who causes it, then it is no longer possible to look with any hope at all at time” (46). Again, just as in the man’s workplace, we are presented with the tension between forward-moving time and the man’s sense of stasis, contributing to the unhopeful view of the passage of time.

“The gleam” in the above quote is a recurring motif throughout the novel. It has both a literal and a metaphorical meaning. In the former sense, it is a reference to, for example, the white façade and the shining spotlights of the Atlantic-Caprice luxury hotel on top of Yensua Hill, “commanding it, just as it commanded the scene below”, as the narrator states. Symbolically, it refers to the ideological power emanating from the sheer material wealth of the powerful. It is where the rich and powerful, the people portrayed by the novel as the neo-colonial elite, go to relax and spend time, such as Joseph Koomson and his wife Estelle. But seen from the outside, from the distant perspective of the (ordinary) man, the Atlantic-Caprice, more than just being a space of action, where people meet and so on, reads more like a perceived space, a monument, as it were. One gazes at it, “its sheer, flat, multistoried side”, and the vision that it
projects, “an insulting white in the concentrated gleam of the hotel’s spotlight” (10). And by gazing at it, one wrestles with ways of making sense of it and one’s own relation to it. This act of perceiving and relating to the gleam, slides into a more figurative and ideological realm. In presenting this, the narrator at first states that “[s]ometimes it seemed that the huge [and useless] building had been put there for a purpose like that of attracting to itself all the massive anger of a people in pain” (10). But the narrator goes on to admit that “[t]he gleam, in moments of honesty, had a power to produce a disturbing ambiguity within. It would be good to say that the gleam never did attract …but it would be far from the truth. And something terrible was happening as time went on. It was getting harder to tell whether the gleam repelled more than it attracted, attracted more than it repelled, or just did both at once in a disgustingly confused feeling all the time these heavy days” (10).

This ambivalence that the gleam produces is registered again later on in the novel, but this time in relation to time and progress. “Having the whiteness of stolen bungalows and the shine of stolen cars flowing past him”, the narrator tells us, the man “could think of reasons, of the probability that without the belittling power of things like these we would all continue to sit underneath old trees and weave palm wine dreams of beauty and happiness in our amazed heads” (94). “And so”, the narrator continues, “the gleam of all this property would have the power to make us work harder, would come between ourselves and our desires for rest, so that through wanting the things our own souls crave we would end up moving a whole people forward” (94). The narrator further relates to us that

[at] such times the man was ready to embrace envy itself as a force, a terrible force out of which something good might be born, and he could see, around close corners in the labyrinths of his mind, new lives for Oyo; for the children with their averted eyes; for himself also. Then in the morning the thick words staring stupidly out from the newspapers, about hard work and honesty and integrity, words written by men caring nothing at all about what they wrote, all this would come to mean something (94–95).

The narrator, however, ultimately portrays this perception as false. The man realizes that regardless of how hard he works in the office, the gleam would remain ever elusive due to his poverty and powerlessness. “How much hard work” he asks “before a month’s pay would last till the end of the month?” (95). The narrator goes on to tell us that the rent of the man’s house keeps increasing, something the man and his family have no say in because “the landlord is the uncle of the rent control man, and both call
themselves Party activists” (95). Rather than hard work, the man realizes that there was only one way to reach the ever illusive and seductive gleam, by “cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud”, by taking the bribe offered by the timber merchant and so forth (95). “That has always been the way the gleam is approached”, the narrator tells us, “in one bold corrupt leap that gives the leaper the power to laugh with contempt at those of us who still plod on the daily round … We shall never arrive. Unless of course we take the jump” (96).

Here again, just as in the reference to the Atlantic-Caprice luxury hotel, the gleam is associated with the shine of bungalows and cars, property that the man gazes at, but is not able to enter or possess. The gleam is, thus, something looked at and perceived, in a very concrete sense, by the man (and others of course) in his daily life. Moreover, the gleam comes to represent a fast track that promises a future life far removed from the daily hardships the man and others like him face. This is less concrete and of the moment, as it is about projected futures, but nonetheless part of the man’s sense of his daily life. As the narrator states, “[t]he pain … is truly unbearable when you see some twin of yours shoot like a star toward the gleam, so fast that he has light of his own to give. And at five in the early morning you get ready to walk obscurely into your little hole to start the morning shift in the ghost world of the unsuccessful and the cowards … waiting for the senior men to come in anytime after nine” (96). The gleam is a corrupting path to future prosperity that is attractive to the mass of people because other paths are closed. Lastly, the gleam is, more abstractly, associated with history and historical progress, in the more general and collective sense. As quoted above, the narrator states that at certain times the man was ready to accept that the gleam, by inspiring hard work under false pretences, would “end up moving a whole people forward” (94). In this way, the gleam comes to represent a full-fledged ideological historical narrative of transition. It is, indeed, a social Darwinist and a teleologically linear narrative, whereby historical progress from the backwardness of sitting “underneath old trees and weav[ing] palm wine dreams of beauty and happiness” (94) can only be achieved through the struggle between atomistic envious individuals for personal enrichment. The gleam, as a trope, then, informs not only the man’s sense of himself, his immediate surrounding and his personal future, but also the man’s sense of history and historical change with regard to the larger society he is in.

It is in connection to the novel’s critical portrayal of the rapid and corrupt change that the gleam represents that I think one should read the image of “the old
manchild”. It is a critique of a specific type of transitional narrative rather than simply a condemnation of transition or of diachronic change in general. The latter reading is suggested by anti-historical critics such as Barthold (32). Similarly, Wright views the old manchild as a symbol that militates against historical change by signifying the continual existence of the old in the new (69). Instead, it seems to me that the rapid maturity, aging and death of the old manchild is associated with the rapid and social-Darwinist temporal trajectory of the gleam, a trajectory associated with a rapid rise and fall (as evidenced by, for example, the rapidity of Koomson’s rise to prosperity and fall from the heights of power after the coup, more of which later). This does not mean, however, that the novel critiques historical change and progress, in general.

Yet, this progress is elusive and lacking. The scene where the gleam is introduced is worth examining in more detail in this regard, as it shows the ways in which the novel brings together aspects of the (man’s) personal and every-day existence with the socio-political context, as well as the ways in which historical change and progress is approached in the novel. The commercial buildings of the Atlantic-Caprice, the U.T.C., the G.N.T.C., the U.A.C., and the C.F.A.O., which are congregated in the same area, are perceived (particularly the first building) as both attractive and repellant, reflecting the man’s ambivalence to the gleam. The gleam, and the glamorous future it represents, is something many are lured by and aim to reach, but it is still recognized, by some at least, as something corrupting. It is a place marked by heaviness, as the novel puts it, promising success, growth and self-development, but dragging one backward. I want to emphasize, here, the historicization that this tightly focalized

21 I find that Achebe’s reading of The Beautiful Ones as being about the “human condition”, i.e., a universal category that denies specific contextualization and historicization (only to be laden with the specificities of Europe), is unconvincing. Achebe criticizes Armah of two things in this regard. He charges him with wanting to be a “universal” writer; “[b]etter to cut all links with this homeland [Africa] … and become in one giant leap the universal man” (627). He also criticizes his attempts of being contextual and historical as unconvincing; “[h]e tried very hard. But his Ghana is unrecognizable” (625). As for the first charge, it is contradicted by the latter in that Armah does attempt (at the very least) to contextualize his story. Achebe is baffled by this contradiction and does not know how to explain it. “Just as the hero is nameless,” Achebe writes, “so should everything else be; and Armah might have gotten away with a modern ‘universal’ story. Why did he not opt simply for that easy choice? I don’t know. But I am going to be superstitious and say that Africa probably seized hold of his subconscious and insinuated there this deadly obligation – deadly, that is, to universalistic pretentions – to use his considerable talents in the service of a particular people and a particular place. Could it be that under this pressure Armah attempts to have what Europe would call a modern story and Africa a moral fable, at the same time; …?” (625). Instead of this “superstition”, however, one need only take Armah’s fictional world seriously and as a whole to understand that much of what Achebe thinks robs the story of context and makes it “universal”, such as the alienated man, his sense of dirt and decay, are in fact deployed in a way that complements and tries to capture a particular historical context in a certain way. The novel’s portrayal of time is key to understanding this
sensuous style achieves. The man’s life-world, the way the man experiences and perceives his surrounding, and the ambivalent hopelessness that colors his perceptions, gains further significance in light of the socio-historical background, as it informs the man’s views and experiences. This continual symbolic presence of the socio-historical and the political, a presence that perpetually shapes the man’s experiences and perceptions of temporality, his sense of continuity and change, is foregrounded in this scene, by the following statement the narrator makes regarding the commercial buildings.

The shops had been there all the time, as far back as he could remember. The G.N.T.C., of course, was regarded as a new thing, but only the name had really changed with Independence. The shop had always been there, and in the old days it had belonged to a rich Greek and was known by his name, A.G. Leventis. So in a way the thing was new. Yet the stories that were sometimes heard about it were not stories of something young and vigorous, but the same old stories of money changing hands and throats getting moistened and palms getting greased. Only this time if the old stories aroused any anger, there was nowhere for it to go. The sons of the nation were now in charge, after all. How completely the new thing took after the old. (10)

What are we to make of these combinations of, at least seemingly, paradoxical temporalities, impressions, and even histories – the static yet forward-moving time, the mixed sense of revulsion and beauty, and the contradictory account of historical novelty and history repeating itself? One thing that Armah does is that he does not simply portray the state of permanence, continuity, or arrested development (both in the personal/daily life sense but also in the socio-historical sense) as the lack of activity, dynamism or even the lack of change. Though there has been change since the end of colonialism, the name and ownership of the G.N.T.C and the replacement of colonialist rulers with the “sons of the nation”, the postcolonial period was committing the same offences as before. The gleam, as a trope, then, highlights this recurrent theme in the novel of dynamic permanence. This is the overriding sense of time, both phenomenological and historical, that the novel presents us with. It is the sense of time moving forward, society changing, but the ultimate failure to see personal and historical progress, as far as the masses and the powerless are concerned.

---

complementarity between what Achebe characterizes as the externally related categories of the universal and particular. The novel may, I suppose, be considered an unconvincing and an unrealistic portrayal of Ghana. But even if this point is granted, it still begs the question, is this not fictional writing? Do fictional worlds have to be “realistic”, in a rigidly defined way, to relate to reality and the actual world? Achebe’s critique also begs the more general question, does universality necessarily preclude particularity?
Another trope that highlights this theme is the ever present trope of decay. Consider, for example, the Block, also called Railway and Harbor Administration Block MCMXXVII, the building where the man works. If the commercial buildings associated with the gleam are perceived spaces gazed at from a distance, the Block is an inhabited space, a space of action where the man can and does enter. The Block is not only seen but also felt by the man, keeping true to the novel’s focalized and sensuous style. We are told that “[i]t did not seem possible that this thing [the Block] could ever have been considered beautiful, and yet it seemed a great deal of care had gone into the making of even the bricks … Each [having] … on it the huge imprint of something like a petal” (10). However, the narrator continues to state that “this impression was to be had from certain chosen angles only. From most other points the picture made by the walls of the Block was much less pleasant” (10). On the walls were accumulating layers of “brown dust blowing of the roadside”, “official murk-yellow color” paint that was “plastered at irregular intervals [for years and years]”, “engine grease left by thousands of transient hands” (10). “Every new coating”, the narrator gravely states, “was received as just another inevitable accretion in a continuing story whose beginnings were now lost and whose end no one was likely to bother about … The flower patterns also had their crust of paint, so that the whole thing gave a final impression of lumpy heaviness” (10). The narrator goes on to describe the banister lining a staircase. As the man enters the building “[t]he touch of the banister on the balls of his fingertips had something uncomfortably organic about it” (10). “The banister” the narrator reveals “had originally been a wooden one, and to this time it was possible to see, in the deepest of the cracks between the swellings of other matter, a dubious piece of deeply aged brown wood” (12). The narrator, then, goes on to fatalistically pronounce that in the struggle between rotting wood and the layers of polish meant to catch the rot, the wood would always win.

It would be impossible to calculate how much polish on how many rags the wood on the stair banister had seen, but there was certainly enough Ronuk and Mansion splashed there to give the place its now indelible reek of putrid turpentine. What had been going on there and was going on now and would go on and on through all the years ahead was a species of war carried on in the silence of long ages, a struggle in which only the keen, uncanny eyes and ears of lunatic seers could detect the deceiving, easy breathing of the strugglers. The wood underneath would win and win till the end of time … only the pain of hope perennially doomed to disappoint … Apart from the wood itself there were, of course, people
themselves, just so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course toward putrefaction … The wood would always win. (12–13)

Again, Armah portrays the state of permanence by combining it with activity, dynamism and change. Note, for example, the portrayal of the banister. We are told in words of resignation that “the wood would always win”, highlighting the permanence of things. The language arrests time, as it focuses on a moment where the man looks at and feels the banister. And yet there is language that denotes dynamic activity over a long duration of time. There is a “species of war” and a “struggle” “carried on in the silence of long ages”, a struggle visible only to “lunatic seers” (12). This protracted struggle and dynamism, however, is limited and framed by the still moment in which the man sees and feels the banister. What is more, this dynamism is hemmed in by fate, by the permanent victory of putrefaction.

Teacher’s account, which I delve into more deeply later, is relevant here. He tells his story of the anti-colonial struggle and starts by saying that “[t]here is nothing that should break the heart in the progressive movement away from the beauty of the first days. I see growth, that is all I see within my mind”, but then adds always these unwanted feelings will come in the end and disturb the tired mind with thoughts that will not go away. How horribly rapid everything has been, from the days when men were not ashamed to talk of souls and of suffering and of hope, to these low days of smiles that will never again be sly enough to hide the knowledge of betrayal and deceit. There is something of an irresistible horror in such quick decay (62).

We are again presented, here, with statements resounding with dynamism, struggle and historical progress, only for them to echo the same note of resignation to the fate of decay. The trope of decay is central to this recurring theme of dynamic movement and struggle that fails to bring progress, the state of dynamic permanence. This trope highlights the theme both in the man’s daily life and his more intimate perceptions, and the larger socio-political historical context he is in, or as the novel puts it “the self and the world against which it had to live” (155).

This theme of dynamic permanence challenges anti-historical postcolonial postulations about historical time and interpretations of the novel along those lines. These interpretations, as outlined earlier, assume that change and continuity, diachronic severance and cyclicality are externally related concepts. Change and diachronic severance are thought to belong to the realm of European/historical time consciousness

---

22 This quote highlights perspective, what is seen depends on the seer. I deal with this crucial point in the next subsection.
while continuity and cyclicality are thought to belong to the realm of African/traditional time consciousness. These interpretations are in line with Chakrabarty’s understanding of historical temporality, particularly his “History 1” and “History 2” binary distinction. As I have tried to show, the novel’s depiction of time does not fit this model. What the novel actually does is it presents a type of historical consciousness unanticipated by this dominant school of postcolonial thought. Armah presents change and continuity as well as diachronic severance and cyclicity as internally related concepts in historical consciousness. To be fair, Wright does sense the contradictory depiction of time, as cyclical and transitional, in the novel. However, keeping true to anti-historical postcolonial thought, he views these two temporal modes as externally related and associates the former with “traditional African time”, and the latter with “modern European/historical time”. Moreover, the novel is seen to celebrate temporalities close to “traditional African time” and to criticize “modern European/historical time”. Contrary to this, Armah, I argue, depicts these temporal modes, that is, cyclicity and transition, as being in contradictory unity with each other and as part and parcel of the critical historical consciousness presented in his novel. Though clock time and the empty, homogenous, linear time of history move on, and history changes and moves from the colonial to the postcolonial period, and the gleam produces a social-Darwinist vision of historical progression that is linear and teleological, the novel continually produces a sense of arrested time, of the permanence of states, and relays the “horrible cycle of the powerless” (119)23. Far from celebrating this state of permanence and cyclicality, Armah is critical of it. Indeed, it is the recognition that historical transition has not brought about progress for the mass of people and is repeating the same abuses of the past that gives sharpness to the novel’s critique of the postcolonial period. And it is the same recognition that helps us critique the interpretations of this novel put forth by postcolonial theorists that advocate temporal difference.

My reading of the novel is very much in line with Lazarus’s dialectical reading. He writes that “The Beautyful Ones … is preeminently a dialectical work. Its reciprocity is first heralded in the resonant ‘not yet’ of its title and is most clearly demonstrated in the complex relationship between the affirmative vision that is implicit in ‘the man’’s search for authentic values and the blasted landscape within which the

23 The question of power, central to the novel’s depiction of transition and to its critique of imperialism, is picked up on in the next subsection.
novel’s action is staged” (137–138). Lazarus continues, “[c]ritics of the novel have not found it easy to describe this relationship between affirmative vision and degraded reality” (138). Unlike critics who view the novel as strictly despairing, Lazarus contends that “The Beautyful Ones depends for its effect upon the reciprocity of its ordering categories [i.e., of concrete and abstract, latent and manifest, presence and absence] … The social environment of ‘the man’ is profoundly unrevolutionary, but the specter of revolution figures in its margins nevertheless. In fact, it is present there as nothing less than a promise” (139, my emphasis). And, unlike Wright’s assertion that “[h]istory in Armah is an encycled continuity” (“Motivation and Motif” 130), I contend that Armah’s novel depends on the reciprocity (or, in my terminology, the internal relation) of its ordering temporal categories – cyclical permanence/continuity and sequential non-repetitive change. This reciprocity lies at the heart of Armah’s critical and revolutionary historical consciousness. Thus, while my reading of the novel comes close to Lazarus’s, particularly in relation to his dialectical approach and his argument that the novel presents a desire for social change and progress, it differs from his reading in that I examine the way temporality is produced in the novel, something that Lazarus does not do.

I am not proposing, here, a “hybridity” between the traditional/mythical African time of simultaneity or cyclicity and the modern European time of transition or linearity, nor am I conflating traditional and modern conceptions of time. In fact, why I think Wright’s and Barthold’s interpretations err is precisely because of their conflation of the concept of tradition with cyclicity/simultaneity and the concept of modernity with linearity/transition. In addition, they propose and assume an external relation between transition time and cyclical time. I argue that if one approaches the novel from a dialectical perspective and a view of cyclicity and transition time as being in contradictory unity, what is revealed is that Armah’s “time theory”, to use Wright’s phrasing, is not rooted in a traditional time consciousness that excludes transition. Rather, it is closer to what Benedict Anderson describes as the modern conception of simultaneity. Citing Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach, Anderson argues that the modern conception of temporal simultaneity has very little to do with traditional conceptions of simultaneity, the latter being “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” in which events are fated, they are prefigured and
Anderson argues that there is very little of this in the modern conception of temporal simultaneity (or cyclical/permanence) and that the latter has to do with “‘homogenous, empty time’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence and measured by clock and calendar” (24). This sense of time lays the ideological basis, according to Anderson, for nationalist consciousness. And indeed, Armah’s novel is very much rooted in an anti-imperial national liberationist tradition, as I will elaborate on below. In other words, Armah’s “time theory” has nothing to do with a traditional time consciousness of fate, linked to philosophical systems that impose a cosmic order on individuals and societies. Nor has it to do with traditional African temporal consciousness, as outlined, for example, by John S. Mbiti, where the discontinuities of diachronic time and a “belief in progress” have no place (17, 23). It has everything to do with a time consciousness of progress that nevertheless recognizes that history is not simply a matter of moving through the continuum of empty, homogenous, linear time but is rather something that is shot through with the shards of the past and marked by the simultaneity and cyclical reemergence of the past in the present, which impedes the attainment of a just future.

**The time of imperialism?**

As I have shown so far, anti-historical postcolonial theorists tend to deal with the issue of transition time of modern historical consciousness as Eurocentric. This idea is also reflected in Wright and Barthold’s interpretation of Armah’s novel – especially in the understanding that transition and cyclicality figure as absolute opposites and in the wedding of the former with the West/modernity and the latter with Africa/tradition. This poses the question, is the temporal mode pursued by Armah, as I have outlined it above, Eurocentric? After all, Armah does ascribe to transition time, though not as an absolute opposite of cyclicality and permanence. What are we to make of the novel’s take on temporality and imperialism? I argue that a central issue in Armah’s depiction of imperialism and time is the issue of power. Power and power relations are central to the novel’s depiction of time and its critique of imperialism. If one boils down

---

24 To borrow from Auerbach’s phrasing, “the here and now is no longer a mere link in the earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something that has always been, and which will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God it is something eternal” (74).

25 As I show further on, Armah’s portrayal of permanence is not about “coincidence”, but rather about power relations, the oppressive and dispossessing order erected by imperialism, and the intentions and actions of those in power.
imperialism to a temporal relation, following anti-historical postcolonial theory, where the transitional temporality of Europe dominates the non-transitional or cyclical temporalities of the Third World, not only will one fall into the traps of postcolonial cultural and temporal determinisms, but also misunderstand the depiction of time and the critique of imperialism in *The Beautiful Ones*.

In order to explore this, let us return now to the novel and examine another central trope that recurs, just as the tropes of the gleam and decay, throughout the novel – the trope of dirt. Just as the others, this trope also connects the man’s life-world to his socio-political world. Further, just as the others, this trope weaves together the man’s sense of phenomenological time with his sense of historical time. Even further, the trope of dirt introduces to this mix the issue of power and powerlessness.

Dirt (and cleanliness) is first depicted in the novel when the man, on his way to work, passes a waste box on the side of the road heaped with rubbish. It first appeared to him to be “a small pile of earth with a sort of signboard standing nonsensically on top of it” (7). But, as he drew closer, “the mound assumed a different shape and the signboard acquired the dimensions of a square waste box” (7). What was once “a gleaming white sign when it was first installed … not so very long ago”, was now “covered over thickly with every imaginable kind of waste matter”, so much so that “the lettering on it was no longer visible” (7). The narrator then goes on to remember what the sign said.

But once the letters had said in their brief brightness:

K.C.C. Receptacle For Disposal Of Waste
That was printed in blue. Underneath, in bolder capitals executed in lucent red was the message:

Keep Your Country Clean
By Keeping Your City Clean

The box was one of the few relics of the latest campaign to rid the town of its filth. Like others before it, this campaign had been extremely impressive, and admiring rumors indicated that it had cost a great lot of money. Certainly the papers had been full of words informing their readers that dirt was undesirable and must be eliminated. On successive days a series of big shots had appealed to everyone to be clean … People were impressed … In the words of the principal secretary, [the boxes] would be placed at strategic points all over the city, and they would serve, not just as containers of waste matter, but as shining examples of cleanliness. (7–8)

“In the end”, however, “not many boxes were put out, though there was a lot said about the large amount of money paid for them” (8). Though this was the case, the narrator states that the few provided “had not been ignored. People used them well, so that it
took no time for them to get full. People still used them, and they overflowed”. “As yet”, the narrator continues, “the box was still visible above it all, though the writing up on it could no longer be read” (8).

Indeed, dirt (and decay) seems to cling to everything surrounding the man. In the scene, however, where the man takes a lunchtime break from work and goes to take a walk outside near the train tracks, he finds relief from the constant presence of dirt. After crossing a bridge, the man “turned at the end and sat on the flanking cement embankment on the right” (23). He then notices “a hunk of heavy cement [that] had parted from the [embankment] and fallen leaning into the thick stream coming from under the bridge and formed a kind of dam” (23). The narrator tell us that “[b]ehind it, all the filth seemed to have got caught for a hanging moment, so that the water escaping through a gap made by the little dam and the far side of the ditch had a cleanness which had nothing to do with the thing it came out from” (23). “How long-lasting the clearness”, the narrator asks, and follows with the statement “[f]ar out, toward the mouth of the small stream and the sea, he could see the water already aging into the mud of its beginnings” (23). The man, then, “drew back his gaze and was satisfied with the clearness of a quiet attraction, not at all like the ambiguous disturbing tumult within awakened by the gleam. And yet here undoubtedly was something close enough to the gleam, this clearness, this beautiful freedom from dirt. Somehow, there seemed to be a purity and a peace here which the gleam could never bring” (23).

Here, I would like to make a few observations before moving further. The dirt and cleanliness of everyday life is depicted in connection to politics and the politico–historical realm. Dirt, it was said, was going to be removed from the country through the campaign launched by the government. The rhetoric of this campaign treated dirt and cleanliness not just literally (i.e. the presence or absence of physical trash) but also symbolically. Note, here, the words of the principal secretary quoted above, which indicate that the boxes “would be placed at strategic points all over the city, and they would serve, not just as containers of waste matter, but as shining examples of cleanliness”. By depicting dirt and cleanliness through this campaign style rhetoric, Armah accomplishes two things. Firstly, he transforms dirt and cleanliness into literary tropes. Secondly, he introduces the issue of power and politicizes the man’s everyday sense of dirt and cleanliness.

The trope of dirt is, then, tied to temporality, in the lunchtime break scene. This is evidenced by the temporalizing choice of words used to describe the flowing stream.
The temporal vocabulary in the question “[h]ow long-lasting the clearness” and the statement “far out … he could see the water already aging into the mud of its beginnings”, not only temporalize the flow of the stream but also depicts the spatially forward-moving stream as being in a temporal loop. This is further evidence that supports my reading of the novel’s theme of dynamic permanence, the permanence and cyclical reemergence of dirt, deterioration, and decay that runs with and hems in the progression and transitions of phenomenological and historical time.

I now move further on to another scene where the trope of dirt is used in a similar way, but this time in connection to the issue of power and powerlessness. It is Sunday and the man spends the day at his home. He cleans the house in preparation for a visit from Koomson and Estie. Koomson is a rich and powerful politician and Estie is his wife. “After every such cleaning”, however, the narrator tells us, the man “could not help being disappointed. The place looked so much the same, the linoleum still looked beaten … the red of the polish had nothing new, nothing encouraging about it … The dark brown of the furniture managed to leave only an impression of great age and dullness” (118). This feeling of disappointment turns into hopeless resignation. “By the time he had finished cleaning the hall”, the narrator continues, “the man was no longer battling with the weight of the feeling that it was all senseless anyhow, all this work which never changed the hall from its depressing self. Something else would be needed for these desired changes, something that he could not hope to have” (118). The man also realizes that “[i]t would be the same for his children” (118). The narrator then, in characteristic fashion, moves from a more sensuous and personal level to a more social and abstract one; and by doing so, associates the man’s sense of the permanence and cyclical reemergence of dirt with the issue of the distribution of socio-political power. The man’s children, the narrator continues, “would grow up accustomed to senseless cycles, to cleaning work that left everything the same, to efforts that could only end up placing them at other people’s starting points, to the damning knowledge that the race would always be won by men on stilts, and they had not even been given crutches to help them” (118-119). “Perhaps”, the man hopes, “one of them would one day break free from the horrible cycle of the powerless. Perhaps one of them would grow up and soar upward with so much power that there would be enough left over to pull the others also up” (119). However, the narration ultimately resounds with the recurrent note of despair; “[d]reams to give a moment’s peace to the parent who know inside himself that things never work out that way” (119).
I bring up the issue of power, because, unlike postcolonial theories of temporal difference that reify time as a civilization abstraction and view imperialism as a temporal relation, that is, the temporal relation between traditional African time of cyclicity/continuity and modern European time of transition, time in the novel is put in the context of social and power relations. In other words, transition time and cyclical time are not a priori givens, each assigned to different groups, Europeans and Africans respectively, the former time consciousness being imposed on and dominating the latter. Rather, in the novel, what is transition and change for those in power mean continuity for the powerless. This is central to the novel’s critique of imperialism in the postcolonial period. Though there has been a change in rulers and the “sons of the nation” were now in charge, there has not been a fundamental transformation of life for the mass of people. Those in power have changed, but the power structure that they have inherited that kept the masses powerless and poor, remained.

The scene where Koomson and Estie are introduced, where they interact with a bread seller on the street, is an example of this kind of critique. Koomson and Estie are in their limousine and driven in front of street vendors.

“Big man, I have fine bread.”
“I have bought some already.” The voice of the suited man [Koomson] had something unexpected about it, like a fisherman’s voice with the sand and the salt hoarsening it forcing itself into unaccustomed English rhythms. Why was this necessary? A very Ghanaian voice. Inside the big car the pointed female voice [Estie] springs and coils around, complaining of fridges too full to contain anything more …
Outside the seller sweetens her tones.
“My own lord, my master, oh my white man, come. Come and take my bread. It is all yours, my white man, all yours.”
The car door opens and the suited man emerges and strides slowly toward the praise-singing seller …

This passage depicts the way Koomson, who is part of the political elite, and a street vendor relate to each other. It is a depiction that focalizes on the voice of the characters, giving the reader a sense of a staged performance, the theatrical rituals of the exercise of imperial power, through the markedly metonymic depiction of the characters and their interaction. Koomson’s hoarse “fisherman’s” voice is portrayed as forcing itself into “unaccustomed English rhythms”. “Why was this necessary? A very Ghanaian voice” the narrator says, signaling its critical distance. Estie’s voice, similarly, assumes a tone of authority and entitlement. The seller’s voice, on the other hand, is submissive and inviting, flattering the male virility and prowess of the “the suit” (i.e., Koomson)
as well as his “whiteness”. This perceived whiteness stems from Koomson’s demeanor, attire, speech and status. This scene displays the continuities of the rituals of colonial power in the postcolonial period.

This continuity, of course, was not something that did not meet with resistance. This depiction of the continued existence of the rituals of imperial rule are quite reminiscent of Fanon’s view on the copying and imitation of alien cultures and rituals of domination imposed by foreign rulers. This imitation is seen to create contradictions and something of a performance syndrome in Africans. Due to the Manichean nature of colonialism and the racial ideology of exclusion accompanying it, due to the brutal oppression enacted on Africans, and due to the inability on the part of the colonizers to eradicate traditional African cultures and systems, Africans were able to recognize the strangeness of these imposed rituals and resist them. This is noted in Armah’s novel by, among other things, Teacher’s narration of the anti-colonial struggle and its culmination. “There is something so terrible”, Teacher states, “in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days” (81). In his narration of the ultimately disappointed hopes of anti-colonial struggle, Teacher relays how the leaders, who ultimately conformed to imperial powers, were resisted and ridiculed by the mass of people for their imitation of the colonial oppressors. “The old lawyers and their rallies gave us one thing to make our days less heavy, something we could laugh at”, Teacher recounts (83). “Afterward”, he continues, “it became our habit to sit, anywhere, and watch someone imitate the speech and the English gestures of the men who wanted to lead us” (83). Teacher, then, tells the story of a young man called Etse “who could make every stomach ache with laughter” by imitating the “new Party people” (83). Etse does impressions of the African political elite and the colonial oppressors and makes fun of the subservience of the former to the latter. This form of resistance through popular ridicule is indicative, as Ifi Amadiume points out, of the inability of the elite classes to reproduce their rule in an unopposed and uncritical form of class and cultural reproduction. This is due to the alien nature of the culture and rituals of the elite, as well as the inability of colonialism to form a monocultural elite (5–7). “In this bizarre and alien system imposed through force”, Amadiume writes, “everybody is ‘performing’, indicating the depth of alienation and corruption” (7).

This being said, Armah portrays the postcolonial African elite as ultimately conforming to and perpetuating imperial rule. Teacher tells us that “[w]e were ready
here for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs” (81). “These men”, Teacher continues, “who were to lead us out of despair … came like men already grown fat and cynical with the eating of centuries of power they had never struggled for, old before they had even been born into power, and ready only for the grave” 26 (81). Teacher goes on to state, “[o]ur masters were the white men and we were coming to know this … And they who would be our leaders, they also had the white men for their masters” (81). Teacher then adds “[our leaders] also feared the masters [like we did], but after the fear what was at the bottom of their beings was not the hate and anger we knew in our despair. What they felt was love … gratitude and faith. And they had come to us at last, to lead us and to guide us to promised tomorrows” (81).

The “tomorrow” that came to pass was, of course, not the promised one as it was marked by the brutal realities of the past. But nonetheless it was not a tomorrow that was devoid of change. Teacher notes these changes and continuities in the following passage, in a dialogue between him and the man.

“You used to see some hope, Teacher”
“That was such a long time ago.”
“Not so long a time. Six years?”
“But in my mind, the time is buried under centuries now. True, I used to see a lot of hope. I saw men tear down the veils behind which the truth had been hidden. But the same men27, when they have power in their hands at last, began to find the veils useful. They made many more. Life has not changed. Only some people have been growing, becoming different, that is all … All the shouting against the white men was not hate. It was love. Twisted, but love all the same. Just look around you and you will see it even now. Especially now.” (92, my emphasis)

Teacher’s narrative of the anti-colonial struggle of the past gives relief to the seeming permanence of powerlessness of the present. However, teacher’s hopeful narrative of the past struggle and the changes it could have brought are limited by the realization that “[l]ife has not changed” for the majority of people in Ghana. But even for those for whom life has changed, that is, the co-opted African leadership, the novel shows that this change is not smooth but rather volatile and marked by decline. The hopeless sense of time, then, makes six years that passed since the anti-colonial struggle seem like

---

26 Note, here, the similarity between the portrayal of the postcolonial African elite and the old manchild. They are both portrayed in connection to the trope of decay/decline, and an untimely and quick one at that. This, in turn, is linked to the theme of dynamic permanence.

27 Notice the gendered language, here. See Osei-Nyame Jr.’s discussion of the relation between nationalist politics and gender/gender relations in the novel. See also the debate between Oseri-Nyame Jr. and Busia referred to above.
centuries. Just as the man’s entropic and arrested sense of time contrasts with the continual passage of clock time, for instance in the work place scene discussed previously, Teacher’s experience of time contrasts with the continual passage of calendric time here. This is not only because the hopeful time of the anti-colonial struggle seems to be “buried under centuries”, but also because the experience of subjugation under colonial rule is still a part of life “even now” in the postcolonial period. The passage of empty, homogenous time, marked by clock and calendar, is in turn marked by the simultaneity of past injustices in the now.

This intrusion of the past and its lost potentialities into the formal narrative present of the novel and its accompanying sense of the hopeless passage of time, is repeated in the end, but this time by the intrusion of the potentialities of the future. In the scenes following the coup, which saw the Nkrumah government fall and the political elite, such as Koomson, of that government persecuted, the novel presents us with a similar ambivalence and mixed sense of hope and despair, but this time about the future. In the scene where the coup has just taken place and where the man returns home from work to find Koomson hiding in the bedroom, the man reflects on the contrast between the confident and proud Koomson who visited him and his family previously and the terrified and cowering Koomson he finds in his and his wife’s bedroom in the present. He then reflects on the potential changes happening in the country due to the coup. “It would be wrong, very wrong,” the narrator states, “to think as [the man] was already thinking, that the change would bring nothing new” (162). The narrator goes on to discuss and speculate on the changes and continuities of the new post-coup period. “In the life of the nation itself,” the narrator states, “maybe nothing new will happen” (162). “But”, the narrator continues, “here was the real change”.

The individual man of power shivering, his head filled with the fear of the vengeance of those he had wronged. For him [and those like him] everything was going to change … For those who had come directly against the old power, there would be much happiness. But for the nation itself there would only be a change in embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted. A pitiful shrinking of the world from those days Teacher looked back to, when the single mind was filled with the hopes of a whole people. A pitiful shrinking, to days when all the powerful could think of was to use the power of a whole people to fill their own paunches. Endless days, same days, stretching into the future with no end anywhere in sight. (162, my emphasis)
Armah’s novel, then, cannot be read as envisioning imperial domination as a temporal relation. The novel’s critical portrayal of continued Western cultural, political and economic imperialism, even after colonialism ended, pushes it to a portrayal of the progression of time as marked by cyclicality, permanence, and repetition. Cyclical time is, thus, linked to the powerlessness of the nation to bring about progress in the face of Western imperialism and the neocolonial African leaders co-opted by imperialism. This expulsion of the masses from historical progress is reminiscent of Fanon’s words about neocolonialism and neocolonial African leaders. “The leader pacifies the people”, Fanon writes. “For years on end after independence has been won, we see him, incapable of urging on the people to a concrete task, unable to open the future to them or of flinging them into the path of national reconstruction, that is to say, of their own reconstruction; we see him reassessing the history of independence and recalling the sacred unity of the struggle for liberation” (135). This inability to “open the future”, due to the place of the nation in the world imperial system as well as due to a co-opted national leadership, is what is registered in the novel’s portrayal of time; we are told of “[e]ndless days, same days, stretching into the future”, a future marked by the absence of progress for the mass of people. “The masses begin to sulk”, Fanon further states, “they turn away from this nation in which they have been given no place and begin to lose interest in it” (135–136). It is precisely this sense of disillusion and lack of progress that Armah explores, in which the collective consciousness of the anti-colonial national struggle shifts to the “days when all the powerful could think of was to use the power of a whole people to fill their own paunches”. The changes brought about by this neocolonialism, that is, the shuffling of predatory and repressive leaders, is also condemned. However, the novel looks forward (and even harks back) to a time when imperialism and its power relations are radically challenged and eventually transformed for the benefit of the mass of people and the nation as a whole; to a time when the static drudgery “of the office and everyday” life (183), the seemingly permanent state of powerlessness and poverty, and the sense of continued historical injustice, changes and the time of “the beautyful ones” arrives.

By taking into account the novel’s portrayal of power structures and relations, I propose a reading of temporality in the novel that contrasts with previous anti-

---

28 This reference to the “nation” and the novels depiction of time bring to mind Anderson’s discussion of the origins of nationalism. The rise of a markedly modern sense of temporality, and temporal simultaneity, (as alluded to previously) lays the ideological basis for nationalist consciousness.
historical, temporal difference readings. Whereas Wright and Barthold claim that the novel champions cyclical and static forms of time, as this is the time that is non-Western and non-Eurocentric, I propose that the novel is in fact critical of cyclical and synchronic time as this is the temporality linked to imperialism and its dispossessing and disenfranchising effects on the nation and the mass of people. Whereas Wright asserts that sequential and diachronic time of transition is criticized by the novel, I propose that the novel is in fact favorable to transition and progress, particularly when it comes to radically changing imperial social relations. Armah’s critique of transition time only extends to the understanding of history as simply being constituted through linearity and change, because this mystifies the continuity of imperialism even after the end of the colonial epoch.

In my reading of Armah’s novel, the depiction of imperialism is one that avoids the determinisms that pervade anti-historical postcolonial theory, namely cultural and temporal determinisms. Imperialism is not only presented under the signs of culture or discourse but also under the sign of political economy. More importantly for this paper, however, the way imperialism is explored in this novel challenges temporally deterministic understandings of the concept. It does so by situating temporality in social relations, relations that are at once about the exploitation of the mass of people by the political and economic elite as well as about cultural domination where the rituals and discourses instituted by British imperial rule remain intact (despite the resistance and challenges they face)\(^29\). Historical time and consciousness is, thus, not a civilizational

\(^29\) This insight into the concept of imperialism can be a contribution to the debate between theorists who argue over whether imperialism has a certain spatio-temporal logic and is a spatio-temporal relation or whether imperialism is a social relation. The former position, partly due to the Leninist heritage, for example, views imperialism, particularly ”classical” imperialism as primarily a territorial relation where imperial powers open up new markets and territories through military force. This relation is territorial/geographic and nation state-centric rather than a social relation. The latter position is advocated, for example, by Rosenberg, who argues that (even) ”classical”/colonial imperialism as a territorial relation is just the tip of the iceberg underneath which lie exploitative social relations that cannot wholly be represented on territorial maps. Drawing on Gallagher and Robinson, he argues, for instance, that the British cotton industry of the early 19th century cannot be located in terms of territorial space. It cannot be described, he argues, ”without identifying the way it related all these distant places to each other organically in a single division of labor”, as illustrated by the links between English textile factories and Latin American cotton growers. ”Its real (and in fact only) existence”, he continues, ”lay in the social and ecological relations by which millions of human lives were interconnected both within these different places and across the vast distances which (territorially) separated them” (32).

As Rosenberg shows, boiling down imperialism to a territorial (outside-in) relation can lead to an unwarranted spatial determinism that excludes the social relations that inform spatiality (32). I argue along similar lines that boiling down imperialism to a temporal relation can also lead to an unwarranted temporal determinism that excludes the social relations that inform temporality. These relations are not only economic nor are they only cultural. They are at once material and cultural.
abstraction that creates imperial relations, in and of itself. It is instituted by and, in turn, impacts on imperial social relations and struggles.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by stating that a more dialectical and contextualized approach to the issue of historical time and imperialism is needed. This is to say that the anti-dialectical assumptions that dominate much of postcolonial theory of temporal difference, assumptions which reduce history (as such) to linearity and transition and European imperialism to a temporal relation, need to be questioned. Indeed, my reading of The Beautiful Ones not only shows that anti-historical postcolonial readings have misunderstood the novel. It also leads us to examine these, in my view, faulty theoretical assumptions made by this school of thought on the issue of historical time and imperialism. Indeed, the time consciousness presented by Armah in this novel does not simply exclude “historical” time, which is to say the time of transition or diachronic change, in favor of cyclicality and permanence. Rather, by drawing attention to the continuities and recurrences that accompany and hem in transitions, he presents us with a more complicated and dialectical form of historical consciousness unaccounted for by dominant postcolonial theory. Moreover, these continuities and recurrences are linked to the continuing existence of imperial structures and relations even as Ghana transitions out of being a colony. Imperialism is, thus, not a temporal relation posited by the abstracted and reified category of transition time; it is not determined by the mere presence of non-repetitive change. Rather, the novel places experienced and historical time in the context of imperial power relations that shape daily life, society and politics. The temporal dimension of imperialism is, then, not the presence of progress but rather its absence, as far as the mass of people are concerned.

This dialectical approach can help us better understand, in Keya Ganguly’s words, “the myriad ways that the past and present impinge upon our understanding of the problems and possibilities attached to emerging out of colonial conquest and attaining cultural and political sovereignty” (177). Moreover, it can also help us better understand the myriad ways in which temporality and history are treated in postcolonial literature. Oftentimes, we at once encounter transition and non-transition temporalities – transition and cyclicality/simultaneity are issues that, in all their contradictoriness, appear together in modern African and postcolonial literature. Instead of dealing with
these antinomies as absolute opposites, and instead of treating historical/transitional time as inherently Eurocentric, I suggest that we return to them in dialectical and non-Eurocentric ways. I see Armah’s radical historical consciousness as doing just that.
Works Cited


