

A PATH THROUGH LANDSCAPES OF WASTE

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ABSTRACT • This contribution suggests a parallel analysis of the debut works of two post-colonial African writers, A. La Guma (1925-1985) and A.K. Armah (1939), inscribed within the recent trend labelled 'literature of waste'. Scrutinised through ecocritical and sociological theories, their works stand out for the striking way in which they provide a unique reading of the Sub-Saharan landscape in which they are set as remnant of neocolonialist processes that have been relegating it, both metaphorically and concretely, to a waste bin for the throwaway economies of the developed countries. Settings buried in garbage reveal themselves not only as metaphorical devices, but as literary pretexts able to open up a window on existing, present-time African nightmarish landscapes. Among them, the Agbogbloshie electronic-waste dumping ground in Ghana, a receptacle of 'next-generation' rubbish originated at the heart of industrialised nations and illegally shipped to the other end of the world, where waste joins wasted humanity.

KEYWORDS • Post-colonial, Ecocriticism, Waste, E-waste, Social waste, Disposability.

The aim of this article is to propose a scrutiny of two post-colonial African literary works, singled out for their distinctive reading of the Sub-Saharan continent as the remnant of global processes – of neocolonialist origins – that have relegated it, and the postcolony¹ in general, to the waste bin for the throwaway economies of the so-called developed countries (Lincoln 2012: 2). Indeed, as observed by a number of scholars, post-independence African fiction displays a distinctive occurrence of scatological tropes, often embedded with political satire (Esty 1999).

The intention of this study, then, is that of approaching post-colonial African 'literatures of waste' through the debut works of two African authors: *A Walk in the Night* by Alex La Guma and *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born* by the Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah. Because their main aim is denouncing colonialism (in its neo-colonial forms) and the failed promises of the post-independence 'autonomous' governments, a comparative analysis of these two works, carried out from a 'waste perspective', will finally attempt to portray the alienation experienced by individual beings within a "hostile post-colonial landscape" (Gikandi 2004: 374).

1. Images Of Decay In *A Walk In The Night* by Alex La Guma

In his first fictional work, the South African author Alex La Guma makes extensive use of the realistic style combined with the theme of waste to denounce the condition of uneven development and extreme destitution of District Six, Cape Town's urban slum in which he had grown up. The environment of poverty and oppression provided by his upbringing had in fact

¹ Here the term 'postcolony' is being employed with reference to Achille Mbembe's work (2001).

turned the young La Guma into a social writer completely committed to the cause of the South African coloured community under apartheid.

A Walk in the Night (1962) is “a long story” (La Guma in Abrahams 1991) whose events take place throughout a single night, and evolve around the roaming of its protagonist, a coloured young man named Michael Adonis who, blinded for being laid off after the umpteenth abuse carried out by his white boss, will end up joining the underworld of Cape Town's petty criminality. Both as a reporter and a novelist La Guma is not only interested in sheer facts, but probes beyond the surface, in an attempt to explain the process by which apartheid policies managed to turn ordinary people into either beggars or thugs. These policies were part of a system which allowed a restricted (white) minority to benefit from the oppression of its non-white community by favouring race segregation and prolonging a state of oppression; being denied any opportunity of advancement, non-whites were thus relegated to a place of perpetual inferiority and socio-political deprivation.

The major distinctive feature of *A Walk in the Night* is undoubtedly the constant occurrence of the scatological trope: not only excrement, but also its corporeal familiars (phlegm, drool, vomit, sweat, urine) are often employed to portray the sordid conditions of the ghetto. This specific literary choice signals the realist intent of the novel, whose pseudo-fictional plot primarily aims at portraying point blank the underprivileged conditions of the poorest communities of La Guma's South Africa, literally sinking in rubbish, with piles that almost reached “the parapets of the building and [...] a collection of junk, rotting boxes and packing cases, ruined furniture and decaying mattresses” (La Guma, *A Walk in the Night*, 1968: 82) next to the overflowing dust-bins.

A more detailed analysis of the novel's imagery themes is called for when, for instance, every narrative element employed for the description of District Six contributes to conjure up the image of an apocalyptic scenario, from the symbolism (a city at dusk, in which the shadows of people are mistaken for ghosts) to the sounds (the alliteration of the letter 'r', evocative of the murmuring and the recurrence of the fricative consonants 's' and 'f', both conveying the idea of a desolate and godforsaken place):

stretches of damp, battered houses with their broken-ribs of front-railings; cracked walls and high tenements that rose like the left-overs of a bombed area in the twilight; vacant lots and weed-grown patches where houses had once stood; and deep doorways resembling the entrances to deserted castles. [...] In some of the doorways people sat or stood, murmuring idly in the fast-fading light like wasted ghost in a plague ridden city (La Guma, *A Walk in the Night*, 1968: 21).

The treatment received by *A Walk in the Night's* setting - at times realistic and at times dystopian - legitimately casts doubt on the apartheid political and social system itself, which has run into difficulty, and on the debilitating effects (both physical and mental) it engendered among its (non-white) population.

In order to bring this matter to the fore, the author built his work around such a strong connection between the book's characters and its negative settings, that by talking about the former, he manages to indirectly evoke the latter, too. A case in point is, for instance, the figure of Uncle Doughty, an old white man living in Adonis' same tenement, whom the protagonist, out of a surge of anger, will end up murdering. Destroyed by alcoholism and diabetes, Doughty is portrayed as a “deserted, abandoned ruin”, (Ibid.: 25) in an implicit reference to the image of the “deserted castle” mentioned above with reference to District Six's desolate scenario. Premature senility, however, does not only affect Uncle Doughty, but also Franky Lorenzo and his wife, two more neighbours of Michael's, a couple whose youth is helplessly compromised by the signs of the long and wearing hours of work required to provide for their many children. “The used shape of [the woman's] body” (Ibid.: 51) has in fact lost its youth, while Franky's

“soft and bright and young eyes, like those of a little boy”, (Ibid: 35) are hidden by the coal dust accumulated in the lines of his face.

A Walk in the Night's characters appear to age prematurely in relation to - if not because of - the situation of general decay and extreme destitution affecting the whole environment around them, first and foremost the tenement where they all live:

in the dampness deadly life formed in decay and bacteria and mould and in the heat and airlessness the rot appeared, too, so that things which once were whole or new withered or putrefied and the smells of their decay and putrefaction pervaded the tenements of the poor (Ibid.: 34).

By turning Adonis' tenement into the primary example where decrepitude and putrescence converge, La Guma is reinforcing once again the tie between a diseased milieu on the one hand, and its broken residents on the other. This contributes to regarding *A Walk in the Night* as a “protest work”, (Agho 2003: 197) which suggests that physical and moral deterioration can be produced by a diseased social environment aimed at oppressing the weakest by encouraging a condition of unemployment and, therefore, extreme misery for a part of its population, condemned to a life of destitution and death.

Ultimately, then, *A Walk in the Night* provides a graphic portrait of the marginalized worlds of South Africa and the poorest victims of an oppressive system, which expels the excess of population that it does not want to assimilate – because un-needed, if not threatening its economic steadiness – and confines it to designated and circumscribed areas.² In the economy of the novel, these places end up acquiring the traits of garbage dumps, and their residents those of waste itself: the “unending flow of derelicts, bums, [...] and the rest of the mould that accumulated on the fringes of the underworld” (La Guma, *A Walk in the Night* 1968: 3) are cast-offs of life, who end up meeting in pubs, the ultimate outlets for the disposal of human[-like] waste.

Adonis, too, has somehow been transformed into the city's waste product, and his provisional nature is shown by his own status, one that might be defined as “being redundant”. In a very interesting sociological analysis, Zygmunt Bauman has shown how – unlike the term 'employment', which can be preceded by the prefix 'un' to indicate a temporary and abnormal condition – redundancy has no antonym and therefore hints at the ordinariness of a condition (Bauman 2004:10-11). To be redundant, then, means to be unneeded, of no use. It means

to have been disposed of because of being disposable, just like empty and non-refundable plastic bottles, once-used syringes or stained product without use thrown off the assembly line by quality inspectors. [...] Redundancy shares its semantic space with rejects, wastrels, garbage, refuse – with waste. The destination of the unemployed was to be called back into service, the destination of waste is the rubbish heap (Ibid.: 12).

Looked at from Bauman's viewpoint, being denied a productive social place, Adonis and many others portrayed in *A Walk in the Night*, are somehow stripped of their dignity, and become part of this very human waste for whom recycling (meant as re-assimilation, rehabilitation) is neither possible nor desirable for those lacking any economic utility. The image of District Six choking in its own rubbish, then, needs to be read together with the social function of the ghetto as dumping ground for human surplus. This twofold employment of the

² In the 1950s a series of Apartheid laws confiscated Coloured people's land, segregating them into suburbs and townships. Back then, District Six and its sandy Cape Flats became the traditional home of many Coloured families. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1988, p. 477.

trope of waste – both literal and metaphorical - can ultimately be interpreted as La Guma's artistic commitment to speak out against the condition of deprivation suffered by the novel's characters by means of describing the diseased milieu they dwell in.

Being denied any productive social role and any chance of social improvement, District Six's mixed population ends up being victims of the circumstances of a decayed socio-economic and political environment which obliterates them as human beings, reducing them to anonymity and even bestiality. Indeed, in a habitat, such as that of *A Walk in the Night*, in which only insects are expected to live, human dwellers are often described by means of zoological terms. This was a procedure already underlying all those theories that, historically, “have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man”, (Fanon 1967: 17) a discourse employed by settlers to legitimise their handling of natives as actual beasts (Fanon 1974: 22-23) and to justify the concentration of coloureds in particularly unsafe or dirty residential areas (Pellow 2007: 39).

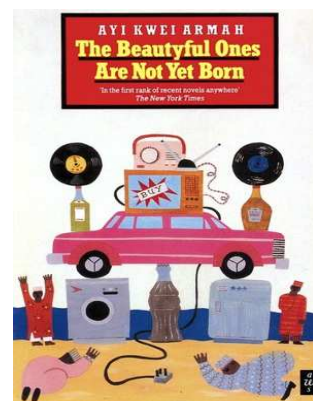
We can therefore conclude that the mortifying descriptions and decaying settings present in La Guma's fictional début work all contribute to restore dignity to those designated as “waste” by subverting the discourse of the 'dirty native' to unmask, on the contrary, a 'dirty system' whose oppression is not justifiable anymore, if it ever was.

2. Reversed Canons of 'CLEAN' and 'DIRT' in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Our path through postcolonial landscapes of waste will proceed with the Ghanaian novelist, essayist and poet Ayi Kwei Armah to focus on his début work, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), which represents the finest example of excremental postcolonial writing.

Three years before publishing his first novel, in 1964, on his way back from his years spent studying and working abroad, Armah is faced with a dreadful scenario: his country, the first colony in sub-Saharan Africa to emerge from colonialism, is drowning in debts. The newly-independent Ghanaian nation was in fact completely subjugated by the capitalist way and people's lifestyle was markedly shaped along European lines. Evidently, Ghana had fallen prey to renewed forms of exploitation and dependence on the 'West', forms which were structured around economic ties, and Armah's early novels – especially the first one – specifically dwell on the betrayed ideals of post-colonial freedom.

The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born is a symbolic novel portraying the daily struggle of a Ghanaian man – simply referred to by its third-person narrator as 'the Man' – plunged into a socio-political environment newly born and already deeply and helplessly gripped by corruption. The Man's job, boring and unrewarding, does not supply him with an income sufficient enough to provide for his family's increasing materialistic whims. As a consequence of this, his wife Oyo is often resentful towards him for his inability to give in to corruption, Ghana's best “national game” (Armah 1968: 55). The story takes an interesting turn when Koomson – one of the Man's ex school mates, now an important and rich politician – asks the Man's family to lend their own name and sign the documents for the purchase of a fishing boat on his behalf which he cannot openly buy as this is not what the population – generally struggling to make ends meet – would expect from a socialist minister. The 183 pages of the book are nothing but an allegorical reflection – based on the symbolic contrast between gleam and dirt – on the last years of Nkrumah's government and the Ghanaians' complacent attitude towards the corrupt system ruling their country.



The feeling of alienation the Man experiences towards his society, deeply stricken by materialistic drives, also affects the relationship with his wife, who is constantly engaged in helplessly trying to keep up with an unattainable life-style of Western imprint: “It is the blinding gleam of beautiful new houses, and the shine of powerful new Mercedes cars. It is also the scent of expensive perfumes and the mass of a new wig. [...] Money, but not only money. Power, too. And these days it is all coming together in the person of Koomson.” (Ibid.: 56).

As the typical “post-colonial homo ludens” (Mbembe 1992:10), here Koomson stands out as a model for his whole community, subjugated and narcotised under the spell of money and commodification - which take the form of gleam and glitters - as if these could grant the oppressed some sort of self-validation. This kind of inferiority complex is not unusual among newly independent nations like Ghana, at that time emerging into a global market dimension in which by default it was being assigned the role of weaker partner of the West. Catching up with the consumerist diktat established by the West appeared, back then, the only viable way to take part in the world game. Fascinated by excess and private greed, then, the Ghanaian native elite set its course of action in accordance with what the white life used to be like, in an attempt to re-establish the former colonial system of power and legitimacy.

Interestingly, *The Beautiful Ones'* imageses run on a meaningful antithesis between 'gleam' on the one side, and 'dirt' on the other, which may at first appear as a replication of that “manicheism delirium” (Dide, Guiraud 1992: 164), typical of the rhetoric of colonial discourse, responsible for turning the logic of imperialism into a binary thought-system accustomed to pair concepts into antithetical relationships. Seeing the world in terms of binary oppositions ('Good'-'Evil', 'Beauty'-'Ugliness', 'White'-'Black', (Ibid.: 183) but also 'Clean'-'Dirty') had in fact legitimated a relationship of dominance of one term, the former of each pair, over the latter, weaker, one. As a consequence of this, 'gleam' is longed for by the majority of the novel's characters, precisely because of its alleged power to make the natives disengage themselves from those characters of backwardness, filth and ugliness which the colonial rhetoric of denigration had cast on them.

However, Armah invalidates the binary logics and excessively simplistic “monologism” (Mbembe 1992: 11) of colonial thought by stating that the 'gleam' is ambiguous, as it “attract[s]” and “repel[s]” (Armah 1968: 10) alike. Placed in between attraction and repulsion, then, the gleam runs on the tracks of Armah's symbolic axis which stretches from dirty/excremental to clean/shimmering. At the extremes of this axis we can find the book's 'antagonist' pair: the Man on the one side – who endures the hard and 'dirty' life of the impoverished masses – and Koomson on the other – who enjoys a clean white life (Esty 1999). However, as the protagonist himself acknowledges, “some of that kind of cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump” (Armah 1968: 44).

Interestingly enough, it is precisely when Koomson's Party colleagues get arrested after a coup d'état that the politician's perfumed life is mercilessly swept away by history, which transmutes him into its own garbage. It is not a coincidence, then, that, while hidden at the Man's house, Koomson is described by means of his bodily waste (faecal, perspiratory and even menstrual) and odour, “overpowering [like a] corrosive gas”. Not only the images, but also the sound effects, the alliteration of the letter 'l', of the fricatives 'f' and 'θ' (“liquid atmosphere of the Party man's farts filling the room”, “an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder”, “silent pollution of the air already thick with flatulent fear”) (Ibid.: 161-163), all contribute to convey the synesthetic liquidity of the man's smell, which is made more real, almost tangible.

These devices are all part of Armah's “satiric manoeuvre” of deconstructing and reversing some fixed logics of beauty/ugliness, cleanness/dirtiness but also of honesty/corruption ruling the post-colonial society and polity (Lincoln 2012: 62). By stating that the gleam smells, in fact, the novel implicitly questions its beauty and purity: in an age in which there is not much room

for ideals, beauty is mistaken for stylishness and it is therefore “bound to turn ugly when current fashion is replaced” (Bauman 2004: 119), just like Koomson, minister one day, outcast and reject the next. The politician and his Party colleagues were meant to be the “beautiful ones” who had the political duty to create “a beautiful life” for their fellow citizens, a society of true worth able to outlive corruption, decay and degradation; their irresponsible behaviour, instead, prevented their country's rebirth, and this justifies the description of his breath's stench of “rotten menstrual blood” (Armah 1968: 163).

By removing the tacit link which tends to associate the masses to filth, and reassigning this category to the perfumed but deeply corrupted élite, then, Armah is unveiling the fundamental role this class has had in the process of supporting and maintaining the gap between their lifestyle, marked by surplus, and the sordid living conditions of the majority, relegated to a context of uneven development. As confirmed by Lincoln, “the clean and beautiful, fetishistic existence of people like Koomson [...] *depends upon*, and indeed *is responsible for*, the abjection of other Ghanaians” (Lincoln 2012: 41), virtually compelled to fast in Passion Week.

Although conceding that the author's picture of Armah's Ghana and native elite is “stark”, “selective” and “trimmed to fit Fanonian theories”, Derek Wright asserts that “there is much in the historical reality of Nkrumah's Ghana that invited the dystopian treatment it receives in the novel” (Wright 1989: 5), thus relating the author's biased reconstruction of his novels' setting and characters to the allegorical nature of his works. However, if La Guma's scatology was in itself the descriptive tool that allowed the author to report the squalid conditions of the characters populating his novel, that very trope is “now *reassigned*” by Armah to his novel's mimic men (Bhabha 1994: 85-92), to make clear once and for all that “the matter out of place are no longer the natives” (Esty 1999) but, first and foremost, their white-masked domestic elite.

As portrayed in this novel, Ghana ultimately appears like a nation “threatened from within” (Fraser 1980: 28) by all those corrupt political leaders who are suffocating their own country with their bribes, thus indirectly favouring its own undoing. As a matter of fact, the novel turns around the concept – both literal and symbolic – of corruption; by exploiting the term's polysemy (both its moral and physical meaning), the corruption metaphor running through the book tends to merge tones and images up to the point that the excremental features by means of which *The Beautiful Ones* places, things and people are depicted “become integral with their objects [and] it becomes impossible to distinguish the object's intrinsic neutrality from its verbal contamination by the author's attributions” (Wright 1989: 122). As with Takoradi's central rubbish heap – which “is so old it has become more than mere rubbish [...] it has fused with the earth underneath” (Armah 1968: 40).

In this light, the excremental imagery (be it in the form of rubbish or body excreta) is not only a metaphor of the author's country (inasmuch as it *represents* the corrupted post-colonial system), but it also is its metonymy, because by bringing up images of rottenness or dirt – concepts contiguous but semantically distinct to that of corruption – the author is polemicising against the fraudulent system responsible for his people's abjection (Lincoln 2012: 28). Moral decay, then, is not merely symbolized by organic decay, but physically produces it: Ghana is a degraded nation sinking in its own garbage precisely because the people in charge of disposing of the rubbish deriving mostly from their irresponsible consumerist habits are extremely corrupt. As in a sort of Dantesque contrapasso, though, these characters are endowed with the same waste features (rubbish, dirt and waste in general) others have to cope with because of their objectionable ruling conduct.

The choice of 'waste' as the novel's principal semantic field by means of which to convey a harsh rebuke against Ghana's native establishment is not coincidental: according to both

psychoanalytic and anthropological studies, orifices (like anuses, but also nostrils and throats³), protuberances and excreta are symbolic indexes of “the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside [...] between the self and the not-self” (Esty 1999). In his interesting study concerning the link between scatological writings and some anti-nationalist post-colonial critiques, Joshua Esty explains that excremental and waste writings can give voice to the idea of self-implication and self-reproach against local forms of exploitation. This would open up new readings on *The Beautiful Ones*' descriptive mode dominated by the scatological tone and the book's tendency “toward complex models of systemic guilt, rather than toward sharp absolutes” (Armah 1968) and straightforward condemnations, thus discharging Armah from the accusation of simply reversing the colonial logics of the good native versus the bad imperialist.

Both excreta (meant as body secretions that are both self and not-self) and garbage (meant as something that is both ours and not-ours), then, operate as signs of self-alienation, directly calling into question the individual's role in a more mature stage of the life of his/her community, emerging from the experience of colonization. “How completely the new thing took after the old”, the Man exclaims disappointingly with reference to the new management of his country at the hands of the “sons of the nation”(Armah 1968: 10), thus giving voice to that anti-nationalist movement typical of Armah's writers' generation, labelled the “literature of disillusionment” (Newell 2006: 22), which managed to turn the “symbolic associations of excrement inherited from colonial discourse” into the cipher of their disappointment (Esty 1999).

The excremental motif reaches its climax towards the end of *The Beautiful Ones*; aware that the leaders of the coup are on the lookout for him, the politician needs the help of the Man to escape. The only viable way out to the sea, though, is through the latrine's hole, a very ironical rite of passage for the Party man, which marks his transformation from a “big man” (Armah 1968: 36) into a “nobody” (Ibid.: 173). This allows the author to deal with Koomson in excremental terms, as the remnant of the regime's widespread corruption and its irrational consumerism about to be expelled and disposed of. In a world in which redundancy, disposability and death are the major taboos weighing down on people, if “the redundant population stays inside and rubs shoulders with the useful and legitimate rest, the line separating them tends to get blurred and assignment to waste becomes everybody's potential prospect” (Bauman 2004: 71). This is where the feeling of repulsion for waste originates, and where the need to get rid of it sprouts from.

Indeed, innovation seems “inconceivable without waste” (Ibid.: 21). The disposal of Koomson and his Party people, however, will bring no social regeneration. When tempted to interpret the novel in a hopeful way, we would do well to remember the spare negation of Armah's title: “not yet” (Esty 1999). Ultimately, deep purification appears unachievable because society's detritus (not only Koomson, but also the inner-tube the Man finds in the sea, uses to reach the shore and finally discards back into the sea) has not been recycled, but simply removed from sight and dispatched to the sea, which eventually appears as the waste-basket of corruption and decay.

³ The novel often polemicalises against the greed of the native elite class by referring to their greasy mouths and throats.

3. When Solid Waste Meets Wasted Humans

The ambiguity around which *The Beautiful Ones*' symbolism is built does not only involve the semantic field of 'gleam' but also its opposite: indeed, far from being a mere stinking heap of rotting food and rejects, rubbish is intrinsically correlated with social prestige. The behaviour of the Ghanaian native ruling class as portrayed in Armah's work displays that, more often than not, "wealth and status are in fact correlated with the capacity of a person (or a society) to discard commodities" (Esty 1999) and, thus, to generate garbage. On the other hand, as suggested by District Six inhabitants in La Guma's novel, the extent to which a community is able to endure a life among overflowing dustbins and rotten stench is indeed deeply related to its state of impotence within the worldwide economic game.⁴

At this stage of our considerations, however, it is necessary for this study to move from fiction to reality in an attempt to investigate the process which saw colonies in the African continent gradually become rubbish tips for the 'first world' filthy lucrative deals and to scrutinise the way the post-colonies have tried to deal with this uncomfortable political and cultural legacy.

Once again we revert to Bauman's theories that provide an unusual and striking definition of the colonial and imperialist conquest - at the root of the matter under investigation - by stating that the deepest meaning of these operations was the "disposal of human waste produced in the modernised/modernising parts of the globe" (Bauman 2004: 6). Regarded as masterless, empty and virgin spaces, those 'no man's lands' appeared to be able to receive the redundant and surplus population which the modern expanding societies were unable and unwilling to absorb. This was true, for instance, for the penal colony set up in Australia and in 1948 for French insurgents shipped to Algeria after the uprising, both examples of the way in which Western countries attempted to get rid of their social waste matter, its excrement, by flushing it down to the other end of the world (Brantlinger 1988: 116-117).

These events help to cast a light on the post-colony, as much as the colony, working as the anus (Suleri 2005: 132) of the developed countries or, more accurately still, its toilet (Lincoln 2012), serving as a sewer for the surplus of the Western-style global economy based on excess and superfluity. Waste, then, "becomes a critical vantage point" (Stam 1998) from which to view, read and judge society as a whole. The role of the literatures of waste together with the post-colonial and the ecocritical theories is precisely that of raising consciousness about the 'white' man's role as producer of waste (Deitering 1996: 197-198).

Such a stimulating perspective allows this study to make use of the literary representations of waste as portrayed in these and other novels, to open up a window on concrete realities physically embodying this very issue like, among other examples, the Agbogbloshie dumping ground in Ghana.

The kind of waste which reports show being constantly unloaded on the Ghanaian coasts on their way to the outskirts of Agbogbloshie, a suburb of Accra, however, is of a very different nature from the fictional examples of waste seen so far. It is made up of electronic waste, the unavoidable price of the fast growing rate of our technological progress, combined with a carefully planned rapid obsolescence policy shaping our 'throw-away' cultures.⁵ As Bauman

⁴ On this matter, a further literary example can be retrieved in *Kill Me Quick*, a novel by Meja Mwangi (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1973).

⁵ Recently, a growing number of researchers from various disciplines have been reflecting on the problem of waste as not just "an ecological problem" but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a process and a

writes, marketing companies strategically “speed up their travel to obsolescence constantly putting goods out of date or creating the impression that if you do not keep up you will be put out of date too” (Bauman 2004: 80).

This 'next-generation' rubbish (encompassing a broad range of electronics from personal devices like mobile phones and computers, to household appliances such as refrigerators and air conditioners) is becoming “the most rapidly growing waste problem in the world” (The Basel Action Network's Website, BAN). It is estimated that between 50 to 80 percent of the e-waste generated in the U.S.A, as an example, is not recycled domestically (Fuhriman 2008) but bound for foreign countries like China, India, Pakistan and Africa, thus revealing how “market forces, if left unregulated, dictate that toxic waste will always run “downhill” on an economic path of least resistance [...] towards the world's poorest countries where labour is cheap, and occupational and environmental protections are inadequate”(BAN, SVTC).

Although illegal, these practices are nonetheless carried out under the guise of 'donation' from the West to help bridge the so-called 'digital divide'. Once the destination is reached, however, the majority of the shipped equipment turns out to be broken, thus revealing how the recycling of electronics is often a misleading concept which brings little or no environmental benefit. This is the other, even less uncomfortable, face of Africa's dependence on the Western world, which arises not only in its being hooked to the capitalist globalised market (as displayed by *The Beautiful Ones*), but also, more painfully, in its being helplessly sustained by the 'crumbs' left-over by the better-off countries of the world.⁶

Serving only the purpose of bypassing international legislations these processes simply move the hazards somewhere else, to “recipient countries usually lacking adequate facilities to safely reprocess the toxic materials contained in this equipment” (Fuhriman 2008: 26).



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Apart from being exposed to a dangerous amount of lead, from ten to fifty times the 'safe' levels, e-waste collectors are in fact also threatened by the highly toxic fumes released from acid baths and burnings. Fuhriman's interviews show that the scrap collectors are mainly teenagers,

mentality. They have been exchanging their opinions on the discard studies blog (<http://discardstudies.wordpress.com/about>), an “online gathering place for scholars, activists, environmentalists, students, artists, planners” and anyone else whose work touches on themes relevant to the multidisciplinary field of discard studies.

⁶ In these respects, another example of contemporary literature of waste dealing with this unbalanced relationship between Africa and the West is the short story *The Rubbish Dump* by Steve Chimombo (in *Lupenga Mphande, James Ng'ombe (eds.) Namaluzi: Ten Stories from Malaŵi, Blantyre, Dzuca Publishing Company, 1984, pp. 72-80*).

aged between 14 and 18 (Fuhriman 2006: 67) and it is precisely the youth factor which increases the danger, as a massive exposure to toxins has proved to inhibit the development of the reproductive system, the nervous system and the brain. Moreover, such a dangerous exposure results in a threat not only for the young scavengers and disassemblers, but for all those inhabiting the area, which reports alarming records of heavy metals. Both the lagoon and the river that run through the dumping site are “biologically dead”⁷ a fact which threatens the lives of the community even more, considering its reliance on fish both as a food and as an economic means.

The rubbish problem in Agbogbloshie also appears to be a constant cause for discrimination against the area (referred to as “Sodom and Gomorrah”) and its residents, outsiders dwelling in apocalyptic places, no man's land of desolation and destitution. The issue has got to the point that the area, its workers and the slum dwellers are now the object of a decongestion scheme; guilty of embodying urban poverty, these people are considered not only out of place but a real “impediment to progress”, and need therefore to be removed to pave the way for the future urban space (Onuoha 2014: 123-130). Unfortunately, however, as for both La Guma's and Armah's protagonists, there is no plan for the relocation of the city's scapegoats, they are simply expected to disappear to prevent them from constituting a threat to the city order. We can rightfully borrow Bauman's words about Guiyu, a Chinese town staging an even worse situation than that in Agbogbloshie, when he states that “the stage is set for the meeting of human rejects with the rejects of the consumers feast; indeed they seem to have been made for each other: in the caste society only the untouchable people can handle untouchable things” (Bauman 2004:559).

Combined with Agbogbloshie's realities, the literary examples analysed so far finally reveal the pattern of the trajectories of consumerism on the one hand and of waste on the other, running from the most to the least powerful actors of our global economic system. Everyday world news, then, provides us with many other examples in which capitalist countries and developing ones are linked into a tight bond, when, for instance, the cheapness of the latter's labour force and the laxness of their regulation are exploited to fuel the former's capitalist market. Cheap labour conditions, added to their richness in raw material⁸ and their suitability as waste containers, locate underdeveloped countries at the beginning and at the end of “vicious circuits of surplus value” (Bhabha 1994:20) which constitute a real threat to their self-development. If considered in their entirety (from raw materials and manufacturing, to 'first' world market destinations, then to 'underdeveloped' countries once again for disposal and, finally, back to rich nations in the form of raw materials to start a new cycle) the pattern of flows produced by modernity's cargoes (containing the same materials, just in different forms) will reveal the degree of perversion of a system in which profit flows always northwards and is enjoyed and accumulated there, while “Made-in-USA” (BAN, SVTC) wastes are ejected in the opposite direction.

⁷ Lauren Ornelas, “Interview with Mike Anane”. Retrievable at <<http://svtc.org/uncategorized/mike-anane-interview/>>, last access: 18/03/2015.

⁸ In this respect, a very significant example is constituted by Congo's richness in coltan. Alternatively referred to as 'white gold', this mineral resource appears to be an essential component of various electronic devices (mobile phones, TVs, computers, cameras, etc...). The most important multinational corporations of this field are indirectly financing the wars and supporting the Congolese corrupted government so as to keep on looting their raw materials. For a more detailed introduction to the matter, see “Congo's Tragedy: The War the World Forgot”, *The Independent*, 5th May 2006. Retrievable at: <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/congos-tragedy-the-war-the-world-forgot-476929.html>>, last access: 18/03/2015.

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