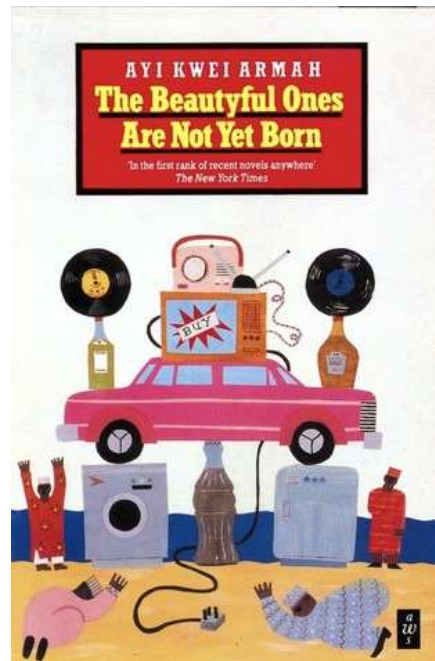


A Comparative Study of the Prose Styles of Achebe and Armah

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Abstract

A number of scholarly studies have been done on the works of Ayi Kwei Armah and Chinua Achebe in general and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Things Fall Apart* in particular. A handful of these studies have been preoccupied with bringing to bare the thematic concerns expressed by the authors in their works in general and the two novels mentioned here, in particular. This study is akin to these studies in that it is also a study in Armah and Achebe: however, their relatedness ends here.

The focus of this study is to investigate the prose styles of the two novelists with *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Things Fall Apart* serving as the data for the study. Hence, a selection of the opening paragraphs of these two texts is central to the analysis.

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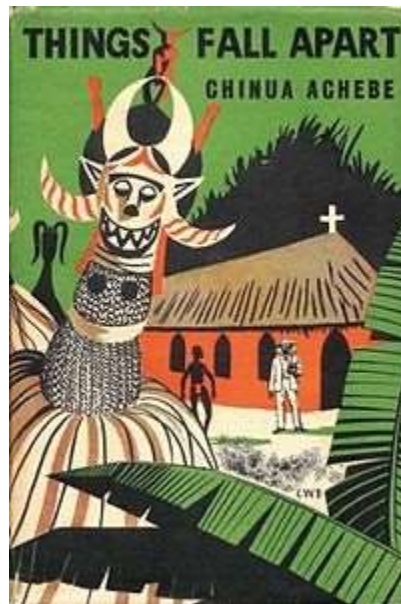
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The study is comparative by design and a stylistic approach is employed towards satisfying this objective. The findings show a significant difference between the two in terms of the sentence patterns and the nature of verbs selected, among other striking features. These unique prose styles of the authors help them to develop their themes and characters.

Keywords: Achebe, African novel, Armah, comparative, prose style, stylistics

Introduction



A good amount of scholarly energy and attention has been devoted to the creative works of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah (Carol, 1975; Wright, 1985; Mwinlaaru, 2012). Most of the scholarship in this regard has been interested in generating thematic interpretations of their novels (Yankson, 2000; Adeoti, 2005; Adjei, 2010; Arko, 2012). It is understandable that most of these works have been interested in the themes that these writers project in their novels because of the too often argued claim that literature has some didactic function to perform. In addition to this claim is also the claim that these two writers belong to the field of literature known as post-colonial literature. The implication of this categorization is that the literature produced by these two writers in particular and post-colonial writers in general seem to have a certain well defined agenda that is expressed through their works. This agenda ranges from providing rebuttals to colonialists' accusations of primitiveness, savagery and the general lack of

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civilization on the part of the colonized (e.g., as in *Things Fall Apart*) to presenting a picture of a post-colonial landscape mutilated by the exploitation and greed of colonialists, and the hypocrisy and greed of a new visionless post-colonial leadership (e.g., as in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Anthills of the Savannah*).



Chinua Achebe

Courtesy: <http://www2.carleton.ca/africanstudies/cu-events/celebrating-chinua-achebe>

Apart from the similarities in themes that the works of these two great writers have been demonstrated to have, probably due to the fact that they as individuals have been shaped by identical cultural as well as historical experiences, it is possible to conjecture that these two writers should share something beyond the subject matter and themes of their literature- perhaps in terms of style. The notion of style has therefore also received some attention. Some scholars have applied stylistics as the framework for investigating the style of authors. Stylistics has been defined (Simpson, 2004) as ‘a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language’ (p.2).

The implication of this kind of method in analyzing literary texts is that it allows critics to arrive at an interpretation that is rooted in the text itself (Stockwell, 2002). From this, we can begin to see that stylistics can serve as a very useful tool in investigating such concerns as the

point of view in literary works or the style of a particular author or novel, as well as accounting for the meaning of a text by looking at the linguistic choices as the basis of that meaning. Viewed from this angle, the importance of stylistics to the literary critic needs no elaboration.



Ayi Kwei Armah

Courtesy: http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/154550.Ayi_Kwei_Armah

What this paper investigates is the prose styles of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah. The study is comparative in this regard because it seeks to identify the linguistic choices these two authors make which are an integral part of the prose styles of the two. Style, and by extension prose style in the words of Short (1996) is ‘... a way of writing which recognizably belongs to a particular writer...’ (p. 327). Prose style is therefore a means through which one can distinguish between two writers based on their manner of writing, the differences in their presentation which may be expressed in the linguistic choices made by these two. This stance makes the assumption that given an apparent sameness in subject matter, there would still be variation in respect of style. This is because literature as noted by Fowler (1986), cited in Mwinlaaru (2012), ‘is a discourse which does not reflect reality in a neutral manner but helps to interpret, organize and classify this reality’ (p.355). The weight of this statement is that the personal understanding of the world by the writer is present in the artistic piece. As such, we can expect that this personal understanding will be reflected in the choices that the author makes with respect to the linguistic resources available for selection.

For this work to thus achieve its intended stylistic analysis we limit our discussion to the opening passages from *Things Fall Apart* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Now these two novels are chosen for the analysis because they each stand as the most outstanding piece of work by the authors in the eyes of many critics and readers. Again, with respect to the journeys

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of the two authors in composition, these novels are their first. The opening passages of the two novels are chosen for the study because it is our belief that the opening passages reveal, more than any other, any differences that exist in terms of the prose styles of the two authors. This belief arises from the fact that the beginning of a novel is very much important to the novelist since it is usually the foundation on which the entire novel is based.

Summary and Interpretation of the Passages

This study uses the opening three paragraphs of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the opening three paragraphs of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The opening three paragraphs of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* introduce the hero, Okonkwo, to us. These paragraphs give us background information about Okonkwo and within these paragraphs can be found the basis of Okonkwo's heroic status as well as the eventual cause of his tragic end. The passage which is generally narrated to us in a flashback recounts the wrestle match between Okonkwo and Amalinze the Cat. It is Okonkwo's exploits in this contest that set him on the path to fame and honour among his kinsmen. The passage therefore makes it clear that part of the reason for Okonkwo's success is his physical strength, and this is demonstrated by his flooring of Amalinze, the other being his hardworking nature.

Placing aside these observations about the passage in relation to Okonkwo, we can now establish the general impression as far as the language of the passage is concerned. The passage is generally written in very simple language which mimics the simplicity of its content. The passage and in fact the entire novel is set in a traditional African community which lacks the complexity of modern life. It therefore stands to reason that what is simple is best expressed in language that is simple. In the analysis to follow, we will try to establish the source of the seeming simplicity of this passage by analyzing the linguistic resources employed here.

As already hinted, this passage also reveals the ultimate cause of Okonkwo's tragic end- his impatience and temper. The narrator tells us simply that: 'He had no patience with unsuccessful men' (p.1). The narrator further adds that Okonkwo walked 'as if he was going to pounce on somebody,' which he did, 'quite often' (p. 1). We therefore find in this passage,

which opens Achebe's novel, the ingredients necessary towards creating a successful tragic character out of Okonkwo.

Turning our attention to the opening three paragraphs of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, these paragraphs centre on the bus, which many critics (Griffiths, 1992; Yankson, 2000) have come to appreciate as a metaphor for Ghana, the country that this novel is about, primarily. This passage describes the bus and its occupants and their actions. The passage provides a physical description of the bus and this description gives us a fair picture of the state that the bus is in. We read about the bus's 'confused rattle' and the fact that 'its pieces were held together by too much rust ever to fall completely apart' (p.1). The appalling state of the bus becomes a sign of the general state of affairs that the novel will unleash in the coming pages. The corrupt state that the bus is in, in these opening paragraphs, becomes a microcosm of the corrupt state that everything is in so far as this novel is concerned. The dirt that is associated with the bus is also associated with the individuals in it as we are confronted with the driver's lack of hygiene and the passivity of the occupants as they descend into the darkness of dawn. Having looked at the summary of the opening passages of the two texts, we shall continue with the linguistic analysis of the opening passage of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Linguistic Analysis of Achebe's Opening Passage

This sub-section provides a discussion of the linguistic choices that Achebe has made in constructing the opening of his novel. This analysis does not provide a description of every linguistic choice made but focuses on those choices that unmistakably mark the passage and have a bearing on the meaning of this passage.

The first linguistic unit within Achebe's passage that draws our attention is the types of sentences that Achebe uses and the frequency of use of these types. The grammatical sentence types that have been identified in the passage are the simple sentence, compound sentence, the complex sentence and the compound complex sentence. The following table provides the sentence types and the frequency of distribution across the passage:

Table 1.0

Sentence types and their distribution in the passage

Sentence Type	Frequency	Percentage
Simple sentence	8	44.4%
Compound Sentence	8	44.4%
Complex Sentence	0	0%
Compound Complex	2	11.1%
Total	18	99.9%

From the table above, we can see that this passage makes use of a lot of simple sentences and compound sentences as well. Only two compound complex sentences are used in the opening three paragraphs of Achebe's novel. As already noted in the initial interpretation of the passage given above, this passage is markedly simple to read. This simplicity, it is argued, stems from the idea that the meaning of this passage, which is tied to the fact that the passage is a remaking of the traditional African life, is simple. The straightforwardness of the way of life that is mirrored in this passage is therefore in turn mirrored by the choice of simple sentence which itself is an exhibition of grammatical simplicity. There is therefore a convergence of semantic simplicity and grammatical simplicity to create a vibrant beginning to a novel whose objective in the main is the de-demonization of the African way of life.

One other linguistic resource that is worth discussing in this essay is Achebe's choice of subject in the construction of sentences and clauses. Of a total of 18 sentences and 31 clauses, only 5 clauses have non-human subjects. The following are examples from the data:

1. **It** was this man that...
2. **The drums** beat...
3. **The flutes** sang.

Even though 'the drums' and 'the flutes' are clearly non-human subjects, we can still see the human association in the kind of verbs that they collocate with. 'Beat' and 'sang' are verbs

that should at least collocate with a ‘+animate’ subject if not strictly ‘+human’. We can therefore argue that their being collocated with ‘the drums’ and ‘the flutes’ has resulted in the contextual conditioning of ‘drums’ and ‘flutes’ so that these two non-human subjects have acquired the added semantic feature of ‘+ human’ (Yankson, 2007). The suggestive presence of the drummer and flutist is therefore present in these two non-human subjects.

For the remaining sentences and clauses, only two others make reference to a human subject that is not Okonkwo. The following are these two examples:

1. Amalinze was the greatest wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten...
2. He was called the Cat because...

The remaining clauses and sentences in this passage have ‘Okonkwo’ or a personal pronoun referent to him as subject. This situation therefore leads to a linguistic projection of Okonkwo as the deictic centre of the passage (Stockwell, 2002). He becomes the centre of the passage because as the subject of most of the clauses, he either becomes the originator of an action or the subject of description. His essence to Achebe’s tragedy is therefore outlined at the onset of his novel. It is therefore argued that Achebe’s choice of the hero of his novel as the grammatical subject of his sentences is an aspect of his prose style.

The next linguistic choice that we would like to discuss as part of the prose style of Achebe is the types of verb that he uses in this passage and their distribution. There are 11 uses of the auxiliary verb ‘was’ as main verb which amount to 28.2% of the total; 15 intransitive uses which translate into 38.4%; and 13 transitive uses which also amount to 33.3%. All these are captured in the table below:

Table 1.1

Table showing verb types and their distribution in Achebe’s passage

Verb Type	Frequency	Percentage
Copular	11	28.2%
Intransitive	15	38.4%

Transitive	13	33.3%
Total	39	99.9%

The first issue in relation to this table that needs commenting on is the use of the auxiliary verb ‘was’. Syntactically, in every sentence that the auxiliary verb ‘was’ is used, there is the need for the occurrence of a subject complement. What this means is that for all the 11 clauses that these verbs have been used as the main verb, there is a subject-verb-complement grammatical structure. The weight of this observation to the interpretative enterprise here is felt when the connection between the fact that for a majority of these clauses, Okonkwo serves as the grammatical subject of the construction. We therefore see a pattern in which the hero of the text becomes the thematic focus of most of the sentences within the opening paragraphs of the novel.

As can be seen from the table above, both the transitive and intransitive uses sum up to 71.7% of the total number of verbs used in this passage. What is however true to both transitive and intransitive uses here is that the verbs are those that denote action or activity. The effect of these choices on the passage is that Okonkwo, the hero of the novel, is projected as a man of action and activity. His presence in this passage and in fact throughout the entire text is felt through his being at the centre of all or most activity in the novel. It can thus be argued that Achebe’s style, with respect to the construction of the hero of his novel, is to make him the centre of activity. Achebe does this through the choice of verbs in terms of their function in the text. The following sentences are from the passage. The first two examples show verbs used as intransitives while examples 3 and 4 show verbs in transitive use:

1. He **breathed** heavily...
2. The drums **beat**...
3. In the end Okonkwo **threw** the Cat.
4. ...the spectators **held** their breath.

The argument, therefore, is still along the claim that when one considers Achebe’s linguistic choices as far as this passage is concerned and by extension the entire novel, one notices that the choices are dictated by the need to present Okonkwo as central to the story.

Linguistic Analysis of Armah's Opening Passage

In line with the procedure used in the analysis of the passage from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we shall begin the analysis of the passage taken from Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by looking at the linguistic choices, first in terms of the grammatical types of sentences used as well as the frequencies of distribution. The following table gives us a summary of the sentence types used by Armah in the opening paragraphs of his novel:

Table 1.2

Sentence types and their distribution in the passage

Sentence Type	Frequency	Percentage
Compound	3	33.3%
Complex	3	33.3%
Compound-complex	3	33.3%
Total	9	99.9%

As will be observed in the table above, Armah's text makes use of 3 compound sentences, 3 complex sentences and 3 compound-complex sentences. It is important to note that the grammatical complexity of sentences allows for a writer, or any other person for that matter, to express his or her ideas in a logically connected manner. When compound and complex sentences are employed in the construction of a text, the interrelationships between ideas, actions and activities are better expressed and foregrounded. In the passage that serves as the data for this study, we realize that Armah's description of the movement of the bus as well as the actions of the driver is presented through the use of compound and complex sentences. The following two examples serve to make this point clear:

1. The light from the bus moved uncertainly down the road until finally the two vague circles caught some indistinct object on the side of the road where it curved out in front.
2. The driver climbed down onto the road from his seat, took a crumpled packet of Tuskers from his shirt pocket, stuck a bent cigarette in his mouth, and lit a match.

Example 1 is a complex sentence and this sentence is a description of the movement of the bus. The argument is that the coordinated movement of the bus is reflected in the grammatical complexity of the sentence. But more importantly too is the fact that the employment of grammatical complexity is itself a reflection of the complexity of the writer's train of thought process.

If we look at the second sentence, we see that though this sentence is a compound sentence, it actually has four different clauses with the last clause conjoined to the others by a coordinating conjunction. What is however valuable to interpretation and also valuable to Armah's prose style is the fact that this compound sentence attempts to join together the various actions of the driver. We are therefore invited to critique the actions of the driver instead of focusing on the driver himself. The effect of this style of presentation is that it focuses the attention of the reader on the actions, of which the driver is the agent. The style in the presentation here is therefore, in a sense, a 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of Armah's treatment of individuals in this novel. It is mainly the actions and inactions of the characters that form the focus of Armah's novel, and the characters themselves are considered afterward.

It is important to add at this point that Armah's prose style as far as this passage is concerned cannot be established by analyzing the sentence types only. As has been done with Achebe's passage, it is prudent to look at the utilization of other linguistic resources. To this end, the next linguistic resource that needs looking at is Armah's use of verbs in this passage. The following table presents a summary of the verb types used in this passage and their frequencies of distribution:

Table 1.3

Table showing verb types and their distribution in Armah's passage

Verb Type	Frequency	Percentage
Copular	1	3.7%
Intransitive	15	55.5%
Transitive	11	40.7%

Total	27	99.9%
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As can be seen from the table above, there is the use of only 1 copular verb throughout this passage. There are 15 intransitive uses, translating into 55.5%, and 11 transitive uses, translating into 40.7%. However, and as is usually the case, the numbers above do not tell the story in detail. Transitive verbs as noted by Downing & Locke (1992) usually express an action that is transferred onto another entity which is the grammatical object of the sentence. From this understanding, we can begin to make the argument that with just under half of the verbs (40.7%) being transitive, Armah's style with respect to this passage is verbal in the sense that the transitive verbs foreground movement and activity as against the presentation of state which would have been the case had Armah's style been marked by a lot of copular uses. This argument is made stronger when we come to realize that even the intransitive uses (55.5%) we find in this passage involve verbs that denote action and activity. The following sentences are instances of verbs used as intransitive verbs but which still denote an action or activity:

1. The driver climbed down onto the road from his seat...
2. After the third try a yellow flame sputtered briefly.

It can thus be claimed that Armah's style as far as this passage is concerned involves the foregrounding of action and activity. This is necessary to Armah's thematic concern in that it allows him to focus the attention of the readers on the actions or activities going on in the text and not necessarily on the individuals. Hence, if we have a major character in his work, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, only referred to as 'the man', it is strongly to support our assertion that focus is more on the actions and inactions of characters as realized in his choice of verbs. It can be summed up that, to a large extent, Armah's prose style here is influenced by his thematic concern.

Another aspect of language use in this passage which is worth looking at in our attempt to establish the prose style of Armah is his use of adverbs. Adverbs have been observed to have three main uses in the English language (Quirk et al, 1973). These are:

1. As modifiers of verbs

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2. As modifiers of adjectives
3. As modifiers of other adverbs.

From the passage, there are 13 adverb uses and all 13 uses involve the modification of verbs. As far as the semantic value of the adverbs in this passage is concerned, they serve to describe the manner in which certain actions are performed. The following sentences from the passage illustrate this observation. The adverbs have been made bold:

1. The light from the bus moved **uncertainly** down the road...
2. ...the driver **resignedly** threw away the stick...
3. After the third try a yellow flame sputtered **briefly**.

From example 1, it can be seen that ‘uncertainly’ which is the adverb in this sentence expresses the manner in which the action that is expressed in ‘move’ is achieved by the bus. In example 2, we also see that the adverb ‘resignedly’ is pre-modifying the action verb ‘threw’. The semantic load of this adverb is manner. The adverb here expresses the manner in which the action of throwing is performed by the driver of the bus. The summary effect of the use of the adverbs in this passage by Armah is that by describing the nature of each and every action within the text, attention is drawn towards the actions and activities within the text and not the individuals within it. This is not to say that the individual characters in this passage and in the novel itself lie entirely out of the focus of the reader because of the focus on actions, but that the individuals and their traits are constructed by Armah through their actions and activities that they have been made to perform. It can therefore be seen that Armah’s use of adverbs and employment of complex, compound and compound-complex sentences as well as the choice of transitive and intransitive verbs are all towards presenting a text in which action and activity are foregrounded while individual characters are placed in the background.

A Comparison of the Prose Styles

This part of the paper will now make a comparison of the prose styles of the two authors as is made apparent by the analysis of the sample passages from the two novels.

In terms of linguistic choices made, the first to look at is the use of the different grammatical sentence types. The compound and compound-complex sentences have been used by the two authors. However, the use of these sentences in terms of numerical distribution varies noticeably especially with respect to the compound-complex sentences. 11.1% of the sentences used by Achebe are compound-complex while 33.3% of the sentences used by Armah are compound-complex. As far as the compound sentences go, 44.4% of the sentences used by Achebe are of this sentence type while 33.3% of the sentences used by Armah belong to this category of sentences. The other noticeable difference between the two authors in terms of grammatical sentence types is that Armah does not readily make use of simple sentences as far as this passage is concerned, while simple sentences are substantial in terms of percentage in the passage by Achebe (44.4%). The argument that can be supported by these numbers with respect to prose style is that Achebe's style is marked by a greater level of grammatical simplicity which is reflected in the fact that a significant proportion of sentences in his passage are simple. Armah's style on the other hand can be thought of as being marked by the employment of more grammatically complex forms and this is also seen in the fact that most of his sentences are compound, complex or compound-complex. There is also the absence of the use of simple sentences in the passage taken from *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and this goes to reinforce the argument that Armah employs grammatically more complex forms in terms of sentence types.

Another linguistic resource which has a bearing on the shaping of the prose styles of the two authors is the verbs. Throughout Armah's passage, we find only 1 use of copular verb but for the passage taken from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, there are 11 sentences with copular verbs. This difference is in sync with the style of the two writers in respect of the two passages. The copular usually occurs in sentences with a subject-verb-subject complement structure. The copular as a verb form does not also express an action or activity. It is therefore reasonable that Armah's style which is marked by the foregrounding of action is low in the use of the copular. The relatively high proportion in terms of the use of the copular by Achebe also fits in the style adopted by Achebe in this passage. We note earlier on that Achebe's style involves the foregrounding of the hero of his novel. Okonkwo is therefore presented as the centre of the

passage. The subject-verb-subject complement structure afforded by the use of the copular is ultimately necessary as far as the projection of Okonkwo as the centre of the text is concerned.

Again, the use of adverbs by the two authors is worth commenting on in the attempt to establish the prose styles that they have adopted. As already noted, there are thirteen (13) adverbs used by Armah in his passage. This number accounts for 5.7% of the total word count of this passage. For Achebe's passage, eight (8) adverbs are identified and this number translates into 2.6% of the total number of words in the passage. So we can see that for Armah, adverbs form a significant proportion of the lexical items employed in the construction of the text. We can however see that the higher proportion of adverbs here is in sync with the fact that there are also a higher proportion of verbs in this passage. The adverbs in Armah's passage have been employed, as have already been argued, to describe the manner in which certain actions and activities are performed. Their presence in this passage here is very necessary in Armah's attempt to foreground actions and activities of characters.

By contrast, Achebe uses relatively less adverbs (2.6%) as part of his prose style. This is also understandable given the relatively high use of copular verbs which do not necessarily need to be modified by adverbs. We have also already noted that Achebe's style involves the foregrounding of the central character of this novel and this he achieves by making Okonkwo the deictic centre of the text. The focus is therefore not necessarily on the actions of the characters in the text. This partly explains the low proportion of adverbs in this text which helps in shaping his prose style.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been to identify and compare the prose styles of Ayi Kwei Armah and Chinua Achebe. To the realization of this objective, a passage each has been taken from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The analysis of these passages has led to the establishment of the prose styles of the two authors. It has been observed that Achebe's prose style involves an emphasis on human character. As such, most of his sentences have Okonkwo as subject and even those sentences without human entities as subject still have those subjects collocating with verbs that should normally take on human

subjects. Armah's style involves an emphasis on action and activity and this is achieved through the employment of verbs that denote action and activity. His style is therefore marked by the foregrounding of action and activity, not individuals. The use of copular verbs is additionally seen to be a mark of his prose style in terms of linguistic choices. In terms of sentence types, it is also realized that Achebe makes less use of grammatically complex sentences whiles Armah relies more on the use of complex sentences to achieve his thematic concerns.

Although this study has been able to identify some of the stylistic differences between the two authors, it is our position that there exist other points of convergence and divergence in terms of the prose style of the two authors. A more extensive and exhaustive study will, among other things, make use of a larger corpus of passages taken from the works of these two authors. Such a study might also be interested in more linguistically complex features such as the kinds of noun phrases used by the authors, or the verb processes that have been used to construct the profiles of individual characters. Other linguistic resources of interest to such a study might also involve the choice of lexical items in terms of the morphological nature of such lexical choices. In all, the prose styles of Achebe and Armah are structured uniquely to bring out the creative prowess of both writers in their works, *Things Fall Apart* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, respectively.

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