

***Re-Narrating the Past: Historical Reconstruction and
the Postcolonial African Novel: The case of Ngugi and
Armah***

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Both Armah and Ngugi have grappled with the trajectory of the continent's history. Whether in their prose narratives or polemical essays, they offer deep philosophical reflections on "the trouble with Africa", then and now. I believe that both novelists do write fiction that reconstructs a historical narrative or is in dialogue with the past. Given the broad scope of the historical framework and the wide range of historical material that pervades most of their narratives, I will refer briefly to the writers' late novels which exemplify best the ideological moorings that shape their historical vision. This attempt is double-fold because on one side it will show the interrelation between history and fiction as narrative mediations of reality. On the other side, it will maintain the claim that despite their divergent ideological orientations and contrary to many critical assertions, both Ngugi's and Armah's visions do intersect.

A. History, Fiction and Reality

Indeed, history may well be compared with fiction because both invoke the principles of selection and derive their material from specific cultures and historical experiences. Moreover, both are narratives and products of an individual interpretation. Even if history pretends to relate "real" events, fiction can use its "fictionality" to signify or point at truth. In The Content of the Form¹, Hayden White discusses the interplay between history and narrative. His analysis may be useful in giving this article a theoretical framework. He argues that the historical text is necessarily a literary artefact because the process of creative imagination involves the writer of fiction as much as it does the historian. (The Content of the Form, 3) White addresses this issue by blurring the distinction between truth and fiction:

One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being imaginary. . . The same is true with

respect to narrative representations of reality, especially when, as in historical discourses, these representations are of ‘the human past.’ How else can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures, and so forth, considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in ‘an imaginary’ way? Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth? (The Content of the Form, 57)

Moreover, White elaborates this issue relying on Roland Barthes. He argues that since the past does not offer itself in the form of a story, narrative becomes the mediator between reality and the communication of that reality. He observes:

Arising, as Barthes says, between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that experience in language, narrative “ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted.” And it would follow that the absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself. (The Content of the Form , 1-2)

History enables the past to be communicated by giving it a structure. But what is communicated is merely one meaning of this past out of an infinite number of possible meanings. In other words, historical “reality” as it comes to us is based on a selection made by the historian in terms of his/her point of view, his/her ideology, his/her personal interest, dominant or non-dominant selection made in completing a literary product. Many of the texts that are found in the archives and history books have thus already been “fictionalised” i.e., produced through the lenses of colonial ideology. The instability of its meaning is a main factor in its being constructed and reconstructed and continually examined. As Orlando de Rudder states, «toute écriture est traduction, transposition, transformation.»² («Quand l'historien... », 32) As for the literary text, it should be seen as part of the wider historiography in its own right. It not only records and experiences the past, but also transforms and reinvents it (even though transformation and reinvention is also part of the game of historians.)

In Homecoming³ Ngugi emphasises literature's ideological as well as imaginative conditioning:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored.(xv)

His view is developed further in Writers in Politics⁴ :

Literature, as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of the community's being and process of becoming. . . At the same time literature is more than just a mechanistic reflection of social reality. . . It follows then that because of its social character, literature as a creative process and also as an end is conditioned by historical social forces and pressures; it cannot elect to stand above or to transcend economics, politics, class, race, or what Achebe calls 'the burning issues of the day' because those very burning issues with which it ideals take place within an economic, political, class and race context. (W.I.P,5-6)

Therefore, I maintain that the narratives of both Ngugi and Armah can be seen as part of African historiography. They both operate at an interesting standpoint with regard to the relationship between reality and fiction. Each of them is attempting to capture a reality of a past through the use of fiction. Their novels constitute a sweeping historical narrative that tells the story of both Kenya and Ghana from the early days of British colonization to the contemporary post-colonial period. While each of Ngugi's novels, ranging from The River Between to Matigari, covers a limited period in the history of Kenya, Armah's late novels, Two Thousand Seasons, The Healers and Osiris Rising, do not focus on a particular moment in the history of Ghana, but the scope of these narratives is much broader encompassing the Ghanaian historical experience of slavery, colonialism and then neo-colonialism. It is to be underlined that in Armah's latest novels, The Healers, the time-span is more circumscribed and limited than in Two Thousand Seasons and Osiris Rising.

B. Ngugi and Armah: A shared Historical Experience

Indeed, for both Ngugi and Armah, the narrative is a tool for shaping, ordering and reinterpreting history. Ngugi, in Carol Sicherman's words, "blurs the lines between history and literature and that, perhaps as consequence of this blurring of the two genres, the distinction between Ngugi and his narrators and certain characters also becomes blurred."⁵ (344) Similarly, Armah's texts are steeped from Ghana's historical landscape and at times even border close to direct allusion on actual historical events. In the act of historical recovery, both writers are selective and creative. They overstepped the endeavors of most African fiction writers of the late fifties and the sixties who initiated a new oppositional discourse by countering the "permanence of vision" embedded in colonial discourse. The writers under question did challenge and rewrite the colonial discourses "as a way of explicating and defining their culture, history and being."⁶ (The Invention of Africa, 184) By questioning the visions, ideologies, the historical claims as well as the representations of Africans propounded by colonialist discourse they mapped out a new African future which could only take place in confrontation with colonial ideology. It was, according to Boehmer, "a literature which identified itself with the broad movement of resistance to, and transformation of, colonial societies."⁷(Colonial and Postcolonial Literature,184) Because the political rupture which independence created did not, according to many writers, necessarily mean an ideological or epistemological rupture, the narrative, in Gikandi's words, "can indeed propose an alternative world beyond the realities imprisoned within colonial and postcolonial relations of power"⁸ (Reading, Chinua Achebe,3). By resorting to the mythical to give space to the production of imagination, Achebe for instance, maintained that it was not enough to evoke "geographical, political, economic and other rational explanations. . . (for) there will always remain an area of shadows where some (at least) of the truth will seek to hide."⁹ (Morning Yet..., 90). Also, in terms of form, this rediscovery of history marks a rupture with the older ahistorical, if not antihistorical, bias of literature and criticism, in which 'formalisms' of various kinds dominated the literary scene.

Therefore, one might argue that history is the stuff of which African literature and more particularly the postcolonial African novel is made. As Abiola Irele writes, the “essential force of African literature” is “its reference to the historical and experiential,” and the main task of criticism is to bring that force “into focus”.¹⁰ (The African Experience, 11) This emphasis again relates to the traumas of colonialism and the resulting conflictive identity; in Irele’s words, “Modern African literature has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience.”(27) For both Ngugi and Armah, the desire to come to terms with a fractured history and a disrupted cultural identity induced the enduring importance of the historical.

Given the impact of colonialism on African history and the symbolic impact of colonialist historiography on the African imagination, it is obvious that history is a crucial area of contestation for most African writers, including both Ngugi and Armah, who seek to extort the control of their cultural identities from the metropolitan center of Europe. These writers, in dealing with history, are faced with the double task of challenging European colonialist historiography and proposing positive African alternatives through the recovery “of an African past that is usable in the construction of a better future.”¹¹ (“The Historical Novel in A. Armah and D. Caute”, 235.) Therefore, the decolonising process invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial counter-discursive practices. As Helen Tiffin observes, “the rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record are vital and inescapable tasks. These subversive manœuvres, rather than the construction or reconstruction . . . are what is characteristic of post-colonial texts, as the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general.”¹² (“Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse”, p.16.) Through the very nature of the writing, the African historical context is selectively created and rhetorically produced. In his assertion of the deconstruction of History into histories, Lionnet Françoise observes:

Puisqu'il n'y a plus de 'grands récits' [Lyotard, 1979] pour légitimer le savoir, l'histoire en miettes du sujet postcolonial ne peut plus être narrée que dans des histoires qui véhiculent l'hétérogénéité fondamentale de son vécu. Le lecteur se trouve aussi obligé de situer chaque texte par rapport à un contexte historique dont la fonction n'est pas de rendre le roman plus «authentique,» mais de souligner l'interpénétrabilité symbolique de l'histoire et de la fiction, du réel et du mythique. Espace de parole tendu entre des espaces culturels différents mais souvent indissociables, le roman postcolonial, expose le brassage des cultures et le métissage des formes qui définissent la 'condition postmoderne.'¹³(« Parcours Narratif . Itinéraire Culturel, » 143)

It is thus not surprising that both Ngugi and Armah have also quite often employed the historical novel as part of their program to generate new postcolonial past. For Armah, going back to the past must involve selecting only ideals and values to which the contemporary society might aspire. In his late novels, Armah attempts to dispel wrong assumptions about Africa's history, advocates adjustment of the way we apprehend the past, and calls for an assertion of traditional African values. He uses details from the indigenous tradition to demonstrate its vitality, to make a statement about the African way of life, and to define its artistic vision. For instance, Two Thousand Seasons shows Armah's efforts at "recuperating the past, but being totally dependent on remembered and reinvented-rather than literal- truths of the past, they are more of metahistory than historical fiction."¹⁴

Likewise, contrary to the Negritudists' celebration for blackness and yearning for Africanness in reaction to Western brainwashing, Ngugi's past goes against the nostalgic affirmation of an ideal African tradition. In many of his essays, Ngugi argues for a radical reinterpretation of Kenya's history. The thrust of his argument is that Kenya's history has been distorted by the colonial writers and by Kenyan scholars who had been educated in Western critical modes of thought. Ngugi claims that colonialist writers such as Ruark and Huxley¹⁵ have tended to give a very biased account of Kenya's nationalist history particularly in their portrayal of the Mau Mau War. The suppression of Mau Mau history and the marginalization of

workers and peasants, Ngugi asserts, has also been a major feature of works written by Kenyan historians like Ogot and Muriuki. According to Ngugi many Kenyan scholars followed a definite line of interpretation which aimed at discrediting Mau Mau as a nationalist movement. Moreover, at the heart of Ngugi's thesis, especially in his late novels, is his contention that Kenya's working people, the workers and peasants, are marginalised, if not totally ignored, in the country's narrative history. His intervention in this process of history-making, to use Cooper's words, strives to "recover the lives of people who are forgotten in narratives of global exploitation and national mobilisation" ¹⁶("Conflict and Connection", p.1516), all of which calls into question the very narratives themselves, indeed, the theoretical frameworks, and the subject positions of the colonialist and Kenyan historians implicated in the project. Ngugi's engagement with them is unequivocal, particularly in his novel, Petals of Blood¹⁷:

For there are many questions in our history which remain unanswered. Our present day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism, insist we only arrived here yesterday. Where went all the Kenyan people who used to trade with China, India, Arabia long long before Vasco da Gama came to the scene and on the strength of gunpowder ushered in an era of blood and terror and instability-an era that climaxed in the reign of imperialism over Kenya? But even then these adventures of Portuguese mercantilism were forced to build Fort Jesus, showing that Kenyan people had always been ready to resist foreign control and exploitation. The story of this heroic resistance: who will sing it? Their struggles to defend their land, their wealth, their lives: who'll tell of it? What of their earlier achievements in production that had annually attracted visitors from China and India? (POB,p.67)

Clearly, Ngugi rejects those historical archives akin to the West; he privileges resistance as the key plot element in African history ; and he insists in his late writings that that the metanarrative of the nationalist victory has to be revised and reconstituted as the story of workers and peasants- history from below. Ngugi, to use Frederick Cooper's argument again, takes the path many African scholars have taken by putting "more emphasis on showing that Africans had history

than on asking how Africans' history-making was implicated in establishing or contesting power"(1528). For Ngugi, Kenyan history should be about the struggles of the subaltern, their resistance to colonial and neo-colonial domination in the postcolonial state. This struggle crystallised itself in the Mau Mau anti-colonial war, a struggle which should continue to inspire new resolves for freedom and dignity in Kenya's post-independence period. It is the narrative of the marginalised, according to Ngugi, which Kenya's pioneer historians have suppressed.

Likewise, in taking a stand in favor of African value systems, Armah posits his writing as a counter-force against prevailing Western assumptions about Africa. For Armah, writing becomes a subversive act in opposition to the forces that have controlled the destiny of Africa. In Why Are we so Blest ?¹⁸, Armah writes :

In the world of my people that most important first act of creation, the rearrangement without which all attempts at creation are doomed to falseness remains to be done. Europe hurled itself against us-not for creation, but to destroy us, to use us for creating itself. America, a growth out of Europe, now deepens that destruction. In his wreckage there is no creative art outside the destruction of the destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art, revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction. (WWSB?,231)

Armah sees art as a means of coming to terms with the past and redefining the course of action for the future. Art becomes a social dynamic to bring about change in Africa. Armah's knowledge of the past comes from collective memory, remembered knowledge shared by African communities, knowledge by intuition and knowledge interpreted by the prophets. In Two Thousand Seasons¹⁹, the story about the origin of the people of Anoa is told in a series of prophetic utterances:

We speak of central prophecy that heard the curse of our present coming before its violence burst upon heads, we speak of the vision that saw our scattering before the first shattering stroke exploded from the desert's white light. . . of destruction's two thousand seasons against us. (TTS,19)

Armah attempts to dispel wrong assumptions about Africa's history, advocates adjustment of the way the past should be apprehended, and calls for an assertion of traditional African values. He uses details from the indigenous tradition to demonstrate its vitality, to make a statement about the African way of life, and to define its artistic vision.

Thus, both Armah and Ngugi are motivated by a passion to write their own version of African history. They are aware that what has been offered as Africa's history has been constructed from Western materials. The past of Africa, as Armah observes, has been altered in reflection of the biases of the dominating European powers which have enslaved and colonized it. Africans cannot continue to see their past through the tainted lenses of Europeans. He begins from a simple premise which the narrator sets out very clearly in the preface: our history has been distorted so much that the issues must be debated in public if the visionaries' objectives are going to be realized. He notes with concern:

The air around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origin. That is also part of the wreckage of our people. What has been cast abroad is not a thousandth of our history even if its quality were truth. The people called our people are not the hundredth of our people. But the haze of this fouled world exists to wipe out knowledge of our way, the way. These mists are here to keep us lost, the destroyers' easy prey. (TTS, 1)

Like many African writers and more particularly Soyinka, Achebe and Ngugi, Armah has expressed his objections to Western writers such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary who have depicted Africa as the context for elemental struggles, both physical and psychological ; a place where "civilized" Europeans must battle with the characteristic darkness of Africa. This myth has been promoted by the forces that have exploited Africa for centuries. Therefore, the challenge for most African writers is to expose this propaganda, and to present African experience from an African perspective. In opposing the colonial discursive practices, they attempt to validate Africa's historiography denied by colonialism. This process is in fact, as

Edward Said calls it, a restoration of “the imprisoned community to itself.”²⁰ (Culture and Imperialism , 259)

Armah revisits Africa’s past through his philosophical visionary interpretation of history and mythopoetic discourse. His recourse to myth or rather myth-making, a different strategy from Ngugi’s, though each, in his way tries to reconstruct history through the past retrieval. This historical reconstruction is itself a resisting form to the prevailing Western historiography. Armah fixed his gaze on the past, at the same time he looked forward. As it is underlined in TTS : “The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming ; our continuation, our flowing not along any meretricious channel but along our living way, the way.”(TTS,xiii) In TTS as in The Healers,and even later in Osiris Rising and KMT²¹ the narrative moves from a distant ideal , through a contemporary state of fragmentation, towards a future recapitulation of the first ideal.

In all his novels Armah perceives history as a cyclic process wherein the cycles underlined are those of recurring colonialisms and neocolonialisms. But with TTS, these cycles become “ temporary aberrations in a wider ‘cycle of regeneration’ that is destined to carry the country back to indigenous roots.” ²² (New Directions, 57).This return to beginnings can only be achieved through reinventing history or, to borrow Lindfors’s term “remythologizing” it. TTS tells, in part, the story of the causes and consequences of the decline in Africa but it also tells of the possibility of its resurgence with future shifts in power and leadership away from the West. “The way” can realize this through, what Soyinka calls, its “ visionary reconstruction of the past for purposes of a social direction.”²³ (106)

Through TTS Armah shows the major phases of African history : slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism in the post-independence era. This broad sweep of African history allows him to chronicle the maining (both physical and psychical) of the African people at the hands of the white colonizers (first the Moslem Arab “predators” then the European “destroyers”) as well as faction of their own black people (the African kings—“ ostentatious cripples”) in the space of a millenium (by African count two thousand seasons of alternating wet and dry seasons.)

Armah's vision is thus both backward-looking and forward-looking. Armah suggests that the experience of colonialism wipes out the pre-colonial African ideal and replaces it with an individualism generated from the divisive practices and selfish tastes introduced by whites. For him, the healing process involves, among other things, offering the philosophy of "the way," "the living way," "our way" as the source of authentic African values. The narrator explains the rationale behind the way. As a positive affirmation, "the way" is community, reciprocity, and connectedness. The negation of its principles leads to fragmentation, destruction, and death:

Our way, the way is not a random path. Our way begins from coherent understanding. It is a way that aims at preserving knowledge of who we are, knowledge of the best way we have found to relate each to each, each to all, ourselves to other peoples, all to our surroundings. If our individual lives have a worthwhile aim, that aim should be a purpose inseparable from the way.

Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness. Our way knows no oppression. Our

way is hospitable to guests. The way repels destroyers; the way destroys oppression.

Our way produces before it consumes. The way produces far more than it consumes.

Our way creates. The way destroys our destruction. (TTS,39)

Armah's novels, especially his late ones are pervaded by prophecies of the apocalypse, mythical conceptions of time, millenarism which shape the millennial consciousness of many of the characters. Myths are creative interpretations of experience in the process of which facts get turned into myth. Armah's principal aim is the mythologizing of history. He often alternates the words 'vision' and 'seer' to underline the importance of a usable version of the past that will provide guidance and goals as well as warnings for the future. In the same line, Thomas Knipp asserts that "history is myth ; it is the reorganization of the past according to the needs of the present."²⁴("Myth, History..."⁴¹) Mythopoesis, Okpewho points out, is an act of creativity : "[the] ultimate resource and the object of mythopoesis is imaginative and intellectual play."²⁵ (Myth in Africa,

264) He argues that TTS is a mythical novel which departs from the old theory that sees myth as sacred tales. And so in his late novels, Armah transcends empirical reality and factual account to attain another form, the creative order.

Armah reconstructs myth to fit his vision and the result is a merging of myth and creativity to become mythopoesis : the making of myth. The value of Armah's mythopoesis may be seen in terms of the following argument:

There is some truth in the claim that change is possible only through myth, for myth can take many forms. It can reorganize the historical content in terms of modern perspectives. It creates an attractive vision defining in familiar cosmic terms the future possibilities of society. Myth can be used to celebrate the achievements of society, making them fall into an acceptable social order.²⁶

According to Armah, mental decolonization can be approached through the use of myth which is not a consciously invented belief system. As "a psycho-linguistic construct," myth operates through a set of related symbols connote a fixed set of ideas.²⁷ The Western myth construct which fosters the white man's racist idea of supremacy should be debunked by creating counter-myths. Thus, the bipolarity of words like white, immaculate, and clean, as opposed to black, dark, devil, which is deeply engrained in the Christian mythopoesis, should be reversed by a counter-myth imparting opposing images, symbols and allusions. Armah does inject into his writing what he considers to be an African view of Westerners and Arabs by using words and expressions like "ostentatious cripples," "predators," "slave-owning god", and so on.

In his concern with cultural decolonization through all his novels, Armah's use of counter-myth is mainly targeted to the intellectual African elite who implicitly imbibed the Western racist assumptions. In consonance with his use of history, Armah constructs a counter-myth to interpret Africa's experience. He subverts and at the same time elevates history to the level of myth.

As for Ngugi, all his novels trace the Kenyan people's history. Yet, contrary to his late novels, his early texts, to use Frederick

Cooper argument, put “more emphasis on showing that Africans had history than on asking how Africans’ history-making was implicated in establishing or contesting power.”²⁸ (“Conflict and Connection, 1528). His first three novels, which look back in time, form a trilogy in chronological progression that runs from The River Between (1965; drafted in 1960), which centres on the 1929 circumcision controversy and the opening of independent schools, to Weep Not, Child (1964; drafted in 1962) describing the Mau-Mau uprising of the 1950’s, to A Grain of Wheat (1967; completed in 1966) showing the uneasy passage to independence in 1963. Ngugi, in the early 1960s, was grappling with the issues of ethnicity, individualism and nationalism. His post-colonial novel, POB (1977), deals with the mid-seventies Kenya as being racked by a corrupt black upper-class and its foreign counterparts. But his last two narratives, DOC and Matigari, concentrate on a revolutionary allegorical rereading and rewriting of Kenya’s struggle before and after independence, pointing to missed opportunities and injustices in this history, particularly after independence, and indicating a direction for future political action. In these late works, Ngugi contributes to the postcolonial “process of ‘revisioning’ history through the reappropriation of allegory”²⁹ (“Post-colonial Allegory,” 163).

Petals of Blood seems to represent a turning point in Ngugi’s literary career. It is a pivotal book, standing simultaneously as the culmination of his development as a Western-style aesthetic novelist³⁰ (Mamudu, 1988, p. 16) and as a new departure in his experiment with developing a more Afrocentric and a more neo-Marxist literary approach. He himself asserts the necessity of giving an African vision of African history so as to better interpret the present and prepare the future. Though it is original in the sense that it is visualized within the African context, it is still similar to the Marxist view of history. In this context, it is important to underline the fact that the Mau Mau war (1952-1959) provides a discourse in which Ngugi can begin to construct a history of colonial Kenya usable in this present. By making Mau Mau stand for a much broader phenomenon, namely Africa’s struggle for independence from foreign rule - and within this

the African popular struggle for economic and social justice- Ngugi delivers both future hope and critical awareness.

Whereas, Ngugi's latest novels, Matigari and DOC look at the present in the light of the future, POB rather looks at the present in the light of the past. It contains not only many reminiscences of Mau Mau but also panoramic allusions to the more distant African past and to the black diaspora, going back through what Ngugi calls "a huge space of time" to show "three different phases of social formations : a long period of pre-capitalist, pre-colonial relations," then colonialism, and finally neo-colonialism.

As a conclusion, we insist upon the fact that it is not enough to reconstruct the past; that past must also be recreated in sharp orientation to the specific intricacies of present confrontations and struggles. "It is not only content and the perspective of that content that accords history its revolutionary power, but also its very mode of presentation."³¹ ("History as a Weapon,") The novel can be regarded as one such mode. It may present historical narratives which do not provide history in its conventional form but questions the processes by which organized narratives are constructed. Narratives of the past for both Armah and Ngugi are textually constructed to present another possibility of a historical experience. In other words, history in their novels is presented as reconstructed narratives of the past in a textual form. Through the fictional construction of historical narratives, the texts question history by constructing and dismantling a past, by reflecting the process of placing fragments of the past into narrative configurations or by exposing the limitations of one textual construction of history. The texts do not impose single interpretations but represent dialogues with the past. Both writers transform historical experience and subvert and recreate history. The world Armah recreates is visionary. While Ngugi, in his use of myth in his latest novel, being bound to his leftist dogma, he could not turn his back on the dialectical historical interpretation, even though he resorts to myth-making in the latest novel. Despite their differences, they believe in reaching the same aim which is the reconstruction of the past for the purposes of social redirection.

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