

The Colonial Cultural Legacy and the Postcolonial African Novel: A plea for an Afrocentric Approach in the Contemporary African Educational System

Dr. Maoui Hocine

Department of English- Badji Mokhtar University -Annaba

Abstract

We contend that while Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o differ significantly from each other in terms of political conviction, they have both attempted to recapture a local national culture based on a constructed pre-colonial past, expressing an ever-increasing disillusionment with current political realities in their countries. We maintain that both writers have diagnosed the ills of Africa and have prescribed the self-same cure. The eurocentrism of Africa's westernized elite is the colonial illness par excellence. The cure is the re-Africanization and the rediscovery and expression of African values as an indispensable part of the decolonization process. They suggest a reformed educational system and a revision of the teaching of humanities that centres on Africa in its form and content.

ملخص

يعدّ هذا المقال محاولة لتسليط الضوء بنظرة مقارنة للرؤية العلاجية والتصحيحية لروائيين إفريقيين وهما: (Ngugi (wathiongo- من كينيا و) Ayi Kwei Armah من غانا. بالرغم من اختلافهما الأيديولوجي إلا أنهما نددا بشدة بالنزعة المركزية الأوروبية (eurocentrism) التي تبنتها النخبة المتمغرية والأخطار المنجرة عنها. يتفق كلا الروائيين على أن الحل يكمن في إعادة أفرقة القارة السمراء (re- africanization) عن طريق الرجوع إلى القيم الثقافية الإفريقية الأصيلة. ومن بين الاقتراحات الضرورية لتصفية مخلفات الاستعمار، مراجعة النظام التعليمي ومناهجه مع ضرورة التركيز على تدريس العلوم الإنسانية في إطارها الإفريقي الخالص.

Like most African writers, both Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have grappled with the trajectory of the continent's history. Their novels considered together, ranging from *The River Between* to *Matigari* for Ngugi⁽¹⁾, and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to *KMT* for Armah⁽²⁾, have offered a deep reflection on 'the trouble with Africa' and have tried to identify the root causes of its underdevelopment. Besides its deficient socio-political formation and its exploitative economic system, Africa has been weighed down by a Western-oriented educational system that is not properly connected with indigenous value system, and hence, generating alienation. In our attempt we contend that despite the plain divergent ideological orientations of their early novels, the two writers' views do intersect in the long run. Their confluence among others, being their concern with their diagnosis of the colonial education and its alienating effects and the necessary revitalization and re-Africanization of the continent through resorting to history, myth and legend. We maintain that through their reliance on these key compositional elements both Armah and Ngugi claim that

the move towards the continent's rebirth should begin with the erasure of differences constructed by colonial fragmentation of the continent. This cultural renaissance also requires a reflective encounter with the dialectics of Africa's historiography in order to identify values and systems that are beneficial to the present. Further, they acknowledge a possibility for the re-making of Africa through a rather nativist, panafricanist, afrocentric and even black diasporic move, especially for Armah's case in his late novels. For instance, in Armah's *Osiris Rising* and Ngugi's *Matigari*, both writers advocate with undeniable clarity a system of education that has Africa as its starting point, in the study of the world- a system that truly seeks to liberate the African mind to work for the benefit of the continent.

The paper is then double-fold for it aims at showing from a comparative perspective how the two writers under study share a conceptual horizon regarding colonialism and neo-colonialism and the resulting alienating effects of culture. It also attempts to put forward some of their healing strategies regarding the African educational system and the teaching of humanities in contemporary Africa.

Indeed, the choice of Ngugi and Armah is motivated by the fact that they share many experiences that have led to their feelings of alienation, especially during the early phase of their literary career. As early writers both of them share a conceptual horizon regarding colonialism and neo-colonialism and the resulting alienating effects of culture. It is to be underlined that both were educated in English, in schools intended to produce an African elite: Achimota College for Armah and Alliance High School and Makerere University for Ngugi. Both spent long periods abroad for their later education: Armah principally in the United States at Groton and Harvard University, and Ngugi at Leeds for his graduate work. Both returned to countries whose nationalist leaders, seen as saviors of the people during the independence struggle, had soon turned to autocracy, alienating Ngugi and Armah from the direction taken by mainstream national politics. But I believe that despite the elitism of their education, both have had profoundly "democratic" hopes and ideals and have seen those difficulties carrying their ideals to the common people.

Regarding education in Africa, the alienating process is first carried through the teachings of Christianity which underpin the white race superiority. The mission education for the natives was "geared to produce a docile and submissive population that was only proficient in reciting basic religious catechism."⁽³⁾ What missionaries and White settlers had in common was their deeply felt belief in themselves as agents of civilization and progress. In this regard, Ngugi observes:

In the name of that civilization, they destroyed dances, our languages, our songs, our poetry. . . Colonialism then systematically tried to kill the African individual and collective image of self. Get at their self-hood, fervently urging the governor and the settler; the spiritual policeman wearing the cloak of a priest or that of a man of letters went about his task sometimes with the subtleness of a serpent, often with the awkward crudeness of the one-eyed giant⁽⁴⁾.

The educational system in Africa during the colonial period was more or less designed to end in the alienation of the colonized through, among other things, the elevation of the colonizer's culture and the systematic denigration of the colonized people's culture. The colonial school was an alien institution in the sense that what it taught often had little to do with the society and culture of colonized. Walter Rodney,

the Guyanese scholar, has noted: "Colonial education did more than corrupt the thinking and sensibilities of the African. It filled him/her with abnormal complexes which de-Africanized and alienated him/her from the needs of his/her environment."⁽⁵⁾

The colonized, seeking self-assertion and advancement in the colonial hierarchy, had to do so by imitating the colonizer's way of life. The result was the loss of his systems of reference and the collapse of his cultural patterns, along with the setting in of an inferiority complex. The colonized tries to escape the inferiority by proclaiming on the one hand the total competence of the cultural model of the colonizer, and on the other hand the condemnation of his own culture and life-style. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon has described how in his native Martinique the mere prospect of going to Europe gave rise to changes in the behaviour and outlook of the black man, and made him the object of new respect⁽⁶⁾. The native returning from the metropolis also exhibited the same changes, a theme Armah has extensively developed in *Fragments*.

Thus, the colonial education received by the natives is alienating. Colonialism, aiming at total cultural domination tries to emasculate, both physically and morally, the national elite which is one of the principal factors of the enlightenment of public opinion and preservation of the national character. At the same time it contributes towards setting up a new elite diametrically opposed to the native.

Ngugi sees the same effects of the colonial education on the African intellectual. The colonial education system brought real problems to the young Africans who managed to find a way into the schools. "The colonial system", writes Ngugi, "produced the kind of education which nurtured subservience, self-hatred, and mutual suspicion." The result was that it produced "a people uprooted from the masses."⁽⁷⁾ Education creates a wider distance between the colonizer and the colonized and his own traditions and systems of reference. Once a native elite which has absorbed the culture of imperialism is produced, we witness, in Fanon's words, the destruction of cultural values, of ways of life. Likewise, Ngugi remarks that in Kenya, the enslavement of the native population is the prime necessity and one of the ultimate colonial goals:

Obedience of the oppressed to the oppressor, peace and harmony between the exploited and the exploiter; the slave to love his master and pray that God grant that the master may long reign over us: these were the ultimate aesthetic goals of colonial culture carefully nurtured by nail boots, police truncheons and military bayonets and by the carrot of a person heaven for a select few⁽⁸⁾.

This new elite, in order to approximate to the cultural level of the colonizer, they try to deracialize themselves and accept the caricature of themselves created by their conqueror⁽⁹⁾.

In brief, the cultural disruption, which is largely effected through education, and the alienation of the 'dominated' can be best summed up by Albert Memmi's words who, during the Algiers Symposium of the First Pan-African Cultural Festival, declares :

When a man is dominated by others, he is also culturally affected. He is firstly affected in the 'present' from which he is excluded by the dominating group. . . . excluded from his social function and unable to take part in the political, social and cultural life of his country. He is also affected in both his past and future. . . . for the past ritual ceremonies no longer accord with the traditions. . . . He is excluded from the future, he no longer projects himself into the future, the future no longer belongs to

him. . . There is in short, no continuity between his present, his past and his future. . . All dominated people are set apart, excluded⁽¹⁰⁾.

The colonized, through the narrow and self-interested channels of colonial education, are taught that their history started with the arrival of the whites and their principles of a Christian civilization. Ngugi claims:

Before colonialism, writes Professor Trevor Roper of Oxford University in 1960, there was only darkness in Africa and as darkness was no subject for history, Africa had therefore no history prior to colonial conquest. A land of darkness and perpetual childhood, cried Hegel⁽¹¹⁾

Excluded from all social institutions, cut off from his own history, deprived of his own language and all possibilities of self-expression, the colonized consciousness therefore, is incapable of developing a revolutionary class-consciousness.

In Ngugi's *The River Between*, it is through education or more exactly schooling in Western mode that the conflicting attitudes are perceived, not only between the white missionaries and the traditionalists, but between the members belonging to the same clan. Waiyaki, was sent to Siriana School, with the hope of acquiring the white man's knowledge through which he can discover the secret world. But from the start, the institutionalised learning that Waiyaki receives seems to contrast with the educative process, the passing on of the traditional wisdom from father to son. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta mentions the European system of schools as the only existing institutions in Kenya⁽¹²⁾. The Mission School proves to have a two-fold process: to attract people to Christianity and alienate them from their customs, rituals and beliefs. Even after the establishment of Independent Schools, Waiyaki fails to see that education should have higher motives such as raising the people's consciousness, unity and freedom. This can possibly be explained by the influence of the type of education he has had at Siriana School: "Perhaps the teaching of Livingstone, that education was of value and his boys should not concern themselves with what the government was doing or politics, had found a place in Waiyaki's heart." (*The RB*, 65) Waiyaki has been cut off from his own people because of the alienating effects of education.

Ngugi, while at Leeds University, has tried to free his writings from the cultural constraints that hindered him at Makerere University College. These constraints are due to the alienating colonial education he received there. He himself asserts these constraints:

You must see universities in Africa in their colonial missionary setting. They didn't want you to question things, or compare Western institutions, with other systems. For instance, those who studied political science heard of Karl Marx only as an incidental rather eccentric figure. . . African history was taught merely as an extension of Europe . . . literature has nothing or very little to do with what was happening in Africa⁽¹³⁾.

It is to be underlined that the alienation that occurs in the colonial society remains after the country has achieved formal political independence. The rather surface changes have not been accompanied by a radical change of consciousness. Armah, in an essay on "African Socialism", declares:

In the colonial situation, the Europeans occupied the apices, the seats of power. The primary aim of post-World War II nationalist agitation was not to overturn or to break down this structure, but to push the white occupiers out of their commanding positions and to install Africans in their place. It may be argued that this was a necessary step

towards the restructuring of the ex-colony, but the point here is that the first objective was the removal of the white top from the colonial bottle⁽¹⁴⁾.

This transfer of authority, is to Fanon merely the localization of colonial rule, since the institutions have not changed, nor have the relations between the ruler and the ruled⁽¹⁵⁾.

The formerly been-to's who, becoming leaders, have been cut off from their roots because of their Western education. Both Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments* suggest the path to power is represented as the path toward a white, dependent, Western-oriented cast of mind, a case that recalls the model colonial subject as analyzed by Frantz Fanon. For instance, *The Beautiful Ones* suggests that like the pre-independence nationalist elite who spent whole lives "fleeing from themselves into whiteness", the new leaders have also finally settled for living "above all blackness."⁽⁹²⁾ In these novels the members of the elite have internalized not only the colonizer's understanding of the Western world as the source of civilization, but also their assumption that Africa is a barbarous and a backward continent.

This brings us to the issue of the conquering power of language which is considered by Ngugi and Fanon as a potently destructive power. The ability to express oneself in the colonial language granted the colonized automatic entrance to a higher status in the colonial hierarchy. Fanon sees language as becoming not only a medium of communication but also a 'social artefact,' since to adopt the language of the colonizer was to automatically assume his cultural forms and thought patterns. (*Black Skin*,17) In Armah's early novels the deracinated Africans are described in terms of how hard they try to speak English with an English accent. So important did the colonizer's language become that in many colonies the educated classes preferred to speak to their children in the colonial language.

Similarly, Modin in *WWSB?* has understood that his stay in America as a student has produced a monster in him. Because of his education, Modin is neither at the center nor at the periphery. He is crushed between identifying with the betrayed masses of Africans at home and the soul-killing imperative of his American experience. While he realizes that "the educated Africans, the Westernized African successes are contemptible worms," he is obliged by his Western education to advance the betrayal of his people. He is aware that Western education is the root cause of his alienation.

I should have stopped going to lectures long ago. They all form a part of a ritual celebrating a tradition called great because it is European, Western, while the triumphant assumption of a superior community underlies them all, an assumption designed to reduce us to invisibility while magnifying whiteness. My participation in this kind of ritual made me not just lonely, not just one person unsupported by a larger whole, but less than one person : a person split, fractured because of my participation in alien communal rituals designed to break me and my kind. (*WWSB?*,31-2)

Modin finally gives up his research and writing, concluding that "knowledge should be lived."⁽²²¹⁾

While in his early novels Armah diagnoses the postcolonial ills, in the late novels he offers their cures. Indeed his late novels discuss Africa's major problems with a view to prescribing the correct cure for each disease. With regard to their affinities, his late novels *TTT*, *The Healers*, *OR* and *KMT*, view the African past as a pre-requisite

to the correct understanding of the present from which the future could be shaped. These novels uphold a pan-Africanist view and urge people of African descent elsewhere to rebuild a continent shattered by selfish African and alien forces of leadership⁽¹⁶⁾. This is in line with Ngugi's ideological orientation which is clearly expressed in most of his novels. The striking students at Siriana, the secondary school in POB, demand to be taught African literature, African history, for "we wanted to know ourselves better" (POB,170), and when one of these students, Karega, becomes a teacher, he tries to do just that. Even the more ambivalent Munira, the headmaster of the Ilmorog primary school, resolves to restore himself "to my usurped history, my usurped inheritance" in order to liberate himself (POB,227). Indeed, all of Ngugi's protagonists wrestle with the past; they seek to reconnect themselves to it. The very narrative structure of his novels-the interaction of past, present, and future; and the dense allusions to history, in which the fictional characters often intermingle with historical characters and events- underscores the importance that Ngugi gives to history.

As for Armah's OR, the healing strategies focus on three elements: First, the importance of a heightened consciousness of African history; second, the practice of collective approach toward solving Africa's educational problems; and third, the need for commitment. (Hope in the Midst of Despair, 146) As do TTS and The Healers, this novel also relies on recovering the past. The root causes of the diseases have been located and identified. They include the abuse of power, irresponsibility, and cultural inauthenticity. Armah's focus on the need to restructure the African educational system radically goes to the heart of the African problem. The thorough examination of the disease that was carried out in his early novels reveals that the African elite consumes more than it produces, and that its thoughts are, in the words of one of the characters in the novel, "belly level". Armah's point is that Africa has clearly remained a diseased continent despite its independence.

For Armah, as well as for Ngugi, to argue that postcolonial Africa is on the right track would be foolish. Those completely given to greed and self-interest, as is shown in the novel's most corrupt character Seth in OR, are unwilling to change their short-sighted vision. The transfer of power from the colonizer to the colonized has caused Seth, in Armah's OR or Settler Williams in Matigari, to have the top position in the pyramid. For both Armah and Ngugi, the cure lies in disrupting such a structure and setting a new organization based on a fair equity of wealth and power. The result is that "those at the top are merely managers of a system which has trapped us [Kenyans] into a dependency relationship with the capitalist wealth."⁽¹⁷⁾ As Ngugi states in Barrel of a Pen: "Everything seems to be copied from a book, the ABC of colonial manners or Western Decorum Made Easy." (19)

Cultural decolonization is a necessary and primary task as shown in OR. To this end, the proper training of teachers and the need for African-tailored curricula are underscored. The novel recreates the homecoming dream through Ast, an African American, who fulfills it by her settlement in an unnamed West African country. She finds Asar, an intellectual leader and former lover from her university days who has just returned from militant struggle in Southern Africa. Asar is now using his position as a college lecturer to revolutionise the nation's teacher-training programme, educational curriculum, and conditions of service. Asar's aim is the liberation of

African intelligence from Eurocentric educational systems, and his revised syllabus represents a major paradigm shift. Colonial history and literature are to be replaced by their African counterparts which are drawn from the study of Ancient Egypt, reinstated at the centre of African history and culture. Egyptological studies are to include research into anti-slave secret societies whose ancient regenerative symbol of the ankh which is a recurring motif in the book. The redesigning of the educational system is underlaid by the broad political aims of seeding a long-term social revolution in Africa, and reunifying the dismembered continent's neo-colonial nation-states.

In this novel, Armah makes it clear that education cannot proceed without key elements such as faith, dedication, honesty, and sacrifice. Asar embodies these qualities which are necessary for social change. But he is under no illusion about how long it would take to cure the diseased country. He is a man of action who "proceeds to put his conclusions into practice." (OR,71) The conclusion he has reached is that there is a need to enlighten as many people as possible about the ills of postcolonial Africa. Revolution, he observes, is far from sight (OR,116-17) Nevertheless, the preparation for the big change must be set in motion now. Revolution without heightened mass consciousness is one-sided.

Indeed many African scholars have noted the resignation of postcolonial Africa to the "new form of slavery." Ngugi, for example, writes that, "the IMF, [and] the World Bank are determining the lives and deaths of many in Africa. . ." (18) Armah also makes the point that both still continue "wrecking the lives of millions" (OR,117). But Armah's interest is in working on the possible solutions that will undo the harmful practices of such structures with regard to Africa. For Asar and his group, the task at hand therefore becomes the organizing "generations of conscious Africans with democratic working and living habits. Not rhetoric. Habits. Live, day to day practice..." (OR,117)

Asar rightly chooses to target education, as proper education is an important element of the cure. Education ministries in postcolonial Africa are generally establishments that have not changed much since independence. The task for such ministries is to keep the Eurocentric curricula of postcolonial Africa in place. In the novel the reactionary nature of the African educational system is symbolized by the very building which houses the Ministry of Education. Armah writes :

The Ministry of Education was long, khaki colored rectangle, four stories high. It was cleverly constructed to shut out sunshine, making electric lighting necessary. Ast looked for an information window. There was none. . . (OR,154)

In Africa there has been little or no innovation either in teaching methods or in curriculum design. The teacher is the center. The system penalizes those who want to make teaching student-centered. Asar uses his position to work against the country's reactionary educational system by encouraging the trainee teachers to be innovative and student-centered. Armah's Asar, it seems, upholds the idea of one progressive educator, Edward Alper. Writing about the nature of true education, Alper notes that it must be about "empowerment, not conformity,"

Adding that "independent thinking and deviation from orthodoxy ought to be encouraged not suppressed in the process, even inadvertently." (OR,10) Asar underscores non conformity to the old reactionary authority. When asked how one could boost the morale of the nonconforming student teachers, Asar advises Ast:

Give them high grades for teaching performance. That shocks some confidence into them. But I know that confidence gets destroyed if they turn into the old authoritarian type of assessor; there are still many around: colonial types. Teacher knows best. Mini-dictators.(OR162).

The clandestine organization in OR assumes responsibility and takes charge in another important specific area: Restructuring the college's syllabi in African studies, in history, and in literature. Armah's choice of these disciplines demonstrates his awareness of their importance as tools that shape young minds. The contents of these subjects and the methods by which they were and are taught emphasize Europe's centrality. Ngugi's observation, which pertains to the teachings of literary studies in Africa, indicates that the Western view is still the "organizing principle." He expounds in *Decolonising the Mind*:

The structure of the literary studies evolved in the colonial schools and universities had continued well into the independence era completely unaffected by any minds of cultural change. The irony of all this is that these departments were run in countries where the oral tradition, the basis of all genres of written literature be it a poem, a play or a story, was beating with life and energy, and yet they were unaffected by the surging creative storm all around them. The historic continuity of a single culture throughout the period of emergence of the modern West was still the organizing principle of literature teaching in schools and colleges⁽¹⁹⁾.

For Asar and his group, the task is to replace the Eurocentric syllabi and curricula with those which underscore the pluralism of the culture and literatures of the African people. Their aim is to decenter the syllabi of the disciplines from their Eurocentric vision, which is, as the elected chair Bai Kamara puts it, a total break with the existing African elite's norm. In his words:

All we Africans have done is to find stuff readymade –syllabuses, curricula, the whole educational system. We haven't created our own system. We have operated within the old system. Sometimes we gamble. We suggest modifications here and there. Low-energy dabbling. What we are facing now is different. High-energy work. Not just attacking something conveniently available. But creating a superior system. Working to replace the old with it. (OR,189)

The old syllabi and curricula, as we have seen, are deemed useless because of their irrelevance to the African situation. It is now necessary to examine the specific components of the newly African-oriented syllabi in the areas of history, African studies, and literature. The new syllabus for history would be based on a "curative principle that cleared the path for innovative curriculum design. . . with an equitable representation of all parts of the world" with black Africa including Egypt as its focal point(OR,199). The curative principle however, is not new except perhaps in its strong emphasis on ancient Egypt as part of Africa. Armah's effort to revolutionize the educational system is thus a part of his attempt to work for a genuine solution.

The attempt can only succeed by revolutionary networks. In Armah's creative work, for example, the implementation of the new syllabi becomes a reality because the preparatory work is carried out effectively. Asar and the other members of the underground organization responsibly agitate and organize an effective force before confronting the status quo. Organization is the key to change. The old cliché "action

speaks louder than words,” the novel seems to suggest, is nowhere more urgent than in Africa, where the colonialist educational system literally cries out for change.

Ngugi’s recommendation for the implementation of new curricula inspired from African past came earlier. But Ngugi’s past is not a frozen museum artifact. With *POB* he insists at some length on revising Kenyan historiography, first through the futile efforts of Karega to find suitable history texts for his pupils and then in Karega’s appeal to the lawyer for help in his quest for a “vision of the future rooted in a critical awareness of the past,” (*POB*, 198). The lawyer sends Karega “books and list of other titles written by professors of learning at the University, “the same university where Ngugi taught. But the books fail to answer his questions. In fact, Ngugi has engaged in intense debates with Kenyan historians, most of whom he criticizes for having failed to decolonize the country’s history. These historians are collectively represented in *Matigari* through the pathetic figure of the Permanent Professor of the History of Parratology.

In brief, Armah and Ngugi differ significantly from each other in terms of political conviction, they both attempted to recapture a local national culture based on a constructed pre-colonial past, expressing an ever-increasing disillusionment with current political realities in their countries. As cultural nationalists, both writers have tried to excavate an African mythology. In other words, they have attempted to decolonize their culture and offer counter-discourses to the dominant logos of the metropolis. This does not mean that they have rejected all of the colonizer’s perception but that they have considered it to be at best approximate and at worst alienating for the colonized person. So, using for instance fantasy, excavating the indigenous mythology, and borrowing many oral devices has been a way of restoring “indigenist” literature while at the same time subverting its premises. The writers’ convergence is particularly seen in at least one specific area: the necessity to restructure the teachings of the humanities in contemporary Africa. Both of them are aware of the serious consequences of the ongoing African practice of the humanities study dependent on Western tradition rather than on the much older indigenous African literary tradition. Both have pointed out not only the anomalous nature of such a practice, which has resulted in the continuous African dependency on the West, but have also suggested proposals for curricular changes in the field of humanities. They suggest a reformed educational system that centres on Africa in its form and content. Moreover, their late novels uphold a pan-Africanist view. Armah’s go farther than Ngugi’s because in his late novels he repeatedly exhorts people of African descent elsewhere to join hands in rebuilding a continent shattered by selfish African and alien forces of leadership. They want the institutional re-Africanization of the continent.

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