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CONTEXTUALISING POST-INDEPENDENCE ANGLOPHONE AFRICAN WRITING:
AYI KWEI ARMAH AND NGUGI WA THIONG'O COMPARED

by
Garnette Oluoch-Olunya

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

Department of English Literature

Faculty of Arts, University of Glasgow (September 2000)

Supervised by:
Professor Lalage Bown
Dorothy A McMillan

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Acknowledgements

I may travel slowly, but I too will arrive

Armah

I want to thank the people who have supported me, and been a part of this work over the years.

My Supervisors, Professor Lalage Bown and Ms Dorothy A. Mcmillan, two phenomenal women without whom this thesis would not have been written, and who have, over time and distance, kept the faith. I Thank You.

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In Kenya, Mathew Buyu and Arthur Luvai; Sophie Macharia, my mainstay, and for arranging for formal and informal discussion of my work at Kenyatta University; Kimani wa Njogu, for access to the American world of Ngugi; Gichora Mwangi, Emily Akuno, Senorina Wendo, Masinjila Masheti, Luther Opondo-Mbai, H. Indangasi, asanteni.

My Glasgow families, Jacqueline Day, Jean Finnie, the Jacksons, Margaret, the Githanga's, Barbara Mhangami, Anne Mwirigi, Emily Cheserem, Athena Marche. And to Malebogo Kgalemag, for Kelvinhaugh Gate, and the spirit.

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To all my family, for patience and support: my mother; my parents-in-law; 'Uncle' Claude, with all my heart; Beryl, Caroline, Cathy and Job Oduor-Owino; Eunice, Mary and Leah, who minded the children.

For the encouraging words that kept hope alive, always, Nicky Nelson of ASAUK/ Goldsmiths College. And Elijah W. Muriithi, for challenging discussion, and for being my family.

Dedication

To my children, Adhiambo and Onyango, who have endured the periods of separation better than I have, and who make the completion of this work a special joy!

And for David, Shukran.

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ABSTRACT

In the 'Introduction', I establish the basic parameters of the investigation, considering the problem of defining the nature and meaning of African Literature and its relationship to African Studies. The problem of African writing as marginalised and reactive, particularly when it is in the dominant English language, is discussed. A brief history of fictional writing in Africa is offered. Movements such as Negritude, Africanist arguments and nationalism are introduced as is the quest for a workable ideology. I show that the uses of the term Postcolonial, indeed the problems with the use of any post- term, are one of the clearest indicators of the tensions that continue to define the field. The version of Africa offered in western writing and communicated to Ngugi and Armah in the course of their schooling is discussed as is the way in which writing from inside the Continent must inevitably encounter the versions of Africa¹ and the African from outside the Continent.

This is the background against which I attempt to situate the novels of Ngugi and Armah. My thesis is then concerned with establishing and integrating the contexts out of which African writing has developed. I aim to assess the different ways in which these contexts supply the narratives with their substance and rationale, and I suggest that the African novel must be read from multiple perspectives.

Chapter 2 offers a brief historical background of Ghana and Kenya as British Colonies. The impact of the two world wars of this century is briefly assessed. The approach to independence for both countries is charted and the initial impact of post-independence leadership is touched upon. The second section of this chapter, however, deals with Kenyatta and Mau Mau and with Ngugi's response to both. Kenyatta's trial showcases the drama of settler administration and prefigures his equivocal position as a national leader. The specifically gendered issue of female circumcision and Kenyatta's attempt to mediate between traditionalists and 'reformists' is advanced.

Chapter 3 concentrates on education in Ghana; specifically it charts the circumstances and issues which led up to the founding of Achimota College, where Armah was educated.

The importance of literacy to the colonial project is emphasised and the consequences for orality are remarked. The roles of Kwegyir Aggrey and the Governor, Sir Gordon Guggisberg, are estimated, as is the growth of nationalism in the Gold Coast. I proceed to the African American link which came from the special position of the Gold Coast as the point of departure for slaves for America and the West Indies. The crucial importance of first Booker T. Washington and then W. E. B. Du Bois to education in the US and in Africa is examined, as is the Phelps-Stokes Commission on Education in Africa. The chapter concludes with the establishment of Achimota and with a brief coda on the tensions between Nkrumah and Armah, between politician and intellectual.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to Ngugi, to his education and its associated literary background. I begin by briefly outlining Ngugi's biography to show that the personal and the literary are intimately bound together. A detailed discussion of Ngugi's education and reading follows against the mission background of the Alliance School, quite unlike the secular and culturally relevant Achimota of Armah. The importance of Carey Francis is detailed. Ngugi's literary encounters with the writers of the African diaspora are touched on and his involvement with Fanon previewed. The main thrust of the rest of the chapter is concerned with language, with English as a medium of teaching and of world expression and with Ngugi's later choice of Gikuyu. The Makerere Conference of 1962 is invoked as an important locus for the discussion of English for African writers. The linguistic problems specific to Kenya are discussed and Ngugi's own controversial privileging of Gikuyu is analysed. The language problem is shown to be ongoing in Kenya and although Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and his community plays in Gikuyu are, on the one hand, linguistically and politically opposed, they are shown actually to have been reinforcing.

Chapter 5 takes as its main task the establishing of the critical climate in and out of Africa into which entered Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born*; the critical reception of this novel is discussed in detail since it is so important for an understanding of the perception of the duty of an African writer to his culture. I assess the critical positions of

Charles Larson, whose admiration for Armah potentially alienated Armah from his African roots by turning him into an English stylist, and Chinua Achebe who was upset by Armah's, as he saw it, premature excoriation and rejection of post-independence Ghana. The issue of what Armah dubbed 'Larsony' is discussed as is Armah's criticism of Nkrumah. The chapter leaves Armah as a novelist at the crossroads of social, political and linguistic change, unable, to use Barthes's terms, to be a watcher, forced always into participation.

Chapter 6 steps back briefly from the writers themselves to establish the crucial importance of the work of Franz Fanon for both Armah and Ngugi because of its couching of a new narrative of colonialism in a discourse available to all of the involved cultures.

Chapter 7 focuses on *Petals of Blood* which represents Ngugi's gauntlet thrown down to the post-colonial administration. It is, however, as I try to show, not merely Ngugi's fraught relationship with Kenyatta and after that informs this, the last novel that Ngugi wrote in English: the language problem and the national problem are shown to be inextricably interwoven. I also discuss Ngugi's problems with the representation of women and relate these to the female circumcision debate begun in *The River Between*.

I then turn back again in Chapter 8 to Armah and to the crucial place of *Why Are We So Blest?* in his work. Its revolutionary treatment of America from the highly critical point of view of the outsider and its resultant reception in Africa and the West is analysed. The central part of the chapter deals with Armah's controversial use of a perverse sexual relationship to figure social, political and race issues. *Why Are We So Blest?* is not a hopeful novel but it is largely seen as cathartic, clearing the way for the reconstructive myth of *Osiris Rising*.

Chapter 9 discusses the enduring problem of settlement and Ngugi's revisiting of independence, 'uhuru' in *Matigari*. His invention of an innovative narrative methodology which incorporates oral and written forms, which invokes Western kinds against the West

and native kinds against the new nation, means that he achieves a transformed kind of narrative which in its very technique leaves questions for the new state to answer.

The final chapter discusses *Osiris Rising* which is the most optimistic in one sense of all the novels discussed, since although it ends with a murder, it also ends with the certainty of rebirth. The myth that Armah devises for *Osiris Rising* comes out of controversies about the relationship of ancient Egypt and modern Africa which have, under the heading of Africanist theory, caused a great deal of upheaval in American universities. I do not attempt an intervention on either side of the debate but rather try to show how the debate has provided material for Armah's construction of a myth of resurrection.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is not about Literature. [...It] is a life discipline. Its substance consists of life reflections.¹

The African continent has had a long, chequered and diverse colonial history the effects of which still continue to exert pressure on the various cultures of the continent. Clearly then twentieth century African literature, insofar as it is a product of history is implicated in the colonial heritage. But this is equally not the only heritage in which it is implicated and with which it must engage. The term 'African Literature'² is itself much contested and problematic, especially as applied to writing from Anglophone Africa. This may largely be attributable to the fact that the disciplined engagement with any written or unwritten forms coming out of Africa, after much procrastination was neatly captured under the general rubric of 'African Studies'. In a presidential address to the African Studies Association, J.D. Hargreaves, a well-respected scholar on African history, outlined the broad conceptual base, in its earliest form consisting of four components: Political Science, History and Sociology; Science; Economics; and 'the African himself' (Anthropology). It is out of the contested notions of 'the African' in Anthropology that a literature evolved and struggled to establish itself, drawing extensively from the other areas that were the subject of the literature. Consequently, African Studies was conceptualised as a multidisciplinary field, and this approach, started in the United Kingdom, was the basis on which the discipline was established on the African continent. It is this multidisciplinaryity that has come to be regarded with a degree of suspicion as eclectic. Consequently, and with particular regard to the contested nature of African literature, there is the need to problematize the very assumption of a singularity of discipline, especially in an environment of European studies largely 'conducted in watertight compartments'.³ This, of course, is ironical at a time when other disciplines are opening out to their interrelatedness.

¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, 'The Lazy School of Literary Criticism', *West Africa*, 25 February, 1985.

² As I found out to my surprise when I offered a course on 'African Writing', not Literature, in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education of the University of Glasgow in 1994.

³ J. D. Hargreaves, *Decolonization in Africa* (London: Longman, 1988), p.119.

As with such descriptions as Canadian Literature, Indian Literature and so on, the very process of the naming of writing from Africa appears to be indicative of a shared positionality with other literatures from other cultures. And yet the politics surrounding this particular process of cultural production is overdetermined by the privileging of those who got there first. As matters stand English literature, which draws from a cultural and philosophical base that provides it with relevance and meaning for its primary audience, retains a dominant and powerful central position supported by the critical rigour crucial to the discipline. Other literatures, which have in their present form developed in direct relation to this literature find themselves always marginal to it even as they struggle to express themselves in its language, and take on its form. The paradox of the position in which the African novel finds itself is a result of its alienation from its own creative sources. V. Y. Mudimbe, interrogating the 'invention of Africa' in a book with the same title notes that:

Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly "Afrocentric" descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order.⁴

It is mistakenly presumed that because African writing (which was a western construct) readily took on the language as well as the rationale underpinning the western novel, that it had no indigenous structures capable of supporting an independent product. The question that lies at the heart of much post-colonial debate about African literature is indeed whether African writing is capable of conceiving of a philosophical abstraction from its own experience.⁵ To Mudimbe, it is a question of power. Mudimbe investigates the processes through which the transformation of knowledge takes place, and is concerned with the ways in which knowledge and power in, and about Africa, are mediated. He starts from the premise that:

the ways in which [African traditional systems of thought] have been evaluated and the means used to explain them relate to theories and methods whose constraints, rules and

⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.x.

⁵ Also in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.137.

systems of operation suppose a non-African epistemological locus [...] a silent dependence on a Western *episteme*.⁶

The idea that theory in itself is the product of a more sophisticated imagination, one on an elevated level of perception and not yet applicable to, or conceptually inscribed in these works is partially responsible for the selective eclecticism popular as an approach in its criticism, even as it is a symptom of the cross-disciplinary nature of the subject. Trespass over a wide range of ideas, some not fully understood or integrated, others derived from disparate contexts left largely unexplored is not uncommon. Theory is nevertheless rooted in the material conditions of a particular culture. Therefore, the most pertinent concern should be for Anglophone African writing to 'be made explicit within the framework of [its] own rationality'.⁷ The creative texts themselves are clearly more than just narrative; they are also the products of complex epistemological contexts, which must in turn be approached from multiple perspectives. This thesis is about the impact of these contexts on two of the most important twentieth century African writers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah.

Ngugi and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi sought to challenge some of these problems in their struggle to set up a Department of Literature that would look at 'other' literatures without treating them as 'apologetic' extensions or appendages to English literature.⁸ John Docker, an Australian academic situates the continued association of Australian literature with that of the British in this landscape. He argues that this literature has developed in such close affiliation to English literature so as to collapse into the 'proud possess[ion] of a thousand-year history of literary culture'.⁹ Ironically, the Outsiders are themselves further subdivided into 'insiders' and 'outsiders', those from the white commonwealth and North America, and the rest,

⁶ Mudimbe, p.x.

⁷ Mudimbe, p.x.

⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'On the Abolition of the English Department' in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft and others (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.438-439.

⁹ John Docker, 'The Neocolonial Assumption in University Teaching of English', *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, pp.443-446 (p.445).

those from Asia and Africa.¹⁰ But even those who fall outside the scope of Docker's claims, those doubly outside, argue for a similar right to representation. Emmanuel Quarcoo, a Ghanaian academic argues that English has been operational in Ghana for close on two centuries and in its usage qualifies as a 'Ghanaian artifact'.¹¹ His claim is borne out by Armah's masterful use of the language even as debate rages over the prudence of using English at all.

Many questions have been raised regarding the relation of English to its original place, and its function within the regions of its former Empire, to which its most strategic link remains language: is it the aim that the literatures produced in these regions should attain a coming of age, overseen by the centre? Is their use of English an apprenticeship, in preparation for full mastery in the future, or is it a test of intelligibility that once passed qualifies one for a return to the original nation languages? And when does African literature qualify to express itself unapologetically in English, acknowledging the full impact of the linguistic legacy of colonialism, and share in the rich and varied heritage English claims in the manner suggested by Docker above? These are some of the paradoxes and tensions that underpin Armah and Ngugi's writing that the thesis seeks to clarify.

From the outset, African writing developed within a dynamic and interactive context and was already by the fifties perceived, both inside and outside the continent, as the literary manifestation of a larger cultural struggle to produce national art forms. In the early sixties literary debate within Africa itself engaged with notions of art for art's sake, ironically at a time when the notion that art could be free of social and political pressures, or that it could be judged on purely aesthetic grounds, was ceasing to have much support in Europe or America. The development of a Black Aesthetic was regarded as crucial to the creation of self-confidence, particularly in the literary arena

¹⁰ Emmanuel Quarcoo, 'The English Language as a Modern Artifact in Ghana', *Journal of Black Studies*, 24:3 (March, 1994), 329-343 (p.331). It is noted in this paper that the presumed binaries are really a part of an ever widening English-speaking world, here referred to as the 'Expanding circle', which includes Japan, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union and parts of Eastern Europe (p.332).

¹¹ English is 'consumed' equally by those who have been previously assimilated by it. In 'Consuming Others,' Willy Maley refers to 'the insatiable English', which appropriates and consumes others (In *English: Journal of the English Association*, 49: 193 (Spring 2000), 78-83 (p.80). Quarcoo argues that inasmuch as cultures have been 'Englishized', so also has English been 'nativised' (p.332). His emphasis is on the duality of the process.

where the emphasis on English, and in Francophone Africa, French literature and culture, had up to now been unquestioningly seen to constitute and command this area of inquiry. One result was the Negritudist movement, spearheaded by Léopold Senghor of Senegal, and characterised by Aimé Césaire's *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* (*Return to My Native Land*). Whatever the contentions of the time, however, African literature was not destined to develop in any kind of pure 'literary' atmosphere. The writers of the period inevitably found themselves tackling positions already embattled, issues whose supporters were already engaged ideologically and in other ways. They were effectively forced to work in an arena where a range of standards and values, not always compatible with each other, had already taken root.

From the early 1960s, a period that John Lonsdale refers to as the 'springtime of the new Africa',¹² there was considerable new writing by the Africans themselves. Unlike the period before this, when the writers had addressed mainly anthropological, historical, and legal matters,¹³ this new writing sought a new form of expression, and addressed itself to an ever widening audience and agenda through the avenue opened up by the genre of Fiction (the novel, short stories, plays). This genre allowed the space for answering questions ranging from the anthropological, as it explained itself, to the more social and political, as it struggled to master its environment. These sixties' writers were unique in the sense that they were engaged in an exercise of creation and retrieval in a relatively permanent, and widely disseminated medium. Their realisation of this fact, and subsequently the enormity of their mission is indicated by their concerns, expressed at such forums as the 1962 Makerere Conference. At this forum, they were able to think about and examine the nature of their task, and determine what course they were to follow in the creation of a body of work that would speak to, and for, the continent. And yet they worked in an environment already fraught with tensions. If the novel, even as it was produced in Africa by Africans was seen as a Western creation, what then did this say about the writers themselves in terms of their identity, and identification? Obiechina has

¹² Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya. Book 2: Violence and Ethnicity* (London: James Currey, 1992), John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: The Problem', p. 275. (This book will be referred to in the rest of the thesis as 'Lonsdale').

¹³ Gareth Griffiths, *A Double Exile: African and West Indian Writing Between Two Cultures* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p. 11.

observed that the West African writer was not a product of the West African environment, a statement that can be equally applied to the East African writer.¹⁴ And if in the early days these writers criticised the West, it was seen as a 'betrayal of Western generosity and trust'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the conscious shift in their purpose and emphasis enabled the development of something new and different, something surpassing simple collusion, reaction, or imitation.

The Quest for an Ideology: Marxism

The failure of independence to live up to its revolutionary promise brought with it an urgency, particularly for radical African writers, to find effective ways to criticise, but at the same time to renegotiate with the new leaders, for freedom. Nowhere is the tension between Ngugi and Armah more clearly displayed than in this search for a functional ideology.

Ngugi sought answers in Marxism, an ideology Armah agrees may have provided a discourse or language with codes and icons that those oppressed by Capitalism felt they could use at the time. Armah nevertheless remains very sensitive to, and harshly critical of the literary Eurocentric hegemony Marxism has itself generated. He tries to look at human relationships outside any formulaic style and is suspicious of the idea of the African revolution as propelled by a cohesive body of 'workers' in solidarity against such competing affiliations as culture, gender, or even the family.¹⁶ These identities, 'primary and powerful enough to to override secondary and tertiary identities' are supposed to be the end result of a revolution by the proletariat.

In 'Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-a-vis African Revolutionary Theory and Praxis' (1984), Armah is sceptical of the suitability and ability of Marxist theory to enhance, advance or clarify African writing, or indeed African liberation. He challenges the notion that a theory so specifically premised on the observation of the

¹⁴ Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.3.

¹⁵ Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy,' p.274.

¹⁶ Ayi Kwei Armah, 'Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-à-vis African Revolutionary Theory and Praxis', *Présence Africaine*, 131 (1984), 35-65, (p.43).

material culture of an industrialising West can be applied as an alternative to Capital in newly independent Africa. Armah sees Marxism as characterised by a manichean polarisation that privileges the West while adding to Africa's problems. He is also struck by the chauvinism and irony of individualism, so taken with itself that it names an idea all about communalism for one man, a contradiction also noted by Ngugi. Talking about the influence of Marxism on his writing since *Petals of Blood*, and in particular about its potential as a liberating ideology in *I Will Marry When I Want*, Ngugi says:

When one looks at a word like *Marxist*, particularly in relation to literature, it can be very misleading. It is just a label. When it comes to art, theater and novels, one must experience the works themselves. [...] Karl Marx? History did not learn from him. It is he who learned from history. [...] Meaning that people live. They work; they struggle; they eat; they marry; they quarrel; they fight. That is the reality. Marx and others observed this and they drew lessons or conclusions from this daily struggle that we all face. We are all dealing with the same issues, the same history.¹⁷

Ngugi draws from these uniquely specific histories and includes his own.

It is specifically from Marx's perception of history that Armah's principal argument against Marxism stems. The idea of a linear view of history – 'obediently lined up like so many Prussian soldiers'¹⁸ – is unacceptable because it ignores the reality of history as a complex, multifaceted process consisting of multiple concurrent realities. This linear sequence is one that inevitably consigns Africa to the dungheap of its so-called modern civilisation, and is therefore unacceptable as a paradigm for progress. The *intention* of Marx's study is singularly exclusive. The beliefs of Marx and Engels in European supremacy precluded their taking other worlds into account, yet presented those from other worlds as a 'residual category'.¹⁹ To these 'rest',²⁰ now ubiquitously referred to as 'other',²¹ Europeanisation or Westernisation was advanced

¹⁷ Tami Alpert, 'Ngugi by Telephone,' in *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1993; repr. 1995), pp.229-232, (p.231).

¹⁸ 'Masks and Marx', p.46.

¹⁹ 'Masks and Marx', p.52.

²⁰ As in Chinweizu, *The West and the rest of us*, (Pero Press, 1987).

²¹ Edward Said, who has himself previously defined and used the word to great effect, rightly argues that it has 'acquired a sheen of modishness that has become extremely objectionable'. Edward Said, 'The Politics of Knowledge' *Raritan*, 11:1 (Summer, 1991), 17-31 (p.19).

as the only desirable goal. Armah refuses to equivocate over hegemonism, which he perceives as presumptuous regardless of its origins.²² His assessment of the function of Western enterprise in post-independence Africa, ideological persuasion notwithstanding, is one of failure to demonstrate nurture followed by maturation and separation. On the contrary, evidence points to the perpetuation of a managed dependency that has no intention of relinquishing its hegemony, and which has invariably established and supported dictatorships that have sabotaged beneficent change and made a mockery of democracy as national desire. It is against this background that the Ngugi of *Petals of Blood* fits into the category Armah describes as 'intellectual orphan':²³ Ngugi's approach in this novel has been read as Marxist, a theory that to Armah is dangerously Eurocentric and racist, and that logically followed leads to a Europeanised world.²⁴ It is the belief of Marx and Engels in European supremacy²⁵ that invalidates their theories as tools for African liberation.

One of the major attractions of Marxism was its seductive 'universality', that provided essential theoretical and ideological space for a generation of African scholars. Terry Eagleton in 1976 refutes the argument for universality that derives from the position that 'the greatest art is that which timelessly transcends its historical conditions'²⁶ even as it is moulded by these conditions. To these scholars, and Ngugi, Marx's historical grounding was superseded by his conclusions, and what these could do to help shift the debate from the antithetical impasse ascribed by colonialism to a more acceptable, and even equal, location. There were precedents pointing to its usefulness. In North America, W. E. B. Dubois used it to empower disenfranchised blacks, and extended to the African diaspora through the Panafrikan movement. Thus Marxism was ironically placed on the agenda by the very first crop of African leadership that Ngugi and Armah were up against.

²² 'Masks and Marx', p.60.

²³ 'Masks and Marx', p.49.

²⁴ 'Masks and Marx', p.50.

²⁵ 'Masks and Marx', p.49.

²⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, (Berkeley: University of California P., 1976), p.3.

The 'historical' view of literature is not exclusive to Marx, and has been held by a number of scholars. Indeed Hegel, the German idealist philosopher (of whom Armah is also critical), had considerable influence on Marx.²⁷ Eagleton, nevertheless, emphasises the uniqueness of Marx's contribution, hence appeal. He says: 'The originality of Marxist criticism [...] lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its *revolutionary* understanding of history itself'.²⁸ This is the meeting point with Ngugi, who while remaining critical, is receptive to the possibilities for change indicated by Marxism. He says: 'Cultures that change to reflect the ever changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy'.²⁹

Post-Independence as Post-colonial? Finding a Meaningful Framework

Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post': postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism....
Homi Bhabha³⁰

The paradoxes and contradictions concerning ancestry, and questions about the ultimate allegiance of both the writers and their writing are still seen as all-important, especially within the framework of the current theoretical discourses on Culture and the Post-colonial.³¹ Questions concerning predispositions to hegemony, and the significance of the 'speaking position'³² in exploring works from the former margins by Western critics (in the essays in *De-Scribing Empire* for example) continue to

²⁷ Ayi Kwei Armah and Aboubacry Moussa Lam, *Hieroglyphics for Babies: A Drawing and Writing Manual for Preschoolers, Parents and Teachers* (Dakar: Per Ankh, 1977), p.6.

²⁸ Eagleton, p.3. My emphasis.

²⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle For Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: EAPH, 1993), p.xvi.

³⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.1.

³¹ Gareth Griffiths, *A Double Exile: African and West Indian Writing Between Two Cultures* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p.143. Griffiths discusses the critical phase in the sixties in which African writing was read/dissected in search of Western influences. Western critics 'were delighted to recognize this [the input from the traditional English literature courses] and to play the game of spotting the influences' (p.143).

³² Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, *De-scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

dominate the debate, and point to the uneasiness attendant in the negotiation of the outsider/insider position.

Recent colonial discourse theory problematises in a useful way earlier notions of postcolonial resistance that fixed the argument into a question of binaries – at once irreducible and essentialist. But the controversy surrounding current use of the term ‘postcolonial’ indicates just how difficult it is to challenge, and indeed change, modes of perception and action. The term ‘postcolonial’ paradoxically contains, and even appears to negate, the potentially liberating forces wrought by independence by keeping it yoked to a historical humiliation. Consequently, it consecrates hegemony instead of changing our view of the world in any radical way, unremittingly but almost unwittingly continuing to privilege the North. There is a real danger in the strategies for subversion being bound by the very thing they seek to subvert. In Killam and Rowe, it is argued that:

It is certainly true that the stress in such theories on the inevitable interconnectedness of colonizer and colonized creates an impression of the continuing dependence of colonialism in modern post-independence cultural formations, and that the stress on subversion and subversive strategies rather than direct opposition appears to deny the abrogative possibility of the decolonizing confrontation.³³

This, surely, is an anxiety largely experienced by those whose world has also moved to the centre, rather than those writing while experiencing the oppressive consequences of the colonial encounter in the post-colonial places? I read Edward Said’s, and Gayatri Spivak’s engagements (as well as attempts to engage) with the political problems in Palestine and India, respectively, as reflections of just this realisation. These, and other critics of postcolonialism are not immune to the conflicting demands made on them by their in-betweenness. Gün Orgun argues cogently that as they probe the nervousness of their condition, the conflicting terms of their self positioning become apparent as:

alternatively contrapuntal, partial, nostalgic, guilty, chameleonic, stereoscopic, schizophrenic, fragmented, fluid, decolonising, orientalisising, ambivalent, and engaged, defensive and strident, complicit yet emancipatory, international yet tied down by, as well as gesturing allegiance

³³ ‘Literary Theory’, *The Companion to African Literatures*, ed. by Douglas Killam & Ruth Rowe (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), p.143.

towards, regional and national identity and history.³⁴

It is this neurotic state that Fanon identified as characteristic of the colonised.³⁵ A Martiniquean, a Frenchman, a conscientious psychiatrist, an Algerian activist, and one of the icons of the radical African school, Fanon is controversial, especially for his insistence that consciousness be translated to action. Yet it is in this insistence that his work continues to appeal to an impressive and diverse group. In his life, Fanon succeeded in combining 'opposition to cultural imperialism with a vigorous defence of culture as a strategy of resistance and a locus of national identity'.³⁶ His sensitivity to the linkage between colonial subject and master, as Moore-Gilbert argues, is what makes him attractive both to western critics and to the colonised who have extensively used his critique of Imperialism in *The Wretched of the Earth* as the 'bible', the textual testament to, and blueprint for, liberation.³⁷

The question of Fanon's relevance for Africa has been contested. David Caute once argued that Fanon was more readily accessible in the West and was popular with the radical left and others some time before Anglophone Africa ever heard of him.³⁸ The Algerians to whose cause he dedicated most of his life have reconfigured his contribution to their cause, seeing in him the European 'interloper' rather than a comrade.³⁹ It is ironical that they read in his versatile capacity a sublimation into 'a discourse of purity and exclusivity'.⁴⁰ According to Ngugi, 'it is not possible to understand what informs African writing, particularly novels written by Africans'

³⁴ Gün Örgün, 'Through Travelled Eyes: Representations of Subcontinental Migrations', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Glasgow, 1997), p.234.

³⁵ Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp.112-123 (p.116). Also the Foreword to the Pluto edn of *Black Skin White Masks*.

³⁶ Gareth Moore-Gilbert, G. Stanton & Willy Maley, eds and Introd, *Postcolonial Criticism* (London: Longman, 1997), p.12.

³⁷ *Moving the Centre*, p.2.

³⁸ In David Caute, *Fanon* (London: Fontana, 1970). Also Derek Wright, 'Fanon and Africa: A Retrospect', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 24: 4 (1986), 679-689.

³⁹ Louis Gates, 'Critical Fanonism', p. 468. This is a notable shift from the simple yet heartfelt tribute - 'Fanon, our Brother' - used by *El Moudjahid* to mark his death in 1962.

⁴⁰ Moore-Gilbert, p.15. There is the enticing suggestion, advanced by Gendzier, that this attitude may stem from the tensions surrounding Arab/Western relations rather than any failure on Fanon's part.

without reading Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.⁴¹ He famously described this writing in the 1970s as 'a series of imaginative footnotes to Frantz Fanon'.⁴² Fanon, whom I discuss in Chapter 5 continues to be central to the contemporary debate over the role of Africa in antiquity, and in the future, and to both Ngugi, and Armah's response to it.

Ngugi and Armah are critically conscious of the tensions inherent in their positioning as products of their different cultures but at the same time as writers determined to problematise the political and cultural configurations inherited from colonialism. My argument is that in their different ways, Ngugi through language and Armah through mythical reconceptualisation, they succeed in radically revisioning the possibilities of a different kind of relationship, one in which difference and innovation, rather than imitation and reproduction are celebrated.

The term Postcolonial has in its definition and usage ceased to refer simply to a time after independence, or after colonialism. As the editors of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* point out, to use the term in this way would give the false impression that the process of colonialism is now over, raising the possibility of decolonisation.⁴³ In keeping with the trend of 'going beyond' or reflexive re-examinations of existing theory that has propelled and transposed European and American critical theories into the 'post' space of postmodernism, postmarxism, and so on, it is not surprising that, using the same logic, writing from the South seizes a similar strategy so as to interrogate Imperial power from within its own territory.

Stephen Slemon in the *Post-colonial Studies Reader* gives a wide range of the areas – remarkably heterogeneous yet closely bound – to which the term Post-colonial has been applied:

It has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as

⁴¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Language of African Fiction', in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), pp.63-86 (p.63).

⁴² Ngugi, 'The Writer in a Neocolonial State, *Moving the Centre*, p.66.

⁴³ 'Introduction', *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), p.117.

a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of 'class', as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a third world intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of 'reading practice' and [...] as the name for a category of 'literary' activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called 'Commonwealth' literary studies.⁴⁴

Slemon summarises the range of possibilities as constituting 'an object of desire for critical practice',⁴⁵ and himself finds this last definition the most attractive. These apparently fragmented disparate areas of interest are, of course, linked by colonialism.

Drew Milne approaches postcolonialism with the scepticism of one firmly grounded by the material basis of his ideological position. He nevertheless captures the intentions and contradictions, already experienced in modern literary theory by postmodernism, poststructuralism, postmarxism, for example. He doubts the power of the 'post', but in expressing this doubt shows the difficulties, and even dangers inherent in breaking free of a constrictive theoretical mould, in trying to create possibility. As he sees it:

'Post' appears in numerous novelty compound terms as an empty signifier which marks the site of ideological conflicts. Major paradigm shifts attempt to become hegemonic through the strategic dissemination of this prefix. 'Post-' paralyses debate around the significance of the term to which the prefix is added, often without respecting the complexity of the existing term: post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonial theory, post-feminism, post-Marxism... [and that] the need to debate the prefix merely compounds the abstract relation to existing social formations, forcing opponents of the critiques left implicit in such hegemonic discourses into ever more reductive arguments about the labels used to control debate.⁴⁶

Milne's argument is that 'post' does nothing to clarify the terms to which it is added even if it forces focus on them. That, I think, is the point. It functions, therefore, as a

⁴⁴ Stephen Slemon, 'The Scramble for Post-colonialism', *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft and others (London: Routledge, 1995), p.45.

⁴⁵ Slemon, p.45.

⁴⁶ Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.24.

'space clearing gesture',⁴⁷ and in postcolonialism allows for an examination and questioning of the past and present impact of imperialism from within the structures erected by imperialism itself.

The battle for cultural dominance is what today characterises global relations. Even as England, conversely the most penetrated territory,⁴⁸ struggles to reestablish and retain control at home, her 'Empire' determinedly demands recognition both at home and away. It is with an awareness of the dangers inherent in a reversal of dominance that Benita Parry warns that the theories of colonialist discourse may in turn become coloniser. The Ibo have a proverb: he who brings home ant-ridden faggots must be prepared for a visit from the lizards. Today, England is the site of cultural diversity and innovation, a locus in which migrant and exiled minds have fought to establish a creative space. The struggle for exclusion is at once the struggle for inclusion, inextricably linking the oppositional forces. In recent years, the term 'postcolonial' has come to define this space.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, in the Western Academy, African writing continues to be perceived largely in terms of its relationship to the 'classical' standard.⁵⁰ As Chris Tiffin and Lawson argue, 'the quest to defeat, escape or circumvent the pattern of binaries which has been identified as foundational to Western thought [...] is seldom, if ever, attained'.⁵¹ This 'traditional Western novel' is still assumed, even as critics search for new forms, to have achieved what Griffiths has described as 'the perfect ideal'.⁵²

⁴⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 336-57.

⁴⁸ Declan Kiberd, 'Inventing England', *Intercultural Communications Conference*, 13th May 1998, Trinity College, Dublin, Eire. I use the term advisedly, having been made keenly aware of the nuanced nature of 'Britain'.

⁴⁹ So popular has the term become, Abiola Irele recently joked that if we are not careful we'll soon be in danger of overreaching ourselves and read significance even in the commonplace – post-office, maybe postman (an aside at the *Mediums of Change Conference* at The School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS], London, 1995).

⁵⁰ Read 'traditional Western': many western critics would argue that there is no such thing as the western novel, but different forms of western novel. The western novel is, of course, itself an imaginary construct.

⁵¹ Tiffin, p.6.

⁵² Griffiths, p.142.

Ato Quayson questions assumptions about European 'mastertexts' and insists on the rereading of western templates.⁵³ The self definition and cultural explanations that at first characterised African writing have given way to a questioning of the reasons for the status quo. The perception of African writing as overwhelmingly political has grown out of this fact; that it is the product of a politically overdetermined environment, overshadowed by the fact of colonialism. To acknowledge this is to recognise the tensions ever present between the former coloniser and the now independent nation. That this nation is first and foremost a political formation has to be acknowledged. It is out of this formation that the writing emerges. In the epigraph to this introduction, Armah indicates this contextual debt, pointing out that literature is about more than just literature. Armah insists that it must be seen as a product of its historical context for two reasons:

First, history itself has, in Africa, long been the prime material of serious literary and verbal art, as distinct from entertainment. Secondly, history is a live issue in discussions of African literature today, partly because historians have played a pioneering role in clarifying the true boundaries of African literature.⁵⁴

In *Transformative Strategies in Nigerian Writing*, Quayson makes a number of important observations about the perception of African writing, especially about the notion that it is attendant on a western model. He tries instead, through a close reading of texts, to focus attention on narratives as products, as well as generators, of their own context.⁵⁵ He suggests new ways of thinking about African writing that have particular relevance here. The first is that African writing is not the expression of a single tradition. Within this thesis, it becomes clear that Armah and Ngugi may be joined by the language of colonialism, but their concerns are dictated by unique circumstances of history and geography, and radical personal experience. This leads to the second consideration, that literature is associative, and not sufficient to itself. Quayson insists on its linkage with historiography and social theory, because

⁵³ In a private discussion at the African Studies Association (ASAUK) Biennial Conference, *Comparisons and Transitions*, SOAS, University of London, 14-16 September 1998, 15th September.

⁵⁴ Armah, 'The Lazy School', p.356.

⁵⁵ Ato Quayson, *Transformative Strategies in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997).

literature, like everything else is the outgrowth of specific situations. According to Quayson, the West is stabilized within a moral framework from which construct it has judged and tamed its empire. It is this framework that needs to be challenged and the West situated within its more threatening cognitive function: not as a benevolent, civilising patriarch, drawing all to itself in global outreach out of some altruistic desire, but as an aggressive, opportunistic, exploitative conqueror. Western literature is part of this project, establishing the literary rules of play and refereeing the match.

*

One of the notions on which this thesis is based is that of shared but radically different colonial pasts for Kenya and Ghana. While Ghana's colonial history gradually evolved into a curiously amicable negotiated partnership based on mutual respect, the situation in Kenya was very different. Kenya was a settler colony, and independence here was precipitated by violent clashes between the colonial forces and Kenyans leading to the Emergency in the 1950s, and the emergence of the Mau Mau movement. This movement is historically configured in the discourse of colonialism as atavistic and irrational, isolated and non-representative. This is the historical fissure that informs Ngugi's literary attempts in *Petals of Blood*, a novel that aims to be inclusive and Kenyan in character.

For Ngugi, Mau Mau symbolises the betrayal, by Kenyatta, of independence. It is from this microcosm that Ngugi radically reconceptualises what independence signifies, as well as the potential threat to it posed by Mau Mau. Ngugi's restoration of this particular narrative is as exciting for the literary critic as it is disturbing for conservative pro-establishment historians, and important for Kenyan history. As well as questioning the available records, most of which are colonial in slant, Ngugi raises pertinent questions concerning the ideological war between oral and written forms; he queries the importance of nationality, language and its significance, the role of women and the position of the local in relation to the national and the global.⁵⁶ The

⁵⁶ Richard Rathbone, 'Ghana', *Changing Historiography of the Transfer of Power in Africa*, Unpublished paper presented at the ASAUUK Conference, *Comparisons and Contrasts*, SOAS, London, 14-16 September, 1998, 15 September. In his presentation Rathbone noted the caution with which colonial records, which are influenced by the institutions that produce them, must be approached.

opportunity that was lost at independence to deconstruct the colonial structures of dependency has created a society curiously at odds with itself. This is reflected in the tensions between Ngugi, and the society he writes for and about, as he searches for an effective idiom in which to express his concerns.

Armah's writing also reflects such tensions but the Ghanaian context has different nuances. In Ghana, it is Nkrumah himself as visionary leader that bears the brunt of Armah's keen disappointment. Nkrumah successfully staged a coup against the intellectuals in Ghana, and sought to establish a non-elitist, egalitarian society. It is his speedy betrayal of this idealistic vision that so disturbs Armah. Nkrumah made the attainment of his dream tantalisingly palpable, creating expectations so hopeful that his failure to fulfil them has come under the harshest of criticisms from Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. But it is the wider context in which Nkrumah was implicated to which Ngugi in his reading of Armah draws our attention. In 'The Allegory of the Cave' Ngugi situates Nkrumah's actions against the backdrop of a hostile and resentful west, as unhappy with Nkrumah's ideological leaning to the left as it was with his vision of a truly independent and united Africa. Citing Nyerere and Nkrumah as examples of visionaries who sought to create African States with African cultural as well as linguistic points of reference, Ngugi emphasises the importance that each of these leaders attached to language as the means through which some sense of autonomy might be retained. Ngugi's criticism comes, of course, at a much later time, when the role played by imperialism is much clearer, but he insists nevertheless that to separate imperialism from its language of oppression has already caused untold damage, and will continue to hold to ransom those who refuse to acknowledge the vital connection between their alienation locally and marginalisation globally. Ngugi says of the novel:

It is truly ironic that the *Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* should have been so incisive in its analysis of the postcolonial middle class and so wrong in its assessment of Kwameh Nkrumah because the text, in part, was inadequate in its grasp of the machinations of imperialism. It also failed to see that the members of the middle class were trapped not merely within their Oxbridge accents but within the languages of colonial imposition. The class condemned in the text would have found no difficulties in embracing the text and its

English linguistic brilliance as an example of their own achievement as a class.⁵⁷

It is against such a background of a denial of the right to full participation, and of complicity from the structures supporting government such as the intellectual community, that one might understand (not excuse) the shock expressed by the American Classicist Mary Lefkowitz, discussed in Chapter 9 (*Osiris Rising: Revisioning Past, Present and Future*) to find that an alternative black culture now runs side by side with mainstream, white, American culture, teaching its own 'truths'.

One of the major constraints under which African writing has had to labour is in its peculiar relationship to expatriate writers and critics of the genre. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, was written in response to what he perceived as the misrepresentation of West African life in Joyce Cary's *Mr. Johnson*. Expatriate critics consciously and unconsciously looked for a literary product reflective of the stage at which western literature had arrived; something to which they could apply the only possible critical standards, those pertinent to their own novels, and circumstances. Today postcolonial theory makes a critical intervention which partially provides a (much contested) forum through which an interrogation of the hegemonic structuring of the literary world can continue. Its invention has already proved particularly useful as an analytical tool for a situation that continues to sanction hierarchical distinctions based on imperial hegemony. It recognises the interestedness of those still struggling for freedom, as well as those determined to retain dominance, revealing the anxieties contained in the struggle. In the words of Stuart Hall, postcolonial theory 'repoliticises the act of reading',⁵⁸ and therefore, of understanding African writing, itself colonial, in its political and related contexts. In 'When Was "The Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit' Hall analyses the emergence and development of postcolonial theory,

⁵⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*, Clarendon Lectures in English (Clarendon Press, 1998), p.99.

⁵⁸ Stuart Hall, 'When was "The Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit', *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996). To Hall post-colonial theory opens up paths of inquiry for some even as others perceive it as a threat. It has indeed become 'the bearer of such powerful unconscious investments – a sign of desire for some, and equally for others, a signifier of danger' (p.242.). In 'Consuming Others' (p.79), Willy Maley sees this danger as demonstrated in the manner in which postcolonialism has subverted the boundaries between disciplines, destroying them 'like there was no tomorrow'. It is so voracious, he predicts that it will ultimately consume itself. Other theories, having served their purpose have similarly run out of steam.

looking at the initial attempts to formulate a framework that might enable the interrogation of a world becoming increasingly integrated, yet divided by the Imperial past. Colonialism was the traumatic event that historically dominated and overshadowed attempts to broadly formulate complementary practice and discourse. Hall traces some of the seminal ideas, from those that read 'post' to mean chronologically 'past' to the increasingly sophisticated readings that recognise, ultimately, that the world can no longer be read in terms of the old paradigms that constituted power in the west although equally it cannot simply ignore or forget them. No culture can now claim self-sufficiency or indeed, purity.

Both Armah and Ngugi resist strongly the idea that intellectual activity is somehow superior to the societies that produce the intellectuals themselves. Ngugi is famous for his attempts to make the University relevant to its community through interactive community theatre and public readings at grassroots level. As a result of his efforts he was first imprisoned, then hounded out of home by the Kenya political establishment. Ngugi had lived, significantly, in his ancestral home, Kamiriithu, contrary to the expected migration of the intellectual to the urban centre. In Kenya, the dichotomy between rural and urban is distinctive and distinguishing, a legacy of colonial policy that excluded native peoples from the urban areas that symbolised progress and arrival, and therefore status, relegating them to rural stagnation and backwardness. In *Osiris Rising*, Armah's most recent novel, he situates the university at Manda, an outlying town that is at the heart of community. It draws from, and is sustained by the community around it, a natural corollary to its desire for self-reflection and progression. But here too, the State is configured as the enemy. The tragedy of the development of writing in Africa is that, because it is largely written in Europhone languages, it is read as an inseparable component of colonial hegemony, such that any employment of it, even to express independent concerns cannot be imagined as stemming from outside this mould. Not all the ideas or processes involved in the generation of literature in Africa are subject solely to this influence. In the attempt to 'domesticate' the African novel, many African critics today insist on the integration of oral and written forms.⁵⁹ Oral forms have been thought of as bearing

⁵⁹ Quayson, p.1-2. He uses the term 'domesticate'.

values that are not normally considered simply aesthetic (historical, or anthropological, for instance), and it is this extra-literary baggage that raises problems when it comes to classification. 'Orature', a term coined during the search for an appropriate rubric in the seventies by Pio Zirimu (in *Black Aesthetics*), the writer and literary critic Austin Bukenya, and others is a fusion of oracy and literacy. Lalage Bown sees in the work of Amos Tutuola one of the best examples of this form. Tutuola's work precedes the naming by more than a decade. In a critical review in 1966, Eldred Jones described what surely signalled a beginning as 'a fascinating literary cul de sac'. He attributed Tutuola's style to his 'imperfect knowledge of English'.⁶⁰ Tutuola was a storekeeper with the Nigeria Broadcasting service at the time, but was also a well known storyteller locally. Jones was right with regard to Tutuola himself. In spite of the literary revolution that has taken place since he wrote *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, his style continues to defy/resist the theory of literary evolution to a 'higher' linguistic state that was largely assumed to be not only desirable, but also inevitable. In 1981, twenty years after *The Palm Wine Drinkard* was published by Faber and Faber (who got the manuscript from The United Society for Christian Literature, to which Tutuola had submitted it),⁶¹ he wrote *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town*, and in 1987 *Pauper, Brawler and Slanderer*, both works written in the manner in which he spoke. He said the following of *The Witch-Herbalist* :

The materials from which I wrote the thing, it's quite simple even a child knows each one in Nigeria. The tortoise was so greedy. When his wife did not conceive in time, he went to a witch doctor gave him some soup but the tortoise was so greedy that he ate from this soup and then he gave the rest to his wife. And then he conceived as well as his wife! So this was a sort of punishment from the witch doctor.⁶²

Tutuola wrote as he spoke. That he continued to write in the same way in spite of the literary controversy his novel had provoked reflects a particularly Nigerian strength. His awareness of his linguistic 'imperfections' did not deter him from writing, an action that certainly legitimized the subversion of the English language. As he says of

⁶⁰ In Hans Zell, C. Bundy and Virginia Coulon, eds, *A New Readers Guide to African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1993), p.501.

⁶¹ The emphasis here is on the word 'Christian' to highlight the influence and role of the church on education, writing, and publication on the continent.

⁶² Zell, p.501.

Soyinka in an interview – ‘he is very advanced in English, he knows English just like his own mother tongue, you. So I cannot compare myself with him’.⁶³ Indeed, even of his published novels, the editors are said to have ‘smoothed out the edges’.⁶⁴ The implication here is of a roughness. That Tutuola was published by one of the most prestigious publishing houses at the time (even as an act of Christian charity) is significant because it reflects the need at the time for diversity. George Steiner had already remarked the end of the (European) novel, in literary circles already seen as jaded. This period paved the way for the quest for the exotic. The freshness and newness of Tutuola’s work made a welcome change, as was indicated by the rave reviews it received.⁶⁵ Dylan Thomas, for instance, was ‘entranced’, an emotion more recently associated with the West’s reception of Ben Okri’s Booker prize winner, *The Famished Road* (1991). Tutuola, ‘quaint’ and ‘exotic’, readily filled a gap. His is at once a creative and irreverent action. While Tutuola was engaged in creatively retelling versions of stories already part of his culture’s repertoire, the written forms, which will be the focus of this study, evolved out of the ‘freed’ imaginations of individual creators. They remain at liberty to draw on these traditional sources but are not bound by the conventions of these forms. For today’s African writer success largely depends on the ability to write with a ‘universal’, non-subversive appeal, making the work accessible to the west, but infusing it with elements of the exotic, fulfilling the desire of the buying public, who remain largely situated in the North, for stimulation.⁶⁶ This is indicated by the equivocal success of writers such as Salman Rushdie, who struggle to straddle the conceptual colonial divide. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini declared a fatwa (legal opinion) on Rushdie making him a target for execution because of *The Satanic Verses*, demonstrating the seriousness of the consequences that can attend what must at once be an intensely private and yet very

⁶³ Zell, p.501.

⁶⁴ Zell, p.500.

⁶⁵ Stewart Brown, ‘Writers From Africa’, *International Writers Series* (London: Book Trust, 1989), p.36.

⁶⁶ Compare for instance Graham Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic: Salman Rushdie and The Booker of Bookers’, *Transition*, 64 (1994), 22-29. He refers to markers that have been used to signify the exotic in Indian writing as in Salman Rushdie’s work: ‘snakecharmers, genies, fakirs, and the like – along with some less likely but still readily identifiable totems: the spittoon, for instance’ (p.27).

public exercise.⁶⁷ But what strategies for dialogue and survival do those in the South devise? Do they invariably resort to Femi Osofisan's method, that of 'surreptitious insurrection' in the face of almost inevitable persecution for telling an oppositional truth?⁶⁸ How do those who insist on claiming a viable parallel existence achieve this while insisting first on a severance from the framework of colonialism which gives them their contemporary identity, but a severance without which any meaningful development remains a chimera? The Salman Rushdie case proves, however, that no matter how protective and nurturing, western fortresses may in the long term prove unable to withstand the forces of allegiances based on an authority altogether much broader, that transgresses policed borders and globalises terror. In Rushdie's case it is Islamic fundamentalism.

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African writers in the sixties were forced, often in painful ways, to confront the contradictions of the supposedly superior culture within which they received their education. This culture seemed to claim for itself the highest aesthetic and moral ideals, while the political and social realities of colonialism in many ways evidently violated the very ideals that the education system inculcated. Within this political environment writing inevitably took on special tensions. Both Armah and Ngugi came to literary writing from journalism, which demands speed and precision. It also influences and shapes public opinion, a fact they recognised. In their search for an appropriate literary form, they readily took on board the Western literary modes that were available and often felt to be admirable. But could these forms accommodate the peculiar political and social dilemmas that the writers necessarily engaged with, and that Western writers had not and could not have encountered? And so the new African writers, in trying to create a space for themselves, came to be seen as what Lonsdale

⁶⁷ The Ayatollah was both the religious and political leader. By an ironic twist he died in the same year as he declared the fatwa, but it wasn't until 1998, almost ten years later that the Iranian government announced it will no longer seek to enforce it. Interestingly in 1993 Rushdie was awarded the 'Booker of Bookers' for *Midnight's Children*, the novel which first won him the award and gained him recognition in 1981 (Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic').

⁶⁸ Femi Osofisan, 'Reflections on Theatre Practice in Contemporary Nigeria', *African Affairs*, 97 (1998), pp.81-89 (p. 85).

has lately called a 'fifth column'⁶⁹ within the tradition or ranks of expatriate writers that had already established themselves on the continent.

1952, the year in which Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* was published in London by Faber and Faber, is usually seen as the starting point of the writing of African fiction by Africans. This is not the case. Much was already being written even if it did not fit easily into existing categories. There was, for instance, Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* (1911) comprising both fact and fiction, and before this the much earlier travel writings such as Olaudah Equiano's autobiographical *Equiano's Travels: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789). Nevertheless, 'Africa in English Fiction', to borrow Killam's appropriate title, was largely represented by a tradition created by European writers whose relationship to Africa was ultimately tied to imperialism: men, and sometimes women came to Africa in the service of the British Empire, as missionaries, administrators, soldiers, or as employees of the various commercial concerns. The attitude towards the African that came through in this early period is explained by Killam as stemming from the belief in purportedly scientific theories of natural selection attributed in the Victorian era to Charles Darwin.⁷⁰ Social Darwinism served its purpose in legitimising the Imperialist and racist sentiments of the Victorian age, and beyond. According to Killam, it was this type of broad misrepresentation of knowledge that led the Africans in the first part of this century to be seen as 'helpless and barbaric, and the incorporation of this view into imperial philosophy provided a seemingly moral basis for imperial practices [...] such morality by implication ennobl[ing] imperialism'.⁷¹ This morality was that based on the teachings of the Christian Bible: it was Western Christian morality in which love and brotherhood was racially determined. Lonsdale points to the fact that even though in the late fifties and in the sixties it was 'no longer much of a White religion, [it] was at least the root of British culture'⁷² and that none of the ex-colonies, in particular the settler colonies like Kenya, were allowed to ignore its power. These were the ideas

⁶⁹ Lonsdale, p.247.

⁷⁰ G. D. Killam, *Africa In English Fiction, 1874-1939* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968).

⁷¹ Killam, p.59.

⁷² Lonsdale, p.274.

underpinning subsequent relations in Africa, and that would constitute what Killam and others have referred to as 'the African's burden'.⁷³ The creation in works of fiction of the character(s) that developed into the stock or stereotypical representations of this far from equal relationship was started by Henty as far back as 1884.⁷⁴

In the chapter 'Background to the West African Novel' Emmanuel Obiechina discusses the role that these writers from outside the continent played in creating a picture of the African continent for the outside world. His discussion, and the general view expressed towards these writers is similar to the one expressed almost ten years earlier by Killam. The context depicted by Obiechina indicates the compulsion behind the development of much of African writing, always in opposition, always seeking to redress. Obiechina is blunt and authoritative:

foreign writers on West Africa express in their writing prejudices and preconceptions which distort their picture of West African life. Sometimes the writer is aware of these distorting elements and boldly works them into his technique and texture of his narrative; in other circumstances they may operate on him as an unconscious projection of his reaction to something strange and disturbing. In either case, the result is different from the view of West African life held by West African writers who see it from the inside. The contrast is so clear that West African writing by the natives cannot help reacting (coming later in time) to the works by the non-natives.⁷⁵

As early as the eighteenth century, the idea of Africa had penetrated the Western world but because very little was known about it at the time and as with most unknown quantity, myths started to grow around this new phenomenon. Eldred D. Jones in *Othello's Countrymen*⁷⁶ discusses the appropriation of Africa in Elizabethan writing, and Obiechina⁷⁷ remarks Africa's appearance in Jacobean writing as well. Obiechina finds even in such 'travel' writing as Defoe's *The Life, Adventures and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* (1720), all the elements that went to form the basis for the paternalism of the Victorian period. He summarises it succinctly:

⁷³ Killam, p.59.

⁷⁴ Killam, p.59.

⁷⁵ Obiechina, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁶ Eldred Durosimi Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁷⁷ Obiechina, p.18.

the irrationality and gullibility of the African, who would barter food, cattle and other necessities for a few pieces of European iron and silver frippery; the poverty of Africa's material culture (often equated with the absence of civilisation); the fabulous wealth of the continent waiting to be exploited by the resourceful Europeans; the fear of the white man's might (usually the fear of his gun).⁷⁸

Later were to come the writers so popular during both Ngugi and Armah's schooldays such as Rider Haggard of the famous *King Solomon's Mines*, considered a classic. Armah and Ngugi were indeed shaped in their literary appetites by English literature, and struggled to take on board the finest of its traditions. The English language was the medium of instruction, and little distinction was drawn in Christendom between the language, and culture. They were complementary, and served the dual purpose of civilising, and Christianising. At Achimota, nevertheless, where Armah studied, considerable emphasis was laid on the different types of indigenous Ghanaian Art, and its appreciation encouraged. This was an important function of the schools. The independent school, Maangu, provided Ngugi with ample cultural grounding before he joined the Alliance. And home life, into which they were invariably and inevitably socialized, remained traditional for both of them.

Even before the Africans themselves began to write, not all the writing that was produced by the expatriate writers took on this paternalistic tone. Killam discusses the discrediting of Imperialism in African Fiction by white writers drawn to its more positive ideas, and 'repelled by its hypocritical abuses',⁷⁹ and who challenged 'the uncritical acceptance of the worthiness and morality of imperialism'.⁸⁰ In 'The Opposition', Killam reads Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as an example of a writer and text opposed to Imperialism, and cites his recognition of its brutality, which Conrad described in 'Geography and Some Explorers' as the 'vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'.⁸¹ Yet tied in with this recognition is the consistent construction of a

⁷⁸ Obiechina, p.18.

⁷⁹ Killam, p.94.

⁸⁰ Killam, p.82.

⁸¹ Quoted in Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.248.

defence for imperialism, rather than an attempt to challenge its bias. It is difficult for even the most well-intentioned of these writers to overcome ethnocentric inclinations, powerfully inscribed socially, and reinforced by their position of dominance. As Killam observes:

Even the most imaginative novelists – those whose sympathies are widest and whose adjustment of character, situation and setting to the demands of fiction are most successful – allow themselves to be controlled by pressures outside the realm of fiction – that is, the intellectual and social climate which caused them to present both the primitive and the educated African characters in a consistently unrealistic convention. [...] the continued use of the stereotype suggests that [...] the radical changes which have taken place in the western view of Africa and Africans have not been sufficiently reflected in the novels dealing with the subject.⁸²

Thus Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, described by Ngugi as 'one of the most gripping evocations of the horror of imperialism particularly in its colonial guise',⁸³ serves as an iconic invocation of Africa in academia, and more generally. It has nevertheless, in the nuanced, contrapuntal re-reading by Edward Said that led to *Orientalism* (1978), generated one of the tightest criticisms of the colonial legacy in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Crucially, it has provoked postcolonial theoretical discourse, that allows for a reconceptualisation of the relationship of power to culture, and hence a problematisation of contemporary discourses that are predicated on colonialist historiography and hegemony.

Writing for the African in the sixties, therefore, involved the inevitable confrontation with issues that would highlight the inherent contradictions of a culture that claimed for itself the highest artistic and moralistic ideals, but one whose reality on the continent was a blatant negation of these ideals. The structure of the African novel, dictated as it was by the rigours of a recognisable western format, was consequently appropriate, but the content evolved out of a repeated questioning of its context, as well as purpose. Expatriate criticism, some well-intentioned, but most of which was self-serving nevertheless set the tone for how African writing would later be perceived, contextualised, and judged. It challenged the writers to reflect continually

⁸² Killam, pp. 80-81.

⁸³ *Moving the Centre*, p.16.

on their project, and position themselves against a well established and comprehensive discipline. It is this challenge that has demanded of Ngugi and Armah an exacting commitment, one that provokes and inspires the people for whom they write.

This thesis is, then, concerned with establishing, and integrating the contexts out of which African writing is developed, as well as with assessing the different ways in which these contexts supply the narratives with their substance, as well as *raison d'être*. The contrastive method will highlight the different ways in which the peculiar conditions obtaining in each area have contributed, and indeed shaped the writing produced. Richard Priebe points out the limitations of a purely literary response to any work of literature. In attempting to read West African fiction while in America, he realised that he needed to broaden his approach if he was to make sense of his project. Subsequently, he found that an understanding of the social as well as historical context greatly enhanced his understanding and enjoyment of the work. But he had to go to Ghana to ground his work. Of the texts he read he says: 'I could only gain a sense of their significance by studying the production and impact of the literature in context'.⁸⁴ It is this context that I create.

My main aim is to situate Armah's, and Ngugi's writing comparatively within their historical and ideological context so as to demonstrate just how crucial the influence of their own particular histories and circumstances have been in their novels. There are multiple perspectives from which the African novel can be read, and it is hoped that this thesis clarifies, and perhaps points to new ways of reading, and of interpreting the novels. This can only lead to a richer and more integrated understanding of the writers themselves, their context, and the work in which they have invested so much.

⁸⁴ Richard Priebe, *Myth, Realism and the West African Writer* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), p.8. Priebe's realisation is supported by a much earlier historical example. In 'World Literature and Class Conflict', in *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp.138-165, S. S. Prawer, discussing the growth of Socialist ideas in 17th and 18th century France says that when the revolutionary writings were transported to Germany, 'French social conditions had not immigrated along with them. In contrast with German social conditions, this French literature lost all its immediate practical significance, and assumed a purely literary aspect' (p.142).

PART 1: BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Chapter One

HISTORY, CULTURE AND DECOLONISATION

Ghana: A Brief Historical Background

From the second half of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, the British had sought to crush the powers of traditional chiefs and kings, and minimise the influence of the Dutch especially along the Coast, where they dominated trade. From the 1830s, the Fante continuously resisted the extension, and jurisdiction of British power.¹ On the domestic front, they were engaged in an old battle against Ashanti domination, exacerbated by the fact that Fante territory blocked Ashanti access to the coast. The Ashanti were particularly dependent on this access for trade, particularly after the collapse of the Slave Trade.² Added to this was the threat to Fante from an emergent educated elite, also seeking a representative foothold.³ These factors precipitated the formation of the Fante Confederation (and Accra Native Federation in the East), a union of Fante and non-Fante that has been described by Adu Boahen as an 'extensively influential, national movement'.⁴ According to Boahen, the Confederation had a progressive agenda whose aims included 'the attainment of self-government, the achievement of social improvement of the people, of education and of industrial pursuits'. The well thought-out, determined, and popular nature of these aspirations posed a serious threat to the British, who had at first entertained ideas of gradual self rule for the Africans.⁵ It was the first movement to unite local chiefs and the educated elite, first against the Dutch, forced to leave as a

¹ Adu Boahen, 'Politics in Ghana', *History of West Africa* Vol 1-, ed. by J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (London: Longman, 1971-), Vol 2, pp.167-261 (p.235).

² Boahen, p.242.

³ Boahen, p.244.

⁴ Boahen, p.259.

⁵ Boahen, p.228.

result, and then against the more determined British. The departure of the Dutch marked the establishment, in 1874, of the Gold Coast as a British Crown Colony.

The Fante Confederation was the precursor to the modern national movements organised under such new alliances as the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society, National Congress, and the United Gold Coast Convention.⁶ Its collapse, doubtless in part engineered by the British led to the abandonment of plans for self-rule 'until a more favourable juncture presents itself'. It had the unfortunate effect of postponing independence in Ghana for close to a century.⁷

The struggle between the British, the Ashanti, and the Fante continued throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in the exile of the Asantehene in 1896 for his attempts to revive the Ashanti Empire, crushed by the British in 1874. This led to the annexation of Asante and declaration of protectorate over the Northern territories in 1901. In 1902 these were joined to the Colony at the coast and renamed the Gold Coast. It was this area that attained independence in 1957 as Ghana, taking its name from a medieval Western Sudanic Empire.

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The mosquito is arguably the single most influential factor in determining the establishment of notably different methods of colonisation in West Africa and in East Africa. West Africa, which proved hostile both in its geography and its people, was subsequently established as an enterprise zone, while British East Africa with its agreeable climate, and at the time depopulated by natural disaster, became a settler colony. The Gold Coast was rich in gold and other mineral deposits and forest. It is for this reason that Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, famously proposed to erect a monument to the mosquito. Nevertheless, it was not due to a lack of trying that the British failed to settle. A. E. Afigbo gives as an example of this failure the nineteenth century experimental farm at Lokoja in Nigeria, as well as

⁶ Discussed in Chapter 2.

⁷ Boahen, p.259.

French attempts to settle in Senegal, experiences he describes as 'chastening'.⁸

Consequently, even when the most advanced systems for the exploitation of natural resources were being developed – gold, the cultivation of cocoa, timber – the colonialists were forced to use indigenous people as effective middlemen in order to ensure the success of their economic ventures. Indeed, Mary Kingsley had warned late in the nineteenth century that:

the most valuable asset you have is the native: and the more prosperous these natives are, the better for you; for it means more trade. All the gold, ivory, oil, rubber, and timber in West Africa are useless to you without the African to work them; you can get no other race that can replace him and work them; the thing has now been tried, and it has failed.⁹

As Afigbo notes, this was a warning well-heeded.

One of the results of the interaction between the colonialists and the West Africans was the eventual development of a system of education suited to the local population. In response to the the bond of 1884, the British made half-hearted attempts to establish a form of education. This was carried out 'in the vernacular only to stifle opposition',¹⁰ a situation that was to be repeated in Kenya. It is to the missionaries, who had already established a bond with the local people, that the task of implementing a system of learning was entrusted. The missionaries were also used as 'barometers' to gauge native response to the British presence. Because of the intimacy of their interaction with the people, they were able to collapse religion, culture and government. Sir Harry Johnstone recognised their strategic function in the establishment and consolidation of Government. He said:

The missionary is really gaining your experience for you [the colonial power] without any cost to yourself [...]. They strengthen our hold over the country, they spread the use of the English language, they induct the native into the best kind of civilisation, and, in fact, each mission station is an essay in colonisation.¹¹

But even as the administration recognised the need to nurture a group of educated locals to help in administrative functions, it nevertheless kept their preparation as

⁸ A. E. Afigbo, 'The Establishment of Colonial Rule, 1900-1918', Vol. 2, pp.424-483 (p.472).

⁹ Quoted in Afigbo, p.472.

¹⁰ Adu Boahen, pp.258-259.

¹¹ Quoted in A. E. Afigbo, 'The Establishment of Colonial Rule, 1900-1918', p.473.

rudimentary as possible, strongly resisting their clamour for a more comprehensive system. It is from this emergent class of African that the greatest challenge and resistance to colonialism came.

Kenya: A Brief Historical Background

East Africa as a distinct geographical region was mapped out during the Berlin conference of 1885, as a British sphere of influence. Nevertheless, the formal colonisation of this area did not begin until 1888, when the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) was granted a royal charter to exploit trade in the region. The Company did not have much success as the terrain was difficult, so the British government stepped in and declared their Protectorate in 1895. A. H. Hardinge, her Majesty's Agent and Consul at Zanzibar set about establishing an administrative network, which involved military expeditions between 1895-1914 to bring under control 'recalcitrant tribes', and even in areas where there were no military expeditions, force was used. These violent encounters were seen as necessary even by liberals such as C. W. Hobley, the 'champion of "native interests"' in order that "the lower races" could fully accept the dictum of the ruling power'.¹²

The context was that of western imperialism at its peak, what the historian Eric Hobsbawm has referred to as the 'Age of Empire'. This period climaxed in European control, by World War I, of up to '85 per cent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths'. The imperial process was about territorial expansion, and domination of native peoples, 'variously exterminated, variously dislodged'.¹³ It was a determined process, sometimes violent, and accompanied by arrogant and authoritative notions of the right to dominate, and the need of the colonised to be dominated.¹⁴ The British established a global world, but on the basis of violence and racial superiority that continues to mediate North /South relations in the present.

The War Years

¹² William Ochieng', *A History of Kenya* (Kenya: Macmillan, 1985), p. 90.

¹³ *Culture and Imperialism*, p.7

¹⁴ *Culture and Imperialism*, p.8.

It is an historical irony that *pax Britannica*, with its agenda of spreading civilisation through Empire, and its claims of stamping out internecine warfare among its subject peoples should have dragged the Africans into two bloody wars.

The First World War 1914-1918

Kenya

More violence, and on a grander scale, soon followed with the First World War. Britain and Germany were already present in East Africa, and it was inevitable that the tensions prevalent on the European continent percolated into Africa, in spite of a clause in the Berlin Act safeguarding colonised territory from involvement. The British settlers in Kenya, in response to the war fever, and led by Ewart Grogan summarily convened a War Council to prepare to defend British interests. In actual fact, they took advantage of the war situation to demonstrate allegiance to their Government, thereby winning Constitutional concessions that would consolidate their position after the war.

All in all the Africans found themselves engaged in what Ochieng' calls 'this European "inter-tribal" trauma' which involved over ten thousand African soldiers and one hundred and ninety five thousand porters, of whom about fifty thousand died. As Elspeth Huxley observed:

Not the least strange thing among the many incredible consequences of the murder of an Austrian Archduke by a fanatical student was that black men from one side of a wholly mythical line in the bush [...] would soon slaughter black men on the other side, with European rifles, in the name of King George and in the name of the Kaiser.¹⁵

A price had to be paid for this war and the colonies were not exempt. Not only had the war introduced its own tensions, it also made worse previously existing ones by playing the groups against each other. Furthermore, there was an increase in such levies as the hut and poll tax to pay for the war; the Kipande (pass book or pouch) had been introduced to curb desertion from the army and was now retained in order to control the movement of the African; and there was countrywide land alienation, which for the first time went beyond the Central Province and the Rift Valley and affected such groups as the Luo, who were pushed out of Miwani and Muhoroni to

¹⁵ Quoted in Ochieng', p.111.

make room for the Soldier Settlement Scheme. The then Governor, Sir Edward Northey, secured from the Africans about twelve thousand, eight hundred and ten square kilometres of land for this purpose.

There were two lessons of great importance for the future to be learnt from this war. Firstly, because of the close proximity as fellow soldiers in battle, the veil shrouding the enigma that was the white man was removed. This was to effect a change in attitude that would culminate in open opposition to the coloniser's position of superiority. The second invaluable lesson was the importance of organisation if any resistance was to succeed. To this end, by 1921 such organisations as the Young Kikuyu Association in Central Province, and The Young Kavirondo Association in Nyanza, had been formed.

Ghana (British West Africa)

In British West Africa, African soldiers were recruited to fight in World War I, and indeed some served in East Africa.¹⁶ While in Kenya the war effort was organised by the settlers, in West Africa, as white men went into service they feared their action might be perceived as colonial withdrawal. The war created a climate of revolt, but it was not politically significant. Indeed the educated, increasingly aware of their rights, saw it not as an opportunity to move for independence, but one in which to reaffirm allegiance to the British Empire. This strategic manouvre might eventually secure for them: 'a more significant place in the colonial decision making process and a role in the imperial reconstruction discussions'.¹⁷ The War had several consequences. Although the black soldiers distinguished themselves in the service of the British Empire, it was still said of the black soldiers sent to police the routed Germans in the Ruhr:

It not only furnishes Germany with material for an effective appeal to outside sympathies, but it places men and women of European race under surveillance of a particularly galling character. [...] And though Germany, in light of her barbarities during the war, deserves small

¹⁶ Michael Crowder and J. F. A. Ajayi, 'West Africa 1919-1939: the colonial situation', in *History of West Africa*, Vol. 2, ed. by Ajayi and Crowder, pp.484-513 (p.492).

¹⁷ Crowder, p. 511.

consideration, [...] nothing can [...] justify the militant enforcement of coloured soldiers on an unarmed and conquered White Population.¹⁸

Even more serious than the problem of race was the removal of productive manpower. The criticism has been levelled at France that it saw Africa as 'an inexhaustible reservoir of men'.¹⁹ The same may be said for the British. But unlike Kenya, where soldier (re)settlement schemes were a significant feature of rehabilitation, in West Africa, these schemes were resisted, as returning soldiers, now exposed to a different way of life, chose to stay in the towns. One of the methods used to ensure that they returned to work the land, as in Kenya, was in the introduction of the hut tax in 1918.

The end of the War marked three changes: it marked the end of the establishment of colonial administration, and the beginning of a system of Government. Economically, it saw the entrenchment of British firms as the main importers and exporters of goods into British West Africa, consolidating their monopoly. And most importantly, it brought West Africa into World politics as a vital strategic, and material source of support for the west.

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As early as World War I, then, the differences that were going to distinguish West and East Africa were already in evidence. The behaviour of the soldiers who returned from the war was the clearest indicator of response to British colonialism. In Kenya, where European settlement was already an issue, and land contested, the (re)Settlement scheme, also meant to rehabilitate, was successful. In West Africa, however, the well-travelled ex-servicemen opted for an urban lifestyle rather than return to their villages, which were under no threat.

The Second World War (1939-1945)

Kenya

The Second World War saw yet again the recruitment of the colonised population, and by the end of the war, ninety seven thousand Kenyans had seen military service. Of

¹⁸ Quoted in Crowder, 2, p.495.

¹⁹ Crowder, p.497.

significant difference this time was the exportation of the African troops abroad. This exposure to the outside world left a lasting impression. One soldier, Bildad Kaggia writes how contact with a high-ranking *black* American soldier underlined for him the fact that as an indigenous Kenyan, no matter how valiant, one could not rise to a commissioned rank: that sharing British victory did not alter one's inferior status. Some of the soldiers who fought in India were constantly reminded by the Indians that their condition for being in the war was Independence. This essentially qualified it for them as a war of liberation. But if the Indians were fighting for freedom, what were the Kenyans fighting for? Their experience away broadened and accelerated their expectations, but of most significance was its creation of a sense of national identity, an element that had been lacking up to now. One soldier wrote after the war, 'The first time I ever thought of myself as a Kenyan was in 1943, in the Kalewa trenches on the Burma Front.'²⁰

After this war, both the political and economic aspirations of the Kenyans were further raised, and they began to adopt a militant attitude towards imperialism although it would be almost a decade before the point of crisis was reached. This delay in the development of militancy can be explained only by the action of the Colonial government. Whereas it devised an attractive post-war settlement scheme for both returning and new white soldiers, in choice pieces of land, the Kenyan soldiers found themselves not only in Reserves, but also separated from each other on the basis of ethnicity just as they began to think of themselves as one people. Gikuyu resettlement both under the Swynnerton plan, and through Kenyatta's piecemeal reform created a new system of individual land ownership and tenure that has altered quite fundamentally Gikuyu culture, previously based on the communal ownership of land. In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi describes the vicious circle whereby the new landowners had to secure loans for development against their title deeds, and how failure to service these loans led to repossession of farms, and hence back to landlessness. Failure of national unity has subsequently been blamed on ethnic chauvinism.

In spite of the establishment of cash crop farming as a settler affair, Kenya was fixed

²⁰ Ochieng', p. 125.

as a primary Agricultural producer, a pattern of underdevelopment to be repeated in Ghana. As late as 1995, the European Gatt Trade countries continued to insist on the exportation of raw material. The situation was revised only in the 1950s under the Swynnerton plan, when it became apparent during the Emergency that the small holdings allocated to the Africans could not sustain a livelihood, and government might be forced to set up a subsidy. 'Local' industry in Kenya only took off when European protectionism could no longer realise a profitable return, ironically as an Asian monopoly. Nevertheless: 'The prospect of substituting Asian economic dominance for European political dominance was [...] equally unwelcome to both Africans and Europeans'.²¹

Ghana

The interwar years were in West Africa characterised by the depression and saw little in the way of either economic or social progress. The story in Ghana was slightly different. Although an autonomous African trade was discouraged, since pre-colonial times, 'the social division of labour was quite advanced and petty commodity production, exchange and monetisation were all firmly established' in Ghana.²² The Watson Commission, charged with examining the possibility of developing the cocoa industry in Ghana, said the 'climate was too enervating to make industry feasible'.²³ Nevertheless, an early local investment in cocoa, communally produced, and which by 1901 had surpassed the United Africa Company's mineral trade to become the number one export, kept the economy afloat. On the international stage, Ghanaian ability to hold out for a fair price during the post-war crash, when they boycotted trade as a unit rather than give in to unreasonable prices, and won, was a great victory in both psychological and actual terms. This was a remarkable economic and ideological achievement for these people whom, according to A. W. Cardinall, a Census Officer at the time and author of *The Gold Coast* (1931), the very idea of Capitalism 'almost

²¹ Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-colonialism 1964-1971* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 44. According to Leys, the Indian trading community had produced the prototype of a national industrial bourgeoisie and although not allowed to own Agricultural land, by 1961 they owned 67% of local industry (pp.44 & 45).

²² G. B. Kay, *The Political Economy of Colonisation in Ghana: A Collection of Documents and Statistics 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p.5.

²³ Kay, p.16.

amounted to a revolution'.²⁴

The colonisation of Kenya and Ghana had been premised on the idea that a colony should pay for itself. In practice, this confined local enterprise to pre-Capitalist mode, based on the export of raw or primary commodities to fuel western industry, in exchange for manufactured imports. The gross irony, clearer in Ghana than Kenya is, of course, that African tax was supposed to pay for European administration and services. Ghana refused to do this without representation. Now for the first time in Ghana, Government intervened to regulate trade, the colonies were allocated a subsidy and local industry was developed.

Military exigency saw the rapid development of the infrastructure, and in Armah's home, Sekondi, the expansion of the harbour and improvement of a road and rail communications network. The soldiers, who had in World War I served within Africa now went abroad, to Burma and to India. They, like the Kenyans, came back having witnessed Indian Nationalism. In the army they were taught to read and write, an exercise that led to greater demands for education, and that eventually led to the establishment of Africa-centred Universities, one in Ghana, in West Africa. More immediate however was a heightened consciousness that increased their demands for participation in affairs at home, and for inclusion in policy matters. It was in Ghana that this was first achieved.

The black soldiers were aware of Hitler's racism, and supported the British cause accordingly. This support was noted, and led to a crucial change in attitude on either side. As the moral right of the imperial project now came under question, for the first time the British Government appealed for subject loyalty rather than assumed it. The war created the climate in which: 'European master was prepared to concede reform and African subject was ready to profit from it'.²⁵

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²⁴ Quoted in Kay, p.33.

²⁵ Michael Crowder, 'The 1939-45 war and West Africa', in *History of West Africa* Vol 2, pp.596-621 (p.614).

More generally, the war brought with it fundamental changes of international significance, heralding a new world order. Great Britain was under international pressure to relinquish overseas territory, and lost its position as the leading world power to the Soviet Union and the United States of America. There were direct implications of this loss of status for the colonies. Whereas the United States pressed Britain to grant independence to its colonies (and not for purely altruistic reasons – trade with India from which the British had excluded them was, for instance, a sore point), in Kenya and Ghana the British pursued policies of economic expansion to help in her recovery. I have noted above the change in economic policy in British West Africa. In Kenya, the settlers got more grants so as to produce more. They also needed more African labour, and as Lord Delamere had at an earlier time ‘explained’ to the colonial government, Africans would now get less land so as to force them into waged labour on European farms.²⁶ Ngugi's home was at the epicentre of the land storm that not only dispossessed and displaced the Gikuyu, but turned them into taxpaying labourers in their ancestral home.

After World War II a distinctive difference in attitude and approach was evident in Britain's treatment of its East and West African territories. Ghana embarked on a period of accelerated social and economic industrialisation and development, and on the basis of its participation in the war won concessions and a bargaining edge used strategically to negotiate for independence. Crucial to this negotiation were the educated elite. In the following chapter therefore, I examine their role in the period leading up to independence, and focus on the importance of Education in the establishment of Ghana.

Meanwhile in Kenya, on which the rest of this chapter focuses, expanding white agriculture hemmed African squatters in, while the land deteriorated as it was exploited beyond its capacity. The traditional land tenure system broke down, resulting in the migration to and formation of towns as centres of employment, and the growth of a

²⁶ Robert B. Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p.16.

landless urban population.²⁷ The ex-soldiers now wanted work using the skills they had learnt while in the army. Militant Trade Unionism subsequently developed between 1945-1952, and rose to challenge not only European and Asian employers,²⁸ but the institutions of government as well. By 1963, under such leadership as that of Tom Mboya, they had coupled their agenda to that of the main political party. Independence was to be confronted with a comprehensive and united opposition.

Approaching Independence: Mau Mau, or the Land and Freedom Army

According to Robert Edgerton, Mau Mau was 'the first great African liberation movement, [and] precipitated what was probably the gravest crisis in the history of Britain's African colonies' forcing a far reaching change in policy and making independence a realisable goal.²⁹ In this lay its importance. It compelled the Colonial Government to declare a State of Emergency in 1952 that was not officially lifted until 1960, three years before independence.

This period was characterized by tensions between mainly the Gikuyu, and British settlers, the latter of whom were supported by British troops flown in to put down the rebellion. This British army was by far superior in arms and number and their actions were legitimized by government. Mau Mau were poorly armed and supported in comparison, and for the most part depended on weapons seized from the enemy; any support from the villages was given at great risk as loyalist homeguards patrolled the residential area to ensure isolation of the resistance. Mau Mau strategy was of necessity guerilla in nature and was, consequently, fragmented.

The Colonialists defined the war. Their propaganda reduced a struggle for land and self-determination to a 'crimewave' and the freedom fighters to 'bestial gangsters'

²⁷ E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo in 'The Rise and Decline of the Kenya Peasant, 1888-1922', *East Africa Journal*, 9: 5 (May 1972), 233-240 (p.239), also discusses how this system has created 'rural idiocy' and peasant poverty.

²⁸ The Asians were initially brought in as superior labourers to work on the Kenya-Uganda railway. Many of them stayed on after its completion, and were later joined by economic migrants. They form a significant part of the population today. The Uganda Asians were expelled by Idi Amin in 1972.

²⁹ Edgerton, p.ix.

who, 'crazed by unspeakable, primitive ceremonies involving cannibalism, indiscriminately terrorized white settlers, especially women and children'.³⁰ Edgerton documents the ferocity of the violence on either side, but notes the reduction of the local fighters to non-human status, a common strategy of dominance that enables the perpetration of inhuman acts against an adversary. As it is, eleven thousand Africans lost their lives, while only thirty two settlers were killed.

Kenya had been earmarked as 'White Man's country',³¹ a 'kith and kin' colony.³² This explains the brutality with which Mau Mau was crushed. The British Commissioner of the Colony from 1901-1904, Sir Charles Elliot, stated this intention quite clearly:

the interior of the Protectorate is a White Man's country. *This being so*, I think it is mere hypocrisy not to admit that white interests must be paramount, and that the main object of our policy and legislation should be to found a white colony.³³

By 1952, more than forty thousand whites were determined '*never* to relinquish power'³⁴ over what they perceived as "their" beautiful and prosperous country, were indeed determined that 'Kenya would *forever* be a bastion of white supremacy'.³⁵ I emphasise the statement of ownership as fact, and the possessive determination. An agenda was set for separate development, and was subsequently developed, supported by such structures as the 'colour bar', and 'villagization'. It can be best understood in relation to South Africa under the ideology of Apartheid.

C. L. R. James has observed that 'the cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression'.³⁶ This statement is clearly supported in the settlement of Kenya, as the Africans were to find to their

³⁰ Edgerton, p.x.

³¹ Edgerton, p.x.

³² Edgerton, p.206.

³³ Quoted in Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (London: André Deutsch, 1963), p.47.

³⁴ Edgerton, p.244.

³⁵ Edgerton, p.25.

³⁶ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), pp.88-89.

dismay. Lord Delamere is a good example of the landed, titled aristocrat who invested and risked much, and whose love for his adopted land is unquestionable. He continued to practise a system of patronage founded on a centuries-old tradition of land ownership and inheritance of wealth, and was responsible for sponsoring a notable number of subsequent settlers, subjected to rigorous vetting procedures. With him came the burden of 'class', an important factor in determining who settled, and as absurd a qualification as it is undeniable in Kenya today.

After the First World War, led by the famous Field Marshall Lord Kitchener, demobilized soldiers came in considerable numbers. Sixty nine of these were listed in *Burke's Peerage*.³⁷ Pedigree was important, and poorer whites were actively discouraged by such leaders as Lord Delamere, who himself sponsored some settlers, in the belief that it would be damaging for Africans to see whites working.³⁸ They saw in the local people an inexhaustible source of labour. The leaders – the Colonial Governors and their support structure, the Civil Service, and Judiciary – were, significantly, from Oxbridge, the bastions of traditional British culture for the very reasons that these institutions instilled as well as reinforced in them a sense of 'public' service, and a 'habit of authority'.³⁹

In the Kenyatta era this legacy was translated into an illusionary and questionable hierarchy. In popular myth making, the Kenyatta family was referred to as the Kenyan 'Royal family'. If the Democratic idea that constituted independence required blue blood to lend it credence, as was the case in Britain, then the new ruling bourgeoisie were willing to create the requisite institutions or structures in which such authority could be invested. Not only did the Kenyans rise to the occasion (in the process spawning the Duke of Kabeteshire, Sir Charles Njonjo, for example); even today the Kenyatta family still retains that mystique associated with Kenyatta's powerful charisma, over two decades after his death.

³⁷ Edgerton, p.17.

³⁸ Edgerton, p.14.

³⁹ Edgerton, p.165.

The issue of land was of singular importance to the Gikuyu because they were an agricultural people whose subsistence was dependent on the land. In seeking to justify white settlement of this area, it has been argued that the land was unoccupied at the time. The period between 1894-1899 had seen a plague of locusts, prolonged drought and cattle disease. It has been estimated that at least fifty to ninety five per cent of the population in Kiambu District in the Central Province died.⁴⁰

Traditionally the Gikuyu are a people suspicious of death and would tend to move away from an area so afflicted for a while.⁴¹ Thus in 1902 when the settlers arrived, some of the areas appeared uninhabited. The pastoral peoples, the Nandi, the Maasai and Kipsigis were also fairly nomadic, so as to rotate grazing areas. A farmer in England hardly expects to find a field left to lie fallow in preparation for the following season occupied by a passerby. By 1920, 5.5 million acres had been confiscated for European use.

The colonies were not free of the politics of their centres. Mboya points out the settlers lobbying with Tory back-benchers at every opportunity, and the consequent pressuring of Ministers to act in their interests. Thus policy was dictated by the mood of the Conservative Party, rather than a dispassionate interest in the African situation.⁴² A Labour government at Westminster in 1955 did much to alter the trend of events in Kenya, which had, according to Carey Francis, then headmaster at the Alliance School, become 'a fierce party issue'.⁴³ The politicians had until now avoided direct confrontation of the facts, but rumour and speculation were rife. The labour MP, Barbara Castle, visited the country in 1955 and detected 'a Nazi element'. She said:

in the heart of the British Empire there is a police state where the rule of law has

⁴⁰ This is a District in the Central Province that was inhabited by the Gikuyu.

⁴¹ The Gikuyu did not bury their dead because it was taboo to handle a dead body. They moved away from the area. If it was a death resulting from an illness, the patient was left in the forest to die so as not to desecrate the land. Today they view burial in terms of its devaluation of land. This can be contrasted with ancestral lineage and ownership of land secured by burial among the Luo people.

⁴² Mboya, p.130.

⁴³ L. B. Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya* (London: Rex Collings, 1969), p.110. 1955 was the year that Ngugi joined the Alliance School.

broken down, where the murders and tortures of Africans by Europeans goes unpunished and where authorities pledged to enforce justice regularly connive at its violation.⁴⁴

But support for her view was not overwhelming, although the situation was itself actually worse. An instance is cited where one of the policemen killed 'these bloody baboons' for the simple reason that they were no longer 'protected animals',⁴⁵ a view echoed in the London *Sunday Times*: 'Perhaps – though not so explicitly avowed – some settlers want as near an approach to Lynch law as British public opinion will tolerate'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the 'wind of change'⁴⁷ blowing over the continent had brought independence to Ghana in 1957. Farther afield, India was free. New pressure from the British public, disturbed by reports of continuing violence and atrocities on either side called for a decisive end to the conflict. The Colonial Governments State of Emergency, declared in 1952 did not officially end until 1960, three years before independence.

It is ironical that one incident, small in comparison to preceding atrocities, was taken up as a *cause célèbre*, helping to bring to an end the violence that had characterized the Emergency period. The historian, Wunyabari O. Maloba sees it as the final straw in the 'pornography of violence' that spelled the end of white rule in Kenya.⁴⁸ An experiment in so-called 'labour motivation', or 'rehabilitation' was carried out at the Hola detention camp. It was cruelly abused, resulting in the deaths of eleven men and hospitalization of twenty critical cases in what Maloba describes as 'the grim epitome of the counter-terror employed against Mau Mau'.⁴⁹ Through this incident, the

⁴⁴ Edgerton, p.159.

⁴⁵ Edgerton, p.163.

⁴⁶ Edgerton, p.172.

⁴⁷ Harold Macmillan, the first British Prime Minister to visit Africa in 1960, and who had served a period in the Foreign Office from 1942, recognized the inevitability of independence. In independent Ghana he said, 'We (British) share the strong tide of feeling among Africans that this is their time of destiny' (Edgerton, p.206). Edgerton summarises the considerations that precipitated the visit as serious economic pressures, increased nationalism and the political embarrassment of imperialism, especially after the Suez incident, in which the British were forced by the Americans to retreat (p.239). These were all indications of the 'wind of change' that was the subject of Macmillan's speech to the South African parliament at the end of his six week tour.

⁴⁸ Wunyabari O. Maloba, 'Decolonization: A Theoretical Perspective', *Decolonization and Dependence in Kenya 1940-93* (London: James Currey, 1995), p.273.

⁴⁹ Maloba, p.299.

existence of elimination camps, the cruelty of the settler structures, and vulnerability of the Africans were highlighted. The Colonial government in its embarrassment renamed the camp 'Galole' to try and erase the entire episode from memory, and all the inmates were repatriated since as an act of protest, they had refused to leave. Hola exists to date.

Although Ngugi has repeatedly stressed the national character of Mau Mau,⁵⁰ there is a sense in which it certainly was a specifically Gikuyu event. One of the results of the repression that followed the defeat of the uprising was the introduction of a programme of centralisation of the Gikuyu into large Villages (the Villagization scheme already mentioned: in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi refers to 'the new Concentration village of Kamiritho' [PB, 15], invoking the Jewish Holocaust and intensifying the horror of this project) for easier colonial control. This event consolidated as well as politicised the Gikuyu as a people to an extent not experienced by the rest of the Kenyan ethnicities. As those collaborating with colonial government shared space with the families of those killed in the resistance or still in the forest, the tension of enforced coexistence intensified by kinship ties created a complex intra-ethnic rift in a situation of enforced togetherness. The Gikuyu were thus forced to evaluate and address their position as a group very early on. There are two consequences to note: first was the idea that betrayal is possible from within the group, that ethnicity does not guarantee loyalty. This has a bearing on the second consequence – it prepared the way for, and made desirable the pan-ethnic alliances that saw Kenya through the period of independence as a united nation. Conversely, it is Mau Mau that makes it possible for Ngugi to speak strongly to an exclusive and cohesive Gikuyu nationalism.

Mau Mau played a significant role in challenging the dominance of the British in Kenya, but as a military offensive, it was crushed. The implications of Mau Mau defeat, which obviously signalled the victory of the colonial forces, are sometimes overlooked in revisionist writing of this period. This lapse occurs because independence followed soon after. This has led to the kind of over-privileging of Mau Mau as solely responsible for independence, a position that now dominates Ngugi's

50 Patrick Williams, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p.4

reading of and writing about that period of Kenya's history. The State is partly responsible. It unjustly marginalised Mau Mau and subordinated it to the idea of a pan-national unity from the moment of independence. Thus it is those perceived to have either been non-committal on the nationalist agenda, and those who collaborated with the colonial side, rather those who fought passionately for genuine freedom, for dignity and for self worth, who benefited. It is the war veteran in Armah's *Why Are we So Blest?* that asks the question, but 'who gained? [...] Who won?' (WAWSB, 16) That is the question asked by Ngugi of the Kenya revolution.

The tragedy of the Kenya that was to emerge at independence may be that the fundamental issues that led to the resistance – lack of political freedom, economic opportunities and social justice – were neither acknowledged, nor addressed. The consequences of the compromises of this period of transition are significant. No one in the early sixties could predict the nature of the legacy of Mau Mau. That this 'epic of sacrifice, cruelty and courage'⁵¹ was influential in inspiring other national movements is agreed, and yet either because of, or in spite of it, 'no other country under British rule has started off with such difficulties in forming a national movement as (Kenya) faced after the Emergency',⁵² and as Kenya continues to face today.

The Effects of the Leadership after Independence

The first leaders of independence were uniquely placed to do much. For both Armah and Ngugi, Nkrumah and Kenyatta have played a critical role in informing and influencing their views of post-independence society. They have also been the subject of much criticism, fleetingly admired, but ultimately bearing the brunt of frustrated hopes and desires quite directly in the early novels, as they have done in the non-fictional writings. Whereas one of Nkrumah's enduring legacies is the nurture of a sense of nationhood that characterises Ghanaians even today, Kenyatta established a different trend. An opportunistic anti-colonialist nationalist of the 1930s, by the early sixties he had cultivated a fiery eloquence and revolutionary rhetoric that helped propel

⁵¹ Edgerton, p.xii.

⁵² Edgerton, p.75.

Kenya beyond the moment of independence, where he tragically failed to sustain the promise. The historian John Lonsdale, though recognising his charisma, nevertheless classifies him as 'more of a Kikuyu than a Kenyan leader'⁵³ who used his power, not like Ghana's Nkrumah, 'to span the gap between past tribe and future nation, but to make it unbridgeable'.⁵⁴ Kenyatta's legacy has been compounded by a heightened ethnic awareness in Moi's Kenya. The original conflict is played out most clearly in Ngugi's language struggle. Ngugi feels compelled to write against colonialism, in his own language. But already his own language carries with it a political aspect that speaks to a specifically Gikuyu, rather than Kenyan, nationalism. The privileging of Gikuyu nationalism in Kenyatta's time was supported by the largeness of the Gikuyu ethnic group, preferential regional development and political power, advantages that the other Kenya 'nationals' did not share. Ngugi is implicated in this political and cultural hegemony.

As Ngugi has been drawn towards a radical reassessment of Mau Mau, so also has the seminal role played by Kenyatta in its suppression and marginalisation taken on new meanings and significances for post independence Kenya. Ngugi finds himself consequently engaged in an ideological battle in the political arena, in which Kenyatta takes centre stage.

Everything Is Political: Jomo Kenyatta, and Ngugi

As Nkrumah with Armah, so also has Kenyatta played a major role in Ngugi's writing from the outset. In *Weep Not Child*, dispossessed of his land, Ngotho invests much hope in the restorative potential of independence, and in Kenyatta: 'To him, Jomo stood for custom and tradition purified by grace of learning and much travel' (*WNC*, 74).⁵⁵ In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi takes the admiration even further, with the transfiguration of a Kenyatta appropriately cast in both the culturally mythical, and Biblical mould:

⁵³ Lonsdale, p.410.

⁵⁴ Lonsdale, p.281.

⁵⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not Child* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), p.74. Henceforth *WNC*.

They sang of Jomo (he came, like a fiery spear among us), his stay in England (Moses sojourned in the land of Pharaoh) and his return (he came riding on a cloud of fire and smoke) to save his children. (GW, 189-190)

This Jomo, at this point, is much admired. In retrospect, Ngugi distances himself from this youthful seduction, stressing that the references or allusions to Kenyatta in his early novels portray him purely 'as a *historical* figure'.⁵⁶ The early Ngugi presumed the disinterestedness and the objectivity of history. The real Kenyatta detained Ngugi in 1977, ostensibly for engaging in populist theatre.

Kenyatta figures prominently in Ngugi's recurrent theme of return and betrayal. A man of many parts, Ngugi distinguishes four major developmental divisions in the formation of his political persona, the first as young KCA (Kenya Central Association) activist, a true anti-imperialist fighting for the rights of his people. As KAU (Kenya African Union) member, Kenyatta left for England for fifteen years, married an English woman, and became a student of Malinowski at the Graduate School of Anthropology at London University.⁵⁷ Ngugi's assessment of this Kenyatta as an alienated cultural Anthropologist in tune with a neo-capitalist status quo, and for the most part uncritical of its inequalities downplays what has proved a notable cultural coup – Kenyatta wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), a book whose cultural significance has increased with time. He also formed his Pan African friendships, associations that helped to consolidate, as at the 1945 Manchester conference, the African need for self-determination in keeping with the opening up of liberational possibilities on a wider scale after the Second World War.

Kenyatta of the KANU (Kenya African National Union), a prison graduate, an ex-detainee, is seen by Ngugi as isolated from the people's struggle. Out of these emerged the Kenyatta of KANU in power, a petty-bourgeois autocrat who excluded the real freedom fighters from participation in independence.⁵⁸ Ngugi's Kenyatta nevertheless drew from his vast experience and metamorphosed into an

⁵⁶ *Detained*, p.159. My emphasis.

⁵⁷ Murray-Brown, p.237.

⁵⁸ *Detained*, pp. 161-162.

overpoweringly charismatic and remarkably popular leader. But his role demanded much more. In *Detained*, Ngugi expresses his personal sense of tragic loss at the betrayal of so much potential:

here was a black Moses who had been called by history to lead his people to the promised land of no exploitation, no oppression, but who failed to rise to the occasion, who ended up surrounding himself with colonial chiefs, homeguards and traitors; who ended up being described by the British bourgeoisie as their best friend in Africa.⁵⁹

Kenyatta failed to sever decisively the threads, public and private, intimately binding Kenya to its imperial master. He remains central to Ngugi's concerns, if only because he was the key to the shaping of all policy that was to impinge on Ngugi, directly and indirectly. He also started the process that resulted in Ngugi's exile from his home which continues today.

Ngugi's reflections on the Kenyatta era as it concerned the future not only of Literature, but of equally fundamental freedoms to do with language, culture, and possibility are encapsulated in an observation he makes on 'The Conference of African Writers of English Expression of 1962',⁶⁰ in which he participated:

What I remember most [...] was *the energy and the hope and the dreams and the confidence*: after all we were part of a continent emerging from a colonial era into...what? We never answered the question, but *the hopes and dreams and confidence* remained. Now we have no doubt, two decades later, about the answer.⁶¹

The turbulence and fear that characterized the Emergency period (1953 -1957) was replaced with the euphoria preceding and culminating in the attainment of independence in 1963. The experience of dispossession was already a part of the people's history, as well as their present, and this explains the intensity of the hope, and the urgent desire to see this translated into tangible, livable possibilities. The betrayal of these aspirations was subsequently keenly felt by the people.

⁵⁹ *Detained*, p.162.

⁶⁰ The irony inherent in this title, by its very exclusion of the African writer writing in an African language is not lost on Ngugi in retrospect. He picks it out in a later essay, 'The Language of African Literature' in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), pp.4-33.

⁶¹ *Detained*, p.142. My emphases.

Kenyatta and Mau Mau: The Trial

The intellectual who for his part has followed the colonialist with regard to the universal abstract will fight in order that the settler and the native may live together in peace in a new world. (WOE, 34)

A Grain of Wheat, the novel in which Ngugi marks the moment of independence, climaxes in the dramatic enactment of Mugo's duplicity as he is about to be honoured as national hero. It is a reflection of the drama at Kapenguria, where Kenyatta was tried and charged with being the mastermind behind Mau Mau and its violent crusade against the Europeans. Repeatedly goaded by the prosecution to denounce Mau Mau, Kenyatta instead outlined the Kenya African Union (KAU) position, maintaining:

that our activities have been against the injustices that have been suffered by the African people and if in trying to establish the rights of the African people we have turned out to be what you say, Mau Mau, we are very sorry that you have been misled in that direction. What we have done, and will continue to do, is to demand the rights of the African people as human beings.⁶²

In reply to the prosecution, Kenyatta repeatedly focused the interrogation on the legitimacy as well as the national character of the struggle, and the right of the African to political representation. He also expressed the desire for inter-racial harmony. In sentencing him Judge Thacker (who was flown out of Kenya immediately after the trial) ignored his plea, and was severe in his censure. He said:

You, Jomo Kenyatta, stand convicted of managing Mau Mau and being a member of that society. You have protested that your object has always been to pursue constitutional methods on the way to self government for the African people, and for the return of land which you say belongs to the African people. I do not believe you. It is my belief that soon after your long stay in Europe and when you came back to this Colony you commenced to organise this Mau Mau society, the object of which was to drive out of Kenya all Europeans, and in so doing to kill them if necessary. I am satisfied that the master mind behind this plan was yours.

[...] perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that you have turned Kikuyu against Kikuyu. Your Mau Mau society has slaughtered without mercy defenceless Kikuyu men, women and children in hundreds and in circumstances which are revolting and are better left undescribed. You have let loose upon this land a flood of misery and unhappiness affecting the daily lives of all the

⁶² Quoted by Murray-Brown in *Kenyatta* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp.274-275.

...races in it, including your own people. You have put the clock back many years and by your deeds much of the respect for your tribe has been lost, at least for the time being.⁶³

The irony of the situation was that Kenyatta was not the leader of Mau Mau. He was, however, perceived as having betrayed it not only at this trial, but more importantly later when he became President of Kenya. As Mau Mau stayed shrouded in secrecy, Kenyatta stood condemned by the British for extremism and by his own people for his moderate approach. Thacker accused Kenyatta of lying under oath. To the colonialists Kenyatta engineered Mau Mau, and:

all the hatreds and fears and suspicions of the last few years found expression in this one belief. It became an article of faith which permanently affected European thinking, for it was now sanctioned by the most sacred text in colonial scripture, namely that truth and justice will always result from a British court of law.⁶⁴

There were implications for future relations of this British mindset, especially as Kenyatta went on to become President of Kenya. How, for instance, might post-independence relations within the Commonwealth be handled? If it confirmed for Africans the impossibility of finding justice within the British courts,⁶⁵ it criminalised for Europeans future African leadership. This trial illustrates the point made by the historian, Wunyabari Maloba in 'Decolonization: A Theoretical Perspective':

Politically, colonialism was a dictatorship. It was imposed by violence and maintained by violence. Ruling with utter indifference to the opinions of the governed – the Africans – colonialism perfected a reign of terror by silencing its opponents through detentions, exile, even outright extermination.⁶⁶

Murray-Brown notes the determination, as at Hola, of the colonial administrators to surpass the Mau Mau in brutality as a means of crushing all resistance and morale within the detention camps.

⁶³ Murray-Brown, pp.275-276.

⁶⁴ Murray-Brown, p.276.

⁶⁵ Murray-Brown, p.276. Interestingly, Carol Sicherman has more recently observed Ngugi's willingness to look for the 'positive' in the West. What he most admires is " 'the notion that nobody, nobody, is above the law. This,' he says earnestly, 'is a concept we can really develop in Africa' ". Thacker was the law. Carol Sicherman, 'Kenya: Creativity and Political Repression: The Confusion of Fact and Fiction', *Race and Class*, 37: 4 (April-June, 1996), 61-71 (p.69).

⁶⁶ Wunyabari O. Maloba, 'Decolonization: A Theoretical Perspective' in, *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya 1940-93* ed. by B. Ogot and W. R. Ochieng' (London: James Currey, 1995), p.9.

Basil Davidson tells us that the Europeans used their dominant position to 'to impose an institutionalised relationship between Africans and Europeans'.⁶⁷ The motivations behind the hounding of Kenyatta are compelling. He was regarded with suspicion by the Colonial administration when in fact he did not wield much real power, not because he was well-travelled internationally, but because he had also visited the Soviet Union. This provoked suspicion and resentment at the possibility of his establishing links with Communism. The political timing was not in his favour. In Britain, Winston Churchill's resignation in 1955 led to takeover by a Labour government, a party believed by the conservative Kenya settlers to have Communist leanings, an unfortunate coincidence. But worst of all was the fact that Kenyatta was married to a white woman. This provoked an emotionalism that 'damned him in [the settler's] eyes, whatever he might have said or done'.⁶⁸ The settlers', responding to earlier wide ranging social reforms introduced by Attlee's Labour government (1945-1951) declared as late as 1950 that:

Any attempts to hand over power to an immature race must be resisted. To the Africans we offer sympathetic tutelage which will lead them to full participation in the Government of the country. But we have made our position clear. We are here to stay and the other races must accept that premiss with all it implies.⁶⁹

The results of this period of intense upheaval and how these translated into the ordering of post-independence Kenya are what concern Ngugi in *Petals of Blood*.

Gender and Culture: Female Circumcision

Just as the peasantry as an analytical category were a product of colonialism, so also was their status as a dispossessed class. It is within this new social formation that the status as well as role of women was to alter significantly from the turn of the century. As land occupation and ownership was fixed by European settlement, the inadequacy

⁶⁷ Basil Davidson, *Can Africa Survive?* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1974), p.17. After the Stephen Lawrence murder and trial, the existence of 'institutional racism' has finally been acknowledged in Britain.

⁶⁸ Murray-Brown, p.237.

⁶⁹ Murray-Brown, p.237. This was said by one of the spokesmen of the settlers.

of the reserves to provide sufficiently for the Africans led to urban migration, and the beginnings of the formation of an urban proletariat. This, according to Atieno-Odhiambo, is the class that was manifesting itself in Nairobi as prostitutes, spivs, thieves, and idlers as early as 1902.⁷⁰ The cultural crisis brought on by the issue of circumcision drew attention to the changing circumstance, role and status of women. In addition, the sexual nature of the issue highlighted male impotence in the face of colonial power. According to Lonsdale, the Gikuyu were a male tribe, and now their ordered masculinity was under threat from unruly women.⁷¹ Joseph Kang'ethe, leader of the Kikuyu Central Association urged the Government to first control 'the urban wilderness of social change' (meaning prostitution), and then get rid of clitoridectomy.⁷² Circumcision was a gendered issue, the undertow in a struggle for control over sexuality, sociality and tradition.

Women have featured prominently in Ngugi's revisits to and rewriting of the history from which his works draw substance. Even before gender became an issue in African writing, women were already engaged in a notable defence of rights. Two such women, often cited by Ngugi, are Me Katilili, in her seventies when she organised the Giriama youth into a fighting force against British colonial administration in 1913-14, and Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, shot dead as she led a demonstration to protest the arrest and detention of Harry Thuku in 1922.⁷³ Thus even before Ngugi embraced Mau Mau, the resistance which for him represents the most dramatic moment in the Kenya colonial encounter, there were women in the struggle. Mau Mau gave a certain structure to their protest as they engaged in dangerous missions, carrying weaponry and food, and acting as decoys to aid the men fighting in the forest. They were severely punished, with no deference to gender, when caught. Ngugi emphasises women's participation at every stage, but in spite of a levelling out of 'previously sharp differences in terms of gender subordination, women were still not able to use

⁷⁰ E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, 'The Rise and Decline of the Kenya Peasant, 1888-1922', *East Africa Journal*, 9: 5 (May 1972), 233-240.

⁷¹ Lonsdale, p.391.

⁷² Lonsdale, p.391.

⁷³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Women in Cultural Work: The Fate of Kamiriithu People's Theatre in Kenya', *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1983), p.41.

this social shift to negotiate new gender relations'.⁷⁴ Hence Ngugi's heroines are most powerful as romanticised symbols of a past glory. Those destroyed by the cultural leaching of colonialism are problematic, trapped by loss of tribal as well as contemporary social identity.⁷⁵

It was to this crisis that Kenyatta returned for the first time from England in 1930. As with Mau Mau, and the terms on which Kenya was to become independent, Kenyatta negotiated a compromise so broad that it could only be conceived of by those who fought for autonomy at all levels, as betrayal. Already the cultural implications of the fundamental issue, the challenge of modernity to traditional ways indicated that the consequences would be far-reaching. Kenyatta's own exploits while in England challenged the mystique and special quality supposedly exclusive to the Gikuyu girl because of this ritual.⁷⁶ In 1942 he married Edna Clarke, an English girl, presumably uncircumcised, who in 1943 gave birth to a son. Nevertheless Kenyatta, charged with brokering between the traditionalists, and the missionaries and government, knew the importance of this custom for the traditionalists, and clutched at cultural re-education as a means out of the impasse. Ngugi is highly critical of this compromise seeing in it the creation of 'a people without spiritual roots which could anchor them to the soil. Education could not be a substitute'.⁷⁷ Ngugi perceived the harm done by Christianity to be more intensely destructive than the loss of land, and stated that 'in Kenya the European settler robbed the people of their land, the missionaries robbed them of their

⁷⁴ Marina Santoru, 'The Colonial Idea of Women and Direct Intervention: The Mau Mau Case', *African Affairs*, 95 (April 1996), 253-267 (p.260).

⁷⁵ In Elleke Boehmer, 'The Master's Dance to the Master's Voice' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 26:1 (1991), 188-97 (p.189), Boehmer discusses the dynamic Wariinga of *Devil on the Cross*. She claims that Ngugi masculinises her, turning her not into a victorious woman but rather an honorary male. He must therefore: 'enlist his women characters into the ranks of a male ordered struggle, or [...] elevate women to the status of mascot at the head of the (male?) peasant and workers' march' (p.189).

⁷⁶ Although already married to Grace Wahu at home, he claimed to be a bachelor. According to Jeremy Murray-Brown in *Kenyatta*, 'Kenyatta had a disarming openness about these relationships. He was an African; the monogamy of the West was an interesting anthropological phenomenon, no more' (p.216).

⁷⁷ Quoted in David Cook & Michael Okenimpke, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of his Writings* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.19. This was in 'I Say Kenya's Missions Failed Badly' an article written while he was a journalist, in 1963. It was also before the writing of *The River Between* (1965) where the marriage between Waiyaki and the uncircumcised Nyambura signals future tribal reunification.

soul'.⁷⁸ There has still been no resolution, nor closure to all of these issues to which Ngugi continues to address himself.

Memorandum on Female Circumcision

The *Memorandum prepared by the Kikuyu Mission Council on Female Circumcision* narrows down to two the reasons for circumcision: the first is the sacrifice and sanctification of the reproductive faculties; the second, initiation into complete maturity and full tribal rights.⁷⁹ This pamphlet traces the dynamics of the conflict between the Missionaries, Government and the Agikuyu over the issue. It is partially a defence by the missionaries against allegations that they single-handedly precipitated the clitoridectomy crisis.⁸⁰ Two Scottish women, Mrs T. Watson and Marion S. Stevenson were at the centre of this bitter cultural controversy concerning Gikuyu women.⁸¹ Their intervention came via the boarding school they started for girls in Kikuyu. They offered their students choice over this issue, but one of the girls was forcibly and brutally circumcised nevertheless, precipitating an amendment to the Church Laws of 1915 as follows:

A girl who has been baptised and has made public profession, or who is a mission boarder, or is the child of Christian parents, or is their protege may not be circumcised.⁸²

The reverberations of their intervention continue to be felt today in the (often implied) equation of female education with rebellion, and in fiction nowhere more dramatically than in Ngugi's work. As Christian women Watson and Stevenson were disturbed by the sexual 'instruction' that preceded the event as well as objecting strongly to the physical procedure itself.⁸³

⁷⁸ Cook & Okenimpke, p.19.

⁷⁹ Church of Scotland, *Memorandum*, prepared by The Kikuyu Mission Council on Female Circumcision, 1 December, 1931 (Kikuyu: Kenya Colony), p.2, hereafter referred to as *Memorandum* in the thesis.

⁸⁰ *Memorandum*, p.66.

⁸¹ In Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), p.135.

⁸² *Memorandum*, p.11.

⁸³ In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta describes the nature and purpose of sexual play allowed initiates. Both *Memorandum* (p.6), and Lonsdale (p.388) have referred to the ritual as 'orgiastic'.

But it is the head of the Church of Scotland Mission, Dr John W. Arthur, who best illustrates the tension and confusion resulting in the long battle over this issue with Government and with the Gikuyu that eventually led to his resignation as Native representative in Government.⁸⁴ A Scottish medical doctor and missionary,⁸⁵ he combined conscientious and pragmatic objection to a procedure witnessed and described by another doctor and missionary, Philips, as 'so brutal and revolting', the mission hospitals refused to support or supervise it.⁸⁶ The Church's aim was to defer sexual activity till maturity, as well as to protect Gikuyu girls from the excessive suffering they had witnessed. Their medical objections were clearly outlined in a five point statement on clitoridectomy. They cited the difficulty of carrying out the procedure due to the proximity of the clitoris to the urinary canal, which might result in damage to the canal. Quite apart from the great pain, there was the danger of various kinds of infection, including tetanus. The missionaries preferred that interest in sex be deferred, as this ceremony drew the girls' attention to their sexual nature too early, but nevertheless thought sexual fulfilment necessary later on, and found the excision indefensible.⁸⁷ The missionaries worked closely with the Gikuyu on this issue, as demonstrated by the Elders' minute in support of the abolition of the custom,⁸⁸ taking informed and compassionate decisions.

Government, on the contrary, wanted liberation for the girls, and yet demonstrated characteristic ambivalence.⁸⁹ They said in 1929 that: 'no girl, may be compelled to undergo the operation, even in its mildest form, against her will'.⁹⁰ But earlier, in 1926 it had been reasoned that:

the practise of female circumcision, which was of very ancient origin, should not be interfered with, but that the respective Governments concerned should endeavour to persuade such tribes

⁸⁴ *Memorandum*, Appendix VII.

⁸⁵ The Scottish were the first to base doctors at their missions. They became aware of the effects of circumcision when dealing with maternity cases (*Memorandum*, p.11).

⁸⁶ *Memorandum*, p.12.

⁸⁷ *Memorandum*, Appendix I, i & ii.

⁸⁸ *Memorandum*, p.17.

⁸⁹ Within the framework of indirect rule dithering was not unusual.

⁹⁰ *Memorandum*, p.67.

as practised the more brutal forms of it to return to the more ancient and less brutal form.⁹¹

As the missionaries were quick to point out, there was no evidence to suggest a less brutal form at an earlier period. It was in order to avoid confusion over the conflicting Government and Missionary positions, especially as Arthur was also representative of Government that the Governor, Sir Edward Grigg, asked him to resign.⁹²

Hilda Stumpf, a missionary of the African Inland Mission, was brutally raped and murdered in her house in 1930. She had strongly opposed female circumcision, and her murder was supposed to serve as a warning to the missionaries about the consequences of interference with tribal custom. By this time, the Kikuyu Central Association was already using female circumcision as a political weapon, and this heinous murder indicated clearly the lengths they were prepared to go to in order to retain a political autonomy they now felt threatened. It has retrospectively been read as a precursor to Mau Mau.⁹³

In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta says: 'The initiation of both sexes is the most important custom among the Gikuyu'.⁹⁴ Kenyatta also claims that circumcision is the condition '*sine qua non* of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion and morality'.⁹⁵ Ngugi uses the traditional Gikuyu female rite of passage as a site for the conflict resulting from the clash between coloniser and colonised. He conflates this with the notion of independence as a rite of passage. Patrick Williams links gender, culture and politics, demonstrating the multifarious meanings inscribed in the struggle to abolish/retain this aspect of culture. Of the struggle between the Church and State, the mission based medical establishment and the indigenous community Williams says:

Female genital mutilation (most frequently, and incorrectly referred to as circumcision) was the traditional adolescent rite of passage for the Gikuyu. It also became a paradigm case for the

⁹¹ *Memorandum*, Appendix VII.

⁹² Sir Edward Grigg was Governor from 1925-1930.

⁹³ In *Kenyatta*, Jeremy Murray-Brown opens his chapter 'Female Circumcision' with this dramatic event (p. 134). Ngugi also draws on it for the story of Dr. Lynd in *A Grain of Wheat*.

⁹⁴ *Facing Mount Kenya*, p. 133.

⁹⁵ *Facing Mount Kenya*, p. 133.

maintenance/defence of cultural practices as a site of resistance to colonialism.⁹⁶

As with Negritude, the African woman in Ngugi is conscripted to represent much, even within practices that bind and marginalise her.

⁹⁶ Williams, p.32.

Chapter Two

'All the Winds of the World'

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF EDUCATION IN GHANA

The last chapter concentrated on Ngugi's focus on a political Kenyatta within Kenya. Armah uniquely spans a remarkably broad and diverse canvas, addressing black people in Africa and the African diaspora. His sense of internationalism owes much to Nkrumah and his transformation of Ghana from the shore from which Africa's fragmentation was largely effected to its singular position as a beacon of hope, as well as a place of welcome for a dispossessed and wandering people; as a spiritual centre for and a haven of black freedom. Ghana had a well-established educated elite, as well as a clear vision for its own, and Africa's future. Nkrumah inherited a proud legacy from a dedicated group of people whose contribution to Ghana left it uniquely placed to handle independence. For Armah, it is Nkrumah's perceived threat to this legacy of intellectualism, and hence to education, that is of most concern. It is of his apparent failure to grasp its full potential that Armah is so critical.

I now turn to the establishment of Education in Ghana, tracing its path from North American debates over provision for 'black' education as demonstrated by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, who influenced the form it was to take. The Phelps Stokes Education Commission forged a link between the black Diaspora and Africa that has proved crucial to the development of education in Africa, especially considering the haphazard record of colonial British policy and attitudes. However, the unusual and significant role played by Gordon Guggisberg, the return of Kwegyir Aggrey to Ghana, and the changed political climate all contributed to a remarkable legacy.

Education stands as the single most important achievement of the colonial encounter. As a formalised concept, it broke the continuity from the traditional way of life, and created in a new generation the desire for, and need to identify with the dominant culture, and lifestyle. It is the greatest social upheaval to take place in Africa this century. It has successfully mediated the all-inclusive transfer of values from the African world, affiliating and submitting them to a dominant, foreign system. In *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney nevertheless sees colonial education as intentionally directed towards: 'instill[ing] a sense of deference towards all that was European [...] Colonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation and the creation of mental confusion, and the development of underdevelopment'.¹ This may have been the case generally. It is what makes the special circumstances obtaining in Ghana so unique. The convergence of several favourable factors led to a remarkable outcome at Achimota itself.

Ghana and the African Diaspora

A seismic impact on narrative formation in Africa resulted from the introduction of literacy, of writing and reading. Chris Barlas, writing in *The Sunday Times*² observes that what we now take for granted as normal is actually the 'technology' on which a cultural revolution was based throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. British Imperialism in Africa employed the same tool, based on the assumption that 'literacy was essential', a position that served to marginalise a great majority of the population by destroying the oral cultures through which they were represented.³ Under different circumstances Armah and Ngugi, now *writers*, might have been griots or storytellers. They are defined by their medium. This 'reduction' to writing, like the subject matter itself, is the complex product of immense forces as yet not fully understood.

¹ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture Publications, 1988), p.241.

² Chris Barlas in the 'Culture' Essay, 'The End of the Word is Nigh', *The Sunday Times*, 4th December, 1994, p.10.

³ Barlas, p.10.

By the turn of the century, the colonial system in operation in the Gold Coast was firmly in place. Of key interest to Government was the establishment of Law and Order; the maintenance of a peaceful environment that would facilitate trade and the spread of Christianity. This emphasis on Law is reflected in the number of Gold Coasters who subsequently became lawyers, and used the legal platform to agitate for greater freedoms, as we will see later in the chapter. Education was at this time increasingly seen as the only means of penetrating the dominant system. The arrangements that were eventually worked out owe much not only to the efforts of the Africans, but to the international pressures that were being brought to bear on Imperialism. The concessions achieved were to alter profoundly key areas in colonial policy, and their effects inscribed in the fabric of place and peoples. This is true for Armah, and for many Ghanaians and other peoples whose perception of themselves and others has been conditioned by the various educational systems.

The kind of education that Armah received in Ghana, like that in the rest of British West African territory evolved over time. West Africa was also specifically influenced by the Portuguese conquest: they had set up small schools like the one at Elmina. Even though Ghana itself did not have Koranic schools and developed a uniform education system, there was an extensive network of these Koranic or Islamic schools based on the teaching of the Koran elsewhere in West Africa, many of them still in existence,⁴ the result of an earlier Arab incursion and settlement around the fifteenth century. Just as the Koranic schools were established to facilitate the spread of Islam, the Christian missionaries, who came much later on, were concerned to evangelise. Indeed, one of the first systematic attempts at organising a schedule for modern schooling was by the Basel Mission from Switzerland, which was established in 1828. Communication was essential to the spreading of the Gospel, hence the Wesleyan Methodists would explain at a later date the need to teach the individual 'to read and understand and search the Scriptures [...] to be

⁴ Mariama Ba describes the complementary spiritual role the Koranic schools still play alongside the secular, academic establishment: Mariama Ba, *So Long A Letter* (Virago Press, 1982, rpt. 1994)

able to make them a *personal* possession and so achieve salvation'.⁵ It was to this end they also pioneered the writing down of some of the local languages. For the Protestant missionaries reacting to centuries of oppressive Catholic mystification in Latin, the language in which this Scripture was to be read or heard became crucial to this possession, and to salvation. The climatic conditions, alas, proved too harsh for the Swiss, and within a ten year period eight of the twelve or so missionaries died. West Africa's reputation as the 'White Man's Grave' was well earned.⁶

Another factor set to influence the workings of the Gospel in West Africa was its link with the American-Caribbean diaspora. A visit in the late nineteenth century from a West Indian Bishop, John Brian Small of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, itself an offshoot of the Negro branch of the Methodist Episcopal church had far-reaching effects.⁷ His meeting with the Ghanaian, Kwegyir Aggrey, was fortuitous for the future development of education in the Gold Coast. He made it possible for Aggrey to leave the Gold Coast for the United States, where Aggrey spent the next twenty two years in preparation for his mission. He returned to Ghana in 1921, highly respected and the only African, indeed, black member of the Education Commission for Africa.

The West African Coast was the gateway to the Atlantic Slave Trade, and it subsequently retained a very direct link with its people of the dispersion, as shown in the case above. Various attempts were made over time to re-establish meaningful connections. The efforts of the Jamaican born Marcus Garvey to bring the Black Americans 'back to Africa', and W. E. B. Du Bois' creation of a Pan-African platform were all part of the larger agenda of reuniting Black people. Radical re-education was perceived to be crucial to this process.

⁵ C. K. Graham, *The History of Education in Ghana: From the Earliest Times to the Declaration of Independence* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), p.52.

⁶ William Macartney, *Dr. Aggrey* (London: SCM Press, 1949), p.16.

⁷ Macartney, p.28.

Sir Gordon Guggisberg

In 1919 Sir Gordon Guggisberg was appointed as Governor to the Gold Coast. His appointment there revolutionised the development of education as well as other administrative structures. Guggisberg had been a Brigadier-General in the first world war, an experience that altered his outlook on life and humanity. He thereafter 'solemnly vowed to devote the rest of his life to the service of his fellowmen'.⁸ In Smith's word, he 'leapt' at the chance to serve in the Gold Coast, and was on hand to translate the philanthropic postwar sentiments into tangible programmes. This he did by focusing on two main, closely linked areas, which he saw as integral to development: economic enterprise, and education.⁹ His proactive behaviour was innovative because most of the previous Governors had managed to sidestep development initiatives and programmes, and were content with the maintenance of law and order. At a time when many commentators still feared education as potentially subversive, it was common to hear such remarks as 'the educated native is the curse of the West Coast'.¹⁰ Guggisberg believed that rather than encourage subversion, education was the essential protection from it. He is described by Basil Davidson as 'unusual' in that at a time when policy dictated the suppression of the African, he translated his conversely 'deep' belief in education as the basis for any development to the specific development of African education. In a speech to the Legislative Council in 1924 for instance, he said:

Education, as I never lose the opportunity of reminding members, education of the right sort – education of the mind as well as the hand and brain – is the keystone of the edifice forming Government's main policy.¹¹

Guggisberg published a pamphlet called 'The Keystone' that stated clearly the role he believed education should play in the Gold Coast:

⁸ Edwin W. Smith, *Aggrey of Africa: A Study in Black and White* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1929), p.225.

⁹ Basil Davidson, *Black Star: A View of the Life and Times of Kwameh Nkrumah* (London: Allen Lane, 1973) pp.22-23.

¹⁰ Davidson, p.25.

¹¹ F. H. Hilliard, *A Short History of Education in British West Africa* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1957), p.86.

The main policy of the Gold Coast Government is the general progress of the people towards a higher state of civilisation [...] The part in this policy played by education is that of the Keystone in the arch [...] To stand the pressure brought to bear on the Arch of Progress by the hurricane of material development, the storm of criticism, the windy tornadoes of political agitation, the keystone must be well and truly laid and composed of strong materials.¹²

Guggisberg's sentiments, expressed in the hyperbolic fervour of a dynamic age did not remain pious hopes but were translated into the most vigorous action probably experienced in Gold Coast education to date. His enthusiasm did not proceed unchecked. There was opposition both from the whites in the Gold Coast and at home.¹³ Smith refers to his frequent run-ins with Westminster. His determination to implement a viable educational programme was, however, not blunted, and in spite of his efforts, he also came under increased pressure from the nationalist front to speed up reform.

A Growing Nationalism

David Kimble claims that the growth of Nationalism was closely linked to the cultural renaissance, a 'movement' that sprung from a perceived need to resist the unrelenting erosion of indigenous West African culture and languages. The educated felt this alienation most keenly because of the linguistic, ideological and material rift created by their education. As Ngugi was to do at a later date, Kimble gives instances of the reclamation of indigenous names to symbolise a return to the traditional fold. It was, however, the immediate threat to their land by the controversial Lands Bill of 1897 that galvanised Ghanaians to form a tangible, nationalist offensive. This Lands Bill, which was actually supposed to 'protect' the people's land from the unscrupulous chiefs who might sell it for profit was blocked by local opposition. The people subsequently organised themselves into The Aborigines' Rights Protection Society (ARPS).¹⁴ The ground work had been started prior to 1900 by Africanus Horton of Sierra Leone, W. E.

¹² Quoted from 'The Keystone' in Hilliard, p.87.

¹³ Smith, p.236.

¹⁴ Macartney, p.25.

Blyden of Liberia, amongst others, and their arguments were now crystallized and carried forward by such Gold Coast/Ghana activists as Aggrey, Mensah Sarbah, Casely-Hayford and others.

Casely-Hayford, an attorney at Law and active nationalist, was commissioned to carry out research for the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society to give them grounds on which to dispute the Bill that was set to turn all 'unoccupied' land into Crown land. This work led to the publication of his book, *Gold Coast Native Institutions* in 1903.¹⁵ Mensah Sarbah, also a lawyer, supplemented this with the *Fanti National Constitution* in 1906.¹⁶ There were other protests, such as that voiced by the historian, Dr J. B. Danquah, with his emphasis on Land as 'the touchstone of national solidarity'. He frequently reiterated the argument that 'It [land] and it alone can and always does bring all States and all the peoples together to act as one man, to act with the will and purport of a nation'.¹⁷ Already in the Belgian Congo and later in the East Africa protectorate, land had been seized by Government, and people were understandably cautious.¹⁸ These and similar protests were to grow into a dynamic political force that led to the reconsolidation of such earlier nationalisms as The Fanti Confederation. This new nationalist spirit also led to the formation of new organisations such as The Congress of British West Africa led by Casely-Hayford. And these nationalist organisations viewed education as the means by which independence would eventually be achieved.

Local agitation grew gradually and became part of the larger colonial instability that resulted after the First World War. A new world order was formed with the League of Nations as its centre. This period also witnessed a much heightened general world concern for colonised peoples. In the Western world, the imperial position of the colonising

¹⁵ Casely-Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions: with Thoughts Upon a Healthy Imperial Policy for the Gold Coast and Ashanti* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1903).

¹⁶ J. Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution* (London: [?]1906), in David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism 1850-1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p.523.

¹⁷ Quoted in Kimble, p.520.

¹⁸ Macartney, p.25.

powers began to be questioned by a wider audience. One of the voices that was to clamour for a hearing was the Negro or Black voice in the USA, raised by W. E. B. Du Bois under the umbrella of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP). He lobbied the League of Nations to bring pressure to bear on the European powers with overseas territories to exercise 'trusteeship' in these areas. Scanlon highlights a statement of the League, one of many dealing with the question of mandated territory:

No articles of the Covenant (League of Nations) contained more sentences than the article dealing with mandates, and farcically or not, the member states recognized that the well-being and development of *helpless* people 'form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this covenant'.¹⁹

Du Bois saw self-representation and empowerment as the only way to defeat the notion of 'helplessness', and moved for the inclusion or appointment of a 'native' to the mandates commission.²⁰ In the sixties, Nkrumah came out even more strongly in his criticism of this 'mandate system [as] a feeble and dangerous compromise between Wilsonian idealism, self-determination and the concept of trusteeship on the one hand, and annexationists' ambition, political subjugation and economic exploitation on the other'. To Nkrumah, it ultimately proved a 'cowardly compromise between their principles of self-determination for dependent territories and imperialism'.²¹

The African American Link: W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington

The role that W. E. B. Du Bois was subsequently to play in politicising the Black agenda and putting it on the world platform cannot be over-emphasised, especially in view of his close links in later life with Armah's Ghana. In so far as he was to influence educational policy, it is important to situate him in the debate about Negro education that was already raging in the United States. His long drawn-out battle with the educator and spokesman,

¹⁹ Quoted in G. Scanlon, ed., *Traditions of African Education* (New York: Columbia University, 1964), p.5.

²⁰ C. L. R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), p.208.

²¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Towards Colonial Freedom: Africa in the Struggle Against World Imperialism* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p.25.

Booker T. Washington, of the Tuskegee Institute, is almost legendary.

On September 18, 1895, as the representative of the Negro race, Booker T. Washington made a speech at The Atlanta Exposition. It came to be known as the Atlanta 'Compromise' Address, because in due course the blacks came to read it as overly conciliatory, a call for a form of apartheid, and a missed opportunity for challenging the structural imbalance to which they were already subjected and that no amount of subsequent hard work could shift. At the time, nevertheless, its conciliatory tenor was received with enthusiasm by a tense and apprehensive South. While the whites felt magnanimous for having given a Negro a platform, the black audience, most of whom, like Washington himself, were ex-slaves, recognised the uniqueness of the opportunity afforded him for initiating interracial dialogue on a shared public platform.

In *Up from Slavery*, Washington used the hand as metaphor in the (in)famous statement that continues to distinguish his undeniably considerable contribution to black advancement in the Southern States of North America: 'In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress'.²² In the same speech, Washington argued for an evolutionary development for the blacks, as if the removal of threat which seemed to be offered by gradualism and commonsense might subvert the irrationality on which racism rests. He said:

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house.²³

The Tuskegee Institute in Alabama was modelled along the same lines as another Negro college, the Hampton Institute, whose principal, Jesse Jones, was later to preside over the

²² Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp.221-222.

²³ Washington, pp.223-224.

Education Commission for Africa. This was Washington's baby, and a monument to the principles he stood for. It was built largely by its students with funds solicited from philanthropists and well-wishers (including a gift from the Phelps sisters of New York, later of the Phelps-Stokes Commission on education in Africa). Washington aimed to up the Negro from slavery by helping them 'make the distinction between working and being worked',²⁴ by emphasising 'the virile philosophy that there is a positive dignity in working with the hands, when that labour is fortified by a developed brain and a consecrated heart'²⁵ [...] *and a bank-account*.²⁶ He stressed the fact that the abundance of undeveloped resources in the South made the kind of education he was advocating practical, not only for the Negro but for everybody. The 'Tuskegee Idea' was that:

correct education begins at the bottom, and expands naturally as the necessities of the people expand. As the race grows in knowledge, experience, culture, taste and wealth, its wants are bound to become more and more diverse; and to satisfy these wants there will be gradually developed within our ranks – as has already been true of the whites – a constantly increasing variety of professional and business men and women.²⁷

Washington even coined appropriate slogans – 'character, courage and cash', and 'mind, morals and muscle' to carry his desire for this education. But as Emmett J. Scott, one time Secretary to the school, observed: 'The public, or at least a part of it, somewhat gratuitously, has reached the conclusion that Tuskegee Institute is a "servant training school"'.²⁸ The idea of 'working by hand and brain' was one shared by Guggisberg, and underpinned his later agenda for education in Ghana. But Washington's programme was thought 'unnecessarily narrow'²⁹ in a climate in which the desire was for intellectual rather than practical skills of the kind associated with labour. Washington was perceived as settling for less, for exclusion from all that the American dream had to offer to those of

²⁴ Washington, p.7.

²⁵ Washington, p.vii.

²⁶ Washington, p.7. Blacks were kept in a state of subjection and poverty, hence Washington's emphasis on economic development.

²⁷ Washington, p.11.

²⁸ Washington, p.vii.

²⁹ As by W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973; NY: Avon, 1965), p.44.

a privileged education. The charge went much deeper, given his position of leadership. Du Bois saw Washington's non-intellectual and apolitical programme as leading to:

The disenfranchisement of the Negro [...] the legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro [...] and] the steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.³⁰

Washington's position could not go unchallenged.

W. E. B. Du Bois was the first black American to attain a Harvard PhD. This was part of his struggle to prove the intellectual capacity, potential and equality of all races. But this achievement in no way changed his status as a socially inferior Negro, as an ex-slave. Like Modin in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* he had scaled Olympus, but was nevertheless refused a seat at the banquet of the gods. He consequently found himself fighting for the sharing of all platforms, political, economic, and possibly even social, of all the American people. He saw the only way of achieving this as through the education of a Negro elite. He wanted them to form a 'brains-trust' of what he called the 'talented tenth', who would consequently open up opportunities for the rest of the Negro people.³¹

Du Bois affiliated himself to such organisations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP), and helped initiate Conferences, and publications because of the status and power he would be afforded by a broad base of support. Knowing the powerlessness of the Negro, trapped in slavery in the public mind, he crucially linked their struggle for recognition within America to that of the oppression of colonial peoples of Africa. Emphasising their commonality of origin, and marginalisation because of colour, he sought to forge a unity and create 'a unified pressure group' to fight what he then figured as the greatest problem of the twentieth century: racism.³²

³⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, p.51

³¹ Elliot M. Rudwick, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Study in Minority Group Leadership* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), p.25.

³² James, p.206.

After the first world war in 1919, Du Bois organised the first World Races Congress in London, a precursor to the first Pan African Conference held later in the same year in Paris, where the victorious powers were holding their peace conference. The conference was sponsored by the NAACP, and their aim was to 'pressure peace makers to internationalize the former German colonies in Africa in a way that would best serve the needs of the growing African nationalism'.³³ Du Bois hoped 'to focus the attention of the peace delegates and the civilised world on the just claims of the Negro everywhere'.³⁴ Du Bois was to repeatedly link the American agenda to issues African, and as the Pan African conference spilt over into another meeting on the 6th of January in New York's Carnegie Hall, again organised by the NAACP, the two issues that dominated were the freeing of German colonies in Africa, and the cessation of Negro lynchings in America.

The first conference was quickly followed by a second, again sponsored by the NAACP. It met, successively, in the capitals of three countries that had colonies – London, Brussels and Paris, and attracted a representative 113 delegates.³⁵ It is important to note that there was Western opposition to these meetings, and that the delegates themselves were not always agreed on matters raised. The first Paris meeting had been opposed by the American State Department, and the French Government. Blaise Diagne, a member of the French Assembly from Senegal, was persuaded by Du Bois to negotiate for permission to hold the meeting, which he obtained. C. L. R. James notes Diagne's reluctance to cast France in the mould of a colonial power.³⁶ Diagne, a French assimilé (later one of the founding members of *Présence Africaine*), was probably, and understandably intimidated by the possibility of an all African unity, especially in view of his allegiance to France at the time.

Amongst the suggestions offered to the League of Nations, as already mentioned, was the

³³ James, p.206.

³⁴ James, p.206.

³⁵ James, p.207.

³⁶ James, p.206.

establishment of a mandates commission with a Negro member, a recommendation Du Bois was to repeat in 1944³⁷ when delegates from 44 countries once more met at Bretton Woods in New Hampshire to project a future beyond the World War II. It is here that according to Zagorin these powers 'created the basis of the postwar international economic system'.³⁸ Du Bois wanted to be an integral part of this world agenda, and he moved to 'put pressure on public opinion through an educational programme to end racial discrimination.'³⁹ The role of the 'talented tenth' was outlined in the manifesto, which read; 'in the process of raising the Africans "to intelligence, self-knowledge and self-control, their (Negro) intelligentsia of right ought to be recognised as the natural leaders of their groups"'.⁴⁰ It was this group that subsequently spearheaded educational and other initiatives, making these more generally accessible.

One of the issues over which Du Bois and Washington disagreed most was that concerning segregation, or separate development within America. In the Chapter 'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others' Dubois had this to say:

So far as Washington preaches Thrift, Patience and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him [...] But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North and South, does not rightly value the privilege of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds, – so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this, – we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them. By every civilised and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'.⁴¹

To black leaders like Du Bois and later, Martin Luther King, these final words held a possibility denied them by the system. Ultimately, it was Du Bois who left the United

³⁷ Rudwick, p.288.

³⁸ *Time*, 25 July, 1994, p.44.

³⁹ Rudwick, p.288.

⁴⁰ James, p.208.

⁴¹ Dubois, *Souls*, p.59,

States, though using James's word, he 'conquered'⁴² Washington by the breadth of his vision. To James, Du Bois:

more than any other citizen of Western civilisation (or of Africa itself) [...] struggled over many years and succeeded in making the world aware that Africa and Africans had to be freed from the thralldom which Western civilisation had imposed on them.⁴³

Although Du Bois never actually joined the Communist Party, he was denied permission to attend the independence celebrations of Ghana in 1957 by the United States government because of suspected communist leanings.⁴⁴ He had been forced to consider Communism as an alternative avenue once he realized the futility of fighting the American system armed only with ideological rather than practical tools. This interest provoked US government censure. Du Bois had reason to attend the celebrations, to which he had contributed through his organisation of the Pan African Conferences and the opening up of other forums for both protest and consolidated action. In Ghana, Nkrumah was later effectively strangled economically by the withdrawal of US aid when he tried to walk the political tightrope between Capitalism and Communism in the early 1960's. Ghana has not fully recovered from this choice.

Du Bois was accused of many things, among the charges being that he was not in touch with the common people because he was 'supereducated', and aloof. He was clearly motivated by concerns with larger freedoms, with total freedom. If at first he focused narrowly on race matters, towards the end of his life, and in a predominantly black environment it became ever clearer that the social structure based on class needs rather than colour also reflected similar inequalities. The fact that the Black and White Americans struggled for privilege in the same space only made colour, such a visible, external, distinctive, differentiating standard, a ready tool for the retrenchment of dominance after the emancipation of the Negroes from slavery. As Du Bois wrote in his 'Retrospect' to *The Souls of Black Folk*:

⁴² James, p.205.

⁴³ James, p.202.

⁴⁴ Du Bois, *Autobiography*, p. 11.

I still think today as yesterday that the colour line is a great problem of this century. But today I see more clearly than yesterday that back of the problem of race and colour, lies a greater problem which both obscures and implements it; and that is the fact that so many civilised persons are willing to live in comfort even if the price of this is poverty, ignorance and disease of the majority of their fellowmen; that to maintain this privilege men have waged war until today war tends to become universal and continuous, and the excuse for this war continues largely to be colour and race.⁴⁵

In his own life, Du Bois reflects the dark side of the struggle towards a system both social, and inevitably political. The struggle was as much about race as it was about protecting privilege. Unhappy with the capitalistic path chosen by Washington, for whom the solution partially presented itself in the development of a Black bourgeoisie, Du Bois recognised that in his America, power resided elsewhere. As he asked himself:

Is it possible, and probable, that millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, and made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic *No*.⁴⁶

It is to this realisation that Kwame Nkrumah, a student in the United States in these volatile 1940s, responded. Political power was necessary to effect social change. Nkrumah subsequently adopted the rallying call that was to propel Ghana and the rest of Africa towards what was at the time perceived as full independence: 'Seek ye first the political Kingdom'. Du Bois had leant towards a Marxist Communism as an accommodating alternative not only because in his case it disregarded colour, a traumatic issue for black Americans, but because it offered an imaginative community in which he could live. Du Bois settled in Ghana. By the time he died in 1963, Ayi Kwei Armah had already worked his way through the prestigious Groton School⁴⁷ in Massachusetts, and was at Harvard University in the United States.

⁴⁵ Quoted in James, p.212.

⁴⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, pp.51-52.

⁴⁷ According to Frances Saunders in *Who Paid The Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, the Groton School was run by the Rev. Endicott Peabody, along the lines of Eton, Harrow and Winchester, and was Alma Mater of many national leaders. It emphasised the principles of 'robust intellect, athletic prowess, *politesse noblige* (sic) and solid Christian ethics' (London: Granta Books), p.36.

The ideas floated in the controversial debate about the nature of education that were to set Washington and Du Bois so apart in the United States were to achieve in Africa what the Black Americans could as yet only dream about. They raised issues about the purpose, nature and relevance of education that were to feed into subsequent education Plans. The most immediate of these was the Education Commission charged with looking into the education of the American Negro and the Africans, and out of this emerged the blueprint for Achimota.

The Phelps-Stokes Commission on Education in Africa.

The Education Commission for Africa was set up in 1921, and was led by Dr Jesse Jones, principal of Hampton Institute and Booker T. Washington's mentor. The Commission was charged with the task of studying the existing, mainly mission centred provisions made for education, and drawing up a detailed Report on their findings. It had a profound effect on the actual drafting of policy documents for the implementation of changes in the structure of education. The first education Report was commissioned by the Phelps-Stokes Fund. This fund was an endowment from a philanthropist, Miss Caroline Phelps-Stokes, whose Will (May 1911) indicated amongst other things that it should be used in 'aiding Negro schools and colleges, in promoting interracial cooperation, and in assisting publications and "movements in the interest of the Negro" throughout the United States'. Its findings were published in 1922. A second followed in 1925, representing 'the first significant effort to consider education within the context of African social and economic conditions'.⁴⁸ These reports, part of the larger aim to 'assess the nature and quality of the education of Negroes both in Africa and the U.S.A.',⁴⁹ and already in the implementation stages in the United States made it possible for administrators in West Africa to study experiments that had been carried out on the Negroes in America. It was one of the first funded attempts to try and redress the imbalance in the provision of education between the races.

⁴⁸ Scanlon, p.152.

⁴⁹ Graham, p.156.

But even with the broad area of reference it was not going to be easy to apply to West Africa the new ideas suggested by the Commission Reports. The Commissioners had found most of the methods in use in Africa shockingly rudimentary. The conception of education was not broad enough and 'in [...] limiting education to classroom instruction in books, missionaries were following the ideals prevailing in their home country'.⁵⁰ They also found that many of the systems set in place had actually failed through lack of organisation and supervision.⁵¹ Because they immersed themselves in their task the commissioners were able to reveal the discrepancies between professed policies and praxis. They moved for certain changes, which published, 'offered a fresh and challenging viewpoint'.⁵² These reports were to encounter a resistance reminiscent of the Washington / Du Bois battle, and for the same reasons.

There already existed in West Africa at the time a significant educated elite, who had enjoyed a fairly sophisticated educational establishment, bound to the respective colonial power. These people, mainly lawyers, were ready to oppose any apparent watering down of the system, regardless of the fact that it served so few. Consequently, this 'adaptation', as the Commission strategy was referred to, of the education programme to indigenous needs was fraught with tension. Scanlon notes the primary reason for African apprehension of the removal of conventional western education structures as fear, already vindicated in some cases by the withdrawal of educational *privileges*, that it would be replaced by an inferior variety, creating a two tier segregated system.⁵³ As Davidson points out, this was a very real fear as it was believed at the time that achievement and 'worthwhile civilisation had to come from Europe [...] 'on European terms'. Indeed, Africans:

had to excel in all the subjects which Europeans thought necessary, not least in Greek and Latin. In the measure they succeeded, they had to accept a special status in their own African countries.

⁵⁰ L. J. Lewis, *Phelps-Stokes Reports on Education in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.9.

⁵¹ Lewis, p.9

⁵² Lewis, p.9.

⁵³ Scanlon, p.55.

They had to become a privileged group or élite, even if this divided them from the lives of the majority of their fellow-countrymen.⁵⁴

Any move away from this western education was subsequently regarded as suspect, not least because preference for an academic education was simply 'a reflection of their realistic perception of the differential rewards and prestige accorded to Europeans'.⁵⁵ This explains why by and large the African countries chose to emphasise an 'elitist' education, rather than consider more closely the need for the technological education perhaps better suited to their needs.

Nevertheless, the policy statements derived from the Phelps-Stokes documents (said to have provoked most discussion in the history of African education), were the first to tackle clearly the imperial Government's intentions for the colonies. Although Scanlon points out the difficulty in assessing the overall impact of the policies at the time he wrote, in the case of Ghana two factors emerged that worked towards the successful implementation of the proposals. Guggisberg, already Governor, believed in the same principles. And J. Kwegyir Aggrey was a member of the Commission. A noted educator and at this time a lecturer in the United States (where he had already spent twenty two years studying and teaching), he was himself from the Gold Coast: was a Fanti from Anomabu. Both men were to have a hand in the foundation of Achimota, the institution that in Guggisberg's words was to be 'the greatest institution for the higher education of the native races of Africa'.⁵⁶

A third factor that greatly added to the attractiveness of the proposals was that they proceeded from an international initiative and consequently generated an international agenda which proved to be the basis for the educational strategies of Armah's school, Achimota.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Davidson, p.26.

⁵⁵ Graham, p.184.

⁵⁶ Kimble, p.114.

⁵⁷ Amos Sempa, later Finance Minister in the Kabaka of Buganda's Government was, for example, one of a select group of Ugandans to attend Achimota.

The Achimota School

It is impossible to think of the Achimota school, at its inception and even today, without thinking of Dr Aggrey. He employed as his icon the workings together of the black and white keys of the piano, a symbol that was incorporated into the school crest in his honour after his death in 1927.⁵⁸ It is a design based on his favourite illustration for cooperation between all peoples, and that embodies the ideals he stood steadfastly for: the working together of the different races towards a better world. He may have absorbed this idea from Du Bois, who, from 'within the veil' in *Darkwater* pleads that the Negro be allowed to 'strike here and there a half-tone, newer even if slighter',⁵⁹ in his own cause.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the point that Aggrey chose to emphasise is not so much inferiority or dominance as harmony between the races. According to Davidson, his vigour and ideals achieved great things at Achimota, where he helped successfully incorporate 'the lessons of black America and white America [as] a stimulus and challenge'.⁶¹ He also worked keenly towards the implementation of the educational programme drawn by the Phelps-Stokes Commission, to which he had contributed.

Aggrey, who had gone to the United States in 1898 under the umbrella of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of the Gold Coast, a breakaway institution from the American Negro parent, saw Achimota as an international institution. The students were to be prepared to lead lives as full and participatory Ghanaians, but the ultimate aim was to 'provide an education that would be fully worthy of world citizenry'. With Aggrey, the 'winds of all the world' began to blow through Achimota's classrooms.⁶² Having stayed so long in the United States, Aggrey was particularly sensitive to the international politics of race relations, believing that conciliation was possible only within the forgiving framework of Christianity. In this he is quite close to Washington, although Smith says it

⁵⁸ See Appendix II for illustration.

⁵⁹ Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1921), p. vii.

⁶⁰ Davidson, p.23.

⁶¹ Davidson, p. 23.

⁶² Davidson, p.23.

as difficult to establish just how much he was influenced by him.⁶³ His methodology, opposed to Gandhi's policy of non-cooperation, was more in keeping with the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore's humanist views.⁶⁴ For him this statement by Tagore highlighted what he sought to achieve:

All humanity's greatest is mine. *The infinite personality of man* [...] can only come from the magnificent harmony of all human races [...] To say that it is wrong to cooperate with the West is to encourage the worst form of provincialism and can produce nothing but intellectual indigence. The problem is a world problem. No nation can find its own salvation by breaking away from others. We must all be saved or we must all perish together.⁶⁵

He was recognised by many to be the ideal choice to mediate in the colonial set-up. This he did, with both vigilance and humility.

The historian, Hilliard, describes Achimota College as 'the first and perhaps the greatest of the developments which resulted from the new impetus and direction which Guggisberg gave to education in the territory'.⁶⁶ In 'The Keystone' he had outlined his dream. When he eventually laid the foundation stone of the college, he altered the agenda of 'Keystone' to encompass an 'all-round' result. Literacy, character training [including training for leadership...], Agriculture, Trades and professional training were all part of the new programme. Achimota was to be the 'Eton' of the Gold Coast.⁶⁷

Achimota was intended to be a college with a difference almost from the outset. At a time when education was still the preserve of the Missions, it was established by Government. And although the members of staff initially were mostly missionaries, starting with the first principal, the Reverend A. G. Fraser, who had earlier taught and served as a missionary at Trinity College in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the spirit of the college reflected its respect for the place and people it was designed to serve. In keeping with the Commission

⁶³ Smith, p. 121.

⁶⁴ Smith, p. 124.

⁶⁵ Smith, p.124.

⁶⁶ Hilliard, p.87.

⁶⁷ Scanlon, p.5.

Report, and Guggisberg's recognition of the centrality of religion in the African world, emphasis was placed on the need to 'conserve whatever was sound in the African's life and transmit the best that civilisation and Christianity had to offer'.⁶⁸ Education was to 'be adapted to the mentality, aptitude, occupations and traditions of the various peoples, conserving as far as possible all sound and healthy elements in the fabric of their social life'.⁶⁹

Fraser, who was empowered to appoint his own staff, further ensured African involvement from the outset. He wanted Dr Aggrey as his deputy principal, but in this desire he was thwarted. It was felt by the larger appointment Committee that Aggrey, who had spent years organising and administering in the US, and who, as already mentioned, had been a member of the Phelps-Stokes Commission, did not have 'proved administrative ability'.⁷⁰ The stigma of colour was not solely a US problem, after all. The Reverend R. C. Blumer, BSc., M.A. was appointed instead. Fraser, who in his conditions for accepting his post as Principal had stipulated that African staff were to be accorded equal status to the European staff made Aggrey the Assistant Vice Principal.⁷¹ By 1930 Achimota had more or less established autonomy under the College Ordinance that gave it its own governing council on which sat both Government and non-Government, British and African members. It was as independent as it possibly could have been.

Both Fraser and Aggrey worked hard to make Achimota a national institution. It was co-educational before women's education became an issue in Africa. It also hoped to close the traditional gap between an elitist education, designed primarily for the sons of chiefs, and technical education, and subsequently developed a programme that catered for masses and leaders alike. At this time of colonial Government it was felt keenly that 'every people

⁶⁸ Graham, p.157.

⁶⁹ Kimble, p.113.

⁷⁰ Smith, p.229.

⁷¹ Smith, p.229.

must have some of its own to serve as leaders', but 'leaders [...] trained directly for service to the community'.⁷²

The teaching of History was seen as important in this respect, and in the 1920's as part of the new history course, *A Tropical Dependency* by Lady Lugard was introduced as the main history text.⁷³ In this book, Lugard traced the history of Ghana as far back as the eleventh century, referring to 'schools and centres of learning, and quoted descriptions of the town as the meeting place of commercial caravans from all parts of the world, and the "resort of the learned, the rich, and the pious of all nations"'.⁷⁴ At the time of his death in 1927, Aggrey in the same vein was working on an historical thesis in which he wanted 'to prove that a number of the Negroes, pure Negroes, who inhabit say the Gold Coast, are a conquering race who trace their lineage to Songhay, to Melle, to Egypt, to Meroe of the Ethiopians'.⁷⁵

The Commission Report was quite specific about the kind of student they hoped to produce, and the process through which they intended to achieve this result. First, the influence exerted on the students by the school was ensured by making it residential from the age of six. The students were then moulded into the character befitting graduates of Achimota. Scanlon sums it up succinctly:

The most effective means of training characters in these ways (ie, the formation of habits of industry, of truthfulness, of 'manliness', of readiness for social service and of disciplined cooperation) is the residential school in which the personal example and influence of the teachers and of the older pupils – entrusted with responsibility and *disciplinary powers* as monitors – can create a social life and tradition in which standards of judgement are formed and right attitudes acquired *almost unconsciously* through imbibing the spirit and atmosphere of the school.⁷⁶

⁷² Graham, p.157.

⁷³ Flora L. Lugard, *A Tropical Dependency: An Outline of the Ancient History of the Western Sudan with an Account of the Modern Settlement of Northern Nigeria* (London: J. Nisbet, 1905).

⁷⁴ Quoted in Kimble, p. xiv.

⁷⁵ Kimble, p. xvii. It is, of course, to this kind of study that Cheikh Anta Diop devoted his life.

⁷⁶ Scanlon, p.95.

Education and Politics: Armah and Nkrumah

The links between Ghana and the Diaspora, established by Slavery, were strengthened in the period leading up to independence through education. Ironically, in the wake of British imperialism, an American education was now seen to represent a rejection of dominance, and to offer the possibility of freedom. While Nkrumah's experience at Lincoln, an underfunded black college, seems to have prepared him better to tackle the practical problems of Ghana, Armah's elitist Groton/Harvard education appears to have created in him a disdain for the modest processes that constitute the building of a new nation. The tension between him and Nkrumah is reminiscent of that between Washington and Du Bois, between a hardnosed pragmatism in the face of racial contempt, and an unsupported elitism. In a peculiar sense Armah reflects the arrogance of the colonised Anglophone towards what is not the 'best of the British', an attitude that comes through most clearly in his allusion to Nkrumah.

Armah has consistently blamed Nkrumah for the betrayal not only of the vision of Ghana, but that of Africa as well. He is referred to by Armah as the 'Anglo-American variant of the educated African', as a man suffering from the "'minority malaise", the anguish of the isolated black man in a world aggressively white',⁷⁷ a charge equally applicable to Armah himself.⁷⁸ It is arguable that had Nkrumah not gone to Lincoln, the trajectory of Africa's history might have been significantly altered. Nkrumah's American experience taught him that the struggle to end privilege had to come from a broadly based, united and sustained

⁷⁷ *The Beautiful Ones*, p.22.

⁷⁸ Armah is careful to include a cleverly worded disclaimer in *Why Are We So Blest?*: 'Since this book is a work of fiction, any resemblance to real persons is coincidental.' His criticism of Nkrumah is harsh, as is his contemptuous reference to the 'educated African', which has annoyed African critics who read in his use of the phrase colonialist arrogance that somehow excludes himself. Colonial reference to the educated African was always ironical, and spoke to that strange half breed described by Achebe in 'Colonialist Criticism' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975):

He was different (from his brothers in the bush); he was worse. His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated had nonetheless done something to him – it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretensions.(5)

Armah's implication is that Nkrumah has gone beyond even this British conceptualisation in his alienation. Today, reference to educated Africans is not always so nuanced.

effort.⁷⁹ Nkrumah responded not with an angst ridden despair at the immensity of it all. His experience of the full impact of racism in America led him to conclude that time was not a factor in the issue of independence, that an evolutionary approach was futile. This translated into the political demand for 'self-government now'.

Kwame Nkrumah is inextricably linked with the establishment, and early development of both politics and education in Ghana. As first president, he identified completely with the new nation such that any discussion about this period of Ghana history must address the pivotal role he played. Armah's attack of him in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, discussed in Chapter 5, stems from an unease with this personal identification with the State, and is especially disturbed by Nkrumah's appropriation of State resources.

Emmanuel Hansen has pointed out, however, that just as Nkrumah made no distinctions between the personal and political, or between his private and the public purse, his commitment to Ghana was selfless, and that ultimately, he willed his worldly possessions to the State.

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When the leadership of the United Gold Coast Convention party (UGCC) invited Nkrumah back as Secretary to the party they were unaware of the extent to which he had been politicised by his African American experience.⁸⁰ Because he came from a small ethnic group, they viewed him as non-threatening, a fact he exploited in the face of formidable Ashanti dominance, using the despised 'verandah boys' to consolidate his position. Nkrumah was aware of his intellectual shortcomings, and shrewdly enlisted the highly intellectual philosopher, Willy Abrahams, to ghost write the well thought-out philosophical treatise, *Consciencism*. Its authorship was an open secret in Ghana. Abrahams had earlier been a fellow of the prestigious and exclusive All Souls College in Oxford. Just as Nkrumah exploited the deep divisions between the parties at home, so he

⁷⁹ I discussed earlier the impact of Booker T. Washington's ideas, with their strong emphasis on self-reliance, on Black education. It is these ideas that run through Nkrumah's early vision for Ghana.

⁸⁰ This was the party formed by Dr Danquah in 1947.

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expectation whetted by his theories generated a keen disappointment. This, then, is Armah's heritage, the palimpsest⁸³ into which he is inscribed.

⁸³ I use the term in the sense of S. S. Prawer in 'World Literature and Class Conflict', *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp.138-165 (p.139). It is a metaphor for the organic interaction between, and layering of different narratives, one on top of the next. Each may partially conceal, and even erase the one before.

Chapter Three

'Go ye Forth'

THE MISEDUCATION OF NGUGI

Ngugi's publication of *Matigari* in 1987 is his literary expression of an enduring interest in Mau Mau and its place in the making of post independence Kenya. Mau Mau's significance has been radically reassessed over the last two decades. Indeed, with the passage of time it 'has increasingly become a dominant theme in Kenya's historiography'.¹ Intense scholarly debate, both from within the country's own departments of History and Literature, and further afield in the work of such scholars as John Lonsdale and Frank Furedi has been rekindled by various factors. Discussion about Mau Mau has been a taboo subject in Kenya, but with the passage of time it has become arguably less threatening. The suspiciously repressive response of the political establishment to its airing however points to its continuing relevance, as such questions as of land redistribution and personal freedoms remain unresolved, erupting from time to time in different forms.² The civil strife in the Rift Valley is just one such manifestation. Interest has also been rekindled by the recent availability of fresh material from the Kenya National Archives, and in Britain the publication of a comprehensive Bibliography by Anne Thurston has refocused interest on this period and on Mau Mau.

The Emergency marks a retrospective watershed for Ngugi inasmuch as the key moments or events from which he draws are contained within this period. There was the displacement and disintegration of home and family in the notorious government strategy to isolate the rebels by resettling villagers into squatter camps and 'lines'.

¹ David M. Anderson, 'The "Crisis of Capitalism" and Kenya's Social History: A Comment', *African Affairs*, 92 (1993), 285-290 (p.289). Anderson also suggests Anne Thurston's *Guides To Archives and Manuscripts Relating to Kenya and East Africa in the United Kingdom*, (Hans Zell: London, 1991), in two volumes, as an important source of information in this area.

² Many Kenyans are apprehensive over the land crisis in Zimbabwe (2000), reading in this violence the failure of Government to address the problem at independence. Kenya has a similar history.

Ngugi's brother, Wallace Mwangi, who had joined the guerillas between 1954 and 1956 was shot by Colonial government forces. His mother was subjected to harassment and subsequently imprisoned at Kamiriithu for three months for her son's action.³ In an interview with Dennis Duerden Ngugi subsequently laments more than the displacement of people: he says that the most 'terrible thing about the Mau Mau was the destruction of family life, the destruction of personal relationships'.⁴ Ngugi's self-confessed need, reflected in his work, to maintain his village as the centre of his creativity can be seen as arising out of this overpowering sense of displacement and loss. It is also during this period that Ngugi found physical shelter, and spiritual salvation at the Alliance School. In the autobiographical *Detained: A Prison Writers Diary*, Ngugi recollects the incident that now assumes momentous significance, and that has come to dominate his quest for a place to call 'home':

home was now only a pile of dry mud-stones, bits of grass, charcoal and ashes. Nothing remained, not even crops, except for a lone pear tree that slightly swayed in sun and wind. I stood there bewildered. Not only my home, but the old village with its culture, its memories and its warmth had been razed to the ground. I walked up the ridge [...] until I met a solitary old woman. Go to Kamiriithu, she told me.⁵

The psychological effect of this incident is profound, as has emerged over the years, indicated by the centrality and recurrence of the return motif, repeatedly coupled with that of loss and betrayal in Ngugi's writings. The destruction of his family life yet again, this time by government as part of its strategy to curb dissent, accentuates continuities and the ironies of independence. Ngugi is twice victim, with independence confirming what he must have imagined could never happen again.

When I visited Ngugi's home in 1994, I experienced an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* as I awaited the opening of the securely chained and padlocked gate, a futile attempt by Nyambura, Ngugi's first wife, at keeping at bay unscheduled police visits. The desolation evoked the description above, but it was all the more tragic in that it was not total. Nyambura was alone in the innovative stone *thingira* (hut) which once housed

³ David Maughan-Brown, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-)', *Dictionary of Literary Bibliography*, 125: *Twentieth Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*, ed. by B. Lindfors & R. Sander, 2nd Series (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993), pp.145-169, (p.147). Hereafter *DLB*.

⁴ Quoted in Maughan-Brown, *DLB*, 125, p.151.

⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981), pp. 73-74.

the fairly large family of seven children. History seemed to be repeating itself prematurely. It is this reclaimed landscape that fed Ngugi's creativity and makes his (in)voluntary exile, first in the United Kingdom, and now in the United States all the more tragic. He is compelled to resist his removal yet again from both nature and nurture.

The political is powerfully implicated in Ngugi's domestic drama, in his personal story. Ngugi married a second wife, Njeeri wa Ngugi, in the United States in 1992. This embrace of polygamy is unusual for a writer who champions so publicly the cause of women, and has in the past claimed an affinity to them based on his relationships with his mother and his first wife, Nyambura. The practice of polygamy has been described by Adagala as a feature of the comprador-bourgeoisie, who practice it as a sign of decadence and proceed to camouflage their action by citing 'tradition' despite the materialist basis for this arrangement having now been eroded by capitalism.⁶ Indeed in a strongly worded indictment of this practice, Adagala underlines the 'retrogressive, backward attitudes of the patriarchy – often called "African Culture"'.⁷ Ngugi is aware of this critique. In an interview in one of the leading Kenyan newspapers, Nyambura tried to excuse his action: 'It was the tradition of the Agikuyu men to marry another woman later in life to help the first wife with the domestic chores'.⁸ In our chat, although she had been reticent about Ngugi, admiration, at least for his work, was evident. At the time a dutiful father, he also ensured Nyambura's financial security. But in an interview published just three days before her death, Nyambura appears to have modified her views and attitude towards Ngugi, admitting: 'The letters and phone calls became fewer. But he continued sending money but he no longer does' [sic].⁹ The drama of what I can only describe as Nyambura's widowhood, neither legitimate, nor acknowledged, and Ngugi's estrangement was undoubtedly impacted upon by forces significantly larger than

⁶ Kavetsa Adagala, 'Wanja of *Petals of Blood*': A Study of the Woman Question and Imperialism in Kenya', unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Nairobi (April, 1981), p.79.

⁷ Adagala, p.79.

⁸ *Sunday Nation*, 14 April, 1994, p.3.

⁹ 'Would Ngugi Weep or Spare a Grain of Wheat for the Wife He Abandoned?', 'Society', *East African Standard*, Thursday 18 July, 1996.

themselves, even as they remained ultimately responsible at some level for their actions. A sense of tragedy permeates this phase of Ngugi's ideological war.¹⁰

Educating Ngugi

The manner in which African education was conceived in Kenya and Ghana differed largely because of the influential role played by the missionaries, who primarily used it to spread the gospel in Kenya. Although literacy in Africa, as elsewhere, was itself seen as an act of civilisation, and a desirable end in itself, it was the need for converts to read the bible that was the greater incentive. But the most significant change in how education was viewed came in a roundabout manner. After World War I there was an acute shortage of labour on white farms and the Governor, Sir Edward Northey was persuaded to 'guide labour into the farms'.¹¹ Dr J. W. Arthur of the Church of Scotland Mission and the Bishops of Mombasa and Uganda saw the potential for abuse in such an action and in a memorandum they demanded that a clear policy regarding 'native life and institutions be drawn up'.¹² The significance of the document lay in that it attracted the attention of J. H. Oldham, an influential figure, later secretary of the International Missionary Council: he drafted several memoranda, such as 'Labour in Africa and the Principles of Trusteeship', and 'Native Affairs in East Africa' demanding clear policy from the Colonial Office in London regarding 'land tenure, the economic and moral advancement of Africans, African representation and the orderly development of African Society'.¹³ His function for East Africa is similar in many ways to that of Guggisberg in Ghana.

African education soon became a major issue, with those soldiers returning from World War I now keenly aware of the reluctance of Government to provide an academic education, instead promoting a policy of technical education for Africans in Kenya, as at Maseno, or the Jeanes School at Kabete. The establishment of independent schools and other initiatives demonstrated African dissatisfaction with

¹⁰ Nyambura has since died, on 21 July 1996. Ngugi did not attend her funeral.

¹¹ Stephen J. Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973), p.10.

¹² Smith, p.10. This is the same Dr Arthur who played a significant role over the issue of Female Circumcision, crucial to Ngugi's treatment of women, discussed in Chapter 6, *Petals of Blood*.

¹³ Smith, p.11.

what was on offer.¹⁴ By the late 1950s, however, changed administrative needs and the prospect of independence meant more local personnel might be required to assist in the lower brackets of administration. The success of the Phelps-Stokes Commission on Education in West and South Africa also prompted a re-examination of the East African situation. As one of the most significant differences between West and East Africa was the dominance of missionaries in East African education, one of the solutions suggested by the Commission report of 1923, ratified in 1925, was cooperation between Government and missions. Provision of grants, a system of inspection, improved standards and national integration were some of the key areas addressed. While at Achimota a balance had been struck between the technical and the literary, at the Alliance a predominantly literary syllabus was to prevail, culminating during Ngugi's time in the Cambridge School Certificate. However, a strong manual work ethic and spirit of service was vigorously encouraged by Carey Francis, who had transferred from Maseno to become the second headmaster, and arguably the man who has influenced most profoundly education in Kenya, and indeed, East Africa.

*

Ngugi started his primary schooling at Kamandura Primary School, a village school where they were taught to read and write in Gikuyu and English. Material was also drawn from the local culture through story-telling and singing. The village school was a passport into the wider, integrated society. From there Ngugi joined Maangu, a Kikuyu independent School, that had opted out of the oppressive Christian ethic of the mission school. In the comprehensive *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel*, Carol Sicherman traces in great detail his literary pedigree, from what books he read to which writers most influenced him. He began, as did most school-going Kenyans in the fifties, with the very rudimentary Longmans Abridged Series editions of, for example, Stevenson and Dickens, such adventures as were found in Captain W. E.

¹⁴ English, for instance, was declared the lingua franca of Kenya in 1929, but by 1935, only the independent schools were teaching it, unaided by native speakers of the language. Ironically, government policy decreed the teaching of Kiswahili only, but according to Karega Mutahi, support for this quickly dwindled when it was seen as a possible means of African unification on African terms: Carol Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel* (London: Hans Zell, 1990), pp.27-28. As early as 1909 the teaching of English in West Africa was denied to Africans because it was seen as a political tool.

Johns's Biggles series, and Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. At school he read what was standard in the British derived syllabus – Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*; poetry by Wordsworth, Tennyson and Kipling. Kipling's poem 'If' has remained a strong favourite, with its seductive idea of manhood.

The Alliance School and Carey Francis

The Alliance School was started by Scottish missionaries in 1927, with G. A. Grieve as headmaster, but Ngugi's time there from 1955¹⁵ coincided with the headship of Carey Francis, from 1940-1962. Francis was a Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary and came to Kikuyu after serving in Maseno at the Maseno School for twenty five years. In Britain he had served in the army, and after the war attended Trinity College, Cambridge. On graduating he became a fellow of Peterhouse College, and lecturer in Mathematics. The 'Foreword' to *Carey Francis of Kenya* is written by Oginga Odinga, former pupil and friend, who highlights Carey's two distinguishing features: a strong belief in the Christian faith, and dedication to the teaching profession.¹⁶ This man who had already influenced so many Kenyans of distinction was to leave his mark on Ngugi as well.

Ngugi's time at the Alliance coincided with the intensification of Mau Mau activity, a drama in which Ngugi was, of course, intimately intertwined. In one sense school was an oasis from the struggle, but the insulation was only partial. Francis noted in his diary that:

There were tragedies [...] the fathers and brothers of some boys were killed by Mau Mau; others lost touch altogether with their parents. Many asked, for safety's sake, to remain at school during the holidays; no one was refused.¹⁷

Ngugi was acutely conscious of the brutality of the civil colonial administration that was destroying his world, and yet glad of the Christian compassion offered at school:

¹⁵ His was student no. 1445. Most Alliance old boys remember their student numbers.

¹⁶ Oginga Odinga, 'Foreword', L. B. Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya* (London: Rex Collings, 1969).

¹⁷ Greaves, p.115.

the paradoxes of colonialism were soon apparent to him. The same forces that were transforming Ngugi into a devout Christian were destroying his family. Francis noted at the time that: 'the unjust attitudes and unjust actions which are common today are building up a legacy of hatred which will be far harder to overcome than are the bands of terrorists'.¹⁸ Ngugi gradually made the connection between the fragmentation of his society, Christianity and colonial oppression. It became clear where power lay. Ngugi later responded by dropping his 'Christian name', 'James' to symbolise his rejection of these outside forces and as a means of reclaiming self.¹⁹

It was as a Christian, rather than a great educator, that Francis wanted to be remembered. And it is largely as a Christian that Ngugi chooses to remember him. Ngugi is critical of the degree to which Kenyan (East African) education was shaped by this man who was above all a missionary. In an interview with some of his colleagues while he was in Leeds, Ngugi tells of the primary intervention of Christianity into African life by an avenue much desired as the key to future progress – education. It was advanced as the new key to freedom as African independence soon replicated colonial oppression. Of the missionary educators he said: 'in their [...] historical role, they have been the forerunners of colonialism [...] the John the Baptists preparing the way for Christ – the colonial administration.' And university education was an extension of the same system of patronage that emphasised and further affirmed the superiority of another culture and people. He describes concisely the role of the university within this hierarchy:

You must see universities in Africa in their colonialist 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. You would never have thought he was one of the people whose doctrine had influenced two-thirds of the world. African history was taught merely as an extension of Europe. One or two of the lecturers were enlightened, but they nearly all believed that the only real education was to be found in Britain. Literature has nothing or very little to do with what was happening in Africa. So, in novels and plays we learned about them not in terms of social issues, but in terms of universal values and the tragedy of a human being

¹⁸ Quoted in *DLB*, 125, p.115.

¹⁹ Greaves, p.37. Francis describes how at Maseno, the taking of a Christian 'name' was just part of the education process, for the boys a form of 'certification' received at the end of the catechism.

caught in a situation whose conditions he cannot control.²⁰

The debunking of the ideas on which this system was based must be seen as crucial to Ngugi's vision of a restructured Kenya. Central to Ngugi's critique, therefore, is Siriana School in *Petals of Blood*, where these ideas were nurtured. Siriana/the Alliance once stood for the best in both colonial, and Christian education in Kenya, and influenced him profoundly. Francis commissioned all school leavers to: 'Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; love and serve the Lord'.²¹ Today, as then, the school motto is the same – Strong to Serve. It has inspired a dedicated body, but whereas the missionaries' complementary commitment to 'God and Empire' was absolute, many of those educated before independence were actually pledged to serve in the colonial Civil Service. This they largely continued to do, even after independence.²² It is their unwavering allegiance, or the ambiguity of national commitment, that so disturbs Ngugi, and with which *Petals of Blood* is concerned.

Education is a central theme in *Petals of Blood*, but it is through protest at the forms it takes that the main male characters in the novel are linked. They have all participated in strike action while at Siriana. Ngugi tells of two strikes at the Siriana school and of an impending third. The first occurred when Chui, now a wealthy, new citizen and Munira were both students there. Chui and others protest at treatment they see as biased. They go further, agitating for a change in the British-based syllabus to something that will be of more relevance to African students studying in an African country. Chui is expelled. When, as a successful leader in Industry he is later sent back to re-establish discipline at Siriana during a strike, he ruthlessly crushes it. Karega is then a student at Siriana, weaned on tales of the legendary Chui's brave defiance of the colonial establishment. His disappointment in Chui is acute. The students had expected an empathetic understanding of their situation, so similar to the one in which Chui himself had been involved. To their disappointment, he is even more autocratic than his foreign predecessors. Siriana has learned its lesson well. It

²⁰ Alan Marcuson, Mike Gonzalez, and Dave Williams, 'James Ngugi interviewed by fellow students at Leeds University', *Cultural Events in Africa*, 31 (1967), p.1.

²¹ J. Stephen Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973), p.230.

²² See for instance David K. Leonard, *African Successes: Four Public Managers of Kenyan Rural Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

defends tradition, consistently strong to serve God and Empire, of its own volition. Mercifully, Chui dies in the fire before the third strike.

Munira, himself a casualty of the second strike that sees him expelled not through an act of engagement, but rather by default, is himself catapulted into near heroism. Not only does he establish a school out of nothing. He is the enthusiastic saviour, come on his bike, to deliver Ilmorog from ignorance and stagnation through education. Only through his immense will-power is he able to make a go of the school – propelled by his revulsion and hatred of the brand of self-righteous, uncharitable Christianity practised by his father. Crucial to the narrative is his recruitment of Karega, in whom revolutionary change is invested. His action opens a window for the hope held out by Ngugi, of a future invested in the child. Education is central to the freeing of Ilmorog. Joshua becomes the protégé of the ex-freedom fighter, Abdulla, and the whoring Wanja. As Ngugi asserts in *Weep Not Child*: ‘Whatever their differences, interest in knowledge and book-learning was the one meeting point between (different) people. Somehow, the Gikuyu people always saw their deliverance as embodied in education (*WNC*, 104).’

It is Cambridge Fraudsham’s patronising attitude towards the boys that provokes protest. A former army man, he transmuted the rigours of his military training into school discipline. In Ngugi’s presentation of him his general attitude is underpinned by a deeply held conviction of the inferiority of the African. To this end he is determined that the boys must know their place in society. His idea of preparing the boys for self-government takes in such social detail:

trousers are quite out of question in the tropics. He sketched a profile of an imaginary thick-lipped African in a grey woollen suit, a sun-helmet, a white starched stiff collar and tie, and laughed contemptuously: Don’t emulate this man. There was to be no rice in our meals: the school did not want to turn out men who would want to live beyond their means. And no shoes, my boys, except on the day of worship: the school did not want to turn out black Europeans but true Africans who would not look down upon the innocence and simple ways of their ancestors. [...] cold showers at five in the morning became compulsory. (*PB*, 29)

This apparently stereotypical rendering of the racist colonial attitude towards Africans is, however, borne out by the facts and, sadly, persists. It is a parody of a caricature

published by Francis in the book, *Hygiene*, at a time when Europeanisation was equated with civilisation. This was Francis's attempt to convince Africans that they did not need to dress warmly because they were in the tropics. As Greaves describes it:

There follows a very amusing picture called 'Do not copy this Man.' It shows an African wearing a large hat, a suit complete with waist-coat, long baggy trousers, a stiff butterfly collar and tie, and shoes with pointed toes. It is appreciatively, though by some a little wryly, remembered still by those whom he was trying to persuade that the khaki bush shirt and shorts which he himself wore were so much better.²³

Five weeks into Francis's joining the Alliance, the boys went on strike over a disciplinary matter in which Francis admitted to acting hastily.²⁴ Thus Ngugi utilises his personal experience of the Alliance in his fiction.

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At Makerere, as at the Alliance, the syllabus was once more based on the canon studied at the English Universities. Ngugi consequently studied English Language and Literature, from Celtic times to T. S. Eliot. When Ngugi took Conrad as a special paper in his final year, he could not have anticipated how enduring their association was to prove. In the Introduction I remarked the special place of Conrad in studies of Africa. There was nothing on the Literature syllabus at the time that spoke, even indirectly, of Africa. Just as Graham Greene was to answer to the West African need for literary identity, Conrad fulfilled the East and Central African desire to be represented, even if by a 'western' reading of Africa. For Ngugi, Conrad's importance lies in his appropriation and portrayal of marginal states, and his questioning of the Imperial role in this marginalisation. That Ngugi has maintained a consistently rational view of Conrad, given the hostility that imperialist writers have endured with each successive post-colonial generation's re-reading of their works, is curious especially considering Ngugi's radical views on such issues as language, and independence. In *Heart of Darkness*, of course, Marlow's non-moralising,

²³ Greaves, p.23.

²⁴ Greaves, p.64.

understated narration may be read as as powerful an attack on the betrayal of a moral ideal as one might wish for.

In *Moving the Centre* Ngugi describes his independent 'discovery' of the extended African world through the novels of African and West Indian writers.²⁵ Although 'outside the formal structure',²⁶ he found he identified keenly with such West African writers as Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe, and the South African, Peter Abrahams. These writers, already publishing in the 1950s, were part of a growing corps responding to the misrepresentation by cultural imperialism of their reality. Ngugi tells of the profound effect they had on him:

I can still recall the excitement of reading the world from a centre other than Europe. The great tradition of European literature had invented and even defined the world view of the Calibans, the Fridays and the reclaimed Africans of their imaginations. Now the Calibans and the Fridays of the new literature were telling their story which was also my story [...] Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom* [...] seemed to speak of a world that I knew and a hope that I shared. When Trumper [...] in George Lamming's novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, talks of his suddenly discovering his people, and therefore his world, after hearing Paul Robeson sing, 'Let My People Go' he was speaking of me.²⁷

After graduating from Makerere, Ngugi worked as a journalist for the *Daily Nation*, (which at the time had its first African editor, Hilary Ng'weno) for six months before he joined the University of Leeds in 1964.²⁸ At Leeds, he was exposed to the radical tradition of the 'Third World', and introduced to the Socialist World. He wrote a dissertation entitled 'A Study of the Theme of Alienation in the Fiction of the West Indies with Particular Reference to the Novels of George Lamming', parts of which he was to later publish in *Homecoming*.²⁹ He published *Weep Not Child* in 1964, *The River Between* in 1965, and he completed *A Grain of Wheat* in 1966. His interest in Lamming opened the gates to the black diaspora and the Francophone world. There

²⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: EAPH, 1993).

²⁶ *Moving*, p.4.

²⁷ *Moving*, p.4.

²⁸ Ng'weno later became the joint owner-editor of *The Weekly Review*, for a long time one of the more radical Kenyan publications. Ngugi in *Detained* sees Ng'weno's silence over his detention as a significant shift in political position.

²⁹ Sicherman, p.6. Ngugi, like Armah the first time in America, did not graduate.

was the need to define and develop a Black Aesthetic; and the failures of Assimilation pointed to the need to reckon with 'otherness', for an acknowledgement of difference within a discourse that would be dogged with questions of autonomy and cohesiveness. Thus Ngugi was introduced to the poets of Negritude, Léopold Senghor, and Aimé Césaire, although arguably of greatest significance to his development as a revolutionary writer, as I show in chapter six, was his reading of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Language and Decolonisation

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing, is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture.

[...] The fact [is] that any true African literature must be written in African languages.

Obiajunwa Wali³⁰

In June 1962, the Conference of African Writers of English Expression, now a literary milestone, was held at Makerere. Here, questions concerning the definition, and direction of African Literature were raised, as was that concerning Language. These issues have remained fundamental, and unresolved in the era of post-colonialism. There is the need for an on-going reassessment, and reclamation of submerged histories; the restructuring of political ideology and machinery to address existing problems and take on new tasks; and the construction or rediscovery of an intelligible self. In 1963, Obiajunwa Wali responded to the Conference of 1962 in a paper entitled 'The Dead End of African Literature?', in which he challenged African writers to be critical of the medium in which they were writing. He insisted that linguistic compromise could only lead to 'a dead end, [...] to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration'.³¹

As with Armah and 'Iarsony' which I discuss fully in the next chapter, Ngugi's literary career has been haunted by what Ngugi himself refers to as 'the Obi Wali challenge of 1963',³² a challenge he has periodically risen to. With Ngugi wa Mirii

³⁰ Obiajunwa Wali, 'The Dead End Of African Literature?', *Transition*, 10: 3 (1963), p. 14. According to Sicherman (p.29), Ngugi was sent a prepublication copy of this paper by the editor, Rajat Neogy. It was considered very controversial at the time.

³¹ Wali, p.14.

³² *Decolonising the Mind*, p.72.

and help from the community he co-authored the script for *Ngahika Ndeenda*, a play in Gikuyu. According to Waigwa Wachira,³³ Ngugi painstakingly learnt, from experts in the Gikuyu language, and through the rigorous orthographical work undertaken in conjunction with Professor Karega Mutahi and other members of the department of Linguistics at the University of Nairobi, the vocabulary necessary for his purpose, and the art of transforming this into the dynamic play first performed and enjoyed by the villagers at Kamiriithu. It was translated into English as *I Will Marry When I Want* and published in 1980. In 1980 while in detention, Ngugi decided to use Gikuyu as his first creative language and proceeded to write *Caitani Mutharabaini*. Kimani wa Njogu sees interesting twists in its writing:³⁴ at first conceived in English, Ngugi then restructured the rough notes into the Gikuyu play while in prison. This he then translated himself into the English version, *Devil on the Cross*, a decision that was later followed by one in 1986 to say 'farewell to English'.³⁵

Ngugi's determination to use Gikuyu might have been appreciated locally, but in the wider academic world, however, the practicality of his endeavour came up against hostility like that of the audience to whom he delivered a paper at a writers' conference in Germany. Such eminent African writers as Achebe and Soyinka, and others who had been present at the Makerere conference in 1962 were in attendance. It is said to have angered many, who read in Ngugi's action not the desire to communicate, but to make a point. Apart from the translator and Ngugi himself, no one else in the room understood Gikuyu. In its various ways, 'the language debate has dominated every single literature conference to do with Africa over the last few years and it is going to continue to do so *with even greater aggressive insistence* as we face the twenty-first century'.³⁶ The aggression and insistence was here well demonstrated by Ngugi himself.

In Kenya today, strong views concerning the language question point to its continuing

³³ A lecturer at the University of Nairobi, and former student / colleague of Ngugi. In a private discussion.

³⁴ In an interview at Kenyatta University, Kenya on November 22, 1994.

³⁵ Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, p.xiv.

³⁶ Ngugi, 'Creating Space For a Hundred Flowers to Bloom', *Moving the Centre*, pp. 20-21. My emphasis.

urgency and relevance. Kimani wa Njogu, who works closely with Ngugi insists on the importance of motivation and content, rather than language of itself, which is subject to the use to which it is put.³⁷ Hence, he argues, Ngugi might be extremely tribal even while writing in English. Wa Njogu shifts the debate from one of representation to one of communication, and insists on the importance of trust in relation to the multilingual community out of which, and for whom Ngugi writes. Crucially, wa Njogu, who is also Gikuyu observes that to read Ngugi in Gikuyu, requires competence in English.

Since colonial times, language, which continues to provoke anxiety in Kenya, has been put to political use. Henry Indangasi reads in Ngugi's use of Gikuyu an abdication of responsibility as well as insensitivity to the inner dynamics of its function in Kenya.³⁸ He finds it regrettable that Ngugi, as a national writer, has chosen to make a 'crusade' of the language question, especially given the political (rather than literary) implications of its use. It is the ratification of cultural hegemony by political power, established by Kenyatta, to which Indangasi is strongly opposed.³⁹

If, then, Ngugi's sophisticated cultural politics is sometimes reduced to the language question, it is because it is that for which he is best known.⁴⁰ Ngugi's international reputation rests on his mission to reclaim his mother tongue as a living, 'nation'

³⁷ In an interview with Dr Kimani wa Njogu of the Department of Kiswahili at Kenyatta University, Nairobi on February 3, 2000. Dr Njogu is a board member of the Gikuyu Journal *Mutiiri*, 'one who nurtures', started by Ngugi at Yale. He is currently working on a Kiswahili translation of Ngugi's forthcoming novel, *Murogi wa Kagoogo*, in English, *The Wizard of the Crow* (Translation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship', *Research in African Literatures*, 31: 1, Spring 2000; wa Njogu translated it as *The Witch Who Brought Down the Vulture*). It is a huge novel (1142 pages) said to be inspired by Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

³⁸ In a conversation with Professor Henry Indangasi of the Dept. of Literature at the University of Nairobi on 10 February 2000. Indangasi took over from Ngugi as Chair of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi.

³⁹ Their debate reflects the point made by Mboya, cited earlier, that it was more expedient to be nationally Kenyan than ethnically divergent.

⁴⁰ In '(Re)turn to the People: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Crisis of Postcolonial African Intellectualism' in *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), Neil Lazarus refers to Ngugi as 'the central and indefatigable spokes-person for an "Afro-centric" position in the so-called "language debate"' (p.11). So-called, because it is obviously about so much else.

language. He persistently worries at the anxieties of those Kenyans caught up in the tension of detribalisation, decolonisation and of national unification, a tension he has tried to resolve using his writing: 'I had resolved to use a language which did not have a modern novel, a challenge to myself and a way of affirming my faith in the possibilities of the languages of all the different Kenyan nationalities'.⁴¹ His efforts to this end make it regrettable that he is currently missing out on one of the most dynamic revolutions to take place in language, an occasion he had hoped might develop in Kenya: the evolution of *Sheng* (a pidgin that uses Kiswahili and English, as well as borrowings from the different Kenyan languages).⁴² Nevertheless, his exile from his primary linguistic community makes his position ironically poignant.

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When Ngugi wrote *Petals of Blood* in English, Kenya's official language, there was nothing at the time to indicate his imminent abandonment of the language.⁴³ However, his writing in his mother tongue within a year of his imprisonment coincided with Kenyatta's death, which signalled the decline of Gikuyu dominance, and with it the quite considerable clout up to now enjoyed by the Gikuyu language. It is in this volatile climate that it was perceived as a serious challenge to the political idea of national unity. Yet Ngugi's writing, while it appeared to challenge a fragile linguistic and cultural cohesion was after all the realisation of a long held commitment to challenge the colonial language of oppression. It is against this background that the

⁴¹ *Detained*, p.8.

⁴² '“Tolstoy in Africa:” An interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o', Reinhard Sander and Ian Munro in Killam, p.49. Referring to the use of so-called standard English in Kenyan writing, Ngugi expressed the hope that a Kenyan idiom might develop: 'We dont, on the whole, have an East African English yet, although it may come into being'.

⁴³ In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngugi issues the following statement: 'In 1977 I published *Petals of Blood* and said farewell to the English language as a vehicle of my writing of plays, novels and short stories' (p.xiv).

idea of reclaiming the mother tongue was originally conceived.⁴⁴ The political establishment may have been ignorant of the language debate to which Ngugi was responding, and the commitment he had made to pursue the expression of African art in African languages in 1962, before Kenya became independent. The coincidence of loss of Gikuyu political power and the beginnings of a Gikuyu cultural renaissance was perceived as a very real threat by the Moi Government, a misconception for which Ngugi has paid. It is arguable that his persecution for his literary ideas strengthened his convictions regarding the interconnectedness of culture and politics, and has led to his aggressive pursuit of Gikuyu 'nationalism' as against a broader Kenya nationalism. The spectre of tribalism in Kenya is still too fresh for such distinctions to be viewed purely academically.

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Ngugi's work has received comprehensive critical attention. There are several full length studies,⁴⁵ but the most comprehensive coverage is surely that by Carol Sicherman, both in an extensive compilation of his work in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources 1957-1987* (1989), as well as her detailed research in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel* (1990). In 1996, a two day international conference was held at the Penn State University in the United

⁴⁴ "Tolstoy in Africa", pp.46-47. Okot p Bitek, to whom Ngugi refers in this interview had by 1954 written his first modern novel, *Lak Tar*, in Luo (Acholi). It was translated as *White Teeth* in 1984. He also wrote the accomplished *Song Of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol* (1970), first in Acholi, and then translated them into English. It is said of him that he made Africans realise that poetry can be enjoyable *even* through English. His was not the questionable adventure with language as of Tutuola. He had impressive academic credentials in Education (Bristol), Law (University College of Wales, Aberystwyth) and Social Anthropology (Oxford), and taught at Makerere, Ife, Texas and Iowa, and at the University of Nairobi, with Ngugi. Against the above logic, it is the idea of first writing in English and then translating into a nation language that appears odd. Additional information from Bernth Lindfors, 'Okot p' Bitek, 1931-20 July, 1982', *DLB 125: Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*, 2nd series (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993), pp.225-237.

⁴⁵ *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings* (London: Heinemann, 1983, revised edn, 1997); G. D. Killam, *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1984); *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995); *Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995); Patrick Williams, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, Contemporary World Writers Series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999). David Maughan-Brown's biographical piece in the *DLB 125* (Detroit, London: Gale Research, 1993) also provides a good though brief analysis, as does the most recent survey of his work in Killam and Rowe's *Companion to African Literatures* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000). Also forthcoming is Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

States, organised by Charles Cantalupo, a well known Ngugi scholar, to both celebrate and analyse the contribution of the 'giant of African Literature'. The conference stressed his contribution to writing outside the 'mainstream' languages as well as his commitment to theatre, music and now film to reach wider audiences. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts* (1995), and *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (1995) are the result of this conference. He was also invited to give the Clarendon Lectures in English at Oxford University (1996), subsequently published as *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*. These are just a few examples out of an impressive body of work about, and by Ngugi that demonstrate his commitment to influence and to change the social and political issues that dominate post independence Kenya, and Africa.

Of peasant origins, Ngugi has within his own generation bridged the transition from pre- to post independence. His experiences have propelled him from a village focus to the position of dynamic and radical representative of the exploited majority and made him an articulate critic of government. He demonstrated this critical social consciousness from his days at Makerere, during his early career as a journalist, as lecturer at the University of Nairobi and in community activity at Kamiriithu.⁴⁶ Even as his education made him part of the new Kenya 'bourgeoisie', he was acutely aware of the processes of its formation and determined to act to provoke consciousness of its potentially tragic consequences, already evident in Ghana. The tragedy lay in that neo-colonialism should so exactly mirror colonialism.

One of the ways in which Ngugi has attempted to communicate his criticism of the establishment is by writing plays, which he felt to have a directness and immediacy the novel could not achieve. He is a fine novelist but his talents do not translate successfully into this format. Simon Gikandi picks on this weakness to demonstrate the literary importance and durability of *Petals of Blood* and the other novels, the immediate dramatic impact of the plays notwithstanding. Gikandi cites *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and *Ngaahika Ndenda* (1977) as two dramatic failures. In his opinion 'Ngugi has never been a master of the dramatic form; neither is there anything

⁴⁶ This is the current form of orthography. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi uses an older form, 'Kamiritho'.

memorable about their [the plays'] ideology'.⁴⁷ Yet, as we have seen, it is because of a play, *Ngaahika Ndenda*, that Ngugi's dialogue with the establishment took a dramatic turn. Gikandi does not underestimate the impact of the plays, and notes:

Ngaahika Ndenda was to add a totally new dimension to Ngugi's notions of literary engagement. For a play touching on Kenya's most recent past, a play about displacement, dispossession, betrayal, to be written in a local language and acted by the very peasants who lived these themes everyday since the 1920's – this was a unique event in Kenyan cultural history. But for the Kenyan state, Ngugi's involvement with the peasantry was dangerous business. Radicalism, it seemed, could only be tolerated at the universities where it was politically ineffective.⁴⁸

Published in the same year as *Petals of Blood*, *Ngahika Ndeenda* treats the same themes as the novel.⁴⁹ It is this duplication that Simon Gikandi sees as unmemorable and aesthetically challenged, a rehash of themes previously well-treated elsewhere, but now with a 'tiresome reductionism'.⁵⁰ Despite this weakness, *Ngahika Ndeenda* served to focus attention on *Petals of Blood*, itself much more complex and durable. The play presented an altogether different proposition, if not artistically, then culturally. I have already noted its unusual conception as a joint project written in an indigenous language. With its singular engagement with one community, it highlighted the national character of *Petals of Blood*. Ngugi appealed to the strengthening of nationhood by pointing out the 'pitfalls of national consciousness', one being the danger inherent in pursuing an ethnic apartheid. It is ironical that it is as Ngugi succeeded in establishing a much more direct and interactive format, breaking with the novel genre of *Petals of Blood* which cushioned the writer from the more direct repercussions of relevance that Ngugi at last succeeds, on both levels, in communicating with his people.

Although *Petals of Blood* marked an end, it also signalled the beginning of a new kind

⁴⁷ Simon Gikandi, 'On Culture and the State: The Writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', *Third World Quarterly* 11 (1 January 1989), 148-156 (p.154).

⁴⁸ Gikandi, p.154.

⁴⁹ In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi himself points out that: 'For those who have read my books *Homecoming*, *Writers in Politics*, *Barrel of a Pen*, and even *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* there may be a feeling of déjà vu. Such a reaction will not be far from the truth.' The same can be said of the issues in his post- *Petals of Blood* novels and plays.

⁵⁰ Gikandi, p.154.

of engagement for Ngugi, a literary revolution in which language, form and genre were conscripted. These elements have made the difference to what Ngugi has written after *Petals of Blood*. Even if in the opinion of Gikandi and others the shift failed to enhance or demonstrate a heightened creative capacity, to Ngugi himself it represented the culmination of what he had only up until now been groping towards. In a sense also a seminal work, *Ngahika Ndeenda* is the one he says: 'showed me the road along which I should have been travelling on all these past seventeen years of my writing career.'⁵¹ Ngugi was *communicating*, by demanding relevance and function, and in linking his intellectual projections with the urgent question of 'democracy, development and destiny',⁵² he became a threat. The effect was dramatic, the response from the political establishment swift. Ngugi was detained. And this act confirmed the artistic and ideological war in which Ngugi was engaged with the state.

Writers who fall foul of the state have already crossed from text to practical engagement. They clearly serve two purposes. They expose the manipulative intrigues of the state system, and themselves embody, and enable the challenge that lies in the confrontation of it. The Nigerian playwright, Femi Osofisan, described this situation as one of 'a close intimacy with Terror', 'the continual gamble with menace'.⁵³ He also suggested an innovative strategy for survival, one of 'surreptitious subversion'. The circumstance of Sani Abacha's Nigeria, under which Osofisan spoke soon proved Edward Said's observation about artists, that 'sufferings did not impede the intransigence of their thought, nor inhibit the severity of their punishment'.⁵⁴ In a bizarre post-colonial incident, Abacha ignored international pressure as well as the demand of the Commonwealth Heads of State in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1996, to release the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, and defiantly and dramatically hanged him instead.

⁵¹ In 'Introduction', G. D. Killam, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1984), p.12.

⁵² Said, 'Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World', p.45.

⁵³ Femi Osofisan, 'Reflections on Theatre Practice in Contemporary Nigeria', *African Affairs* 97 (1998), 81-89, p. 81. I attended his riveting presentation/performance to 'Africa 95' of the same paper at SOAS, University of London, in September 1995. The conference was attended largely by African and other scholars living and working abroad, but also by a good number of delegates from Africa.

⁵⁴ Said, p. 45.

PART II: ESTABLISHING THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Chapter Four

THE RECEPTION OF AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*

Aggression [is] the mechanism of passion which permits an escape from the pangs of paradox.

Fanon¹

The preceding chapters looked at the ways in which education was established in both Kenya and Ghana, and noted the secularisation privileged at Achimota, and the retention of the mission emphasis in education at the Alliance High School. These differences in emphasis are reflected Armah's, and Ngugi's writing. Both are products of these systems, into which they are inscribed by their education, their environment, and their participation. This chapter will focus on the critical reception of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in an attempt to understand how such new writing, by Africans, was perceived both by the Western academy with an interest in Africa and by Africans themselves. Through an examination of controversial outside critics such as Charles Larson in *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1971),² and the early responses of insiders like Chinua Achebe in his book *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, (1975), I hope to establish the critical environment into which the works on which I principally focus, Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?*, 1972 and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, 1977 were published.

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When Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, was published in

¹ Frantz Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', *Présence Africaine*, Special Issue 8, 9, 10 (1956), 122-131, (p.130).

² Armah's response to Larson all but destroyed his credibility as a critic of African literature. I nevertheless treat his views, which were widely held at the time, with seriousness because of the impact such views have had on the development of African writing.

1968, both its African, and the international audience hailed him as 'an important new writer'.³ But it is widely agreed that the book provoked what Ama Ata Aidoo in the preface to the Collier-Macmillan (American) edition of the novel (1969), also published as 'No Saviours', calls 'a torrent of controversy of the kind which seldom accompanies a first novel'.⁴ Aidoo quotes a private letter from a friend that largely represents the general African feeling and initial critical response at the time. Her friend had this to say:

I have since read (the) novel [...] maybe he wrote it to provoke, to irritate – but I think he overdid the tone of contempt [...] it is too aloof, in a foreign sort of way, like some report from a casual foreign visitor who is visiting a primitive society for the first time and is bent on exposing it in all its primitivity, crudity and so on. I can't take that from a fellow African.⁵

The implication here is that this kind of criticism might be excused coming from other than an African, and indeed, this kind of criticism, from Western critics, was not unusual at the time. Another African critic, Leonard Kibera, takes it less personally, but cannot, nevertheless, mask his concern at Armah's disdain. He says: 'it is hard to accept Armah's contempt for Africa. In judging his society disgusting, Armah goes further than almost any other writer'.⁶ Armah's early view of Africa as an 'unbeautiful' world is developed in subsequent novels, a view confirmed by Solo in *Why Are We So Blest?*, as he gazes on a world ravaged by struggle against imperial oppression:

On the way down and on the way back up, the world shows me its face. It is not beautiful. After I have been forced to contemplate it, I am overwhelmed by a disgust I cannot help, and then by guilt. (WAWSB, 15)

Aidoo is, of course, quick to point out that 'what is revealed is not in fact the horrors of "primitive Africa" but the nauseous essence of Africa civilised':⁷ postcolonial

³ Hans M. Zell, Carol Bundy and Virginia Conlon, eds, *A New Readers Guide to African Literature*, 2 ed. (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.352.

⁴ Ama Ata Aidoo, 'No Saviours', in *African Writers on African Writing*, ed. by G. D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp.14-18.

⁵ Aidoo, p.14.

⁶ Leonard Kibera, 'Pessimism and the African Novelist: Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 14:1 (1979), 64-72, (p.71).

⁷ Aidoo, p.14.

Africa.

According to Aidoo, a significant section of so-called 'international opinion [...] praised the novel to God's own skies!'⁸ a notable shift from an earlier tendency to form negative judgements about literary work produced by Africans because it was so little understood. Even Chinua Achebe, who is today an icon in African studies, and whose *Things Fall Apart* is now a classic because of the West's familiarity with Achebe and his works, was not always so fortunate.

Achebe himself selects two articles, one journalistic, the other a scholarly piece, to illustrate Western attitudes to African writers.⁹ The first is the review of *Things Fall Apart* by Honor Tracy, a literary journalist, in 1958. She said:

These bright negro barristers who talk so glibly about African culture, how would they like to return to wearing raffia skirts. How would novelist Achebe like to go back to the mindless times of his grandfather instead of holding the modern job he has in broadcasting in Lagos?¹⁰

More than a decade later, in 1970, Iris Andreski writes with the same attitude – what Achebe refers to as the 'I know my natives' attitude; the one that implies that the native is simple, and easy to control.¹¹ She also uses the same style – what Achebe calls the 'sedate prose of the district-officer-government-anthropologist of sixty or seventy years ago'. Andreski says:

The British administration not only safeguarded women from the worst tyrannies of their masters, it also enabled them to make their long journeys to farm or market without armed guard, secure from the menace of hostile neighbours [...] The Nigerian novelists who have written the charming and bucolic accounts of domestic harmony in African rural communities, are the sons whom the labours of these women educated; the peaceful village of their childhood to which they nostalgically look back was one which had been purged of bloodshed and alcoholism by an ague-ridden district officer and a Scottish mission lassie whose years were cut short by every kind of intestinal parasite.

It is even true to say that one of the most nostalgically convincing of the rural African novelists

⁸ Aidoo, p.18.

⁹ Chinua Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.3-18.

¹⁰ 'Colonialist Criticism', p.4.

¹¹ 'Colonialist Criticism', p.5.

used as his sourcebook not the memories of his grandfathers but the records of the despised British anthropologist [...] The modern African myth-maker hands down a vision of colonial rule in which the native powers are chivalrously viewed through the eyes of the hard-won liberal tradition of the late Victorian scholar, while the expatriates are shown as schoolboys' blackboard caricatures.¹²

But Achebe in a sense educated his readers to understand him. Richard Priebe, emphasising the importance of situating works within their context (while conceding also that novels *can* be read more generally) gives Achebe as a good example of a writer who created enough context within his novels to enable an appreciation of each work as it stood, although initially he was criticised for his 'anthropological detail' by early Western reviewers who were confused by this approach, and consequently objected to it.¹³ Priebe makes his observation within the context of what he considers cardinal principles – the 'simple lessons' that govern our relation to each other as arrived at by anthropologists Claude Levi Strauss, Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas:

First, that any culture, judged by the standards of another very different culture, can always be seen as 'inferior,' where 'strange' or 'different' become equated with 'inferior'. Secondly, that no culture can be found to be either qualitatively better or more complex than any other culture whenever each aspect of a given culture is examined in relation to the underlying rules that govern the dynamics of the entire social structure.¹⁴

Charles Larson also notes 'the strong aversion that many western critics have towards the anthropological overtones present in African fiction, except for the anthropologist, of course, who is looking for this kind of thing'.¹⁵ But allowing for some hiccups at the beginning, Achebe has now become the standard against which younger writers can be measured. Armah, on the other hand seems to have journeyed farther away from acceptance as the shift in reception of his later works indicates.

The cover of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* carries extracts from the favourable reviews that accompanied the popular marketing of the novel, and the effusive praise it received for its stylistic finesse. The *Publishers Weekly* called his second novel, *Fragments* (1970), 'powerful and poetic', while Lehmann-Haupt in the

¹² 'Colonialist Criticism', p.5.

¹³ Richard K. Priebe, *Myth, Realism, and the West African Writer*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), p.166.

¹⁴ Priebe, p.166.

¹⁵ Charles Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971, rvsd 1972), p.43.

New York Times praised Armah's 'formidable' descriptive powers and thought the novels sense of structure 'worthy of a Swiss watchmaker'.¹⁶ Such was the power of Armah's prose that some passages actually left him 'feeling nostalgic for Ghana', and he'd never even been in Africa.¹⁷ This imagined transportation is just one of the qualities by means of which the accomplishment of Armah's writing was measured at the time.

But not until the publication of *Osiris Rising* in 1995 has Armah really tried to connect with a readership. In a field dominated by discussion about the whole business of writing, Armah stands out as notable in his insistence that his novels speak for themselves. Ode Ogede in 'Armah as a Literary Critic' points out that Armah rarely gives interviews about his work, and yet it is in his response to criticism that some of his views have been most memorably expressed. His essay on 'larsony' is a case in point.¹⁸ Ogede here marks many critics' gratitude to 'Professor Larson [for his] invidious comments which eventually rattled Kwei Armah out of his shell'.¹⁹ With the publication of *Why Are We So Blest?* the fascination with the man behind the work took on an even keener edge because of the acute anguish manifested within a novel largely viewed as autobiographical. But *Why Are We So Blest?*, which in the words of Charles Nnolim 'articulates in bold language what others are too modest or too nice to put into print',²⁰ may have driven Armah even further from his critical public than the earlier novels.

Charles Larson's criticism of Armah in *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1971) has come to represent earlier, extreme views of his work by western critics, mainly because it was to Larson that Armah chose to write back. Larson made several

¹⁶ Zell, p.353.

¹⁷ Zell, p.353.

¹⁸ In 'Armah as Literary Critic', *Savannah*, 10:1 (June 1989), 84-92, Ode Ogede suggests that Armah realised very late the importance of talking to critics about his work. Armah singles out *Western* interviewers, whom he sees as having misrepresented his views. More to the point is Armah's insistence on the primacy of the text, not the writer.

¹⁹ Ogede, p.84.

²⁰ Charles E. Nnolim, 'Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah', *African Literature Today*, 10 (1979), 207-223 (pp.222-3).

allegations to which Armah took exception. He said that Armah had denied his Africanness, distanced himself from the South and situated himself in the North. He also termed Armah's absence from Ghana 'exile', limiting Armah's potential freedom of movement, as well as suggesting that there might have been more to Armah's absence. According to Larson, Armah no longer remembered his first language, Akan, but was competent in both French and English. Armah himself remarks the authority of these pronouncements, an authority that derives from their being published. In one of the most blistering instances of writing back to date, Armah responded to these charges in the famous essay 'Larsony: Fiction as Criticism of Fiction' in which he suggests that all 'judicious distortion' of African writing be henceforth termed 'Larsony'.²¹ Larson's thesis is that as the African novel 'emerged', so too would the African writer evolve from being an *African* writer, to becoming a 'universal' writer like the western writer. It is within the category of successfully evolved writer that Larson places Armah. He says:

Such is the way that Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah tends to regard himself: as a novelist only incidentally African. On occasion Armah has gone to rather great pains to make it clear that he is writing literature first, and that the Africanness of his writing is something of less great importance [...] for there are very few 'Africanisms' in his work'.²²

Later, referring to Armah's use of Akan chapter titles in *Fragments* Larson says that they 'are apparently corruptions of Akan [as Armah] has said that he no longer remembers his African language'.²³

Larson may have been selected by Armah for correction, but the views he expresses were not his alone, nor were they solely those of outside critics. Achebe in 'Africa and Her Writers' refers specifically to Armah himself as 'an alienated writer, a modern writer complete with all the symptoms'.²⁴ Pointing out Armah's 'scornful, cold and remote' air, he says that only in the early European writers on Africa did one find this

²¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, 'Larsony: Fiction as Criticism of Fiction', *First World*, 9: 2 (March/April, 1977), 50-55 (p.55).

²² Larson, p.258.

²³ Larson, p.270.

²⁴ Chinua Achebe, 'Africa and Her Writers', *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.19-29 (p.26).

same 'attitude and icy distance'.²⁵ Achebe says much the same thing as Larson, and also refers to Armah's claim that he is first and foremost a writer, rather than *African* writer. Achebe goes even further than Larson. Juxtaposing Joyce Cary with Armah, he declares: 'Joyce Cary was an alien writing about Africa; Ayi Kwei Armah is the alienated native'.²⁶ Ultimately, he declares the self-effacing stance of the neutral (or 'universal') position a defeat. This neutrality is one shared by other African writers, as Achebe notes; indeed Ben Okri told me much the same thing about his writing at a book signing event at Dillon's bookshop in Glasgow in 1994. Armah is nevertheless clearly distressed at such criticism from the distinguished and clear-thinking Achebe. In an interview with Dimgba Igwe Armah produced a copy of *Morning Yet On Creation Day* as evidence to Igwe of what he perceives as Achebe's unwarranted attack on him, claiming never to have denied his Africanness. Indeed, he has personally asked Achebe about these claims: 'When we met at Ibadan, I simply asked him, where did I make such a statement?'²⁷ Armah does not give us Achebe's answer. The essay in which Achebe made his claims was published in 1972, at around the same time as Larson's work (1971). If indeed Armah did admit to having forgotten Akan, I have been unable to trace an exact reference to this admission. But much as it may sound absurd today it does express the general desire of African writers in the sixties and even seventies, as they had been taught within the British system – to be human, and to write universally. But how has Armah negotiated larsony?

Living with 'Larsony'

In *Books Abroad*, Armah's 'bête noire', Larson, recalls an incident that occurred in Ghana:

When I asked a number of students at the University of Ghana about their preferences for contemporary African novelists, Ayi Kwei Armah was the writer mentioned most frequently, in spite of the fact that many of Ghana's older writers and intellectuals regard him as a kind of negativist [...] I have for some time regarded Ayi Kwei Armah as Anglophone Africa's

²⁵ Achebe, p.26.

²⁶ Achebe, p.26.

²⁷ Dimgba Igwe, 'Armah: The Reluctant Novelist', *African Concorde* (7 May 1987), 17-18.

most accomplished prose stylist.²⁸

Chinua Achebe has shown a keen aversion to this kind of endorsement of African work by the West, of which he has borne the brunt because of the special pioneering position of *Things Fall Apart*. What Achebe generally called 'colonialist criticism' Armah gave a name. In 'writing back' to Larson and systematically defending his position, Armah significantly shifted the balance of power that held the 'fieldhands', the African writers themselves, hostage to those to whom the standards of judgement had so far belonged – western critics.²⁹ Larson, above, presents himself as visionary for Africa in a sense not shared by the old African guard who are presented as conservative and tied to unprogressive traditional *western* literary notions. It is with the youth of Africa that Larson identifies and shares his vision. With his academic standing and wide influence, his appreciation of Armah arguably has done much to establish Armah's status as one of Africa's most accomplished writers, not only to Larson's western audience, but evidently, as the extract above indicates, with an *emergent* African one. In spite of Armah's spirited protest in 'Larsony; Fiction as Criticism of Fiction', at the implications of some of Larson's pronouncements, notably his appropriation by Larson, Larson's most emphatic statement is actually in praise of Armah's accomplishment, demonstrating the dangers presented by this kind of criticism that undermines even as it appears to nurture. He repeats his praise of Armah as 'the most skilled prose stylist in Anglophone Africa today' in *The Emergence of African Fiction*.³⁰

Armah is alert to, and resists this damning praise that is a double-edged sword, inflicting injury whether as praise or censure. In a curious way, Larson has had a profound impact on Armah. As already mentioned, Ogede remarks the great irony that leaves critics of Armah in Larson's debt, for it is his 'invidious comments'³¹ which forced a response out of Armah in defence of his position that have allowed a window

²⁸ Quoted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p.6

²⁹ In 'Larsony', p.50, Armah refers to African writers as 'fieldhands' (as opposed to house niggers) in the 'fertile and profitable field of African Literature'. In the North American Slave metaphor, fieldhands were at the bottom of the pile.

³⁰ Larson, p.276.

³¹ Ogede, p.84.

into Armah's jealously guarded world. But 'larsony' was just the first and most obvious result of Larson's book. Looked at in retrospect, Armah can be said to have responded broadly in varying ways to Larson's accusations. Charged with being a self-styled exile in Europe and America, Armah has actively made all of Africa his home; accused of not being competent in his mother tongue Fante (a variant of Akan), he has demonstrated an ease with the language that allows for confident linguistic gymnastics, as with the headings in *Fragments* itself, on which the accusations were based. Armah has pursued competence in another, pan-African language, Kiswahili, as well as ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics as possible key to the spirit that might unite Africa. In response to Larson's observation on the dearth of African publishing houses for creative writing, Armah has most recently established Per Ankh, an African publishing house that also teaches creative writing skills, and a bookclub to enable shared reading and discussion.

All in all, Armah has responded to Larson's early categorisation of him by rising to the challenges that threatened to contain him as an African writer. Yet in his response may be read the very thing he sought to avoid – falling in with Larson's prescriptive blueprint or vision for the development of African writing. Indeed, Armah ultimately creates for African writing with his six novels what Larson again proposed as the only way forward for African writing – diversity.³² Armah has produced some of the most experimental and innovative work to come from a single writer, even as the overall tone remains unmistakably his.

His decision not to give any interviews particularly to non-African critics, and his position that his novels speak for themselves, however, continues to provoke much conjecture and speculation. It moreover appears eccentric in a field in which, because of the extensive role of the African writer, the expectation of much more than just the text is now established.

More recently, Derek Wright, who has published extensively on Armah, and comments that much of the criticism is too banal to warrant response, attempts to situate Armah firmly within an African environment, having sifted through the

³² Larson, p.282.

Africana in Armah's work. Interestingly, he uses the term 'larsony' in the way that Armah intended. Wright's criticism of Armah comes almost twenty years after Larson and promises 'new perspectives'.³³ The book jacket sets out an admirable agenda:

The book endeavours, by tying Armah's writing back to very specific African roots, to dispel some Western critical myths about its dependence on Western literary models, and thus to relieve Ayi Kwei Armah of an ill-fitting "expatriate" tag bestowed upon him by criticism of his early novels.

Wright, having been dismissive of much of the outside criticism, admittedly tries to deliver. Yet statements reminiscent of the very tendencies he is critiquing leap out, especially in instances where he broadly generalises. He classifies *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* as texts of 'largely spurious simulated orality', not saved by the 'detailed complexity', the 'tremendous formal accomplishments of previous works'.³⁴ In these 'more African' (and therefore less accomplished?) novels, he sees the 'African presence as thin, because the works are increasingly polemical and ideological'. Underlying this criticism are certain assumptions, such as that of betrayal of western generosity by a leaning to the ideological left, as well as of an unsuccessful regression to pre-colonial time.

It is, of course, the absolute authority with which the expatriate critics have appraised African writing and the seemingly prejudiced nature of their assumptions about both writers and their writing that has compelled Armah to attribute his research and influences purely to African history and aesthetics. Such purity is no longer possible. Nevertheless, for over fifteen years Armah has lived in different parts of Africa, and carried out extensive research on African history in order to realise his vision. He should reserve the right to select and to himself privilege experiences he feels to be pertinent to the development of his aesthetics.

It is instructive that both Larson and Wright 'regard [...] Armah as Anglophone Africa's most accomplished prose stylist'. It is to this type of critic that Achebe sounded a caution in his essay, 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' in 1962. He repeats

³³ Derek Wright's, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of his Fiction* (London: Hans Zell, 1989) is the first in a series of full length studies of African writers called 'New Perspectives on African Literature', edited by Eldred D. Jones.

³⁴ Wright, p.187.

this caution in 'Colonialist Criticism':

that the European critic of African literature must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience of the African world and purged of the superiority and arrogance which history so insidiously makes him heir to.³⁵

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The publication of *The Beautiful Ones* is a significant milestone in the writing and criticism of African literature. It focused on the postcolonial situation with a critical intensity unusual at the time, capturing almost from the outset the transience, the tensions of 'between-ness' that is the characteristic of a culture in transition. The African context was assumed to be gradually moving from a state of primitivity into the higher state of civilisation. The anxiety in Armah's novels belied this expectation. It probed an African psyche not yet at ease with itself with the tools provided by the West. His exposition of the acceptance that deceit, compromise³⁶ and fear had begun to weave before, and continued to weave after independence created a vulnerable space, which the critics quickly filled with their anxieties about the fact of African writing, and its nature. Even with the publication of four more novels: *Fragments* (1969), *Why Are We So Blest ?* (1970), *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), and *The Healers* (1978), *The Beautiful Ones* continues to disturb.

Dimgba Igwe, the literary critic who has come closest to interviewing Armah, looks at *The Beautiful Ones* as having 'stirred a hornet's nest'³⁷ of literary criticism, especially violent in the early days. Indeed, the 'intellectual and emotional primitivism' (WOE, 123) that permeated the initial response to this novel is still much in evidence. As Fraser notes, critics were unprepared for what Armah had so finely unleashed. A powerful metaphor was fortified by a relentless outpouring seemingly so

³⁵ Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', p.6.

³⁶ Chinweizu in *The West and the rest of us*, 1st ed. 1975 (Lagos: Pero Press, 1987; 1975) discusses the great compromises that were made in the struggle for civil liberties and African independence. Rather than struggle 'for the rights of individual Africans within sovereign African States', they settled for 'the rights of petit-bourgeois Africans within disguised enclaves of European empires' (p.99).

³⁷ 'Armah: the reluctant novelist,' *African Concord*, 7 May, 1987, p.17. As already mentioned, Armah gives interviews selectively.

unstoppable Armah was *accused* of creating a 'a world in which the sewage pipes of history have exploded and everything is polluted', where the 'senses of the reader are vigorously assaulted to the point of being numbed by the persistent imagery of decay, putrefaction and death'.³⁸

The African novel in this form was still new, still an experiment. Arthur Luvai reads in Armah's innovative use of this technique a successful attempt to get the reader 'to apprehend reality not via worn out categories, some of which could very well be opportunistic, but in a fresh and unexpected way [...]'.³⁹ Just as the English novel was, paradoxically, as much about innovation as it was about maintaining a tradition, Armah broke with 'tradition' even while attempting to establish it.

It was not in matters technical or linguistic that Armah was faulted. Igwe describes *The Beautiful Ones* as 'distinguished by its unique modernist style',⁴⁰ and it is in technical terms indeed regarded as his most successful, realized work. The problem lay not so much in his choosing to criticise a Ghana hurtling into an abyss – this was happening – but in his bold choice of literary metaphor. Achebe declared it 'a sick book'. In 'Africa and her Writers' Achebe uses Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* as an example of the beginnings of the most grotesque form that the African view of itself, and its world, can take. He turns on its head Armah's own metaphor about 'obscene haste' in what he perceives as Armah's 'rushing out [...], so prematurely, to an assignation with a cruel destiny that will not be stirring from her place for a long time yet'.⁴¹

Since Tutuola and even before, criticism of African writing in English remarks, usually negatively, as inept, the use of language. It is used to gauge linguistic as well as cultural competency. On this score, Achebe is generous. He commends Armah's

³⁸ S. A. Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p.17.

³⁹ Arthur Luvai, 'Armah and the Concept of Defamiliarisation', *Mwangaza: Journal of the Literature Students Association*, 1: 2, University of Nairobi (1987), p.22.

⁴⁰ Igwe, p.17. Also Neil Lazarus, and Derek Wright.

⁴¹ Achebe, 'Africa and her Writers', p. 25.

book, which is 'well-written [...] Armah's command of language and imagery [...] of a very high order indeed'. It is Armah's distancing of himself from a Ghana he renders 'unrecognisable', buried as it is underneath the massive filth, but which he also shrouds in an 'aura of cosmic sorrow and despair' that Achebe finds it difficult to understand. To Achebe, Armah's is the kind of alienation that occurs to an African novel when it takes on board the concerns of Europe and the West. Armah's fascination with the French Existentialism of the sixties is seen as largely responsible for his 'sophisticated' concerns. Achebe laments his embracing of the despair of the 'human condition syndrome'.⁴²

Most Anglophone critics found Armah's starkness abrasive. In the Ghana of *The Beautyful Ones*, for example, Armah ridicules the love of the lofty processes of legality, held in high esteem by Ghanaians who valued the struggles of such lawyers like Casely-Hayford and others for their liberation. These processes epitomized for them independence/progress. But here was Armah placing them under scrutiny in their new role:

These men who were to lead us out of our despair [...] were lawyers before, something growing greasy on the troubles of people who worked the land, but now they were out to be our saviors. [...] They came late and spoke to their servants in the legal English they had spent their lives struggling to imitate, talking of constitutions and offering us unseen ghosts of words and paper held holy by Europeans (the very tools which had been used to dispossess them in the first place), and they asked us to be faithful and trust in them. (*TBO*, 81)

Some of these lawyers had been honoured with MBEs, and, therefore, offered proof of the possibility of a gradual assimilation into the culture and structures of the centre. Armah's criticism was of their highest aspirations.

Outside influences were quickly sought, and found, to explain Armah's position. The aggression, the crudeness, and outspokenness were subsequently attributed to his American years.⁴³ Critics also looked to Francophone Africa, and most specifically compared his work to that of Yambo Ouologuem. Ouologuem's novel, *Bound to*

⁴² Achebe, 'Africa and her Writers', p.25.

⁴³ For example, Derek Wright, *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* (London: Hans Zell, 1989), p. 81.

Violence (Le Devoir de Violence) had received considerable critical acclaim and won the Prix Renaudot.⁴⁴ His work displays a degree of detail and intimate intensity that is unfamiliar in Anglophone writing. And if indeed Armah was influenced by this style, he surpassed it to provide his readers with an instance of *litterature engagée* at its most earnest.

Armah's messages have remained characteristically disturbing. His work assumes the urgency of the 'obscene haste' (88) the 'frenzied power cycle', the 'intense speed'⁴⁵ of his perception of Nkrumah's betrayal of Ghana independence that set the trend for the post-independence African slide into neocolonialism. To capture this haste, Armah used the metaphor of the old manchild, which:

had been born with all the features of a human baby, but within seven years it had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity and old age, and in its seventh year it had died a natural death [...] in its gray old age, [it was] completely old in everything save the smallness of its size, a thing that deepened the element of the grotesque. The manchild looked more irretrievably old, far more thoroughly decayed, than any ordinary old man could ever have looked [...] the cycle from birth to decay had been short. Short, brief. (*TBO*, 63)

The issue of Nkrumah's betrayal of Ghana is a vexed one. His early commitment to the liberation of Ghana is in no doubt. Armah, who 'knew Nkrumah alright, but [...] wasn't close to him personally [...] believes that [he] made too many compromises with the colonial power and inevitably lost touch with the masses.'⁴⁶ In *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah powerfully laments this estrangement, the political transmutation of Nkrumah into a parasite: 'If only he could have remained that way!'⁴⁷ (*TBO*, 86) For Nkrumah, there could be no excuses. In his book, *Consciencism*, written, as earlier noted, with considerable assistance from Professor Willy Abrahams, he had theorised the transformation of the 'African Personality',⁴⁷ and the development of an active and

⁴⁴ According to Robert McDonald in 'Bound to Violence: A Case of Plagiarism' in *Transition*, 41: 8 (1972), 64-68, Ouologuem has been accused of the grosser crime of plagiarising Graham Greene's work. Influences have also been spotted in Andre Schwarz-Bart's *Le Dernier Des Justes* and *La Mulatresse Solitude*, translated as *The Last of the Just* and *A Woman Named Solitude*, respectively. Although this has no bearing on Armah, it highlights the important line between influence and imitation.

⁴⁵ Wright, p.88.

⁴⁶ Igwe, p.17

⁴⁷ Lazarus, p.2.

socially conscientious community. Thus Ghana's independence heralded a revolution that was supposed to change the continent, not only with regard to the achievement of political autonomy for all, but also by the generation of a desire in the citizens to forge national allegiances, and ultimately panafrican unity.

Nkrumah's conception of a much broader vision, his pursuit of the panafrican agenda led to some neglect of domestic duties.⁴⁸ 'The role of the old man in the emancipation of everybody else' is consequently part of Armah's critique of the litany of 'killing work' with which Nkrumah busied himself, at the expense of the equally demanding, necessary work required for the consolidation of nationalism in Ghana itself (*TBO*, 90). Nkrumah sacrificed Ghana to Africa.⁴⁹

It is important to be clear about, and to emphasize just what independence meant to the new African nations. In his introductory chapter entitled 'Great Expectations and the Mourning After', Lazarus has pointed out that 'unless we grasp the huge significance that the (re)attainment of nationhood carried for African intellectuals in these years of decolonisation, it is almost impossible for us to understand the subsequent trajectory of African literature'.⁵⁰ The sexual innuendo in his title suggests intimacy, hence the emotionally high premium placed on this event, and this period, as well as the devastation of its anticlimax. In emphasising the significance of this moment, Lazarus compares Ghana's triumph at independence with that celebrated later in Kenya, and cites Ngugi's description in *A Grain of Wheat* (1957) of the excitement, the hope and the high 'expectations'⁵¹ of the people. In Armah's terms: 'The promise was [indeed] so beautiful. Even those who were too young to understand it all knew that something good was being born. It was there. We were not deceived about that' (*TBO*, 85).

⁴⁸ Like Armah, he was a graduate of Achimota into which Dr Aggrey had admitted 'all the winds of the world'.

⁴⁹ It is, of course, this much broader understanding of freedom that Armah himself insists on, as discussed in the Chapter 9, *Osiris Rising*.

⁵⁰ In Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.3.

⁵¹ Lazarus, p.2.

In the rewritings of the story of the colonial period by African historians and others,⁵² a new window has been opened, and a new way of looking at and interpreting the events of the late fifties and early sixties is emerging. Chinweizu, for example, argues that a revolution did not really occur at independence.⁵³ He claims that the dream of a purely African independence was not only not possible, but that it had been conceded even by such stalwart hopefuls as Casely-Hayford in their earlier negotiations with the imperial power for autonomy. This compromise is clearly reflected in the speech of Sir Charles Noble Arden Clarke, the first Governor-General *and* Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces' on the opening of the first 'independent' parliament. First, he pointed out the potency of nationalism, only good when reasonable. He said:

Here, thanks to the statesmanship of the political leaders, particularly of the Prime Minister, the good sense and good will of the Chiefs and people, nationalism and colonialism have worked in partnership, a *genuine partnership*, animated by forbearance and mutual understanding, towards a common objective. Of her own free will, this country has chosen to remain within the British Commonwealth of Nations, and she has been *welcomed* as a member by all the other members. *In so far as the birth of Ghana today is the natural outcome of British Colonialism, I am proud to be a British Colonialist.*⁵⁴

Obviously, this speech was made at a time when colonialism was read very differently than it is today. Ghana was also a singularly different place. Nevertheless, Lazarus may be overly optimistic in his likening of this transitional 'rite of passage'⁵⁵ which was clearly under tight *colonial* Government control, to the revolutionary 'storming of the winter palace'.⁵⁶ But such is the power of the imagination that the people were

⁵² This comment is more pertinent to Kenya, as in West Africa from mid-19th century the Africans were already engaged in debate about, and involved in the writing of their own history. David M. Anderson, in 'The "Crisis of Capitalism" and Kenya's Social History: A Comment', *African Affairs*, 92 (1993), p.287 gives such examples as The *Hadith* series edited by Professor Bethwell Ogot in the seventies and the journal of the Kenya Historical Association that produced *The Kenya Historical Review*; and the works of writers such as Ogot, Atieno-Odhiambo (now at Rice University in the United States), Ben Kipkorir, Tabitha Kanogo, William Ochieng', Ahmed Salim et al. Significant new work has also come from John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman.

⁵³ This is the position from which Lazarus in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (1990) argues.

⁵⁴ *Ghana is Born*: 6th March 1957 (London: Newman Neame for Ghana Information Services, 1958), p.59. All emphases are mine.

⁵⁵ Lazarus, p.235.

⁵⁶ Lazarus, p.ix. I have in mind the British behind-the-scenes action and stage managing of the June 1997 handover of the last Imperial possession, Hong Kong to China, even if the circumstances were not identical.

prepared to seize this as a moment 'that meant more than freedom from colonial rule. It meant the freedom to build a new life, a better world'.⁵⁷ And there was a definite shift in the colonial equation. It is for this reason that it becomes significant for so many. Meanwhile, the inconsistencies of this freedom were visible straight away.

Being an African colonial dependency, Ghana, above said to have joined the Commonwealth 'of its own free will', was apparently only admitted into this fraternity after extensive and heated opposition by the other members. Even in her 'welcome' she was not granted a similar relationship within it to the 'cousins'. Nkrumah makes a clear distinction between 'those colonies of the capitalist countries which have served them as colonizing regions for their surplus population, and which in this way have become a continuation of their capitalist system (eg Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, etc), and those colonies which are exploited by the imperialists primarily as sources of raw materials and cheap labour, as spheres for export of capital, and as markets for their manufactured goods and commodities'.⁵⁸ These Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the then South Africa⁵⁹ enjoyed a different status, and were, according to Nkrumah, 'in league with the financial oligarchy of Great Britain for the exploitation of the colonies'.⁶⁰ A concession was made. Ghana, like the African countries in its wake would forge a 'special' bond. They would 'hang on and act like the tail of the kite of the British Empire'.⁶¹ Nkrumah himself was under no illusions as to the concessionary, if hard won, aspect of independence. But he also points out the heady nature of the prospect of freedom, for Ghana sufficiently unexpected as to provoke great generosity of spirit from the formerly colonized. Ghana set the precedent for future relations with Britain, establishing a tenuous link.

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⁵⁷ Lazarus, p.235.

⁵⁸ Kwame Nkrumah, *Towards Colonial Freedom: Africa in the Struggle Against World Imperialism* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p.31.

⁵⁹ It is interesting to watch the changing nature of the West's relationship with independent South Africa (1994) under its African leadership. Also compare the linguistic division based on this preferential partnership referred to by Emmanuel Quarcoo in the 'Introduction'.

⁶⁰ Nkrumah, *Towards*, p.30.

⁶¹ Nkrumah, *Towards*, p.32.

What was initially perceived simply as Nkrumah's betrayal of Ghana, that short-circuiting of the dream of democratic liberty, was to be repeated in the other African countries. Ghana was a pawn in an economic and political game much larger than itself. Nkrumah's professed communist leanings, in spite of his country's stated position of non-alignment and, therefore, freedom of association with all, led to harsh economic punishment and political instability. He is not entirely blameless. Armah talks of his losing touch with the reality of the conditions in Ghana and elevating himself 'up there, above the world, a savior with his own worshippers, not a man with equals in life' (*TBO*, 86); 'of the promise he held out but which he himself consumed, utterly destroyed' (*TBO*, 88). Six military coups down the line, in 1979, finally fed up with the repetitive cycle, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings (incidentally of mixed Ghanaian and Scottish parentage) declared what he termed a 'holy war', a crusade to restore suitable conditions of livelihood as distinct from the short-termism of the almost fashionable and endemic military coups. He has since 'devolved' the country into democratic civilian practices so as to rescue the Ghana of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*.⁶² Armah has been involved, as court *griot*, in this process.⁶³

The period since the appearance of *The Healers* (1978), Armah's last novel before *Osiris Rising* (1995), has seen Ghana submerged under the weight of concerns heavier even than those discussed in *The Beautiful Ones*. Poverty levels in the eighties were multiplied by the Structural Adjustment Programmes allegedly intended to alleviate want by 'the removal of impediments to growth through structural reform',⁶⁴ programmes instituted by the agencies of multinational corporations, The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These are the same agencies that W. E. B. Du Bois and his non-governmental lobby had sought to persuade to consider and safeguard 'minority' economic interests at their inception at Bretton Woods after the Second World War. As with independence, Ghana was the first

⁶² Jerry Rawlings methods have been harsh, and he has a bad human rights record as a result.

⁶³ According to Ama Addo, a Ghanaian student on the course I offered on 'Reading African Writing' at the University of Glasgow in 1994.

⁶⁴ *Economic Review*, Nairobi, Feb 20-26, 1995.

African country on which this experiment was tried.⁶⁵ The agencies report great success. The debt owed to them by Ghana is being serviced according to plan. But the story in Ghana itself is one of continuing strife. This poverty is synonymous with the so called Third World.⁶⁶ It stems from the historical linking of North and South, today masquerading as such benignly worded if self-serving recovery programmes as Structural Adjustment, in which, 'discourse on Western Imperialism [is] transmogrified into a discourse on Western humanism' into a 'democratic and humane' perversion of itself.⁶⁷

It is this discourse from the West which Armah challenges. His response to Larson can be read as part of a much wider response to a construct skewed in favour of the West. Larson wrote at a time when the African point of view was seriously underrepresented, and Armah's impassioned response was an instance of 'writing back' before Salman Rushdie's popular naming of it. In a world long dominated by the west, it is natural that Larson, himself of the West, should 'operate [...] from a received framework of Western values and prejudices'. It also follows that, imagining his position to be universal, he should seek to impose this outlook on others. The Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, had a term for this notion. He called it the 'imperial-universal'.⁶⁸

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A recurring, and valid, criticism of African literature is that it fails to reach an audience wide enough for it to be considered representative of social culture, as its oral antecedents did. Its dependency on literacy also makes it inevitably narrowly elitist. I

⁶⁵ Armah criticised these programmes in the paper 'The Third World Hoax', (*West Africa*, 25 August 1986, p. 1680), quoted in Wright, p. 267. The World Bank and IMF have since come under great criticism. Repeated demonstrations have been held to protest their actions in aggravating world poverty.

⁶⁶ Nada Elia, 'Violent Women: Surging into Forbidden Quarters', *Fanon: A Critical Reader* ed. by Lewis Gordon and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 163-169. Elia captures the sense of relational disproportion in her naming of it, seemingly obviously, as the Majority world.

⁶⁷ A. Sivanandan, 'All that Melts into Air is Solid: The Hokum of New Times', *Race and Class*, 31: 3 (January-March 1990), 1-30. Sivanandan quotes Fanon to this effect.

⁶⁸ Tim Brennan, 'Cosmopolitans and Celebrities', *Race and Class*, 31:1 (July-September 1989), 1-19 (p. 17).

have already touched on the debilitating revolution that was caused by literacy, a coup that reduced masters of eloquence to clumsy, alternative communicators, its limitless potential notwithstanding. As was first noted by the Education Commission in 1921, the local systems of education favoured the English language. Therefore, communication not only had to be written; it had to be written in English.⁶⁹ According to Professor D. Westermann 'any educational work which does not take into consideration the inseparable unity between African language and African thinking is based on false principles'.⁷⁰ Armah tackled this problem on two fronts. In an attempt to disseminate his work to a wide and popular readership cheaply, Armah, in his Tanzania years, offered *Two Thousand Seasons*, before its publication to the Tanzania *Daily News* and the Ghanaian *Daily Graphic* for serialisation.⁷¹ This proved to be unsuccessful, for what Armah interpreted as reasons of censorship.⁷² Like Ngugi, Armah also saw translation as a way out of the dominance of English. He arranged for the translation of *The Beautiful Ones* into Kiswahili as *Wema Hawajazaliwa*.⁷³

From this discussion, then, Armah emerges as a writer negotiating the crossroads of change. He attempts to push back the frontiers of a discipline traditionally and culturally Western and elitist. He tries to communicate his art to an audience to whom orature/literature has been socially interactive and so he subverts and challenges Western traditions. This controversy over how African literature should be appreciated, indeed what its parameters should be did not begin with Armah. And just as it did then, it still comes down to the question of language. Rajat Neogy, later editor of *Transition* noted in 1963:

⁶⁹ Ironically in more recently independent southern African countries such as Zimbabwe, African literature thrived in indigenous languages partly because Government policy sought to exclude Africans from the language of political dominance.

⁷⁰ N. I. Omenka, *The School in the Service of Evangelisation: The Catholic Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria 1886-1950* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), p. 192.

⁷¹ 'Larsony', p. 54.

⁷² Larson, p. 54. In Larson's view, Armah's intended audience 'rejected' his work, there was 'no reader interest'. He doesn't give any supporting evidence as to whether, for example, the Dailies experienced a drop in sales, or if there was public protest in letters to the Editors.

⁷³ The 'Meeting of African Writers, Accra' in 1975 pledged to set up an African Co-operative Publishing House that would translate every work it published into Swahili: they 'unanimously adopted Swahili as the logical language for this purpose' (*Transition*, 50: 9, p. 15). Emphasis in text.

Literary Criticism in Africa is a comparatively new phenomenon. It is a new discipline which is just beginning to grow. Its seeds were planted at the Writers Conference at Makerere last year, where, as any participant would agree, a critical toughness and ruthlessness of a kind no writer had experienced publicly before accompanied each discussion of his work.⁷⁴

Already, the publication of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* in 1952 had sparked critical controversy. To African writers like Achebe, a university student at the time, this novel was inexcusably and unarguably badly written, and one not deserving the monumental attention it received, and especially not for the reasons it received this attention. Today, he is kinder in expressing this view. Sadly, Tutuola is still evoked, and still for the wrong reasons, as the progenitor of African literature, such was the power and influence of his non African critics. The emphasis here was on Tutuola's feeble attempts to use the English language. Some critics insisted on elevating his 'young English' into a stylistic art form.⁷⁵ It was seen as natural that African writing should develop in just such stages.

Armah has been much praised for his mastery of discourses and his sophisticated technique. And in a world increasingly secular, criticism is less puritanical in approach and more selective in its focus. Starting from the position of a literary mongrel with a massive grudge against the political and social establishment, Armah has tried to make sense out of the Fanonian 'caricature of cultural existence'⁷⁶ that holds one trapped in a 'sustained death agony'.⁷⁷ This is an existence on the margins of the dominant discourse, yet inseparably tied to it. In his last two books Armah investigates the 'reciprocal relativism of differing cultures, provided only that the colonial status is irrevocably excluded'.⁷⁸ He recreates, and tells, a different story.

I now turn to Fanon, whose revolutionary formulation of a radical critique of colonialism enabled the fusion of theories of revolution with practical engagement.

⁷⁴ Rajat Neogy, 'On Literary Criticism in Africa', 'Editorial', *Transition*, 10: 3 (1963), p.3.

⁷⁵ In *Hopes and Impediments* Achebe, countering Adrian Roscoe's early criticism, can be read as suggesting that a content-based reading of Tutuola might yield much.

⁷⁶ Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', p.129.

⁷⁷ Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', p. 124.

⁷⁸ Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', p.131.

Chapter Five

FRANTZ FANON

*auteur subversif, penseur d'avenir*¹

His Life and Work

Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique, part of the French Antilles (with Guadeloupe), in 1925, at the height of the practice of the French colonial policy of assimilation. His family were part of an already existing black *haute bourgeoisie*, a class which shared the French desire to assimilate, and it was to this, rather than to national liberation that this class of Martiniqueans at the time aspired. Fanon's affiliation at this point was dictated by family and class, and it was not until he went to France, as an adult that he realised that being French and being Black did not constitute the same reality, and were somehow mutually exclusive.² This is not to say he was unconscious of the tensions of the colour line. While he was in high school, he was taught French by Aimé Césaire, who had himself already started querying the Islanders' acceptance of the status quo, while pushing for recognition that black was just as good as white, a totally unacceptable and consequently highly subversive idea at the time. Indeed, Fanon's first overtly political action was to vote for Césaire, then a member of the Communist Party, for the first national Assembly of the IVth Republic. Césaire's ideas, better known within the context of Negritude, particularly with the publication and translation of *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* (*Return to My Native Land*), influenced Fanon profoundly in spite of the public break in their relationship over Césaire's campaign for a 'Yes' vote in the De Gaulle referendum over devolution or independence for Martinique in 1958. Fanon, who wanted independence, perceived Césaire's support for devolution as an unacceptable compromise. His own views on colonialism were beginning to harden. Emmanuel Hansen credits this to two of his

¹ From *Memorial International: Frantz Fanon, Fort de France*, 31 Mars-3rd Avril, 1982, *Présence Africaine* (1984).

² Ayi Kwei Armah, 'Power and Principle. Fanon: The Awakener', *Negro Digest*, 18 (1969) 4-9; 29-43, (p. 8).

peers, Mosole and Manville. By 1943, Mosole was sharply aware of the implications of racism and colonialism, while Manville, whose father, a socialist lawyer defended black cases pro bono, also helped those unable to defend themselves while still a student. The other determining factor was his experience in the French army, where the treatment of black soldiers was determined by their degree of assimilation.

It was within the military context, both within, and outside Martinique that Fanon, according to Hansen, 'came face to face with blatant racism'.³ In their enthusiasm to respond to De Gaulle's appeal to save France, driven rather ironically by the spirited and patriotic desire for solidarity and commitment to France, and the principles of *fraternité, égalité* and *liberté*, Fanon and his friends had themselves paid their way to the Dominican Republic to enlist and train in the army. It was a brief stint because of the success of the American blockade against the Vichy government. Fanon returned to Martinique, and after the Vichy Administration was ousted, he went to North Africa to join the Free French Army.

During the Vichy period in France, five thousand French soldiers were sent to Martinique as part of the defence strategy against the American blockade. Their action while there is summarised by Geismar as a 'totalitarian racism'. It included the rape of women, demeaningly dismissed by police when cases were reported, as 'overpriced prostitutes'. The soldiers monopolised all services and amenities, and reduced Martiniqueans to subordinate status.⁴ This 'occupation' was nevertheless seen by the majority of the Martiniqueans, not as a French, but as a German affair, because of the close association between the Vichy administration and Nazi Germany.⁵ The French were perceived as humanists, and it was to French culture that Martiniqueans aspired. They could not change their way of thinking so swiftly.

It was in the army that Fanon lived his 'otherness', an experience that also concretized just what not being white actually meant. His links with Africa were forged, first in

³ Emmanuel Hansen, 'Frantz Fanon: Portrait of a Revolutionary Intellectual', *Transition*, 49: 9 (1974), 25-36 (p.28).

⁴ Quoted in Hansen, p.27.

⁵ Hansen, p.27.

Morocco, and then at Bougie, where he underwent military training.⁶ If he was sheltered from the occupation in Martinique because of his class position, he now experienced institutionalised racism at first hand. Here, the black soldiers were the first line of defence, fighting not only for France, but protecting the white soldiers as well. This situation invokes the Brechtian analogy that Caute formulates in *Fanon* to describe the term 'exploitation':

The white man comes to the wide and roaring river; he jumps on the native's back and shouts to him 'swim!'; the native toils and finally reaches the far bank, exhausted; his hand reaches up for recompense, but the white man is indignant. 'Without me,' he says, 'you would never have crossed the river'.⁷

Fanon has depicted the racial situation in Martinique during his youth as unpolarised, but in many ways it reflects the pattern of other colonial enclaves with a similar racial mix and a colour-based hierarchy of power. David Lowenthal in 'Race and Colour in the West Indies' describes the situation whereby:

The elite take their ascription as white for granted; colour is an overt issue among them only in gross transgressions of the social code. Nor is colour per se overwhelmingly important in lower class communities; the interest in identifying ancestral strains focuses on line of descent, not degrees of whiteness. But in the middle class colour is the crucial determinant of status, and status is the main goal in life.⁸

Hansen (1974) provides us with an even clearer analysis of the racial and class hierarchy, and the tensions governing their interaction with each other:

The Martinican society consisted of a rigid class structure. Society was pyramidal. On top of the pyramid was a small group of whites, called *Creoles* or *Bekes* [...] a status group[...] consist(ing) of native whites, and whites from metropolitan France [...] Below the white group was a small but fairly prosperous middle class of Blacks and, at the bottom were the bulk of the Black population. As happens in all cases of rigid class structure, those at the top of the pyramid tried to stress their social distance from those below them, and those at the bottom tried to stress their social nearness to those above them.⁹

⁶ Robert Blackey, 'Fanon and Cabral: A Contrast in Theories of Revolution for Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 12: 2 (1974), 191-209, reminds us that Fanon's ancestry was, of course, African.

⁷ David Caute, *Fanon* (London: Fontana, 1970), p.67.

⁸ Quoted in Irene Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study* (London: Wildwood House, 1973), p.7.

⁹ Hansen, p.26.

Language, and colour, were the main determinants of status in the elite group to which Fanon belonged. To bridge the race and class gap, therefore, one need only speak 'impeccable' French,¹⁰ to try and 'have children by someone less black than oneself'.¹¹ It was nevertheless a complex process, and one reflected within Fanon's own family. It has been suggested that Fanon, himself the darkest out of eight children, perceived in his mother's attitude towards him a subtle rejection, to which is attributed his subsequent interest in matters pertaining to colour in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Even his later desire to go to Cuba after serving in Accra is read by Gendzier¹² as the result of wounded pride due to this purported maternal rejection, rather than as the more logical attempt to get away from a Ghana where the nationalist bourgeoisie were distressingly 'steeped in corruption, conspicuous consumption, authoritarianism and a shameless display of affluence in the midst of poverty, the very issues which Fanon was to denounce most vehemently in *The Wretched of the Earth*'.¹³ In Hansen's view, the attempts to cast Fanon's work as mere response to personal psychosis is inconsistent with his sustained and reasoned interjection in matters of freedom and justice. He sees the attempts to configure the innovative Fanon as psychopathic as 'shallow'.¹⁴

Fanon's innocent view of 'miscegenation' as creating a new and hybrid race worked to some extent within the island of Martinique, but things soon changed.

World War II

The War maybe more than any other global event shifted the focus onto the gross inequalities experienced by subject peoples in defence of freedoms from which they were excluded, both at home and abroad. It brought French soldiers to Martinique, and with them came a new strain of racist arrogance, described above, that was to alter the already fraught balance holding the society together. The soldiers were openly

¹⁰ Hansen, p.26.

¹¹ Hansen, p.7.

¹² Gendzier, p.16.

¹³ Hansen, p.34.

¹⁴ Hansen, p.27.

racist because *they* were French. Martinique may have been a department of France, but Franco-Martiniquean relations were clearly weighted to privilege France. This in turn led to increased feelings of resentment and inferiority on the part of the Islanders. Fanon the soldier felt keenly the contradictions of the colonial system.

After the war he won a scholarship to study at Lyons in France, where he qualified as a psychiatrist. Within the educational establishment he was stigmatised by an attempt at 'positive discrimination' by his professor at an examination. Although he passed fairly, the slight stayed with him. One of his responses to the overwhelming pressures of identity, function and place in the world, was to write. He took the decision: 'Not as a way of describing the world or himself, but as a way of understanding it, its absurdities, and the possibilities of its rationalisation'.¹⁵ *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) was the result.¹⁶ This seminal work, published when Fanon was twenty-seven sought to answer fundamental question concerning racism.

Once Fanon started writing, he did not to stop until his death in 1961, when on his death bed he read the proofs for *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961) translated as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). It is a fitting epitaph for those he sought to liberate. In between he wrote *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (1959), which carried the subtitle *Sociologie d'une révolution* in its 1966 edition, and was translated as *A Dying Colonialism* in 1967 and *Pour la révolution africaine* (1964), translated as *Toward the African Revolution* (1968). The titles are indicative of the issues that occupied Fanon throughout his life. He continued to work as a psychiatrist throughout, and as well as the numerous articles he wrote to promote and explicate the revolution, he continued to contribute to medical publications.

While in France Fanon fully integrated into the social and intellectual life, and counted amongst his friends such eminent French intellectuals as Simone De Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Alongside his studies in medicine he pursued his keen interests in literature and philosophy: he attended the lectures of Jean Lacroix and Maurice

¹⁵ Gendzier, p.4.

¹⁶ Grove Press also undertook all subsequent translation of Fanon's other texts.

Merleau-Ponty at Lyons. He also read widely, from the Existentialist philosophers Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, as well as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx and Lenin. Two of Sartre's works that appear to have affected him the most are *Anti-Semite and Jew*, and *Critique de la raison dialectique*. According to De Beauvoir, he was keen on the analysis of terror and brotherhood contained in *Critique*. His stand against anti-semitism caused his near-dismissal from the psychiatric hospital at Manouba in Tunisia, where his high standards not only alienated him from the rest of the staff who subsequently called him 'the nigger', but also led to his being suspected of espionage for Israel.¹⁷ Between 1949-1950 while still a medical student he wrote several plays: *Les Mains parallèles*, *L'Oeil se noie*, and *La Conspiration*. According to Dr Marie Perimbam who was able to read them, 'they reveal Fanon's attempt to solve human problems within the existential framework'.¹⁸ They remain unpublished, as was his wish.

Fanon married a French woman, Marie-Joséphe ('Josie') Dublé, in 1952, a choice he defended vigorously, and surely with justification.¹⁹ The black girls he met in France were themselves determined not to marry black men, having successfully got 'out of that' (BSWM, 48). Some only socialised in places 'where-there-was-no-chance-of-running-into-niggers' (BSWM, 50). His marriage has nevertheless irked those of his non-western critics who value his ideas on revolution, but who believe that the degradations experienced at white hands should retreat into racial essentialism, not integration. Their case, paradoxically, is strengthened by the Fanon family domestic dilemma. According to Peter Geismar, his wife Josie will remain in Algeria 'since she is white and her son is black: both will at least have a more dignified existence in Algeria than in her French homeland'.²⁰

¹⁷ Hansen, p.33.

¹⁸ Hansen, p. 29.

¹⁹ Armah concedes that Fanon's choice of spouse is a personal matter, but notes with an element of satisfaction that Josie Fanon returned to live in Algeria, and took Algerian citizenship. But Peter Geismar's account of her return, quoted below, tells an altogether different story, and one that confirms the racism that Fanon spent his life fighting.

²⁰ Peter Geismar, 'Frantz Fanon: Evolution of a Revolutionary: A Biographical Sketch', *Monthly Review*, 21: 1 (1969), 22-49, (p.23).

While training at Lyons, Fanon researched and published an article on the living conditions of North African immigrants. Theirs was the peculiar alienation of strangers in their own country, a condition he termed the 'North African Syndrome'. To Fanon, this condition, from which most of the neuroses he had to treat as a psychiatrist evolved, was a consequence of French assimilation. The system was racist, and even the doctors, most of whom were recruited from France had a superior attitude. At Blida Joinville in Algeria, where Fanon subsequently worked as Director from 1953, he urged them to recognise that in their 'power to define normality and madness',²¹ they wielded a formidable political weapon, which they ought to use responsibly. With Dr Tosquelles, a Spanish immigrant, they subsequently favoured a holistic and culturally relevant approach to mental illness, based on empathy with, rather than fear of the patients.

As Gendzier notes, the linking of psychiatry to politics is not a new idea, and is one that has been exploited before to devastating effect. In Algeria, it bred the conditions that ghettoized (physically, and metaphorically) the Algerian people.²² Not only did Fanon discredit purportedly scientific studies, similar to that carried out in East Africa at the Mathare mental hospital, showing the African brain as smaller, and therefore, inferior to the European brain. He eschewed the notion of 'universal' man, an idea popular in French thinking at the time and, conscious of his own crisis of identity, insisted that methods be developed for cross cultural understanding. The cumulative effect of the inconsistencies of the system, with which he might be seen to be complicit, led to Fanon's resignation in 1955/56. In his letter of resignation he cited the loss of freedom that results from madness as one of the legacies of the colonial system.²³ Already deeply committed to working for the Algerian Provisional Government (FLN), he was unable to sustain the dual roles of government doctor by day, and doctor and strategist for the FLN by night. The disparity evident in the conditions between his white patients and his African patients could only be explained in political terms, and it was to this configuration that he now turned his focus.

²¹ Gendzier, p.64.

²² Gendzier, p.93.

²³ Renate Zahar, *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Alienation. Concerning Frantz Fanon's Political Theory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), p.xi.

According to David Prochaska in *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône 1870-1920*, Algeria was supposed to be the perfect example of assimilation²⁴ but both for the Algerian in France, and the one in Algeria, it was clearly evident that assimilation did not work.²⁵ Fanon devised new and relevant ways to deal with the specific problems of the Algerians. Professionally, and as a prolific journalist and social philosopher, he created and disseminated knowledge and information about the impending crisis. The changes Fanon introduced within his profession have had far reaching effects, particularly his insistence that patients be reintegrated socially and not treated as social outcasts. But it is for his role as a theorist, strategist and activist in the Algerian war of liberation that he is both controversially, and best remembered. He saw at first hand the extremes (madnesses) to which the colonial system could drive people and this stirred in him an answering sympathy. Blida was close to the centre of the resistance, and Fanon not only provided training (from his experience as a soldier in the War) and sanctuary for the revolutionaries, he also trained nurses, provided facilities for meetings, and published articles explaining the Algerian Provisional Government (FLN) agenda and appealing for support for the cause. This last role was particularly important in that it helped to create the public image of the resistance, both nationally and internationally. In *The Memory of Resistance*, Martin Evans discusses Fanon's success in achieving an impressive, extremely high public relations profile for the FLN. The French Governor General in Algeria, Robert Lacoste, eventually expelled him from Algeria in 1957, ostensibly because of his participation in a strike by doctors sympathetic to the FLN.²⁶ His expulsion was a consequence of many things – the speech he made at the Congress of Black Writers in 1956 sanctioning the necessity of violence in liberation struggles, there were his activities at Blida, and of course, his provocative letter of resignation, in which he sharply criticised French government policy in Algeria.

²⁴ David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône 1870-1920* (London: Fontana, 1970), pp.230-232.

²⁵ Michael Crowder has argued that the French never did succeed in implementing this policy in their African territories because of the enormous investment in time and money required, and largely settled for Association. Nevertheless Algeria was not really viewed as part of Africa, and later on in this chapter we read Crowder's reference to mean sub-saharan French West Africa.

²⁶ Hansen, p.33.

His political activism in the Algerian cause led to his appointment in Ghana in 1960 as a diplomat representing the FLN. While he was in Ghana he 'witnessed at close quarters some sordid intrigues and power-play' that marked the beginnings of Nkrumah's decline from the idealistic promises of independence. 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth* was written as an acute response to these events in post-independence Ghana. Fanon concluded – and this is 'a crucial element in the philosophy of *The Wretched of the Earth* – that countries which had gained independence by the peaceful political route were in the grip of a bourgeois class as aggressive and chauvinistic as the French bourgeoisie of the Great Revolution'.²⁷

Fanon's letter of resignation, which has attained near symbolic status, even notoriety is a concise statement of disapproval of the French system from a virtual, albeit notable, outsider. It triggered his expulsion from Algeria and signalled his break with France. He returned to France only once more, incognito, pending his relocation to Tunis where he continued his work for the Algerian resistance. By this time, his actions were already considered enough of a threat to necessitate clandestine, circuitous travel arrangements that took him through Switzerland and Italy. Fanon's letter explains that psychiatry as it was being practised actually created the alienation it was supposed to cure:

If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization [...]

Monsieur le Ministre, there comes a moment when tenacity becomes morbid perseverance. Hope is then no longer an open door to the future, but the illogical maintenance of a subjective attitude in organised contradiction with reality [...] A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society to be replaced.²⁸

Fanon exposed the structure that supported French exploitation of its subsidiary territories under the pretext of assimilation, but it was his commitment to reforming the system that acted as a direct challenge to Monsieur Lacoste, the Governor General,

²⁷ Cauter, p.61.

²⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), p.53.

and led to his banishment from Algeria.

It was in his total identification with the Algerians at the human level, and with their cause, that Fanon's appeal for Armah and Ngugi lay. Armah's discipleship was secured by Fanon's principled commitment. The impulse behind his identification with Algeria is nevertheless not unproblematic, and Henry Louis Gates in 'Critical Fanonism' has recently raised the issue that his being resurrected and appropriated both as 'totem and text' focuses attention away from the very specificity that he emphasised in *Black Skin, White Masks* with his assertion that 'I belong irreducibly to my time'.²⁹

One of Fanon's most important legacies, and one that has been seized by groups as diverse as the Africans, the African-Americans and the Arabs in their various struggles, is his 'eloquent defence of violence' as a legitimate means of overthrowing oppression and realising freedom.³⁰ In chapter 1, 'Concerning Violence', Fanon begins by stating unequivocally that 'decolonisation is always a violent process' (*WOE*, 27) because of the 'violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world' (*WOE*, 31). In this chapter Fanon casts the violence of the oppressed as a necessary and responsive violence, one that is retaliatory and restorative. It is a means for the oppressed to challenge, while retaining their humanness, the rhetorical justifications for their oppression.

The colonial system was ushered in by violence, and requires the continued use of actual or potential violence to sustain dominance. Colonialism was not an involuntary spasm. It was not a glitch in an otherwise altruistic and philanthropic Imperial system, something that might right itself. Fanon wrote directly and unflinchingly about the power politics he witnessed, not sparing himself morally or physically in his commitment to the pursuit of freedom for oppressed peoples. Aimé Césaire's tribute to Fanon best sums up his extraordinary qualities:

²⁹ Henry Louis Gates, 'Critical Fanonism', *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Spring 1991), 457-470, (p. 457).

³⁰ Hussein M. Adam, 'Frantz Fanon as a Democratic Theorist', *African Affairs* 92 (1993), 499-518, (p. 499).

If the word 'commitment' has any meaning, it was with Fanon that it acquired significance. A violent one, they said. And it is true he instituted himself as a theorist of violence, the only arm of the colonised that can be used against colonial barbarity...

But his violence, and this is not paradoxical, was that of the non-violent. By this I mean the violence of justice, of purity and intransigence. This must be understood about him: his revolt was ethical, and his endeavour generous. He did not simply adhere to a cause. He gave himself to it. Completely, without reserve. Wholeheartedly... In him resided the absoluteness of passion...

A theorist of violence, perhaps, but even more of action [...] No one was more respectful of thought than he, and more responsible in face of his own thought, nor more exacting towards life, which he could not imagine in terms other than of thought transformed into action.³¹

Fanon and Black Nationalism: The United States of America.

In *Fanon*, David Caute problematises the iconic position that Fanon has come to hold, not only as an 'Algerian' revolutionary, but as a symbol for African-American, African and other Southern liberation struggles notwithstanding his 'other' identities as a West Indian, Frenchman, and African.³² During the period of upheaval and instability in North America in the 1960s, Fanon's ideas, which had of course in a circuitous manner also evolved from the 1920s America of the Harlem Renaissance proved very attractive for blacks engaged in the struggle for civil rights. The general spirit of radicalism at the time, punctuated first by the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, and later by the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, also spilled over into the more international protest against American involvement in Vietnam. Fanon's critique of oppression and misuse of power was well received by the Black groups looking for possibility, as well as the legitimacy afforded by the printed word. But although there were some who thought Fanon's ideas timely, others found them threatening.

In 1966 *The Wretched of the Earth* was translated and published in America. It became one of the most popular books within the prison system, where the majority of black

³¹ Quoted in Hansen, p.35. My emphases.

³² According to Césaire, Fanon 'became Algerian. Lived Algerian. Fought Algerian. Died Algerian' (Hansen, p.35). Peter Geismar (1969) takes it a step further and says 'Fanon became Algerian, lived Algerian – but died African' (30).

radicals often found themselves.³³ Its impact on the black movements was instantaneous. Bobby Seale, one of the founders of the Black Panthers, on his release from prison reportedly gave it to Huey Newton to read. By October of the same year the Black Panthers was formed. Although it did not become a mass movement, it has been described as 'a vanguard organisation'.³⁴ It was based on a Marxist understanding of socio-political and economic systems, and was political in its thrust. The motto of the Panthers came from Mao's *Little Red Book*, and read:

We are advocates of the abolition of war; we do not want war; but war can only be abolished through war; and in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to pick up the gun.³⁵

One of the clearest articulations of the organisation's political intentions is cited by Eldridge Cleaver, soon to become one of the leaders.³⁶ He first came into contact with the Panthers at a meeting held to plan a memorial for Malcolm X. Their impact on him was profound. They were well-dressed, disciplined, and most impressively, armed. They also had an agenda, which they articulated concisely and boldly at a time when it might have been prudent to disguise it under the safer options they were offered: economic advancement, self-defence, or Black culture. They said:

Our message is one and the same. We are going to talk about black people arming themselves in a political fashion to exert organised force in the political arena to see to it that their desires and needs are met. Otherwise there will be a political consequence. And the only culture worth talking about is a revolutionary culture. So it doesn't matter what heading you put on it, we are going to talk about *political power growing out of the barrel of a gun*.³⁷

The importance of Algeria for the Black Movement in America was two-fold: it stood for the possibility of interracial solidarity, because some of the French had joined forces with the Algerians against what they perceived as an injustice against humanity.

³³ Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), p.98. According to Cleaver in *Soul On Fire*, as well as the books on Malcolm X, *The Wretched of the Earth* was one of the most popular books being read by inmates at the time (17).

³⁴ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Fire* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), p.90.

³⁵ Robert Scheer, ed., *Eldridge Cleaver: Post Prison Writings and Speeches* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p.37.

³⁶ *Soul on Fire*, p.90.

³⁷ Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, p. 31. I draw attention to the militancy that Ngugi has famously taken up, writing from the *Barrel of a Pen*.

Secondly, the Algerians had staged a successful revolution against the French, and Fanon had provided them with its blueprint. Part of the appeal of the Panthers (as well as their challenge) lay in that, unlike Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam, they did not preach separatism. It must be remembered that at this time a strong sense of betrayal already pervaded the black community. Within the context of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King had modelled himself on Ghandi, advocating peaceful protest as the way out of oppression. And Malcolm X was the spokesman for the Nation of Islam, a religious group. Such were the alternative, proactive outlets through which blacks could express themselves. When both the radical Malcolm X and peace-loving Martin Luther King were assassinated, their killers unestablished, it became clear that it was not method that counted. Any prominent Black murder was assumed at the time to be part of an Establishment, racist conspiracy. If Malcolm X had given 'the black man the power of the word',³⁸ King's death 'shut down the future of non-violent speech-makers'.³⁹ It was in this already charged atmosphere that Fanon was read.

Ronald W. Walters in 'The Impact of Frantz Fanon on the Black Liberation Movement in the United States' points out that a strong current of ideology, activism and social change was already present, and Fanon's writings gave 'a new and urgent rationale and necessity' to the existing agitation for social justice.⁴⁰ As first Malcolm X, and now Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver among other African American activists and scholars had already discerned, violence was emerging as the only means to agitate for equal rights. What made Fanon so attractive, and his intervention so timely, was that it came at a point when the black movements appeared to have reached an impasse, held in check by the (ir)rationality of a system that promised, and yet eschewed peace and dialogue. *The Wretched of the Earth*, Cleaver said, 'legitimizes the revolutionary impulse to violence'.⁴¹

³⁸ Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p.37.

³⁹ Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p. 90.

⁴⁰ Ronald W. Walters, 'The Impact of Frantz Fanon on the Black Liberation Movement in the United States', *Memorial International Frantz Fanon*, 31 Mars-3 Avril 1982, Fort-de-France (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1984), p. 209.

⁴¹ Scheer, p.20.

The publication in America of *The Wretched of the Earth* was hailed by Cleaver in 'Soul on Ice' as an historic event. Its impact in America can not be overestimated. It seemed to contain all that this particular revolution needed in order to realise its goals. One of its most significant achievements was its transformation of the Civil Rights Movement, up to now pledged to non-violence, into the more militant Black Liberation Movement.⁴² Within the movement *The Wretched of the Earth* was simply referred to as 'The Black Bible',⁴³ or 'The Bible'.⁴⁴ It was this transformative potential that ensured that a similar status was accorded to it in Ngugi's Kenya in the 1970s. By this time, however, its impact in North America was already diminishing because of the increasing deradicalisation of American politics. The Nixon administration developed effective strategies to deal with subversion, and shifted government focus to the domestic economy.

But apart from this changed focus in America itself, Algeria became the Mecca of revolutionaries. Cleaver, who had to flee America because of his activities, and some of the Black Panthers went to Algeria as the international arm of the Panthers to seek help in accomplishing their own protest. They returned to America greatly chastened by an experience so rough, that they began to doubt its relevance to their own situation. According to Cleaver, apart from support from the Vietnamese who had finally succeeded in their own fight, the Algerian authorities, the revolutionaries of Fanon's day, were remarkably intolerant of 'subversives', and even cooperated with the American authorities against the Panthers. Ironically, he uses the same words to describe Algeria in the late sixties that Fanon applied to newly independent Ghana in the early sixties – the period of decolonisation. It was 'corroded with political intrigue'.⁴⁵ But it was also here that Cleaver admitted the magnitude of Fanon's

⁴² The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed in 1960 out of a student sit-in campaign which stemmed back to the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott of 1955, which made Rosa Parks so famous, and which was led by Martin Luther King. By 1966, its leader was Trinidad born Stokely Carmichael. They formed an alliance with the Black Panthers the same year, but soon parted company over ideological differences. See Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969).

⁴³ Eldridge Cleaver wrote a review of *The Wretched of the Earth* with this title in *Eldridge Cleaver: Prison Writings and Speeches*, edited by Scheer.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *Memorial Internationale Frantz Fanon*, p. 210.

⁴⁵ Cleaver, *Soul on Fire* p. 134.

sacrifice and commitment. Conditions in Algeria were rough. In playing 'the comparison game' in which America won everytime, Cleaver was forced grudgingly to concede that in America '*there were some principles, civilised procedures, due process.*'⁴⁶ Fanon's was a tough choice when compared with the comforts of American material culture to which Cleaver was accustomed.

Through Western Eyes: Fanon in Europe, and Africa

If 1960s North America was ready to receive Fanon, the situation was decidedly more ambivalent in Europe. Fanon's critique was, after all, of a European system which he had been able to observe from the inside. The political scientist, Jinadu, singles out right-wingers in the West as being particularly hostile. To them, Fanon was clearly 'a villain, a perpetrator of heinous myth, someone who glorified violence'.⁴⁷ It mattered little that Fanon was responding to imperial violence. Whatever the case, Fanon did not invite indifference: he provoked devotion in some and hatred in others, both expressed, in Jinadu's words, with a 'burning consuming passion'.⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, most of the emotions his work generated here were hostile. He was largely read as being in dialogue with the European left, especially because of his interest in Marx' and Engels' analyses of the economic systems dictating global relations. Marx and Engels were the key figures in resistance from the left at the time. Indeed there was a popular saying in Europe in the sixties that Fanon was 'rediscovered' in Europe and America.⁴⁹ Because of the incendiary potential of Fanon's message, it was imperative for Europe to contain him within its borders in order to prevent the spread of his ideas to the colonies, already demanding representation and self-government.

Furthermore, Fanon was problematic even within the West. He radically challenged Marxist assumptions about who constituted the revolutionary class, and endowed the up-to-now ignored lumpenproletariat with a potential revolutionary vigour. They,

⁴⁶ Cleaver, *Soul On Fire*, p. 124.

⁴⁷ Adele L. Jinadu, *Fanon: In Search of the African Revolution* (London: KPI, 1986), p.10.

⁴⁸ Jinadu, p.10

⁴⁹ Jinadu, p.13.

rather than the peasantry of Marxist theory formed the new majority wretched within the *favelas* and shanty towns. And just as the peasantry were not 'naturally' revolutionary and only become so 'with ideology, leadership and organisation', so also do the new urban poor.⁵⁰ Worsley argues persuasively that:

one of the major factors keeping the urban proletariat depoliticized is the very theory that they *are* a lumpenproletariat. Revolutionary theory is thus one of the major reasons why that potentially revolutionary category remains on the sidelines of history. Ruling elites, for once, have cause to be grateful to Karl Marx; for treating people as 'lumpens', in fact, ensures that they will be.⁵¹

Fanon shattered this assumption, and to Worsley the Algerian revolution stands as the pioneer of a challenging new way of protest. It was clearly not in the best interests of European States to provide Fanon with a political platform abroad. The North American example showed the mobilisation power of Fanon's ideas: the oppressed blacks embraced his message. It is the radical Africans like Ngugi and Armah that were to bring Fanon home. They both read him away from Africa, Ngugi privately in Britain: and Armah in North America.

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It is against this background that Derek Wright insisted⁵² that 'Fanon is almost irrelevant from an African perspective, being chiefly a European figure',⁵³ a notion that has been reproduced uncritically – that Fanon was relatively unknown in Africa.⁵⁴ Wright trivialised Fanon's efforts in challenging colonial dominance, and himself then seemed to forget for a moment that Fanon was French in his passionate attack on *The Wretched of the Earth*:⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Peter Worsley, 'Revolutionary Theories – Frantz Fanon: Evolution of a Revolutionary', *Monthly Review*, 21:1 (1969), 30-49 (p.40).

⁵¹ Worsley, p.40.

⁵² In 'Fanon and Africa: A Retrospect', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 24: 4 (1986), 679-689.

⁵³ Moore-Gilbert et al, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.13.

⁵⁴ Hansen, p. 25.

⁵⁵ In Wright's 'Bibliography' of *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa* he refers to twelve of his own previous publications on Armah, and eight others which refer to other African works more generally but also contain reference to Armah.

the book in which Europe was written off [and which] was sent, of necessity, to a Parisian publisher and prefaced by a French philosopher whose claim that the third world “finds itself” and “speaks to itself” through Fanon’s voice *now* sounds odd in the light of Fanon’s minimal influence on African political thought .⁵⁶

Relevance is different from influence, however, although my argument is that Fanon has exercised both.

By 1989 ⁵⁷ Wright had significantly modified his views, but retained his attitude towards Fanon’s *function* within Africa. In this book he minimises Armah’s internationalism, a legacy not only of Armah’s education at Achimota, but also of his North American experiences, and locks him primarily within the context of traditional Akan mythology and culture. Wright takes a broad sidesweep at both Armah and Fanon, at once noting Fanon’s influence on Armah, and the irrelevance of both to literature and politics in Africa. Wright transposes an argument made by Armah in which Armah points to the unease of the post independence African leadership with the revolution advocated by Fanon to validate Fanon’s irrelevance. Wright claims that :

to African leaders who have turned their backs on him, Fanon’s books “make bizarre, incomprehensible, menacing reading”, and it has become a commonplace of Western political commentary that Fanon’s Bakunin-like promotion of revolutionary sub-proletariats made his books the gospels of urban riot and terrorism among the radicals and racially repressed slum-dwellers of Europe and the United States, not the inhabitants of African shanty-towns and South American favelas. *It is arguable that Armah’s work has not fared much better* .⁵⁸

Intrinsic to Wright’s argument is the fact that Fanon *was* of the West. If indeed Fanon was accepted as French, Jean-Paul Sartre’s writing of the preface to *The Wretched of The Earth* might not have acquired the special significance of bridging a conceptual, as well as racial, divide. Sartre’s voice spoke to the West, as Fanon’s did to the oppressed of the so-called Third World. The book was widely read by a white western

⁵⁶ Wright, p.46. In ‘The Awakener’, Armah notes that in 1967, Josie Fanon ordered Jean-Paul Sartre’s ‘Preface’ to *The Wretched of the Earth* to be excluded from future printings of the text because of Sartre’s support of a pro-Israel, anti-Arab position in an altercation between the two. I have not come across one of these editions yet.

⁵⁷ In *Ayi Kwei Armah’s Africa: The Sources of his Fiction* (London: Hans Zell, 1989).

⁵⁸ Wright, p.46.

readership *because* it was introduced to them by a respected philosopher, one of their 'own': Geismar is nevertheless critical of what he reads as Sartre's 'strident anti-Europeanism, [his] hysterical perversion of Fanon's thinking' in this preface.⁵⁹ And yet Sartre uniquely opened up the debate of colonial oppression to the oppressor from the point of view of the oppressed. Fanon was keenly aware of the politics of race, and the location of power. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he had made the remark: 'I do not carry innocence to the point of believing that appeals to reason or to respect for human dignity can alter reality' (*BSWM*, 224). In securing the participation of Sartre in the project of African independence and decolonisation, he executed possibly the most enduring masterstroke of public relations both as a writer, and strategist for the FLN, a coup he had hoped to repeat on his last, ill-fated trip to France. Because of Fanon, the coloniser and colonised read, arguably for the first time, the same text, to which they had to respond with alarming immediacy. Especially in France the text stood as a challenge to the ideals that had constituted their own revolution and philosophy based on *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. After Fanon it was no longer possible to plead ignorance of their role in the colonial process, nor fail to recognise the untenability of assimilation. Wright's view, therefore, underestimates the distance already travelled by Fanon, intellectually and in practice.

Africa was central for Fanon. He lived and worked there, and addressed it directly in his writing. Fanon participated in African politics at the highest levels where he advocated action, but also advised caution in the face of violent reprisals. It is in this sense that Césaire's reading of him was so accurate when he declared his violence to be that of the non-violent. In 1958, when only Ghana was independent, he attended the Pan African Congress as a member of the Algerian delegation, and met such leaders as Patrice Lumumba of the Movement National Congolais (MNC), Felix Moumié of the Union Populaire du Cameroun (UPC), and Tom Mboya, then Trade Unionist, and others. Both Lumumba and Moumié were murdered soon after for expressing their desire for African independence on African terms.⁶⁰ Fanon, himself

⁵⁹ Geismar, p.46.

⁶⁰ According to *The Guardian* of 10 August 2000, the American president Dwight Eisenhower ordered the CIA quite directly to 'eliminate him', meaning Lumumba. This evidence has only recently come to light as part of the investigation into the assassination of J. F. Kennedy.

later the victim of assassination attempts by the French right wing organisation, the 'red hand', had pointed out the pitfalls of resistance. The message contained in the fate of Lumumba and Moumié was clear, and Fanon blamed himself for having failed to warn them sufficiently of just this possibility. On Lumumba's death he called on the African leaders 'to be sure never to forget it: the fate of *us* all is at stake in the Congo'.⁶¹

In 1960 as the ambassador of the Algerian Provisional Government (FLN) to Ghana, Fanon addressed the All Africa People's Congress in Accra. One of the delegates to this conference, Peter Worsley, Professor of Sociology at Manchester University and Socialist scholar noted Fanon's anguished and passionate brilliance in making the case for intervention in Algeria even though it was the extremely striking, and at the time impossible problem of Apartheid in South Africa that dominated the agenda.⁶² His subsequent impact on the African leadership gathered at the conference may not have been as profound as it was on Worsley on whom he clearly made an impression. The 'ricochet' of Worsley's encounter with Fanon has nevertheless led to a keen analysis and even application of his ideas. Many of the African leaders witnessed for themselves the 'menace' emphasised by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, and if they appeared to have 'turned their backs on him', it is because they had learned to play the post-colonial survival game. Like the African-Americans before them, they recognised and tactically retreated from the ruthless violence that inevitably attended protest.⁶³ Ironically, it is the dissident intellectuals, who Fanon had hoped might form the revolutionary vanguard even as he invested in the potential of the peasantry to revolt, that these governments inevitably came to see as threat. Fanon now represents what really needs to be done, as colonialism has shifted into neo-colonialism, and now transmuted into postcolonialism.

It was while in Ghana that Fanon 'witnessed at close quarters some sordid intrigues

⁶¹ Quoted in Zahar, p. xvii

⁶² Worsley, pp.30-31.

⁶³ For a detailed record of administrative strategies to contain protest in America see Doug McAdam, *Political Protest and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

and power-play' within Nkrumah's independent government,⁶⁴ and arrived at a conclusion – 'a crucial element in the philosophy of *The Wretched of the Earth* – that countries which had gained independence by the peaceful political route were in the grip of a bourgeois class as aggressive and chauvinistic as the French bourgeoisie of the Great Revolution'.⁶⁵ But retreat into the reactionary and parasitic 'bourgeois' positions that Fanon so abhorred and that he bitterly attacked was also a result of the early lessons about the extent of imperial violence. Fanon wrote at length of their not really being a true bourgeoisie, and of course they were not. As Robert Blackey says, Fanon (and to a lesser extent Cabral) used such words as 'proletariat' and 'bourgeoisie', not as believers in Marxism: 'Rather, it is suspected, they employed them symbolically as a basis for comparison with European revolutionary theory and because they were writing, in large measure, to a western audience familiar with such terminology'.⁶⁶ In Fanon's own words, these 'bourgeoisie' were 'only sort of a greedy little caste, avid and voracious with the mind of a huckster, only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hand(ed) out to it'. He famously talked of 'a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois' (*WOE*, 121), one sadly 'saturated by [colonialisms] worst paternalistic and racist poisons'.⁶⁷ The parasitic nature of this class holds a peculiar fascination for Armah, as it does for Ngugi, and is an invidious legacy of the colonial system. Hansen suggests that urgent research in colonial studies be done to address this 'notorious' subject and assess the damage done to colonial peoples as Fanon did in *Black Skin, White Masks*, so as to develop a comprehensive understanding of the psychological impact of Imperialism and white dominance on black people.⁶⁸

Wright's reference to 'what has become a commonplace of western political commentary [...] South American favelas' though not attributed to, closely mirrors similar ideas expressed in Worsley's 'Revolutionary Theories'. Worsley suggests that Fanon's challenge to the branding of protest, such as the implications of impotence

⁶⁴ Caute, p.60.

⁶⁵ Caute, p.61.

⁶⁶ Blackey, p.198.

⁶⁷ Caute, p.69.

⁶⁸ Hansen, p.29. This is part of Armah's project in *Osiris Rising*.

contained in the word 'lumpenproletariat', enables the recasting of previously held Marxist classifications. Ngugi's Kamiriithu project (1976-1977) is a perfect example of the workings of this idea of Fanon's within an African context, and was based on a knowledge of Fanon. Worsley argues that these Marxist classifications have been rendered redundant because of the tragic forms that urbanisation has taken. He says:

Fanon's stress on the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat, however, is much more unfamiliar and provocative; to my knowledge, he is the only important contemporary thinker who has seriously advocated this*. (*The notion that the lumpenproletariat constituted a potential revolutionary force, and the proletariat a bureaucratised non-revolutionary class, is of course, to be found in anarchist thinking, e.g. in Bakunin.) Yet if one considers the massive and rapid growth of the cities of the Third World, the ever-swelling exodus of the peasants to the cities – to Sao Paulo, Johannesburg, Saigon, Cairo, Nairobi, Bangkok, or Manila – and the appalling conditions under which these new urban populations live in the *favelas*, *barriadas*, *bidonvilles*, shantytowns, or whatever the local name is for the universal phenomenon of life in encampments made of card board, flattened petrol tins and old packaging cases, one must surely challenge the highly insulting and analytically unilluminating Marxist term lumpenproletariat, and begin to treat seriously both the human beings this pejorative epithet purports to describe and Fanon's theories about them.⁶⁹

Wright seems to have been looking for clear indications within African political and theoretical thought of 'Fanonism', possibly of the kind coming out of black America. His influence clearly worked differently in Africa. Indeed Armah, as a critic, strongly deprecates the propensity of western criticism to encourage the ownership of ideas which is implied by such proprietary namings as 'Marxism', or 'Leninism' for ideas shared by a large number of people. Furthermore, lack of a clearly dominant philosophical position and loose reference to African socialism in opposition to Western political ideology have only added to the problem. Consequently difference in political approach is read as lack of political method. Difference in political method is, of course, one of the means of protest against colonial method. Non-conformity to identifiable systems, to uniform systems, is read as aberration, notwithstanding the fact that it has taken different cultures at any period of history centuries to arrive at a comfortable consensus. During the cold war period, newly independent countries were expected to align themselves either with the Eastern or Western bloc countries.

⁶⁹ Worsely, p.39-40.

After the break up of the Soviet Union, America is the only superpower. The battle for ideological and political ascendancy has now been superseded by the success of 'free' market capitalism, a battle into which Africa is co-opted despite brave claims to neutrality. Within the global superstructure, the African position remains fraught. Nevertheless, revolutionaries such as the Guinéan Amílcar Cabral who has profoundly influenced both Ngugi and Armah have based their own strategies, and achieved successes on the strong foundation laid by Fanon.⁷⁰

Wright's reluctance to accept the obvious links between Fanon and Africa, and Fanon and Armah, signals the polarised nature of contemporary debate with regard to how Africa is *read*, as well as how it is written.⁷¹ As well as ideological distance, Wright emphasises geographical fissure, distinguishing between the Maghreb (the Northern part of Africa that comprises Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) and sub-Saharan Africa. Fanon, keenly pan-African, first applied for work in French-speaking Senegal:

Fanon emphasized that the national boundaries in North Africa and Black Africa are artificial: they are the work of the Europeans competing to occupy overseas territories in the nineteenth century. The boundaries in no way reflected differences in Africa or economic and social factors anywhere in the continent. Africa partitioned into small competing units was one of the legacies of imperialism: destructive, petty, national rivalries were Europe's gift to the Third World.⁷²

This was a view popular at the time of Fanon's death and in the early sixties. According to Geismar (1969), although Fanon did have a following in Algeria, he died 'before he could achieve a substantial following outside the United States and

⁷⁰ Comparisons have been made between Fanon and Cabral, especially in their approach to revolution. Fanon is largely seen as a visionary, a theorist. Cabral is concerned with detailed implementation – the daily organisation of the party and the politicisation of the peasantry. See, for example Robert Blackey, 'Fanon and Cabral: A Contrast in Theories of Revolution for Africa', pp.191-209; Chidi Amuta, 'Fanon, Cabral and Ngugi on National Liberation' in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, pp.158-163.

⁷¹ Even though Wright has published extensively on Armah, his reluctance to acknowledge the full extent of his engagement with his subject occasionally manifests itself. In *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of his Fiction*, for example, he says in the 'Preface': 'Much work remains to be done on the sources of Armah's histories, but my feeling is that *it would be better left to someone who holds them in higher esteem than I do...*' (my emphasis, viii). His tone suggests a preoccupation with issues of greater importance, despite his earlier statement that this is a work 'designed to suit the *specialised* needs of scholars and students of African literature...' (vii, my emphasis).

⁷² Geismar, p.26.

Europe'.⁷³ Since his death, however, this position has changed significantly, making pertinent Moore-Gilbert's claim that Wright signally fails to engage with the impact of Fanon that has characterised radical African writing since the sixties, particularly in Anglophone territory, in the work of Armah and Ngugi, as well with radical Sociologists and Political Scientists. The western intellectual might read Fanon as an exercise in dialectics or polemic, or obliquely, for privileging a previously marginal point of view. For the African, however, *The Wretched of the Earth* was perceived as much more; it was read as an instruction manual, a blueprint for procuring and sustaining freedom.

The assumptions that Wright brings to his reading of Armah are not unique, and are common in the contested area of Postcolonial Studies, where alternative readings of 'texts', particularly readings that challenge established interpretations, generate tension.⁷⁴ It is against such a background of Eurocentric scholarship that Wright's obvious struggle with himself to acknowledge the (un)importance of his own work is configured. Wright is clearly a reluctant, albeit prolific, critic. His interest in Armah, a sophisticated, postmodern African writer is fraught with tension. Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* signalled, but did not subsequently yield, the expected crossover into the unproblematic niche in the literary margins allocated to such 'emergent' works. He has instead, by studying the historical, sociological and modernist configurations of master narratives (re)created his own. For Armah, the duty of an African writer within the context of post independence involves finding validation on African terms rather than those drawn up by the West, with the aim of understanding itself, and engaging with Africa's own regional particularities. Armah has succeeded, contrary to all post-*The Beautiful Ones* expectations, in becoming one of the most compelling critics of Western hegemony. This position has led him into the labyrinths of commitment to African historic antecedents and to question the selection and hierarchical structuring of knowledge advantageous to the consolidation of western imperialism. It is a position that has not endeared him to the same western critics who at the start of his career found him such an engaging iconoclast. He has done so by

⁷³ Geismar, p.23.

⁷⁴ Andrew Gurr in the 'Preface' to 'The Politics of Postcolonial Criticism' in *The Yearbook Of English Studies* (1997), pp.1-2, gives a clear example of how these tensions are generated.

grounding his work incontrovertibly within the theoretical paradigms set by Fanon, and then pushing Fanon's boundaries by arguing for the importance of a supportive foundation, whether mythic or real, which he believes is crucial to Africa in the global jostle for space. To read Fanon into this African context carries unsettling implications. It is to acknowledge Fanon's relevance to understanding and, indeed, subverting the postcolonial context.

Présence Africaine

One of the most remarkable developments of Fanon's time was the establishment of the bilingual journal, *Présence Africaine*, in 1947 by the respected Senegalese, Alioune Diop.⁷⁵ It was broad in scope, and a representative forum for political and cultural intellectual exchange across the diaspora. Its aims, which have only increased in relevance and resonance with the passage of time, were outlined by Kofi Awoonor to a symposium in Seattle in the mid nineteen seventies. He emphasised the importance of language and literacy, nurtured by a vibrant 'original and expandable ontological systems [...] that define man, his world, time, place and events'. It was noted that 'the literature of the Black Diaspora does not begin with the written text' (thus prefiguring the importance of Orature), just as it was stressed that much work addressing the complicity between culture, politics and the arts already existed autonomously, in indigenous languages.⁷⁶ In 1982, *Présence Africaine* organised a tribute event in memory of Frantz Fanon. In the summary of the 'Memorial' Fanon is called '*Auteur subversif, penseur d'avenir*' an appropriate epitaph for one of the most influential theorists and activists to assume the task of the mental, and physical liberation of people oppressed by colonial systems, regardless of their primary geographical or national allegiances.

Fanon recognised from the outset the importance of public relations, especially within

⁷⁵ *Présence Africaine* was established as a marginal forum for Black writers, away from the Pléiade, 'one of the standards of admission into the privileged canon of French letters', which labelled works from such places as Africa and the Caribbean as 'connexes et marginales', as marginal dependencies. Noted in Louise Fiber Luce, 'Neocolonialism and *Présence Africaine*', *African Studies Review*, 29:1 (1996), 5-11 (p.5)

⁷⁶ Luce, p.7, discusses its role.

the context of the Algerian revolution, and sought effective platforms to maximise the dissemination of information. Apart from the more scholarly *Présence Africaine*, he wrote a great deal for 'El Moudjahid' (the Freedom Fighter). He also published in such journals as *L'Esprit*, *Conscience Maghrébine*, *Afrique Action*, as well as medical journals.⁷⁷ It is within this context of struggle for Algerian autonomy that he held an extensive dialogue with the French left. They were a position to support the idea of freedom for Algeria but after thirty years of French domination, could barely conceive of it. They believed in the myth of French Algeria (*Algérie Française*), and feared the spectre of barbaric communism that threatened the humanism of France. The left were also reluctant to accept the full implications of the endpoint of revolutionary national struggle – an autonomous Algeria. They thought in terms of only partial freedoms and concessions, and saw no contradiction in their wanting to guide the movement of the colonised. Thus Fanon challenged Sartre over the 'painful ineffectiveness' of his group.⁷⁸

Fanon's role in France, and positive French response to him, are important. There were fundamental issues at stake, of national loyalties and human freedoms, giving rise to tensions similar to those that had instigated the Revolution. In an impressive historical study of the French response to the Algerian resistance, the historian Martin Evans stresses the importance of Fanon's writing in mustering broad support for the Algerian resistance.⁷⁹ Evans points to key events or 'moments' – post World War II anti-Nazism, anti-Colonialism and anti-Stalinism, the fusion of which gave the Algerian resistance its historical specificity. Of crucial importance to the shaping of these moments was Fanon. Added to the high regard in which he was held by his French colleagues was his first hand knowledge of their attitudes and plans. The French prided themselves on being upholders of humanist principles; Fanon showed that their action in Algeria told a very different story. Evans carried out interviews with French men and women who supported the Algerian side during their struggle

⁷⁷ A full list of his publications can be found in Renate Zahar's, *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Alienation. Concerning Frantz Fanon's Political Theory*, trans by Willfried F Feuser (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

⁷⁸ Fanon, 'French Intellectuals and Democrats and the Algerian Revolution', *Toward the African Revolution*, pp.76-95 (p. 77).

⁷⁹ Martin Evans, *The Memory of Resistance: French Opposition to the Algerian War 1954-1962* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

for independence from France, with a view to establishing the factors that inspire people to eschew narrow nationalisms and embrace social and political justice regardless of borders. During his interviews Fanon and the Tunisian, Albert Memmi, came up repeatedly as the two most important literary influences whose writing changed opinions and attitudes and inspired supportive action.⁸⁰ In one of the interviews, Gerard Chaliand, who supported (and carried out some work for) the FLN said:

I read *L'An cinq de la révolution algérienne* (*Studies in a Dying Colonialism*) as soon as it came out. As we had no other sources, we found that what Fanon had to say about the emancipation of women, the new stance adopted by young people regarding the traditional authority of their elders, the changes in social structures brought about by the revolutionary process – we found it all highly likely, if not almost certain. Let's say that the picture of the revolution in the circles I'm talking about was perceived through the perception depicted by Fanon.⁸¹

Evans also notes that *The Wretched of the Earth* was one of the texts banned in Algeria by the French government during the war, because the language it used to describe opposition validated Algerian resistance to French occupation. This text, driven by the urgency of a man with a mission and very little time, has served a similar function for formerly colonised countries, raising questions about the capacity for real revolutionary change. It has proved prophetic during the period of attempted decolonisation.

Engaging with Fanon:

Ayi Kwei Armah

The impact of Fanon on Ayi Kwei Armah has been profound. Armah, arguably more than any African writer, has espoused the wide-ranging commitment of Fanon's vision. In his 1969 article 'Power and Principle. Fanon: The Awakener', based on a detailed reading of Fanon, he explains what Fanon has come to mean to him. What he

⁸⁰ In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, introd. by Jean-Paul Sartre (Beacon Press, Boston, 1965; Paris: Correa, 1957). This book was particularly important because it 'showed how subjugation was not just economic but also psychological and cultural'. More important was its analysis of colonialism as a reversible, historical process, and its focus on the role of the French within the system of subjugation. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the introduction to both Fanon's *The Wretched* and Memmi's *The Coloniser and the Colonised*.

⁸¹ Evans, p. 88.

has taken from Fanon is the understanding that as black people:

We are not free [...] The central fact of our lives, the central statement in all of Fanon's work is simply this: we're slaves [...] Until we've looked hard at this fact not as a metaphor, not as some poetic figure of speech, but as rock hard statement of what we are, we can't even begin to understand Fanon. And without understanding him, we'll never get where we need to go. We may move without him, but only blindly, wasting energy.

In the provocative article 'Ideology and Aesthetics: The African Dilemma', S. E. Ogude starts from the heretical premise (and the informing idea behind *Black Skin, White Masks*) that 'the undercurrent of contemporary black thinking is the desire to be white'.⁸² According to Ogude, Armah, more than any contemporary Anglophone writer, insists on the importance of Slavery to the present debate.⁸³ Armah's work is underpinned by an understanding of the function of the myths spawned to justify the inhumanities of the period of European conquest, and Slavery. The continuity of these myths in their different forms sustain the structures that today support the oppression of Africans at home, and in the African diaspora. The mythologies, rather than diminishing with time are continuously reenergised.

Armah's view of post independence African dependency is refracted from the specific observations that Fanon made of Ghana while he served there as Ambassador for Algeria in 1961. Of particular note are Armah's efforts to participate in revolution to liberate Africa, which mirror in their pan-African scope, not only the unifying vision projected by Nkrumah, but the participatory pattern set by Fanon. Today, a strategic 'arguing beyond' the reality of imperialistic hegemony is enabled by the pause created by 'posting' the debate. As Andrew Gurr remarks, the difference between proud postcolonialism, and much more covert neo-colonialism lies in linguistic sleight of pen.⁸⁴ The former term avoids the politics inherent in the latter, neutralising historical guilt sufficiently to enable discussion across the coloniser/colonised fault line. It is an understanding of this dynamic that reading Fanon fosters, and that became for Armah the only feasible premise from which to approach the writing of the African experience

⁸² In Ernest N. Emenyonu, ed., *Literature and Black Aesthetics* (Nigeria: Heinemann, 1990), p.9.

⁸³ Ogude, p.8.

⁸⁴ Gurr, p.1.

into the 'glocal' narrative.⁸⁵

Armah read Fanon within the heady atmosphere of protest and possibility generated by Civil Rights conscious America. This and his own experience of American society influenced his receptiveness to the intensive polarisation of matters of race, as well as hegemony. For Armah, Fanon 'had a quality few of us have and none of us are trained to live by: he was allergic to bullshit'.⁸⁶

Ngugi and Fanon

Ngugi has credited his stay in Leeds with many things, among them the fact that it was here he first felt his education to have a 'relevance'. In Leeds he learnt to think critically and systematically in a way that had not been possible in the liberal, yet cloistered atmosphere at Makerere, and before that within the parameters set by the 'muscular' Christian ethic at the Alliance School.⁸⁷ This was largely due to the dynamism and socialist/liberal/Marxist views of one of his lecturers, Arnold Kettle. But by far the most profound event that was to characterise his stay in Leeds was his private reading of Fanon. As had been the case earlier at Makerere the truly interesting 'discoveries' were not included on the syllabus. He read privately West Indian literature which he found compelling because of the stamp of 'African consciousness...in West Indian awareness',⁸⁸ and so he read George Lamming. In Leeds the French holiday of Grant Kamenju took on legendary significance with his 'discovery' of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in a small bookshop in Paris. His find has unarguably altered the way of thinking about colonialism for an entire generation of African and other scholars.

⁸⁵ The term is used by Joseph Obi in 'Global Concerns: End-of-Millennium Lessons from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*' to signal that local and global narratives are given the equal status. Paper presented at 'Toward The Millennium and Globalisation' Conference, University of Central Lancashire, 24-25 April, 1998.

⁸⁶ 'The Awakener', p. 30.

⁸⁷ This is Carol Sicherman's description of the robustness of Carey Francis' ethic, in 'Ngugi's Colonial Education: "The Subversion ... of the African mind"', *African Studies Review*, 38: 3 (December 1995), 11-41 (p.14).

⁸⁸ Sicherman, p.32.

Already an established writer before he read Fanon, Ngugi had written three novels and was on his way to completing a fourth, *A Grain of Wheat*. Fanon's influence is clearly discernible in the remarkable break in form and style that distinguishes *Petals of Blood* from the earlier works. The radical reappraisal, not so much of the detailed inequalities of colonialism, but of strategies in handling its impact, as well as the shift from the privileging of the individual to casting the problem as a communal one, all point to his engagement with Fanon. His initial ideas have matured and been fortified by the fusion of theory and praxis that is Fanon's distinctive mark. This shift can be read as a Fanonian intervention. It was to alter the trajectory and scope of Ngugi's work, and has led to his being perceived today as 'the paradigmatic post colonial intellectual: politically committed, oppositional, outspoken, activist, exiled'.⁸⁹

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Fanon is as central to North/South dialogue as he is to the discourse of Africa and her diaspora, to which he gives 'a new and urgent rationale and necessity'.⁹⁰ He challenges the social construction in which the west dictates the global agenda. That Armah and Ngugi have been able to pitch their ideas so variously, points to the panoptic breadth of Fanon's vision. His greatest appeal and impact lies in his successful conversion of theory to practice. Armah situates his concerns in the politico-cultural domain and is largely concerned with the restoration of a sense of humanity to Africa. Ngugi, meanwhile, has as the main thrust of his concerns, issues of materiality and questions of political economy.

David Caute remarks the tremendous pressures, and courage, that must have driven Fanon to espouse revolution, eschewing the privileges of respected doctor and 'évolué'.⁹¹ Influenced by Existentialism, which cast moral and social responsibilities as immediate and subjective, rejecting historical and other forms of determinism,

⁸⁹ Patrick Williams, "'Like Wounded Birds'?: Ngugi and the intellectuals', *The Yearbook of English Studies: The Politics of Postcolonial Criticism* 27, ed. by Andrew Gurr (1997), 201-218 (p.201).

⁹⁰ Walters, p.209.

⁹¹ Gendzier has noted the exclusion of Fanon from the work of some contemporary Algerian critics, who insist that Fanon was one of many, and should not be the main point of focus. The facts, however, demonstrate a remarkable commitment.

Fanon concentrated on the pursuit of a workable system for the new nations, albeit within the parameters defined by colonialism. Nationalism as a fundamental consolidation is as foreign a concept to independent Africa as was the colonial incursion. A refusal to accept the confinement dictated by the liberation politics of nation statism is a powerful challenge to the power that created these formations. Fanon's rejection of the artificial boundaries set up to divide the South, and his identification with the oppressed, particularly against his background of social recognition among the French intellectual elite, is significant in its subversive potential. In Southern intellectual and liberational circles, the influence of this citizen of France cannot be underrated.

PART THREE: READING NGUGI AND ARMAH

Chapter Six

A(R)T WAR WITH THE STATE: NGUGI'S

PETALS OF BLOOD

The distance between the barrel of a gun and the point of a pen is very small: what's fought out at penpoint is often resolved at gunpoint.

Ngugi¹

In Kenya, autocracy has always met with popular opposition, repression with resistance, reactionary violence with revolutionary heroism. [...] Repression by the powerful [has been] met by the indomitable resistance of those they thought powerless.

Ngugi²

African imaginative literature lacks unity [...] because it is not connected—'com nectere'—with the total history of the place and the people it seeks to represent[...] Modern African literature as a whole is partial and truncated; it lacks the historical centre.

Kwadwo Opoko-Agyeman³

The Story

Petals of Blood is set in Ilmorog. Once small and dusty, desolate and all but forgotten, boasting not even a track fit for a cattle wagon (*PB*, 31), Ilmorog is plunged by the new Trans-Africa highway, and Wanjia's entrepreneurial rediscovery of Thengeta, a once traditional brew, into the twentieth century. It is transformed into the New Ilmorog of horror and intrigue in which the present moment of the story is set. The Trans-Africa

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Mau Mau is Coming Back: The Revolutionary Significance of 20th October 1952 in Kenya Today', in *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press), pp.7-31 (p.9).

² Ngugi, *Barrel of a Pen*, p.30.

³ Kwadwo Opoko-Agyeman, 'A Crisis of Balance: The (Mis) Representation of Colonial History and the Slave Experience as Themes in Modern African Literature', in *Nationalism and Internationalism: (Inter) National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, ed. by Wolfgang Zach & Ken L. Goodwin (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996), pp.219-228 (p.226).

highway, which 'cut right through Ilmorog' brings division to Ilmorog even as it takes its youth and innocence. It transforms the village to a totally new way of life, one in which murder *is* 'irio or ugali', in which murder has become commonplace. The novel, structured as a detective story, opens with the investigation of the deaths in a brothel fire of three influential members of society, Kimeria, Mzigo and Chui by Inspector Godfrey. The first two are educationists, while the third is an industrial mogul. Those suspected of committing the murders are in its opening sections arrested: Munira, the school teacher, Abdulla, a shopkeeper and ex-freedom fighter, and Karega, an untrained teacher turned trade unionist. Wanja, injured in the fire, is also under suspicion for the murder. She owns the brothel in which the three men are burnt to death. She awaits questioning at the hospital. The drama unfolds as the suspects recount to the police the events and histories leading up to the murders against a backdrop into which Ngugi interweaves historical and contemporary Kenya events – corruption and other politically motivated murders, for instance, that lend credibility to his story, and make it a plausible version of the post-independence country.

Conversely, those crippled by the urban centres have found a refuge in Ilmorog. This is how the main suspects in the murders, Munira, Karega, Abdulla and Wanja find themselves there. We have already seen the way in which Siriana School links the main characters. Munira, and Karega, both untrained teachers (UT's) arrive in Ilmorog at different times to teach at the village school. Both are former students of Siriana School, and both were expelled from the school for the same crime, committed at different times: taking part in unlawful strike action against an oppressive school administration. Munira's response was to a colonial administration, inspired by the radical Chui. Karega's was to the even more repressive African one that took over, this time led by establishment Chui – conservative and repressive. Both have subsequently dropped out of the system prematurely. Their lives are also linked in other ways.

Karega's family were squatters on Munira's father's farm, but they only meet in Ilmorog. Karega finds answers to disturbing personal issues from his childhood answered by

Munira, with whom he shares a past. Munira is brother to Mukami, one time friend of Karega's brother Nding'uri. It appears that Nding'uri was betrayed to the colonial forces by Munira's father, Waweru, when he found out of Nding'uri's involvement with his daughter. Nding'uri was subsequently caught and hanged at Githunguri for allegedly carrying weapons for Mau Mau. When Mukami found out what her father had done, she committed suicide. Karega's mother, Mariamu, quietly dignified, has rejected advances from Munira's Christian father. In Ilmorog Munira and Karega both pursue Wanja, an interest that directly leads into the murders. Munira, once an outcast in his father's Christian compound in the end turns fanatically to the Christian religion, and uses it to justify his vengeance both at the personal and political levels. The more pragmatic, Karega turns Union organiser, opting for a pro-active confrontation with economic exploitation of local labour by joint foreign and local Industry.

The third suspect is Abdulla. Crippled in the Mau Mau war, his expectations at independence have all but been betrayed. He sets up shop with Wanja, the barmaid/prostitute and only original inhabitant of Ilmorog. Together they nurture the future hope of Ilmorog, the little boy Joseph, whom they undertake to educate. Wanja, responsible for bringing enterprise to the village, returns to live with her grandmother having rejected the degradation and exploitation that is a woman's life in the City. Her life is ruined early by Kimeria, a married man who makes her pregnant while she is still at school but cannot marry her because he is a Christian. Ironically, she flees the sordid and unbearable life of prostitution in the City only to bring it home to Ilmorog with her.

As the investigation progresses, it becomes clear that Wanja is at its centre. The lives of the three victims, as those of the three male suspects are intimately and inextricably interlinked with her life. She is the key not only to the murder investigation, but to the unity of the stories of the other central characters and the narrative of a dweller in Ilmorog. The intricate narrative method gives us access to the conflicting consciousness of its main actors which we piece together from Munira's monologue and musings while in prison. In its telling, the absurd lengths to which power, be it secular or spiritual, will go to establish

and maintain dominance are examined.

A(r)t War: Politics, Literature, Culture

The ten year period between the publication of *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) has seen Ngugi undergo an ideological and stylistic evolution. *A Grain of Wheat* may continue to be favoured by critical consensus as by far the most accomplished of his novels, but this gap period nevertheless marks Ngugi's most significant ideological move away from the expectations of the moment of independence, and from his earlier concerns that focused on the cultural tensions generated by imperialism, played out in key areas of social organisation such as religion and education, the two areas dominated by the Church missions. Ngugi makes a critical shift, focusing now on the political implications of colonial intervention in these cultural matters. He also explores new tensions and wars – about power, gender, ethnicity and language, for example – generated by the multinational Kenya.

If these diverse factors exerted pressure on the writing of the novel, they equally condition readings of *Petals of Blood*. Charles Cantalupo perhaps best captures its essence, when he compares it to forms of African sculpture that are a 'site of accumulation [which] is added to, embellished, and encrusted, and in places even obscured, by those who seek to communicate to or through it'.⁴ *Petals of Blood* represents one of the most significant early attempts on the literary, and ideological levels, to surmount the impasse that

⁴ Charles Cantalupo, ed., 'Introduction', *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), p.6.

disillusionment had already created in the literary and political landscape.⁵

The strategy that Ngugi employs to tell the story is popular, and yet allows for both fluidity and discipline, for exploration and confirmation. *Petals of Blood* is constructed as a detective novel. The story is knitted together by a retrospective sifting over the events of the suspects' lives leading to the murders of Kimeria, Mzigo and Chui. The investigator is the dedicated and seemingly impartial, if establishment, Inspector Godfrey. His intrusion into the narrative is minimal. His main concern is to see the murderer(s) brought to justice, rather than to judge. Once the suspects are apprehended, he gives them as much time and space as they require in which to go over their lives and the events that have brought them to this point, and it is in this process that the links between the characters, as well as the coincidences that intertwine their lives are unravelled, as they are probed for context, motive, and opportunity.

In this chapter, I focus on just two of the issues that inform the novel. Munira and Wanjia will be used to demonstrate Ngugi's critique of the new Kenya, founded on Christianity and western education, and backed by colonial power. Munira, a social misfit of doubtful sanity, stands as a strong indictment of post-independence possibility. He is emasculated and destroyed by his Christian upbringing, and an education that is in conflict with his social and cultural needs, and that for the most part contradicts its environment. The novel has Wanjia at its centre, and I attempt to analyse Ngugi's treatment of her within the gender dynamics of the Gikuyu culture. An understanding of the social and cultural significances of female circumcision clarify the conflict that runs as an undercurrent in Ngugi's

⁵ Neil Lazarus, '(Re)turn to the People: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Crisis of Postcolonial African Intellectualism' in *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo, pp.11-25 (p.12). In the sixties Taban Lo Liyong referred to East Africa as a literary desert, a view it was difficult to contest. Indeed, Ngugi was a 'first'. Ime Ikkideh suggests as much in 'James Ngugi as Novelist', where he says that 'in the not too crowded Parnassus of East Africa the manuscript of his first novel alone was enough in that region to earn him the distinction of the novelist': *African Literature Today*, 2, p.3. Ngugi himself reads in this judgement the mistakenly held but widely believed notion that writing meant writing in English or a colonial language. The wealth of writing in Kiswahili and other languages is for him just as important. In Reinhard Sander & Ian Munro, 'Tolstoy in Africa: An Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o' in *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. by G. D. Killam (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1984), pp.46-57 (p.47).

characterisation of her. An anti-heroine, Wanja, like Munira, is also torn from the social and cultural moorings that validate her and is pitted against a shattered world struggling to reinvent itself. Ngugi interweaves history with fictional character, location and cultural event, always reassessing the social and cultural impact of this intervention. All are tied to a power driven political culture. Ngugi himself remains keenly aware of what he is doing. By merging the real and imaginary, his work becomes more than an academic engagement, and is ultimately a challenge to those who hold power, those who can initiate or block change.

This multilevel strategy invites and rewards a knowledge of Kenya history. For example in his allusion to the interdisciplinary debate about the place of Mau Mau in the recorded history of independent Kenya that started in the 1970s and threatened to cause an unbridgeable rift amongst academics in Kenya, Ngugi names the real historians involved: Professors Bethwell Ogot, William Ochieng', Godfrey Muriuki and Gideon Were. This academic debate was brought to a halt by presidential decree in 1986, the year in which Maina wa Kinyatti, the man at the centre of the recording of the songs of Mau Mau was released from detention. In *Barrel of a Pen* Ngugi examines some of these songs, perceived by Government as threatening to the very fragile pan-ethnic unity on which the Kenya nation balanced:⁶

You homeguards must know
We shall never forget that
You had us put in prisons
And treacherously revealed
The secrets of the Africans.

⁶ Andre Astrow, 'Maina wa Kinyatti: A History of Resistance', *Africa Report*, July-August 1989. In this interview, given soon after his release from custody, Kinyatti, who was accused of sedition speaks of Government claims that: 'the Mau Mau issue was very political and that I (Kinyatti) was trying to divide the country (p.56). He argues: 'The people who now run the government were actually on the other side (KADU), or at best did not take part at all. So they have been doing their best to cover up this chapter of our history' (56). Kinyatti was also accused of being 'a communist, a Marxist' (56). Government response indicated unease over the political implications of the argument that the war of liberation was a Gikuyu affair. The claim of dominance of one ethnic group over the rest is an event that has assumed such a critical place in the post-independence imagination, it threatens the larger idea of nation, as well as inter-ethnic unity.

There can never be compromise with the traitors
 And no mercy towards them,
 For the blood of hundreds of our martyrs
 Cannot be forgotten
 And is crying for vengeance.⁷

Already, this fragile cooperation has suffered extreme provocation. Kinyatti was seen as 'recycl[ing] as a resistance ethic for the present' the same calls to protest that had been banned by the British.⁸ His imprisonment confirmed Ngugi's observation that in Moi's Kenya, history is subversive.⁹

Kinyatti's is an example of the manner in which the political casts its shadow over all else, and demonstrates just how the literary and ideological are intertwined. In the stifling context of a world divided in two by the cold war and, for Ngugi, a world dominated by Capitalism, the only retreat at the time was necessarily to its opposite. It is for this reason that to many critics, *Petals of Blood*, which proposes a communalistic arrangement and looks to socialism as a liberating ideology 'confirmed' Ngugi's Marxist leanings.

Since in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi draws thematically from his earlier novels, analysing, tightening and always advancing the debate, I will look particularly at the connection between the gender and cultural issues of *The River Between* and those of *Petals of Blood*.

The River Between

Ngugi's conceptualisation of Wanjia is dominated by the issue of female circumcision, the concern of the earlier novel, *The River Between*. Although published in 1965 after *Weep*

⁷ *Barrel of a Pen*, p.15.

⁸ Patrick Williams, *Ngugi wa Thion'go: Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.98. This was also the same year that saw the formation of the activist group for which Kinyatti was allegedly detained, Mwakenya.

⁹ Ngugi wa Thion'go, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993), p.96.

Not Child (1964), *The River Between* was written first and is, therefore, generally considered Ngugi's first novel. It is set in 1930s Kenya, the period during which the issue of female circumcision dominated the social and political agenda. The great determination of the Scottish missionaries to put an end to what they saw as a barbaric custom met with the equally great determination of the Gikuyu to protect the custom which gave them their *raison d'être*. Colonial might overcame Gikuyu debate, resulting in a period of general tension, as well as intense bitterness amongst the Gikuyu.

The River Between is about this clash of cultures. Set against a background of a people already divided,¹⁰ it climaxes with the death of Muthoni, the girl child who risks death rather than forsake what had defined her sex amongst her people. Muthoni, the daughter of the Christian and church leader, Joshua, rebels when her father will not allow her circumcision. Her argument is simple: both her parents are circumcised, yet Christians. The only way in which she can survive in her community is if she understands it, and not undergoing the rites of circumcision robs her of this right. As she explains it to her sister, Nyambura:

I – I want to be a woman. I want to be a real
girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and
ridges [...].
I, too, have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know
it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You
learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not
quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more. My life and
your life are here in the hills, that you know'. (RB, 26)
[...] 'Yes – I want to be a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe....' (RB, 44)

Muthoni's rebellion ends in her death. The ritual that makes her a woman also kills her. To her, the physical mutilation is inconsequential when set against her assured status as

¹⁰ Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, Book Two, *Violence and Ethnicity* (London: James Currey, 1992), hereafter Lonsdale. According to Lonsdale, the concept of a united Gikuyu tribe is imaginary. They lived quite separate lives in divided geographical terrain loosely linked as were Kameno and Makuyu by the Honia river. Ngugi, of course, uses this natural fissure to demonstrate the ease with which the naturally occurring divisions enabled infiltration by outside ideas and forces.

respected marriageable woman. This status, branded physically and psychologically on her body, is fundamental. But as she dies, she also sees Jesus, reconciling the Christian and the tribal. In the novel, Waiyaki, educated but sensitive to the importance of tradition echoes Kenyatta as he reflects on the significance of Muthoni's action:

Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person. It could not be stopped overnight. Patience, and above all, education, were needed. If the White man's religion made you abandon a custom and then did not give you something else of equal value, you became lost. An attempt at resolution of the conflict would only kill you, as it did Muthoni. (*RB*, 142)

Custom is nevertheless sacrificed to Christianity which, with its assurance of eternal life, triumphs. Chege, defender of the tribal ways in the novel queries the Christian intervention:

Were these Christians now preaching against all that which was good and beautiful in the tribe? Circumcision was the central rite in the Gikuyu way of life. Who had ever heard of a girl that was not circumcised? Who ever pays cows and goats for such a girl? (*RB*, 37-38)

This is how Waiyaki describes circumcision in the novel:

Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and a something that gave meaning to a man's life. End the custom and the spiritual basis of the tribe's cohesion and integration would be no more. (*RB*, 68)

The renunciation of indigenous culture for the uncertain promises of Christianity, and indeed for the material rewards of western education were strongly contested. But if they could not win, the people were determined at least to be selective. They insisted that:

We're going to get that Western education, but within our own cultural soil [...] without having to accept the religion, without having to accept the colonial government.¹¹

As a non-Christian, Waiyaki is not allowed to complete his education at Siriana but to the rousing cry of 'Gikuyu Karinga. Keep the tribe pure. Tutikwenda Irigu' (*RB*, 68)¹² he

¹¹ Killam, *Critical Perspectives*, p.50.

¹² *Tutikwenda Irigu* means 'we do not want division.'

starts a secular school. In Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), an interviewee and spokesperson, Ng'ang'a Ngoro said of the choice between Christianity and tradition: 'I was a Christian. If the choice lay between God and circumcision, we choose (sic) circumcision. But it is a false European choice.'¹³ It may have been a false European choice, but it was the one that prevailed.

I argue that circumcision, cause of the bitterest historical conflict between the Gikuyu and the colonialists, in crucial ways informs the context of *Petals of Blood* and underpins Ngugi's treatment of women. Although considered radically pro-women even by Feminists, Ngugi cannot surmount the historical betrayal of the female sex by an oppressive patriarchy that chose political compromise over female cultural identity.¹⁴ I then explore the ways in which Ngugi recognises the new uses to which culture is appropriated, and its exploitation in the battle for ethnic, economic and political dominance. From New York University Ngugi has started publishing and editing a Journal, *Mutiiri*.¹⁵ Interestingly, this was the name for those who supported the initiates during the circumcision ceremony, symbolically the upholders of culture.¹⁶ Within the shaky Gikuyu nation within a (Kenya) nation, culture becomes the new battlefield for dominance as well as a site of repression.

The Critical Reception

In *Homecoming* Ngugi explains why he writes: 'My writing is really an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and history' (31). He feels keenly that writing should serve social and political purposes. But how was his work received locally

¹³ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 4 edn (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), hereafter *Facing*, p.119.

¹⁴ Elleke Boemer's essay 'The Master's Dance to the Master's Voice: Revolutionary Nationalism and The Representation of Women in the Writing of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', on Ngugi's treatment of women is often quoted for pointing out just how entrapped Ngugi is by patriarchy and its structures. As in Williams, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, p.95.

¹⁵ *Mutiiri: Njarandaya Mũkarire*, 1 (Newark: Mutiiri Abirika, 1994)

¹⁶ *Facing*, p.145. Kenyatta calls them sponsors.

and abroad?

Petals of Blood was generally well-received by an 'enthusiastic' foreign press, who were sensitive to the force of Ngugi's criticism of government for its betrayal of independence. In 'Ideology and Form: The Critical Reception of *Petals of Blood*' Joseph McLaren argues that the novel marks a moment, a transitional period in Ngugi's evolution as a writer and, therefore, understanding its critical reception is crucial to situating it within the discourse of the political left, as well as in the tradition of the Western novel and the African oral tradition.¹⁷ McLaren notes the attention that critics have paid to its ideological message. McLaren himself reads Ngugi's ideology as grounded in his support for a Marxist view of history.¹⁸ It is this rootedness in the Marxist paradigm that has perhaps earned Ngugi some of the harshest criticism from both his African and his international readership. Reviewing the novel for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1977, Homi Bhabha, whose biggest concern is with Ngugi's experimentation with literary form, was disturbed that Ngugi 'seems not to be embarrassed by the very sound of his most potent political message'.¹⁹ Ngugi's attempt to relate ideology to novelistic form was the subject of much criticism at the time, and his attempt at socialist realist writing was seen by Bhabha as 'contrary to the revolutionary socialism of the novel's development'.²⁰

To Charles Larson, writing for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1978, Ngugi's 'somewhat dated Marxism: revolt of the masses; elimination of the black bourgeoisie; Capitalism to be replaced by African socialism' weakened a potentially progressive and gender-sensitive text.²¹ The issues informing the text dictate what many critics read as a highly subjective novel, doctrinaire in its Marxism.²² But Larson was sensitive to the

¹⁷ Joseph McLaren, 'Ideology and Form: The Critical Reception of *Petals of Blood*' in Cantalupo, ed., *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* pp.73-91 (pp.87-88).

¹⁸ McLaren, p.73.

¹⁹ Quoted in McLaren, p.75.

²⁰ Quoted in McLaren, p.75.

²¹ Quoted in McLaren, p.75.

²² Chris Wanjala quoted in McLaren, p.81.

highly charged political context in which Ngugi was writing, unlike John Updike, well known American novelist and short story writer who reviewed *Petals of Blood* over a year later in July 1979, after Ngugi's release from prison. Updike insisted literary criteria be restored to the reading of Ngugi because 'whatever use political fervour has done for Ngugi, it has not helped his ear for English; the fine calm style of *A Grain of Wheat* [...] has come unhinged'.²³ He suggests that the moralistic urgency of *Petals of Blood* was so infectious that critics privileged social rather than literary issues. The consequences of Ngugi's 'political fervour' were severe, and McLaren perceives Updike's criticism as mean spirited given the circumstances. Andrew Salkey struck at the heart of Ngugi's project. He read in Ngugi's shift from familiar narrative strategy the quest for a form that 'satisfies both the novelist's political intent', and his artistic 'obligation'.²⁴ The context was one in which the relevance of *Petals of Blood* was confirmed by the imprisonment of Ngugi for expressing the same ideas in a slightly different form, one more immediate and direct. The staging of the play *Ngahika Ndeenda* precipitated his imprisonment and created the idea of a suffering Ngugi. It is thus that his status as political detainee (or prison graduate) consequently influenced critical reading of his work. Updike insists, nevertheless, that literary criteria be restored to the reading of Ngugi.

The Kenyan Response

At home the first newspaper reviews were as enthusiastic as the foreign ones had been. Joe Kadhi writing for the *Daily Nation* dramatically proclaimed *Petals of Blood* 'a literary bombshell [...] without doubt, the most hard-hitting novel criticising contemporary Kenyan Society written since independence'.²⁵ An anonymous critic for Hilary Ngwen'o's *Weekly Review* of June 27, 1977 described the novel as Ngugi's 'crowning literary achievement' (*WR*, 40), though it criticised aspects of the novel for being out of touch with Kenyan reality. Again, it is Ngugi's choice of a Marxist paradigm that made this

²³ Quoted in McLaren, p.76.

²⁴ 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*', reviewed by Andrew Salkey, *World Literature Today*, 52 (University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), pp.681-2 (p.681)

²⁵ David Cook and Michael Okenimpe, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of his Writings* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.14.

reviewer uncomfortable. The reviewer notes the ideological distance between Ngugi and the majority of the people for whom he was ostensibly writing:

People don't walk into the Hilton Hotel from their cardboard dwellings in Kawangware and turn into roaring Trotskyites. Neither is it possible that the workers of Ilmorog could shout the slogans of Che Guevera! (*PB*, 40).

Entitled 'Ngugi's Bombshell' the article was influenced not so much by a critical consciousness of its context as by the daring of Ngugi's engagement with the political. Within the criticism is contained the very thing Ngugi was trying to convey: that the Hilton and cardboard boxes were simultaneously products of Capitalism, 'wealth and poverty [produced] at a stroke, as material conditions of one another', a contradiction Terry Eagleton argues that only Marxism acknowledges.²⁶ *Petals of Blood* demonstrated Ngugi's growing consciousness and elaboration of a political dynamic that opened up a gap between him and his readership, to whom his new idiom with its insistence on a broad solidarity was alienating. This claim to a broad base added to the nervousness of those he criticised. If Marxism was long out of steam in the West,²⁷ in Africa it was new and fresh and just beginning to provide a structure for the different forms of protest which had as yet to find a name.

In claiming class as an aspect, indeed consequence and problem of the post-independence period, Ngugi's writing threatened the popular perception of a composite culture of the type presumed to have existed in the traditional African setting, free of class distinctions, quite remarkably uninfluenced by the new economic arrangements of colonialism. He also challenged the safe and often self-righteous position assumed by the African writer writing against colonialism, offering instead that of interactive writer arguing urgently against neo-colonialism. His intention was to provoke debate, and possibly change. Experimenting with both style and genre, Ngugi mounts an open and robust challenge to the State in what

²⁶ Terry Eagleton & Drew Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.6. They argue that 'capitalism exists in a state of neurosis, and could not do otherwise'

²⁷ Eagleton, p.2. He says that by 1973, the debate on Marxism had become 'irrelevantly obsolete' in the West.

has come to mark the beginning of his art wars. The questioning of the betrayal of independence in *Petals of Blood* precipitated a crisis in Kenya between the literary establishment and the State, marking the shift in which a fairly liberal tolerance was replaced with active repression, leading to the first case of politically driven literary exile.²⁸

Petals of Blood: The Interaction of Text and Context

For many critics, *Petals of Blood* is where Ngugi allows politics to ruin everything.

Patrick Williams.²⁹

Patrick Williams has recently noted that Ngugi has at present written more critical work than fiction. I use his own revised assessment of *Petals of Blood* to situate it. In this novel, Ngugi depicts 'the evolution of Ilmorog from precolonial self-sufficiency into a colonial source of cheap labour and a post-colonial industrial boom town, that left more people even more deprived than ever before'.³⁰ It is a novel that Ngugi says he was compelled to write by a madness that led him to 'a dangerous world where the magic of words could so easily collide with the words of power',³¹ where it is clearly 'not yet uhuru'.³² Subsequently, Munira is driven to declare his intention to 'do something to make independence real' (*PB*, 10).

In tackling the problems faced by post-colonial Kenya, Ngugi is inevitably entangled in the web woven by Kenyatta, as already seen in Chapter 3. His detailed critique and discussion of the secret acts contained in the cultural significances of social and political

²⁸ As Ngugi notes in 'Freedom of the Artist: People's Artists versus People's Rulers' in *Barrel of a Pen*, p.65, neither imprisonment nor censorship was new. He cites the case of Abdilatif Abdala, author of *Sauti Ya Dhiki* who was imprisoned between 1969 and 1972 for writing the pamphlet, 'Kenya: Twendapi? (Kenya, Where are We Heading to?)'.

²⁹ Williams, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, p.167.

³⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (Oxford: James Currey, 1981, rev. & enlarged, 1997), p.88.

³¹ *Writers in Politics*, p.88

³² Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: The Autobiography of Oginga Odinga* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

formation placed him on a collision course with Government. Ngugi defied Kenyatta's narrow ethnic chauvinism, and campaigned valiantly for a pluralistic Kenya while arguing for the proud right to cultural specificity for each ethnicity. But the context was already heavily compromised. Circumcision, for instance, is by no means a national ritual and has been used to exclude more effectively than politics or religion.³³ It is crucial that this bias is understood against the fact that the Gikuyu set the agenda of power in independent Kenya. With ethnic cleavage emerging as the way of the future, encouraged by Kenyatta's favouring of the Gikuyu,³⁴ Ngugi's writing was perceived not merely as betrayal; in the political atmosphere of the time it amounted to treason.

Drawing on actual contemporary events, Ngugi demonstrates the manipulative ways in which Kenyatta fuelled hatred between the Gikuyu and the Luo through propaganda. In one situation in the novel, those of the 'house of Mumbi' betray the Luo, whose leader had declined to take up national power prior to independence as a strategy in the negotiation for the release of Kenyatta. Ngugi is, of course, referring to Oginga Odinga, who soon found himself excluded from a share of power, and ultimately from political participation soon after independence. 'Fat stomach', an enforcer or party youth winger refers to 'the threat from the tribe from the lake [...] and others deceived by the Indian communist who was recently removed from this earth' (*PB*, 85). Pio Gama Pinto, the Indian 'communist' allegedly assassinated by the Kenyatta Government, and popularly seen by the left as a true nationalist, is presented as potentially subversive. All dissenters were, in the cold war period, branded communist for desiring the equal sharing of national resources. The mistaken notion that these resources were somehow personal property is anticipated by Fanon, who recognised that those new to power experienced the 'pressing necessity of nationalizing the robbery of the nation' (*WOE*, 37-38), because to them:

nationalization does not mean placing the whole economy at the service of the nation and deciding to satisfy the needs of the nation. [...] To them, nationalization quite simply means the

³³ The Luo for instance do not undergo this ritual, and it may be for this reason that the Gikuyu have apparently not thought them 'man' enough to take on leadership. Kenyatta, of course, insulted them to this effect quite publicly.

³⁴ Kenyatta was the Government.

transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period'. (WOE, 122)³⁵

Pinto's was the first of a series of political assassinations, threatening the notion of freedom and security in independent Kenya. Munira, slightly deranged, ruminates on, and reels off the murders and detentions that followed, creating the sense of so-many-in-such-a-short-time: 'the murders of Pinto, Mboya, Kung'u Karumba, J.M., the detention of Shikuku, Seroney' (PB, 340). Nevertheless the audacious assassination of Tom Mboya,³⁶ then Kenyatta's right hand man, here clearly perceived as part of the threat from the lake, shocked Kenyans, and created a state of seige. These events were very fresh at the time of the publication of Ngugi's novel, and by discussing them Ngugi had risked provoking Government. It in turn perceived him as having overstepped the mark in his naked focus on the intrigues of power. It was soon after the publication of *Petals of Blood* that he was detained, an event that to Williams 'represents the culmination of his own allegory of postcolonial history'.³⁷

Up until the colonial period the kinship ties forged at the circumcision ceremony were enough to bind the Gikuyu and ensure their loyalty to the tribe. Kenyatta however indicated he needed even greater reassurance of this loyalty and instigated additional oathing under the guise of the infamous 'tea-drinking' parties held at his home in Gatundu, a notorious feature of the late sixties and early seventies. Munira, invited to one of these ceremonies is proud and happy. He is, after all, 'going to tea with a living legend who had dominated the consciousness of a country for almost a century. What wouldn't one give for the honour!' (PB, 91). Bursting with importance and anticipation, Munira is disappointed to find the invitation is not exclusive, the bus is very late, and the 'tea' turns

³⁵ This is the subject of Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1982).

³⁶ He has been reinvented more recently as a Suba Luo by the Moi Government showing just how consistently the strategy of divide and rule is applied. Lonsdale, who describes Mboya as 'Kenya nationalism's chief tactician' notes Mboya's sensitivity to the fact that 'How to be a Kenyan was deliberately made less contentious than how to be, for example, Luo' (p.316). In Kenya, nationalism is theoretically privileged over ethnicity, as shown by the post *Petals of Blood* resistance to Ngugi's use of Gikuyu.

³⁷ Williams, p.215.

out to be something else altogether:

A funeral tea? Munira wondered, numbed to silence by the eerie sombreness of everything. He looked around: the government official had vanished. They were now ordered into lines – one for the men, and the other for women. A teacher asked loudly: is this the tea we came to have? He was hit with the flat of a panga by a man who emerged from nowhere. How did Mzigo and the government official come into all this? It was dark: a small light came from a hut into which people disappeared in groups of ten or so. What is it all about? thudded Munira's heart. And then it was his turn! (PB, 92)

The oath was supposed to secure ethnic loyalty and the celebrants swore on pain of death.³⁸ Ngugi does not reveal the actual procedure, but as a Gikuyu male, it is enough that he had the temerity to write about it. Ngugi was showing open defiance in challenging Kenyatta's privileging of an ethnic nationalism that ran counter to his professed pursuit of a multinational Kenya. In exposing the use of tribal oathing, Ngugi revealed the mockery of the idea of a Kenya nation. And more than that, he exposed the death of possibility at the hands of those charged with bringing the nation to birth. Returning to Ilmorog:

all throughout the bus was this hush of a people conscious of having been taken in: of having participated in a rite that jarred with time and place and persons and people's post-Uhuru expectations! How could they as teachers face their children and tell them that Kenya was one? (PB, 92)

When 'Fat Stomach' tries to secure the support of the villagers in the protection of their (that is 'Fat Stomach' and his friends') acquired property, he fails largely due to the fact that the villagers have no property to protect, and share a class solidarity with other villagers elsewhere in the country who have been equally ignored by the Government. Ruoro, a villager, asks the questions: 'How come that they from out there were threatened by other tribes? Had they piled enough property to excite envy from other tribes?' (PB, 85) In sharp contrast to the possibility of an abundance that would invite the envy of others, Ruoro focuses attention on the absence of basic amenities in the village, a situation

³⁸ John Reader, 'Scram for Africa: The Politics of Independent Kenya by Keith Kyle', *London Review of Books* (16 March, 2000), 31-34 (p.33). Reader further notes that a good number of the Gikuyu killed during the Emergency were victims of the Mau Mau, who saw them as collaborators with colonial forces and therefore betrayers of the cause.

prevalent in most rural villages: 'Here, people (are) threatened by lack of water; lack of roads; lack of hospitals' (*PB*, 85). The people of Ruoro's village collectively refuse to go to Gatundu to take part in an oathing ceremony to guarantee their allegiance to a government that demands their support and yet ignores their welfare. Oathing, after all, serves to: 'divide the people of Kenya and to protect the wealth in the hands of only a few' (*PB*, 341). The government, not to be outdone, devises a new strategy to get them there. It personalises responsibility, threatening immediate and direct victimisation of those who resist. Ironically, it introduces the aspect of individualism that belies the communalism of the African Socialism that is its stated policy, a policy arrived at in order to counter that of the colonial state that within a short period had succeeded in destroying individual and communal relationships' and had established a tradition of 'rifts and conflicts'.³⁹

*

One of the compelling issues in *Petals of Blood* is the motive behind Munira's murder of Kimeria, Mzigo and Chui. Certainly, as a Christian, Munira is compelled, in the name of moral purity, to fight the erosion of the community by unchecked capitalistic greed (*PB*, 334).⁴⁰ Inspector Godfrey, seeking to understand his action, muses: 'And yet there was a way in which Munira was right. This system of capitalism and capitalistic democracy needed moral purity if it was going to survive' (*PB*, 334). It is also as a Christian that he acts to save Karega, icon of socialist ideas in the novel. In a complex twist that links moral purity, socialism and gender, Munira seeks to save Karega not from the exploitative men, owners of industry and controllers of new immoral Ilmorog: rather, he accidentally kills them in his action to save Karega from contamination by Wanja, who he believes has trapped Karega with her femininity: 'she is Jezebel, Karega will never escape from her

39 Simon Gikandi, 'On Culture and State: The Writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', *Third World Quarterly*, 11:1 (January 1989), 148-156 (p.150).

40 Ngugi greatly admires Russian writers. Munira bounces off the manic Raskolnikov of Dostoevsky's classic, *Crime and Punishment*. In an intensely religious experience, he commits murder in the belief that it purges and purifies, as does Munira.

embrace of evil' (*PB*, 332). He is arrested while reading his bible, from the book of Revelation. An extract from the sixth chapter is part of the epigraph leading into the first chapter of the novel:

And I saw, and behold, a pale horse: and he that sat
upon him, his name was Death...
And there was given unto them authority over the fourth part of
earth, to kill with sword and with famine, and with death

Munira, it is suggested, imagines himself an instrument of the great vengeance prophesied here, but his temperament is ill suited to achieving success in his society, now controlled by those like his father, whose collaboration with the British has ensured their dominance in the post-independence era. His embrace of Christianity, a western idea, arguably rescues him from the charge of mere tribal atavism. Munira's act is futile, however. Through him Ngugi demonstrates the failure of Christianity to save the community.

In childhood Munira is the 'black' sheep of a family that has been redeemed, and washed whiter than snow (*PB*, 90). Anaesthetised beyond the reach of culture, Munira 'had always felt a little incomplete because he had been circumcised in hospital under a pain killer, so that he never really felt that he truly belonged to his age-group: Gicina Bangi' (*PB*, 204). Method changes everything. Removed from its ritual context, the cultural meaning and significance of the procedure was altered, making a mockery of what might have been the defining moment for Munira, the seal to his bond with his peer group and with the land. This is the root cause of his anguished displacement. Just as his circumcision takes place on the margins of his age group, he also falls just this side of taking the batuni oath, the initiation into the Mau Mau (*PB*, 221). While they are child gunrunners for the Mau Mau, his friend Nding'uri is captured and hanged, but Munira escapes narrowly, the decision to run having 'as it were decided itself' (223). Added to his other inadequacies, then, is survivor's guilt.

Munira's soul searching takes place on the night Theng'eta unlocks 'confessions, the memories, the inner wrestling with contradictory impulses' (*PB*, 224), and it is this

purging that alters irrevocably the relationships between the characters in the novel. He reflects on the path his life has taken, as well as the consequences of choices, personal and political, made by his parents. In every sense a child of two conflicting worlds, he is neither fully of the one nor the other. He: 'had always stood at the shore and watched streams and brooks flow over pebbles and rocks. He was an outsider, he had always been an outsider, a spectator of life, history' (*PB*, 212). Munira is expelled from Siriana where he doesn't seem to have made any lasting friendships, but where he finds his father's faith confirmed. In his search to connect, he marries a traditional woman to escape the cold austerity of his Christian upbringing but is disappointed. He has abandoned the lacklustre and hypocritical lifestyle of his family, but it is to this way of life that Julia is drawn. It is Munira who opts to leave, without Julia. Julia embraces his family's belief, transforming herself into a model Christian daughter-in-law: a good woman (*PB*, 91). In the process she is emptied of beauty and passion. This is how Munira describes her:

She could have been beautiful, but too much righteous living and Bible reading and daily prayers had drained her of all sensuality and what remained now was the cold incandescence of the spirit. (*PB*, 16)

To make matters worse, their lovemaking is framed by prayer: 'Munira could have forgiven her everything but those silent prayers before and after making love' (*PB*, 91). Munira finds this divine intrusion into marital intimacy unnecessary and absurd. This relationship is cast against the missionaries' argument that circumcision caused damaging and lasting psychological trauma on young girls. What Ngugi depicts is the psychological conditioning of Christianity evidently having an even more devastating and longer lasting effect on female sexuality than does circumcision. Julia is psychologically bound by a Christian dependency on divine grace and atonement. The sad fact is whichever way we look at it, women are doubly oppressed – by tribal culture, and by imperialism. Julia exemplifies woman bound by both.⁴¹

Munira's desire to find succour in relationships with women is ultimately transferred to

⁴¹ *Barrel of a Pen*, pp.39-51.

Wanja. As Theng'eta opens out possibility, as 'dreams become wishes', he hopes for rebirth, for a reconnection to all that is fundamental through her: 'He wanted to say: Wanja! Give me another night of the big moon in a hut and through you, buried in you, I will be reborn into history, a player, an actor, a creator, not this, this disconnection' (*PB*, 212). But he is not 'ready to receive' (*PB*, 211) because, as it turns out, Munira has a guilty secret. He has failed to avenge the death of his childhood friend Nding'uri, and instead has sought refuge in Ilmorog. Having failed to possess Wanja, Eve in his Eden, 'she looking so desirable like the fruit in the old garden' (*PB*, 332), he now blames her for shattering the protective world he has built around himself, for 'his later sliding into sloth and drinking' (*PB*, 332).

To Munira Wanja epitomises all that has gone wrong in his society. Ironically, her promiscuity, which he finds so abhorrent, is the result of a deep cultural split created by the very structures in which Munira seeks solace. Even though implicated as part of the exploiter class, she is herself largely a victim of a past that, beginning with Kimeria, leads her ultimately to a life of prostitution. In her plea to Karega, she says of her association with the rich men: 'I have tried to fight them, the only way I can' (*PB*, 327). Wanja fighting back is not heroic. Ngugi has her shuttling back and forth between not one or two but three bedrooms, and the kitchen, in a parody of the two places in which he has earlier situated women's oppression. But even worse, he has her revelling in this bizarre role: 'Cooking and the kitchen became the most important link in the drama and she was beginning to enjoy it' (*PB*, 329). It is Wanja herself who early in the novel says of the female attempt to go beyond domestic prison: 'It seemed that no matter how much effort we put in, our road led to the bedroom and the kitchen' (*PB*, 37).⁴²

⁴² In this conversation, Wanja's chances of advancement are compared to those of the boy Ritho, a classmate. Ritho wants to become an engineer. What is unimaginable in *Petals of Blood* is achieved in *Devil on the Cross*. In this novel, Wariinga, fourth in her class after three men, finally becomes an engineer.

Revolutionary Heroine, or Barmaid: Female Circumcision and its Effect on Ngugi's Treatment of Women.

hell is woman... heaven is woman

Ngugi⁴³

Circumcision and Clitoridectomy were like forest clearance; they cut childish nature into adult culture

Lonsdale⁴⁴

If at the time of the writing of *The River Between* Ngugi seemed to represent the victory of Christianity over the tribal ways by Muthoni's death,⁴⁵ his views had undergone considerable change by the time he wrote *Petals of Blood*. His ambivalence towards the 'new' woman is demonstrated in his equivocation over the status of women. It is evident in the metaphor he uses to anchor his female characters: even at their most radical, they are prostitutes. It is, of course, a metaphor resonant with and reflective of the urban context, in which Gikuyu men found themselves threatened by the changes that gave their women new freedoms and entrepreneurial opportunities, making them more difficult to control. Gikuyu infrastructure became even more largely dependent on female labour, a situation the men saw no reason to challenge since, as already noted in Chapter 2, the women continued to command little status.

In *The River Between*, circumcision appears as an anticlimax rather than prelude to a sexually fulfilling life. John Lonsdale, who presents perhaps the most detailed research on this topic, sees no contradiction in his claim that: 'men's preoccupation with fertility made

⁴³ *Petals of Blood*, p.25.

⁴⁴ Lonsdale, p.340.

⁴⁵ Church of Scotland, *Memorandum prepared by The Kikuyu Mission Council on Female Circumcision* (Kikuyu, Kenya Colony: 1 December 1931), hereafter *Memorandum*, pp. 10, 22, 37. It is possible that Ngugi based Muthoni's death on the incident that sparked off the 'circumcision issue'. In April 1929, two women circumcisers were prosecuted and fined Kshs 30 each for forcefully carrying out a major operation on an unwilling girl. They were in breach of the Native Council directive to limit the operation to the minor procedure. It was argued, as in the case of the schoolgirl at Kikuyu who had hidden to avoid circumcision, that the circumcisers were unnecessarily brutal, almost as if punishing the three girls for resisting. Muthoni is Christian, and although she chooses circumcision, she also represents the forces against it.

them want to control sexuality, not dominate women'.⁴⁶ Lonsdale attempts to rationalise the ritual by metaphorically situating it within Gikuyu social culture. He says: 'Circumcision and clitoridectomy were like forest clearance; they cut childish nature into adult culture. Women felt the same'.⁴⁷ By clinching his statement with women's compliance, he conscripts them into a collusion with culture while suggesting the highhandedness of external intervention in a matter consensually agreed to locally. And he is right. The perceived western threat to Gikuyu social order, forged since *agu na agu* – as far back as tribal memory went – was strongly resisted by both sexes. Equally important in defining manhood and womanhood, women themselves fought to retain the practice, reading into the lack of support from the men failure and betrayal rather than collusion with Western forces in patriarchal oppression.⁴⁸ Muthoni's desperate and heroic action in *The River Between* best demonstrates her inability to conceptualise or comprehend the sudden and complete loss of identity signalled by this change. Livingstone, the missionary in *The River Between* retreats in horror and disgust at the 'instruction' and ritual dances (*RB*, 56). And yet it is a strictly controlled and cathartic purging, secured by taboo against the consummation of the desires unleashed (*RB*, 41-42).⁴⁹ It is after this event that Muthoni asks: 'How can I possibly remain as I am now?' (*RB*, 43)

In Chapter 2 I discussed the importance of circumcision. According to Kenyatta, who analysed its implications from an anthropological, as well as cultural point of view, everything in Gikuyu life was bound up with this ritual. His claims in *Facing Mount Kenya*, often quoted as the authoritative voice on the place of female circumcision in Gikuyu tribal psychology and culture, apply equally to male circumcision. He says circumcision is not only the most important custom among the Gikuyu, it is the one upon which all else rests:

⁴⁶ Lonsdale, p.340.

⁴⁷ Lonsdale, p.340.

⁴⁸ With feminist revisionism that attitude is completely altered.

⁴⁹ An identical sense of disgust was felt by the missionary, Dr Philps when he observed ritual circumcision (*Memorandum*, p.12).

this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite from the operation itself. For the present [1930s] it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without a clitoridectomy. Therefore the abolition of the surgical element in this custom means to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution. [...] It is regarded as the *conditio sine qua non* of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion and morality. [...] It is important to note that the moral code of the tribe is bound up with this custom, and that it symbolises the unification of the whole tribal organisation.⁵⁰

It was presumptuous to imagine an easy substitution of one set of values for another. At meetings held to address the issue re-education rather than Government decree was soon proposed by both sides as the only way to overcome the psychological disjunction.⁵¹ The ramifications were many. Kenyatta says:

No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation.⁵²

This taboo could only be lifted by undergoing ritual purification, '*korutwo thahu*' or '*gotahikio megiro*', a literal vomiting of the evil deeds.⁵³ This is the point at which Ngugi leaves Waiyaki and Nyambura in *The River Between* (RB, 151-2), with the prospect of a ritual purification, the nature of which is not disclosed, looming.

The reverberations from the social and cultural upheaval precipitated by the 1920s debate

⁵⁰ *Facing*, p.133-4.

⁵¹ Ngugi proposes education as the solution to the problem in *The River Between*. In *Memorandum* is the Government's argument as presented in the 'Report of the Native Affairs Department', 1929, Ch.2, Para.4, in which it agreed that:

Such an ancient custom cannot be abolished in a moment. It is hoped that it will be dropped gradually as a result of education in the widest sense of the word, just as such customs as the slitting of the ears, the plastering of hair with mud, and the extraction and filing of teeth are dying out slowly but all the more effectively because of non-interference. (*Memorandum*, p.67)

Government further argued that it wasn't its aim to prohibit, 'but to endeavour to get the people to see the evils of the operation, particularly in its severest forms [...] may constitute an offence of grievous hurt or maim.' (67)

⁵² *Facing*, p.132.

⁵³ *Facing*, p.132.

on female circumcision continue to be felt today.⁵⁴ Patrick Williams now argues that the sense of outrage displayed by the missionaries, discussed earlier, was exaggerated given that this practice was not exactly new to westerners.⁵⁵ Williams is nevertheless suspicious of Kenyatta's attempts to minimise its seriousness by claiming it was just a clitoridectomy, a simple 'trimming'.⁵⁶ He also situates the practise within a broadened context. Williams says:

Although the practice was portrayed as the essence of primitive savagery and the patriarchal abuse of women's bodies, such an attitude required a degree of historical amnesia, as well as racism, since the more localised form of genital mutilation, clitoridectomy, had been practised in late Victorian England, and on a rather more widespread basis in the United States. The Gikuyu version involved cutting off the labia as well as the clitoris though Kenyatta insists that only clitoridectomy was involved, and that excision of the labia was an aberration, creating a mistaken impression among whites.⁵⁷

In her research on female madness in Victorian England, Elaine Showalter found that circumcision was practised even in its more severe form, that is, the removal of the labia. She reports the case of a surgeon, Dr Isaac Baker Brown who in the 1860s 'went beyond clitoridectomy to the removal of the labia.' Brown was subsequently expelled from the Obstetrical Society in 1867, curiously not for medical negligence,⁵⁸ but for engaging in what even at the time was regarded as patriarchal abuse of women's bodies. In failing to

⁵⁴ Williams, p. 32. Williams refers to the mass boycott of mission schools in favour of the Gikuyu independent schools for this reason. In Chapter 2 I quote the medical arguments presented in *Memorandum*, the most serious consequence occurring at childbirth, where both mother and baby might die.

⁵⁵ See for instance Chapter 3 'Managing Women's Minds' in Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 74-78. There is no corresponding evidence for Scotland. In *Unhappy Valley*, Lonsdale notes the growing popularity of male circumcision among the British middle classes around the time of the Gikuyu crisis to partially explain the intensive focus on female circumcision (p. 388, n. 427).

⁵⁶ As of the garden hedge, for example? Indeed, Lonsdale, above, likens it to 'forest clearance' (p. 340). Male writers in their description consistently trivialise clitoridectomy even while recognising its severity. In *Memorandum* is a note on the restriction of the operation to 'the simple removal of the clitoris', even as the same article points out the 'severe mutilation' that could sometimes result from the carrying out of this far from simple procedure (p. 68).

⁵⁷ Williams, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Showalter, p. 78.

protect women he was charged with 'misuse of male authority'.⁵⁹ Showalter defines it within an ideological, gendered context:

Clitoridectomy is the surgical enforcement of an ideology that restricts female sexuality to reproduction. The removal of the clitoris eliminates the woman's sexual pleasure, and it is indeed this autonomous sexual pleasure that (is) defined as the symptom, perhaps the essence, of female insanity.⁶⁰

It is fascinating how a similar kind of 'madness' drove the issue in 1920s Kenya, though ironically, the church and Gikuyu men crucially failed to recognise that ultimately they both wanted the same thing: effective control of female sexuality.⁶¹ The purposes of Christianity were ironically fulfilled by the ritual of tradition in grotesque symbiosis. Effective control of women was ensured and female sexuality checked, a function the puritanical church might have recognised with relief but for the accompanying orgiastic practices. And yet the Scottish missionaries believed passionately in the emancipation of women, a commitment demonstrated by their taking on political organisations (eg. the Kikuyu Central Association) and Government over this issue. Neither tradition nor Government have succeeded in resolving it.⁶²

In 'Cultural Nationalism', Rosberg and Nottingham give us in brief an indication of the perceived immensity of the loss and hence insight into Muthoni's anguish. In Gikuyu

⁵⁹ Showalter, p.76. Some of Brown's patients had complained of being coerced and tricked into treatment (p.77) In the speech that sealed Brown's expulsion Seymour Harden, Secretary to the Obstetrical Society said:

As a body who practise among women we have constituted ourselves, as it were, the guardians of their interests, and in many cases, [...] the custodians of their honour (hear hear). We are, in fact, the stronger, and they the weaker. They are obliged to believe all that we tell them. [...] Under these circumstances, if we should depart from the strictest principles of honour, if we should cheat or victimize them in any way, we would be unworthy of the profession of which we are members (p.78).

⁶⁰ Showalter, p.76-77.

⁶¹ The church wanted to defer sexual activity to adulthood, within marriage.

⁶² There has been a resurgence of interest and reclamation of this ritual in Kenya. A sect called Moghiki, made up of young Agikuyu see the return to old values grounded in the rite of circumcision as the only way of reclaiming tribal morality and unity. Another sect, The Tent of the Living God (also *Thaai*), led by Ngonya wa Gakonya share in this belief, and in December 1999 carried out a traditional circumcision ceremony at Dagoretti. Ten boys, now of the *Thingira* age group, were initiated (*The People on Sunday*, Nairobi, 26 December, 1999)

culture:

only a circumcised girl could be considered fully a woman. It was widely believed that uncircumcised girls would not physically be able to bear children. Not to be circumcised was to be debarred from developing the personality and attributes of womanhood and to be condemned to remain psychologically a little girl (*kirigo*). In Kikuyu eyes an uncircumcised girl of marriagable age was an object of derision, indeed almost disgust. Far from being unnecessary, the operation symbolised the most important moment in a girl's life, and her bearing during the pain that accompanied it was a matter of great pride or shame to her family.⁶³

A woman was nothing without circumcision. In many African societies, and especially amongst the Gikuyu, a barren woman is shunned.⁶⁴ The idea that 'the sexuality of young girls was depraved and that female promiscuity caused sterility'⁶⁵ linked fertility to circumcision. Ironically, it was the very ritual that initiated them into the secret world of adult sexuality that also blunted their enjoyment of it. Interestingly, the medical establishment was pressured by the Gikuyu, and the Church into supervision of the male ritual, in itself a problematic privilege, as in Muniras case. The church nevertheless resisted any such involvement in the female equivalent, already a highly politicised and explosive issue.⁶⁶ The result of this is that women continue at the mercy of traditional practitioners or quacks, with often disastrous, if avoidable, consequences. This has led to an unhealthy secrecy over the practice even today. It goes some way to explaining the anxiety and ambivalence demonstrated by Ngugi in his characterisation of women.

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⁶³ Carl G. Rosberg and John Nottingham, 'Cultural Nationalism', *The Myth of 'Mau Mau': Nationalism in Kenya* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p.112

⁶⁴ In the majority of Gikuyu marriages even today, marriage occurs once the woman has conceived.

⁶⁵ Lonsdale, p.340. One of the consequences of urbanisation was the spread of venereal disease, some kinds of which cause infertility. Again on p.386 Lonsdale reiterates Gikuyu men's concern, that the women's 'prostitution caused sterility.' There was a lot of reference to women as loose, or as prostitute. In this sense, therefore, Ngugi's metaphor of woman as prostitute is historically derived.

⁶⁶ As noted in *Memorandum*, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) used this ritual for political leverage. The missionaries claimed this action subsequently delayed female emancipation (p.7). The same report also refers to KCA as 'an indeterminate collection of malcontents, with no constitution, no representative authority and no constructive programme of reform' (p.26).

Ngugi's post-independence context is, therefore, figured by a powerfully gendered cultural nationalism that stems from the crisis centred on female circumcision. Curiously, Ngugi's criticism has strong humanist, moralistic overtones in which the suspension of judgement is betrayed by his sharp contrast of woman in ideal states, as pure, or as whore. These opposites may be felt to derive from the Catholic tradition of Virgin and Magdalen. He projects the female metaphor in which a capricious Kenya prostitutes herself, allowing trespass by settlers, retaining neo-colonial links, forging new alliances with the United States and succumbing to the dictates of its powerbrokers, the International financial institutions, the IMF and the World Bank in order to keep afloat. As I argued earlier, the transition to neocolonialism was sealed by the failure of Kenyatta's government to restructure the colonial system at independence. I want to suggest two things here. The first is that Gikuyu cultural cohesion was broken on the back of female circumcision. The second, that as a result of the prominence given women because of this focus, Ngugi uses the issue as a ready link to the much broader issue of cultural dispossession of the Agikuyu, and ultimately of Kenyans. Caught at the crossroads of imperialism and tradition the female is sacrificed at the altar of compromise at all levels – religious, political (to be in favour of female circumcision meant one belonged to the KCA), social (they were excluded from missionary education, hence the formation of independent and Karinga schools), cultural and economic. The result is that she loses all that defines her within her culture. It is the so-called 'liberation' or emancipation by modernity of the Gikuyu female from the cultural moorings of a traditional way of life underpinned by initiation rites of which circumcision was the climax that have led her to use what was once sacred as a cheap commodity in the newly defined post independence market. The distance between female sexuality as virtue, to vice, is short.

In *Petals of Blood* Wanja, corrupted as a schoolgirl by a hypocritical, godfearing neighbour turns into the Wanja of New Ilmorog, entrepreneur and madam. Her link to the seven male characters that dominate the novel is that she has slept with all of them.⁶⁷ The four murders that anchor the plot of the book are connected to her, as are the suspects, and

⁶⁷ Williams, p.92.

she is herself a suspect. Ngugi assigns her a paradoxical role, at once powerful and disturbing. She is the product of a system that exploits her, and the only way she can strike back is with the tainted weapons of her exploitation. Williams sees the words of Ramatou, the exploited woman in Djibril Diop Mambety's film *Hyenes* as particularly appropriate to Wanja's situation here: 'Society made me a whore: now I'm going to make the whole world a brothel'.⁶⁸ In her youth she bears so much promise, she is equal to the boys. They call her Wanja 'Kihii', uncircumcised Wanja. She explains it:

It is what they used to call me at school. I often wrestled with the boys. I also did some drills done by boys. Freewheeling. Walking on my hands. Wheelbarrow. I would tuck in my skirt and hold it tight between my legs. I also climbed up trees. (PB, 25)

This is a back-handed compliment, chauvinistic and offensive in that it groups women with children. Lonsdale pins down that issue when he says: 'This debate on what it was to be a man or a woman defined, perhaps more than any other issue, what it was to be Kikuyu.'⁶⁹ Within this context, issue can be taken with Ngugi's equation of the valiant Wanja to a 'kihii', an uncircumcised boy.⁷⁰ Wanja the woman becomes a prostitute, and in the Kenyan society of the 1970s, the female prostitute had no male equivalent. In repeatedly casting women at their most dynamic and revolutionary as whores, Ngugi establishes the neo-colonial context as one in which past shame frames present triumph. It is a profound shame, as priceless virtue submits to cheap, transient pleasure. Men are invested with a power over, and contempt for women as they use and violate them. Somehow, in view of this prevalence in Ngugi, it is difficult to agree with Felix Mnthali whose poem, 'First Things First' I refer to in the following chapter. Mnthali insists that to black women and men, colonial oppression supersedes that of gender. Ngugi recognises that women are doubly oppressed, and still his writing carries rather than subverts the

⁶⁸ Williams, p.93.

⁶⁹ Lonsdale, p.391. In *Petals of Blood*, Nyakinyua's story demonstrates this point. Ngugi indubitably invests all power in the circumcised male. The disputed female circumcision is but preparation for the ultimate female right of passage. Nyakinyua, venerated bearer of tradition, says:

He was a man – he belonged to a race of men such as will never be. I know it: didn't he take me under the millet growth and I felt his power making a woman out of me, a girl? (PB, 324)

⁷⁰ Lonsdale, p.xiv.

oppression by employing the one metaphor that is, within its context, both unforgiving and unforgivable.

Once violated and defiled, Wanja's redemption is secured ultimately by her murder of Kimeria. Wanja draws from a power within and refusing to be victim, strikes back at her oppressor: 'What she would never tell anyone now that she was still alive and the evidence had been burnt, was that it was she who had killed Kimeria ... struck him dead with the panga she had been holding (*PB*, 330). In the final analysis she does not leave her difficult task to Abdulla, as she had earlier planned: she seizes the moment and resolves the issue herself. Even her family demons are conscripted into her triumphant cleansing in a rebirth by fire. What at first looks like a tragic triumph for Christianity, Munira's purging of vice in one masterstroke is transformed into a much more complex interplay of the degeneration of Munira into holy insanity, juxtaposed with Wanja's fiery absolution. As Munira 'watched the whorehouse burn, the tongues of flame from the four corners forming petals of blood, making twilight of the dark sky' Wanja secures her freedom under cover of the same petals (*PB*, 333). It is a convergence at once compelling and dramatic, and contrary to Munira's understanding of his own role in the drama. This Jezebel, who subverts all that Munira's disturbed mind holds sacred, has, he believes, to die a sacrificial death. She lives. He is consigned to a delusional state, teetering on the edge of insanity.

*

Ngugi's neo-colonial Kenya is engaged in an internal struggle with itself, as well as an external struggle with outside forces. In the allegory of Capitalism, individual escape is figured as impossible. Ngugi's repeated representation of woman as prostitute has nevertheless proved problematic. As Williams says, 'Although Ngugi's portrayal of women has been praised, including by feminists, other critics have argued that it is still ideologically bound up with Patriarchy'.⁷¹ The cost of this massive cultural fracture is

⁷¹ Williams, p.93

high, and leads Ngugi to reflect through Wanja: 'Sometimes there is no greatness in the past. Sometimes one would like to hide the past even from oneself' (*PB*, 128).

Undoubtedly 'prostitution is the crudest and most blatant form of exploitation and oppression of women, the ugliest child of capitalism'.⁷²

Fanon, whom I looked at in the previous chapter, advances the idea of the establishment of post colonial states as brothels of Europe, in which 'The national bourgeoisie organizes centres of rest and relaxation and pleasure resorts to meet the wishes of the Western bourgeoisie. Such activity is given the name of tourism, and for the occasion will be built up as a national industry' (*WOE*, 123). Ngugi's Kenya is one such brothel, literally and symbolically. It starts at the top with the Kimeria's, Chui's, Mzigo's, who trickle it down to the lowest levels, a harsh indictment by Ngugi of those in power. In Kenya, Tourism, once marketed in Europe as 'Sun Sea and Sex' is one of the major foreign exchange earners. In the novel, Nderi wa Riera, MP for Ilmorog exploits his drought-ridden constituency as just such a resource (drought for Ngugi symbolises moral bankruptcy). He muscles in as partner in Ilmorog's major industry, the Theng'eta Brewery, and is a conspicuous consumer of Wanja's services. The most dramatic moment of the novel is in response to the intolerable drought. The villagers collectively march to the city, with Abdulla's donkey, and demand an audience with their MP. Their journey there reveals the different strata of life in Kenya, exposing extremes of poverty as well as obscene affluence and affectation. Nderi wa Riera's notion of an ingenious stroke is his proposed sublimation of all into an abstract, called 'culture':

KCO had originally been a vague thing in his mind. It had grown out of his belief in cultural authenticity which he had used with positive results in his business partnership with foreigners and foreign companies. Why not use culture as a basis for ethnic unity? [...] Yes! Why not! He himself had recently been sent an invitation to join the Free Masons in Nairobi – a secret European business fraternity. Why not an African based counterpart to control Central Province where peasants and workers seemed very restive and this was dangerous because these people had had a history of anti-colonial violent resistance, a spirit of struggle, which could be misused by the enemies of progress and economic prosperity. Later the idea could be sold to other leaders of

⁷² Kavetsa Adagala, 'Wanja of *Petals of Blood*: A Study of the Woman Question and Imperialism in Kenya', unpublished seminar paper, University of Nairobi (April, 1981), p.48.

other communities. (*PB*, 186)⁷³

Once a radical supporter of change, Nderi has gradually been seduced by privilege, and has allowed himself to relax into it, having benefitted hugely from the system. He assumes the role of chief tactician with the ultimate aim of maintaining the status quo. His interests are not at all in things cultural. He simply aims to exploit such aspects of culture as the use of the oath to bind, but this time: 'in progressive cooperation and active economic partnership with imperialism' (*PB*, 186).

Riera's transformation demonstrates the stranglehold of colonialism, its coercive pulling power. In Nderi wa Riera we also sense a hint of the deep sociological problems that accompany the negotiation of a strenuous balancing act, as well as the psychological gap suggesting that the cost far outweighs the benefits of so-called modernisation. The extent to which Nderi wa Riera carries the idea of individual ownership is absurd. Theng'eta was once a community and celebratory drink. Wanja recalls its traditional function and significance:

They would drink it only when work was finished, and especially after the ceremony of circumcision or marriage or *itwika*,⁷⁴ and after a harvest. It was when they were drinking Theng'eta that poets and singers composed their words for a season of Gichandi, and the seer voiced his prophecy. It was outlawed by the colonialists. (*PB*, 204)

A few pages on is Nyakinyua on Theng'eta:

The plant was very small with a pattern of four tiny red petals. It had no scent.

Theng'eta. The spirit.

Nyakinyua dismantled the distillery. The pot-jar was full of a clear white liquid.

'This is only ... this is nothing yet.' Nyakinyua explained. 'This can only poison your heads and intestines. Squeeze Theng'eta into it and you get your spirit. Theng'eta. It is a dream. It is a wish. It gives you sight, and for those favoured by God it can make them cross the

⁷³ Ngugi is in effect describing the Gikuyu, Meru, Embu Association (GEMA), started in 1971 to consolidate political power, and to promote Gikuyu and associated culture.

⁷⁴ Lonsdale translates *itwika* as 'generational handover of ritual power' (p.xiv).

river of time and talk with their ancestors. It has given seers their tongues; poets and Gichandi players their words; and it has made barren women mothers of many children. Only you must take it with faith and purity in your hearts. (PB, 210)

It is patented and privatised, and stripped of its spiritual significance. Its ceremonial link with the ancestors is broken and like everything else it becomes a commercial product. And just as the colonialists had outlawed its ceremonial use, claiming it to be only an excuse for drunkenness (PB, 204), monopoly is ensured by criminalising domestic brewing. Karega, reflecting on all the changes that have transformed his world, captures the elusive essence of transience, the transformation of a culture once vibrant and meaningful: 'It was really very beautiful [...] it was like beholding a relic of beauty that had suddenly surfaced, or like listening to a solitary beautiful tune straying, for a time, from a dying world' (PB, 210).

I now turn to Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* to look at the issues with which he was engaged.

Chapter Seven

WHY AREN'T WE SO BLEST?

Preamble: And So We Give Thanks

Thanksgiving started in New England in 1621 when the Governor, William Bradford, invited some Indians over to join the pilgrims in celebrating a bountiful harvest and to give thanks for the past year. This early incident already signalled the shift in power from native to pilgrim. It also marked the emergence of a new and prosperous America after an initial period of white settlement that had been fraught and difficult. By the nineteenth century thanksgiving had become an institution in New England, and was in 1863 declared a national holiday by Abraham Lincoln.

The concept of giving thanks for bounty is by no means exclusive to America. It is Armah's treatment of it as excluding and unique that makes it so significant in *Why Are We So Blest?* This event, which stems from the success of settlement in America gives the novel its title. For settlement to succeed requires the subjugation or decimation of original inhabitants, as well as sufficient labour and resources. In America, these requirements were met in the mass genocide of the native American Indians, and the importation of slave labour from Africa and the West Indies to work the fields and create the agricultural base on which monolithic America now rests.

In the novel, thanksgiving is discussed in the context of a celebratory article in the *Sunday Times*, read avidly and with self-congratulatory satisfaction by Mike 'the Fascist', a student at Harvard. He is secure in the knowledge that 'it's all there' (WAWSB, 78), somewhat like Aimée's bourgeois money, to fall back on. The article contains the thesis of the novel:

'The land we inherited from these men' – there's been a long bit about the pilgrims– 'was not the utopian ideal. It was its realisation: a society of men who brought with them the whole deep matrix of European civilisation, and were at the same time wise enough to eschew the irrationalities, the invidious gradations, the heights and depths of blood politics – in a word, the all-too-human flaws of feudal Europe. This was a new world, born of the old, it is true, but bearing no macula from that birth, completely innocent of those crimes against humanity which have turned the European experience into such an exquisitely ambiguous heritage' [...]

'The myth of paradise finds its full meaning here, in the New World. Paradise is a state of grace, and grace is space – the distance that separates the holy from the merely human, the sacred from the profane, *separates and protects*. That distance that removes the motion of the Greek athlete, effortlessly perfect, from the awkward stumblings of unblest humans, [...] that distance is grace. And that is the distance between the American commonwealth and the remnant of the world. It is the measure of our blessedness.

The vulgar have come to call it abundance.[...] But there is no necessity for the vulgar to acquire vision. Here they too are blest at their own level. The blest among the blest know what this vision from the new world is. They see its oneness with whatever has been pure in the Western tradition: the perfect symmetry of the Olympic ideal, the unsullied wholeness of that Christian Eden ignorant of the fall from Grace. That is our reason for giving thanks. (WAWSB, 79-80)

Mike's America is doubly blessed. It is legitimised by its ability to lay claim to an ancient heritage, Greek civilisation. This state of grace is characterised by physical perfection as well as intellectual reason. And it can also lay claim to the Christian heritage, from which it obtains its spirituality and anchors its claims to the moral high ground. The *Sunday Times* is best read against Fanon's article 'Racism and Culture,'¹ as well as the 'Conclusion' of *The Wretched*. In 'Racism and Culture', the state of grace is described in context as an exalted state, a state of sublimation that comes only after an intense encounter. It is presented as the antithesis of that encounter. Fanon gives two examples of this: the euphoria experienced by native peoples on realising that it is alright to embrace their indigenous cultures, as happened with Negritude; and the converse side to the aggression that is the inevitable response to the violence of colonialism. America's triumph is achieved as much over Europe as it consists in the subjugation of its new territory. In *The Wretched*, Fanon describes the Europe that America has escaped. America has attained her state of grace by leaving:

¹ Frantz Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', *Présence Africaine*, Special Issue 8, 9, 10 (1956), 122-131.

this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe [...] That same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind. (WOE, 251-252)

The irony is that America was established in the pioneering European spirit, as an extension of the urge towards conquest and freedom. It has since become a victim of its own success having surpassed Europe, and itself become an 'obscene caricature' (WOE, 254) devoid of that retrospective spirit to 'civilise' that Europe cultivated so as to justify conquest, and which Europe also betrayed. Rather than escape the macula of its European birthing, in America this legacy is magnified. Fanon again:

Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions. (WOE, 252)

The imitation of Europe merely produces a larger monster.

Mike emphasises the rigid distinctive divisions along which America was structured from its inception, calling attention to the fact that the article is about the blest, not about the underprivileged, whom it makes no attempt to address.² The *Sunday Times* is normally a conservative newspaper, but Mike complains that it has been infiltrated by liberals reporting 'dull' news that makes for 'dull entertainment' – about floods in Thailand, strikes over conditions at the copper mines in Chile, war in Vietnam and changes in government elsewhere (WAWSB, 78). The reporting of serious, life altering news from elsewhere is unimportant. Juxtaposed with the selfish and self-celebratory tone of the article on thanksgiving, this unapologetic celebration of privilege is made grotesque. Popular versions of Darwin's theory on survival reverberate throughout this article about

² The revolutionary office in Laccryville is as yet an unsophisticated imitation of the complex arrangement of which Mike 'the Fascist' boasts. The Bureau is symbolically located in the middle – halfway up the hill. Manuel is in 'heaven', on top of Olympus, while Ngulo festers halfway down – in 'the plains of mediocrity', in 'hell'. Modin and Aimée are confined to the purgatorial Tartarus to await Manuel's judgement. The irony is that it is this very structure that the revolution wants to overthrow, and yet it copies it exactly (WAWSB, 81).

the select who have survived and now thrive.

Thanksgiving is used to reflect on the paradoxes and inconsistencies of the desired state of advanced complexity at which America has arrived, complete with 'heavens – and hells [...] built into it [...]. There's Olympus. Below that there are the plains of mediocrity. Then Tartarus [...] a much superior arrangement' (WAWSB, 81). It is all realised within Graeco-Christian mythology. Modin resists Mike's attempts to situate him harmoniously within this concept of paradise to which he appears to belong effortlessly. He, after all, has intelligence, and class, for which his colour can be overlooked particularly as he is also an outsider. Curiously, in *Osiris Rising*, Armah uses Mike's image of Modin as model for Asar: 'A hero. Part man, part god' (WAWSB, 83). In this novel Armah calls into question the entire basis of the smug satisfaction displayed in *Why Are We So Blest?* by undermining the mythic Graeco-Christian foundations that bolster and sustain as well as underpin this paradise. In *Why Are We So Blest?* Modin alludes to, indeed insists, that there are other mythologies, and myths. In *Osiris Rising* Armah finds the myth appropriate to his hero, whom he subsequently transposes. He invokes the older Egyptian mythology that is rooted in the complex mystery of Osiris, predating Christ.

Armah succeeds in making a mockery of an American national institution. By placing the concept of thanksgiving within a context in which there is little to celebrate and much to rue, one in which the Christian virtue of humility is clearly absent, as is the celebration of family (now famously dysfunctional) that is traditionally made much of, he challenges the misconception that everybody has something for which to return thanks. A large proportion of the original settlers of America were puritans who sought to escape religious persecution in Europe and establish a society that could guarantee their freedoms. They fled oppression because of difference. It is ironical that their settlement of America was ultimately predicated on the taking away of freedoms from other groups of people on the basis of a difference – that of race. The newspaper article alludes to the hierarchical structures, now rendered invisible within the perfected model that supports the system. Thus is difference institutionalised, making superfluous the repeated calling of attention to

it, apart from under such celebratory circumstances, by the select. The summation is succinct: 'The *myth* of Paradise finds its full meaning here, in the New World' (WAWSB, 79).

In his inaugural lecture at Makerere University in 1966 Ali Mazrui addressed the subject of 'Ancient Greece in African Political Thought'.³ Mazrui pointed out that there was 'a crisis of identity confronting every modern African University and the mystique of ancient Greece [was] at the heart of it'. It was this 'mystique of ancient Greece' that he blamed for contributing to the total cultural arrogance of Europe in relation to the rest of the world'.⁴ Harvard, to which Modin Dofu, Ghanaian scholarship student, is admitted, is secured on this mythology.

Why Aren't We So Blest?

Often when I have sat down and tried to write I have felt behind me presences disapproving of my unborn thoughts, harsh voices raised in contradiction of my unwritten words [...] when all around us there is so much to be done.

Armah, *Why Are We So Blest?* (p.3)

We want freedom by any means necessary

We want justice by any means necessary

We want equality by any means necessary

Malcolm X

Where Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute.

Let the hawk perch, and let the eagle perch.

Chinua Achebe (Igbo proverbs)

The Context

Why Are We So Blest? marks a notable shift in direction from the concerns of Armah's

³ Also Ali Mazrui, 'Ancient Greece in African Political Thought' *Présence Africaine*, 61 (1967), 68-93 (p.70). See also Robert Young, 'Egypt in America', in *Racism, Modernity, Identity on the Western Front*, ed. by Ali Rattansi and Sallie Westwood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp.150-169 (p.160).

⁴ Mazrui, p. 70.

earlier writing. In Chapter 4 I showed the context into which his subsequent work would be received, and although each of his novels is different, each distinctively displays his 'markedly radical awareness'⁵ and enormous struggle to effect change by the pen against oppression. In *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah deals with corruption in Ghana after the failure of independence to establish productive change. *Fragments* (1970) is a story about the return of the been-to, Baako Onipa,⁶ from the United States. In *Fragments* the rupture and fragmentation of family is examined through the trauma that Baako, the returnee, undergoes in trying to fulfil family expectation while at the same time struggling to stay true to his moral self. The family demands material reward, but Baako only brings back potential; he brings back knowledge. He defies their desire for instant gratification, an act read as selfish indulgence by those for whom, since they are unable to make the crossing themselves, 'oversea' has come to represent the magical key to prosperity.

Armah's writing insists on urban contemporaneity, and nowhere is his tenor more threatening to the wider literary establishment than in *Why Are We So Blest?*, where he conscripts the other worlds, creating an integrated context in which the blest and unblest confront each other. It is here that 'middle class' independent Africa meets post-slavery, liberal, elite America, generating powerful tensions. It is an unusual novel in several ways. In it, Armah moves boldly 'from the tight circle of largely Ghanaian concerns'.⁷ He embraces America, the Muslim Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, ending up in 'the progressive, decolonized country of Algeria'⁸ – Fanon's Algeria. Using the Slave/Gold Coast, now Ghana, beacon of post-independence Africa as springboard, the novel is positioned at the intersection of African and American cultures and one consequence of this positioning has been that neither side felt represented by it. Armah preceded and pre-

⁵ Robert Fraser, 'The American Background in *Why Are We So Blest?*', *African Literature Today*, 9: *Africa, America and the Caribbean* (1978), 39-46 (p.39).

⁶ This name literally translates as 'one man'. (Translated by Richard Cudjoe of the Department of Classics, University of Glasgow).

⁷ Hans M. Zell, Carol Bundy and Virginia Coulon, eds, *A New Readers Guide to African Literature*, 2nd edn (London: Heinemann, 1983; repr. 1993), p.353.

⁸ Samuel Dseagu, 'Ayi Kwei Armah: 1939 - ', *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp.45-51 (p.48).

empted the theoretical interrogation of hybridity and difference within 'postcolonial' space: he questioned the framework underpinning colonial discourse, and deconstructed the divisive binaries that have long protected centres from the possibilities of invasions from the margins. The ideas that he pioneered in his fiction are later argued for fiercely in different ways in the works of such theorists as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.⁹ Like them, he posed his challenge from America, where his first three novels were initially published. Although it imprisoned him within a racist colonial history, America enabled the sharpening of his ideas as well as their dissemination. Admittedly, the space that America has been able to offer to 'other' voices has revolutionised disciplines.¹⁰ At the same time America has borne the brunt of much of the criticism that it has enabled: this is certainly true in Armah's case.

Why Are We So Blest? offers an exceedingly harsh critique, even rejection of political and educational systems of America, from within the upper reaches of those systems. Armah ignores the literary as well as psychological boundaries that presume the right of the North to interrogate Africa but not vice versa. He also defies any 'ethnocentric classification', rejecting the limitations that it implies.¹¹ His transgression is captured in Fraser's description of him as 'a startling writer, a fearless and unpredictable "enfant terrible" at drastic odds with the literary establishment.¹² He implodes myths regardless of mythmaker. He even creates his own.

*

Before the publication of *Why Are We So Blest?* in 1972, Armah was celebrated as probably the finest writer to come out of Ghana, a country which already had a modest but

⁹ Said, Spivak and Bhabha have been referred to as the 'holy trinity' of postcolonial theory. See also Trinh T. Minh, 'No Master Territories', in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.215-18 (p.216). She discusses iconoclasts like Armah who subvert the distinction between marginal and central spaces, refusing containment by either.

¹⁰ America has, of course, closely monitored these changes. See for instance Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999).

¹¹ Minh, p.216.

¹² Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.ix.

distinguished literary lineage. Although troublesome to some African critics, he had pleased an international audience. But this novel did not prove as easy for Western audiences to accept either in terms of its content or its experimentation with form. Since Fanon's *The Wretched*, no casualty of the imperial system had written so compellingly or openly, and the critics were unprepared for this incisive and insistent talent staking its claim beyond the bounds of place as well as conventions supposed to guarantee objectivity and temperance. The mirror Armah held up reflected back the gross misdeeds the North had perpetrated in his world. Most Western critics now turned on Armah with an outrage similar to that which had typified the earlier African response to Armah's washing of the continent's dirty linen in public. Added now to his betrayal of African trust in his previous novels was 'a betrayal of Western generosity and trust'.¹³

Even more recent criticism has remained hostile: Neil Lazarus calls the novel a 'racist and poisonously misogynistic work', remarking the crudeness of Armah's allegorical conception that views the world in a Manichean, totalising manner. Lazarus sees the novel as linking sexual obsession to imperial violence but feels that Armah fails adequately to explore this linkage. I argue that this is exactly what Aimée and Modin's relationship demonstrates. Lazarus believes that the motivation behind it may be clarified by comparing its bleak perspective to that found by Theodore Adorno in Samuel Beckett's post World War II play, *Endgame*. In both works the cataclysm is so severe that as Adorno has it 'even the survivors cannot really survive'.¹⁴ Although admitting the 'stark insights and brilliantly deployed multiple perspectives'¹⁵ of *Why Are We So Blest?*, Lazarus sees the novel as irremediably damaged by Armah's insistence on a single, essentialist point of view.

The crucial question for Lazarus, then, is why a writer of Armah's skill and intelligence should feel compelled to write a novel like *Why Are We So Blest?* He ultimately reads the

¹³ Lonsdale, p.247. Lonsdale sees this tendency as characteristic of the reception of early, and even much later African novels.

¹⁴ Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.121.

¹⁵ Lazarus, p.118.

novel as Armah's attempt to interrogate and understand 'westernity', a necessary exorcism of imperial demons so that 'healing' can begin. It is in this sense that he reads *Why Are We So Blest?* as a 'dead-end' in African literature; but he does not interpret the 'dead-end' in a pessimistic manner. Perhaps it is better described as marking a watershed: closing one phase and inaugurating a new. Lazarus suggests that it is this purging of the soul that has enabled Armah to 'think himself beyond' the labyrinth of radical 1960s African intellectualism.¹⁶ Thus *Why Are We So Blest?* is paradoxically connected to Armah's penultimate novel *The Healers* by disjunction:

on the one hand, in spite of the conceptual continuities between them, *Why Are We So Blest?* does not pave the way towards *The Healers*; on the other hand, in spite of the enormous differences between them, without *Why Are We So Blest?*, *The Healers* could never have been written.¹⁷

It is, then, because of its exposure of the mutilated soul that has emerged from the imperial mangle, its refusal to reconcile itself to imperialism, that *Why Are We So Blest?* is arguably Armah's most important book. James Booth believes that 'as a cry of resentment and suffering the book is unparalleled'.¹⁸

It is one of the arguments of this thesis that Armah has become more profoundly influenced by the 'memory' of slavery than the more recent colonial experience as he continues to write. Growing up on the slave coast still marked, even today, by slave castles at regular intervals, he experienced an enduring curiosity about the fate of his ancestors, which has provoked the responses demonstrated in his novels. His awareness of and contact with the descendants of these slaves in America – still bearing the macula of slavery and marginalised in the present, clearly bears heavily on the tensions in his fiction.

¹⁶ Lazarus, p.190.

¹⁷ Lazarus, p.190.

¹⁸ James Booth, 'Why Are We So Blest? and the Limits of Metaphor', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 15:1 (1980), 50-64. Both Lazarus and Booth, however, find it impossible to accept Armah's insistence on a totalising vision.

The Story

Why Are We So Blest? is the story of Modin Dofu, a Ghanaian student who finds that he cannot, on principle, proceed with the charade that his education has come to represent. He abandons his studies at Harvard University so as to free himself for more meaningful work. His purpose now is to become part of a revolutionary movement in Africa. In this mission he is accompanied by Aimée Reitsch, also a student, at Radcliffe.¹⁹ When we first meet Aimée she is frigid, and without purpose. Modin cures her frigidity and gives her life purpose. A relationship, highly destructive and ill-balanced though it becomes, subsequently develops. Modin, in love with Aimée, allows her to accompany him to Laccryville to join the African revolution. Here, at the headquarters of the movement they meet Solo, a failed revolutionary whose own life closely mirrors that of Modin. Through his consciousness and commentary we hear Modin's and Aimée's story.

Solo, an African student from Congheria, a colony still fighting to liberate itself from Portugal, has preceded Modin along the path of disillusionment and self-discovery. His own experiences are based on Portuguese colonialism,²⁰ and a failed relationship with a Portuguese girl, Sylvia, because of his race. He finds himself in Algeria, seeking a political/revolutionary answer to personal trauma. The tension between Aimée and Modin grows as their entry into revolution is delayed. Impatiently, they set off into the desert looking for action, but here they find a strong French military presence that is as hostile as the terrain. Modin decides to get back to Laccryville, and it is during the attempt to do so that they meet the four Frenchmen that, with Aimée, bring the story to a grotesque climax. What follows is a scene in which is related Aimée's most intimate fantasy. The servant Mwangi makes love to her unaware that her husband, the Kapitan Reitsch, has returned and has a gun aimed at Mwangi's head. Only now, Modin is substituted for Mwangi. The four Frenchmen use Aimée to arouse Modin. They then mutilate him sexually, and leave

¹⁹ Aimée, naturally, attends a sister college. Lazarus has expressed disquiet at the way everything is so neatly rounded off. It reflects the motif of the book, the yang-yin.

²⁰ Portuguese colonialism has been described as having been particularly oppressive. In Cabral's Guiné, it meant 'a stagnant existence coupled with the absence of personal dignity and liberty'. In Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*, ed. by Africa Information Services (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p.10. The lack of generosity displayed in their colonies resulted from, and reflected their own poverty.

him to bleed to death in the desert. They also rape Aimée.

Aimée eventually returns home to Denver using money from the trust fund that, while she was with Modin, she had refused to touch on principle, calling it bourgeois. It is she who almost perversely, probably in a moment of shock at the events in the desert, entrusts both Modin's and her diaries to Solo for 'safekeeping', as if she thinks she deserves the protection of silence. When she discovers that Solo will not return the hideously incriminating diaries on her demand, her real deep-seated neuroticism and hatred surfaces in her vicious insult to Solo, Nigger!

I had not heard that word said with that American intensity before. I understood. They understood. She stood looking at me, her nostrils turning white. Then she spat – a sudden ex-pletion, with no preparation, no warning. Her spittle landed hotly on my right cheek, below my eye. (WAWSB, 219)

The abortive bridging attempt of Aimée and Modin is finally exposed as the sick farce that it has perhaps always been. Through these diaries the reader is admitted into the intimacy of their innermost lives. The story is in this sense 'leaked' to the reader as it were, inadvertently, and therefore, persuasively. Booth remarks the brilliance of this narrative strategy in which Solo constructs a framework against the background of his own story, creating the context for the narrative, for the telling of the story of Aimée and Modin.²¹

It is within the context of intimate heterosexual relationships, therefore, that Armah chooses to investigate the problems of colour polarity. The relationship between Modin and Aimée refracted through that of Sylvia and Solo becomes a strategic tool for the exploration of the wider global problems of race and resistance at all social and political levels. These tensions stem from hierarchical, as well as racial structuring both temporal and spatial. In this construction, everything is drawn to the centre, even as the centre has flooded the spaces marginal to itself. Aimée represents these indomitable forces, mediating the relationship between North and South with a single-minded focus in her function as

²¹ Booth, p. 58.

facilitator of the imperial agenda, and ultimately as its executioner.²² Armah questions the givenness of this arrangement in which culture as well as geo-politics is co-opted, and argues against the grain of the historical events – slavery and colonialism – that have created this monolith. It is against this background that the literary strategies employed by Armah to resist African alienation, and to embrace African selfhood, emerge.

The African revolution is itself represented by the emasculated Modin, and Solo, clearly no match for Aimée's neuroticism. Modin allows her contrived enthusiasm for his cause to dictate the spirit of his journey. She trivialises his commitment, is a barrier between him and the revolution he seeks, and alienates him from those with whom he seeks to identify. Solo adds a footnote in the diary detailing and contextualising Modin's degeneration: his 'life and death [...] become the symbol of the entire Africa's progression from independence, "so woefully assimilated" to the West',²³ as are Modin and Aimée themselves 'wilfully assimilated'.²⁴ At Harvard Modin is an isolated African, but he extrapolates his experience and imagines the alienating action of imperialism to include not only the select, but all Africans: 'Europe has no need to destroy us singly any more. The force of our death is within us. We have swallowed the wish for our destruction' (WAWSB, 128).²⁵ Aimée's domination of Modin functions within the parameters of this neo-Imperial context contained in 'a psycho-sexual-political allegory designed to represent not only the violent mechanics of the imperial subjugation and exploitation of Africa, but also the sadomasochistic and ultimately suicidal complicity of African intellectuals in this despoliation'.²⁶

Though classified as an African novel, *Why Are We So Blest?* is characterised by its concerns with diaspora as well as with anti-colonial struggle on the continent. It is situated at the heart of the academic community of which Armah was himself a part and yet it is

²² See also Dseagu, p.48.

²³ Dseagu, p.48.

²⁴ According to Fanon in 'Racism and Culture', assimilation is simply a euphemism for alienation.

²⁵ Robert Fraser, 'The American Background'. To Fraser, this essentialist and totalising vision, rejected by Lazarus and Booth, suggests 'a prolonged inner struggle of mental emancipation' (p.46).

²⁶ Lazarus, p.117

keenly observed from his position as an outsider, mediated by a third consciousness, that of Solo. The narrative balances in the interstitial spaces, what Homi Bhabha would term the 'in-between' as Solo and Modin respond to the challenges of association with worlds to which they do not belong, and the tensions of the struggle to reclaim what is now only illusory. Struggling for a foothold, Armah's carries his critical metaphors to harsh extremes, and it is for this reason that his imagination has been typified as 'exiled'. In *Why Are We So Blest?* this imagination first clearly manifests itself. It can perhaps be best understood, therefore, as what I call a 'book in exile.'

This type of novel has, of course, been written before. J. P. Clarke's *America their America*²⁷ springs to mind as an example of a book written from the kind of critical perspective that Armah assumes. But it is not fiction. Black/white tensions have often been explored in and out of fiction in different ways. Such explorations occur in the early autobiographical writings by African Americans like Frederick Douglass, Du Bois, Washington, and Malcolm X. The Harlem Renaissance that started in the 1920s produced American poets such as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay from the West Indies. And there is, of course, Fanon. Exploration of racial tension also features in the work of numerous contemporary writers and poets of whatever race.

But until Armah's controversial novel, anglophone Africa had largely remained, in any significant way, the silent continent. Armah himself comes from a privileged background and is of royal lineage traceable back to the nineteenth century.²⁸ He is highly educated, well travelled, and multilingual – equally competent in the Francophone as well as Anglophone worlds, North and South. It is from this position that he minutely observes, and writes about the distressing subject of racism in America against America's more celebrated and self-advertised qualities: altruism, equal opportunities for all, democracy, the rule of law, philanthropy and so on. These exist, however, within a system that, as Apartheid did in South Africa, discriminates without mercy. Even Marlow in Conrad's

²⁷ J. P. Clarke, *America, Their America* (London: Deutsch, 1964)

²⁸ Dseagu, p.45.

Heart of Darkness at his imperialistic best, recognises that 'the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much'.²⁹ Armah presents the reader with the unequal, unjust and inhuman face of America. He has been charged with a Conradian 'fascination of the abomination' by P. N. Njoroge.³⁰ There is also a widely held critical consensus regarding his choice of literary allegory, which is seen as threatening to consume itself. Neil Lazarus sums the book up as 'brutal, harrowing and extreme',³¹ but reflective of the situation to which Armah responds.

Education: Journey to the North

Modin wins a scholarship to Harvard (*WAWSB*, 96), but his journey to the North is driven by personal preference as well as political motivation. Fraser sees the choice of America as symbolic of protest against British domination: 'beginning with Doctors Aggrey and Azikiwe, the decision to study in the States rather than in Europe has often been as much a political as an academic one'.³² But nothing in Armah's life in Ghana prepares him for America. His reaction read against American racism is not singularly violent, though the threat of violence pervades *Why Are We So Blest?* Having chosen America for the freedoms it promised, he was acutely disappointed to find it embraced the

²⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 3rd edn, ed. by Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988; first pub., 1902), p.10

³⁰ P. N. Njoroge, 'The Tradition of Search in West African Literature', unpublished master's thesis, University of Nairobi (1976), p.433. Njoroge reads Armah as making no attempt to: 'look at human violence against possibly positive social phenomena, [as] reduc[ing] life to an emotion of horror' (pp.432-433).

³¹ Lazarus, p.117.

³² Fraser, p.39. As discussed earlier, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who returned to political office and was consequently in a position to put his ideas into effect, may have overemphasised the liberating potentialities of America to the West Africans, disregarding the particular psychological tensions generated by British colonialism. One of these is elitism. The Ghanaian, more than any African, believed in the potential of liberation; and the Ghanaian, more than any African in the early sixties, experienced the consequences of its shortcomings as in Armah's case, both at home and abroad.

-The cover of the African Writers Series (AWS, 1974) edition of *Why Are We So Blest?* captures the contradiction. British colonisation, symbolised by the rose (with its sharp but hidden thorns) is here strangled by the chains of American slavery.

idea of him (or the reflection of its own beneficence), but not the substance.³³

The American backdrop is the educational institution, Harvard University: old, prestigious, elite, and, at the time, arguably representative of the finest that one could aspire to become in America. Armah gains admission to this institution, where he is accepted intellectually and socially:³⁴

My personal truth was that the Americans were my hosts, excellent ones at that. From my first minute in America I'd been treated courteously and kindly, and persons who were by any reckoning part of that country's power elite had made me a welcome friend in their homes.³⁵

In spite of this seeming acceptance, his colour already placed him. And if not exactly excluded, he was not fully included. It is the invisible ordering of the system that makes him question and interrogate the myths that apparently governed and supported this bastion of privilege, making it impossible to accept the kind face turned toward him. Harvard, admittedly, was established as an institution to promote educational excellence and cultivate the finest in Euro-American culture. What Armah seems to suggest is that it has outlived its usefulness within its own context as well as outside it. The tokenism through the rare boon of a scholarship for those from the Majority World³⁶ provokes the compelling question – why aren't *we* so blest? The function and relevance of education, an important means through which hegemony can be challenged, is here rendered superfluous. Reflecting on the alienating process of such education Modin writes in his diary:

Life. My life. A search for the centre, away from the periphery of the world I found. Leaving home for school, always. The search for knowledge should not be synonymous with increasing alienation and loneliness. In particular circumstances it is so. It has been planned that

³³ The end of the Cold War has put to an end such educational incentives.

³⁴ Ayi Kwei Armah, 'One Writer's Education', *West Africa*, (August 26, 1985), 1752-3.

³⁵ 'One Writer's Education', p. 1752.

³⁶ Nada Elia, 'Violent Women: Surging into Forbidden Quarters', in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Lewis Gordon and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 163-169 (p. 166). Elia uses this term to refer to the world formerly known as 'third'. She talks of 'the Majority World as well as the West', a reversal of the usual central position given the west as in Chinweizu's *The West and the rest of us* (Lagos: [?] 1975; repr. Pero Press, 1987).

way.

Knowledge about the world we live in is the property of the alien because the alien has conquered us. The thirst for knowledge becomes perverted into the desire for getting close to the alien, getting out of the self. Result: loneliness as a way of life.

This loneliness is an inevitable part of the assimilationist African's life within the imperial structure. Because of the way information is distributed in the total structure – high information in the center, low information on the peripheries – overall clarity is potentially possible only from the central heights.

[The manipulation] is in the present structuring of the machinery for acquiring knowledge, not in the essential nature of the learning process itself. (WAWSB, 23-24)

As Modin questions his presence at Harvard, disturbed that he might after all be simply a factor within continuing imperialism, he highlights the particular tragedy of the African student whose highest aspirations within this structure inevitably lead to such alienation. Modin embodies Fanon's description of this experience:

where intellectual work became suffering and the reality was not at all that of a living man, working and creating himself, but rather words, different combinations of words, and the tensions springing from the meanings contained in words. (WOE, 253)

According to Modin: 'In the imperial situation, the educational process is turned into an elitist ritual of selecting slave traders' (WAWSB, 174). Modin resists such factorship before his induction is completed, but Solo recognises that it is too late for escape. The process of assimilation is systematic and gradual, and in Modin's case, irreversible. In Modin Solo sees:

that unfortunate African soul eager to shed privilege before he had settled into it, shrinking from power with the realisation his training for it was a careful apprenticeship for becoming an accomplice in the murder of his people. He thought he could escape his destiny; he did not know his death was multiform, waiting for him whichever way he chose to turn. (WAWSB, 183)

Neil Lazarus probes the apparent radical shift in Armah's perception of intellectualism to what he reads as extreme anti-intellectualism in this novel. Comparing it to *Fragments*, where Armah flirts with the possibility of creative intellectualism, given impetus by the psychiatrist, Juana, Lazarus sees Armah as abandoning the idea of radical intellectualism; here the abandonment is cast as a gradual healing process. He reads in *Why Are We So*

Blest? the total co-optation of education into the service of empire such that intellectuals become 'creatures of empire' (WAWSB, 192). He claims:

The very emergence of intellectuals as a social fraction is cast [...] as a moment within the drama of empire; it is entirely circumscribed, in all its manifestations, by imperial social logic. (WAWSB, 192)

Curiously, Aimée, for whom the academic institution might be expected to have unquestioned relevance, rejects it as well (WAWSB, 115). Her rejection signifies her awareness that these structures that continue to be upheld once held meaning, that success makes innovation redundant.

Modin is the perfect candidate for assimilation and his protest is a devastating rejection of 'blestness'. He translates this protest against western education into an anti-intellectualism into which Lazarus reads the ultimate irony – his rejection of intellectual work that actually forms a crucial part of revolution itself. Lazarus quotes from Armah's 'Fanon: The Awakener' Fanon's positive role in the Algerian revolution:

Early in 1957 Fanon went to join the revolutionary base operating from Tunis. There he began writing for the press services of the Algerian revolutionary movement, working as a member of the editorial board of the soldiers' newspaper *El Moudjahid* (The Combatant), while continuing medical and political work with the militants. His major concern at this time was to help shape the theory and doctrine guiding the guerilla war – the kind of guiding work whose absence made other African uprisings (like Tanganyika's Maji Maji and Kenya's Mau Mau) such sad, blind, wasteful disasters.³⁷

By the time he wrote *Why Are We So Blest?*, Armah had attempted to participate in revolution. Urged by his own failure to be revolutionary, he spares neither Modin or Solo who in turn come to represent the death of both body and soul in a world in which: 'revolution [is] the only art, revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction' (WAWSB, 182). Armah is particularly suited to query this system and has several advantages in doing so: the product of an old and distinguished lineage, he is also privileged in the best that the new order has to offer; not being American, he is

³⁷ Lazarus, p.34.

unintimidated by, and unfettered by the racial constraints of America. He falls outside of the 'policing narrative' in which '[t]he distinguishing features of the not-Americans [i.e. blacks] were their slave status, their social status—and their colour'.³⁸ Like some of the 'not-Americans' however, he responds violently to the obvious injustices.

Armah strategically peels back the protective layers that others have hidden behind, to reveal wounded souls in all their vulnerability. In *The Wretched*, Fanon identifies the neurotic suspension of these ambivalent spirits, here rejected by 'westernity' yet trapped in its web:

Mine paced uneasily the wide territory between the destroyed people I had left behind and their enslavers, those whose words and ideas and whose art had drawn me with an attraction strong enough at times to make me wish for deafness against the frightening cries of my own doomed people. (WAWSB, 57)

*

Perhaps the most difficult and subversive aspect of *Why Are We So Blest?* is its use of the sexual metaphor. Armah develops an unusual kind of sexual figuring round which the race question revolves. Using the explosive context of a sexual relationship, glaringly public and yet intimately private, Armah demonstrates the overdetermination of the personal by the political in racially constructed societies, as well as the 'erotic [and violent] drama of imperial "othering"'.³⁹ Aimée takes on the masculinity of the dominant, while Modin is reduced to effeminate, ineffectual, other.⁴⁰ *Why Are We So Blest?* is in part Armah's response and challenge to this actual racism intellectually, as well as an attempt to formulate a strategic intervention against the exclusion it fosters.

³⁸ Toni Morrison, 'Romancing the Shadow', in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992), p.48.

³⁹ Lazarus, p.117.

⁴⁰ Male African critics such as Adewale Maja-Pearse in 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Harbingers of Death', in Abdulrazak Gurnah, ed., *Essays on African Writing, 1: A Revaluation* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), pp.13-23, are clearly disturbed by the total emasculation of Armah's male characters in *Why Are We So Blest?* White male critics such as Booth, or Lazarus, on the other hand refer to emasculation in terms of 'technique', and 'strategic device.'

Armah's choice of explicit sexual metaphor has, however, alienated Armah from his African audience.⁴¹ The African diaspora is a result of the rape of the African continent, its fragmentation, and the debasement of African sexuality. In searching for an effective method to handle this history, Armah's dramatisation reads as a blistering declaration of war configured in the text as love. Armah commits unapologetic violence on perceived notions of love. The reader is seductively drawn into this all too human 'story of the of the ambiguity of love, of its closeness to hate' (WAWSB, 20), used here as a microcosm of the colonial relationship, and that can be extended to include that of master/slave.⁴² There is an energy that binds the oppressor and oppressed, and it is this force that Armah calls love. Through the prism of sexual love he examines the functioning or brokering of power across the race barrier.

The Text and Its Texture

The Akan have a saying: Love is Death

Kofi Anyidoho⁴³

The Algerian revolution resonates as a triumph of the colonised over a colonising force. Fanon's theorisation of the anatomy of this revolution in *The Wretched of the Earth* captured the imagination, not only of radical Africans, but of oppressed people everywhere. Armah raises two questions which reverberate throughout *Why Are We So Blest?* In the first flush of post-independence euphoria, Armah shows us a multitude of fatherless children, orphans and mutilated beggars, the wretched of the earth, that people the site of an event looked to for inspiration and hope. The novel is structured as a journal,

⁴¹ It must be noted that the context is the post-independence missionary/Christian one found in at least Kenya and Ghana, in which sex was equated with sin. Armah flouts this cultural modesty. Bernth Lindfors in 'The Rise of African Pornography', *Transition*, 42: 8 (1973), 65-7, examines the place of pornography in (West) African fiction. The African, he claims, tackles sex with humour, as compared to Western writing in which it aims to titillate (p.70). See also Charles Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p.273.

⁴² As Malcolm X famously said, the slave came to love the master to the extent that when the master was ill, the slave in turn said 'we is ill'.

⁴³ Kofi Anyidoho, 'Slave Castle, African Historical Landscape and Literary Imagination', *Drumspeak: The Journal of the Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast*, 1 (March 1996), 21-32 (p.26).

and in the first entry the one-legged cripple, a casualty from the war of independence demands the answer to just one question: '*Who gained? Who gained? Who gained?*' (WAWSB, 17). Solo, himself a patient in the same hospital is recovering from a nervous breakdown, a result of his failure to participate effectively in the struggle. Solo struggles to find a meaningful answer to the man's question, explaining it in metaphorical terms – that such is the nature (*l'essence*) of fuel that it is consumed even as it propels its burden. The crippled man strains to understand that revolution consumes; that those who constitute its essence may pay the ultimate price. The realisation that he is merely one of those ordinary, dispensable ones evokes the rhetorical question, charged with his despair: '*Mais c'est juste? C'est juste?*' (WAWSB, 20).

In this dramatic opening, the crippled body meets the destroyed soul, and sets the tone for the rest of the book. Frustration, loneliness and isolation fuse to generate disillusionment and near-despair. This section is titled 'Solo', from its narrator. 'Solo' means 'lonely stranger' in Akan.⁴⁴ It is also in Africa a short form for Solomon, and, therefore, is a possibly ironic evocation of wisdom. As it is, Solo embodies failure: emotionally crippled, he fails to use his foreknowledge to save Modin: 'Regret overwhelmed me [...] that I had despaired of trying' (WAWSB, 216). He has failed as a revolutionary, and he is now debilitated by failure in his personal life. He says:

Even the smaller hopes have fled. I have had large dreams, and I have learned not to want to speak again of their death. But that the small, harmless hopes should also have crumbled into nothing, that is so cruel [...] The thing I hoped to hold was love, the attraction of one person to his opposite, the power that brings the white to the black and leads them all to open to each other areas of themselves which they have long kept hidden from everybody else. (WAWSB, 2)

Solo has invested heavily in the power of the personal to give meaning to the political, and he is disappointed: Armah suggests the disappointment is inevitable. Sylvia is too deeply immured by her own culture and cannot meet him halfway. When Solo first sees Aimée

⁴⁴ Marie-Thérèse Abdel-Messih, 'Identity Text History: The Concept of Inter/Nationalization in African Fiction', *Research in African Literatures*, 26: 4 (1995), 163-71 (p.171). In Akan, Modin means 'I am called a person who loves' (p.171).

(‘the loved one’ or ‘beloved’) and Modin (‘the one who loves’), they remind him sharply of his hopeful self, but beyond that he can already envision a repeat of the tragedy of his own disappointments, of his own retreat into nervous breakdown.

For Armah these are more than just interracial relationships. They also showcase the tensions of imperial ‘othering’, and are central to the entire political dynamic of *Why Are We So Blest?* Modin and Solo represent black male sexuality, fear of which, according to Cornel West, is central to white racism. He says:

White fear of black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism. Social Scientists have long acknowledged that interracial sex and marriage is the most *perceived* source of white fear of black people – just as the repeated castrations of lynched black men cries out for serious psychocultural explanation.⁴⁵

Armah constructs his critique of the system from the core of this fear. The first relationship, and the one that serves as a backdrop against which the second relationship is refracted, is that of Solo and a Portuguese girl, Sylvia. They meet as university students. Although she is attracted to Solo, she is overwhelmed by the forces of her racially exclusive and purportedly superior culture. Sylvia is bound by the conventions of her society, to which she responds both physically and mentally. In the final scene with Solo, intercourse, physiological, and psychological, shrivels and dries up in the face of an unyielding and unforgiving cultural force. This is not a triumph for Sylvia; it is a loss of the fundamental right to choice at the most personal level, and ironically, it is one that frees her to acceptance in her own society.

As a typical character Sylvia is, however, not sufficiently realised to carry the weight of significance she is made to bear. Her role works at the symbolic level, and gestures to a racist and misogynistic Portuguese culture. Although she remains shadowy, she is clearly very differently conceived from Aimée, the woman in the second, more developed, relationship. She is passive, in sharp contrast to Aimée, ‘the American girl [who was] the hyperactive embodiment of that energy, that hatred that has impelled Europe against us

⁴⁵ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p.124-125.

all' (WAWSB, 180). Abena Busia sees Aimée as the epitome of 'Woman as Parasite'.⁴⁶ She is 'egocentric, narcissistic, and cruel: the incarnation of all that is aggressively individualistic and destructive about the West'.⁴⁷ Her character contrasts with what Abena describes as 'woman as liberating prophet', qualities found in such women as Idawa in *Two Thousand Seasons* and Araba Jesiwa of *The Healers*.

Modin first becomes aware of Aimée at the Psychology labs where they are volunteers as subjects for experiments. He needs the money, she sexual stimulation. Their relationship is set against the Chinese symbol that for Armah encapsulates the quintessence of the novel, the yang/yin.⁴⁸ It is a symbol of dualism and reciprocity, embodying Armah's concept of wholeness. Armah employs it as the underlying motif in the novel, on two levels: the interpersonal, as well as the interracial. As intimacy develops between Aimée and Modin, Armah tantalisingly makes these mutualities seem *almost* possible – understanding, consideration, passion. But their impossibility is implied, equally powerfully. It is racism that stands as crude obstacle to their fusion. Modin's token admission into the world of the blest does not guarantee anything, least of all acceptance of his race. Instead, he finds himself a victim of a system of patronage, in which the continued dominance of one race over another cannot be overcome even by education, which so many believe furnishes enlightenment and fosters equality.

Modin is a token and, therefore, tragic figure. His stay and education in America is funded by Mr Oppenhardt, and overseen by a committee. One of his patrons, Professor Henry Jefferson, is an 'Africanist'. Armah is ironic in this gesture to Africa as a place worthy of study. He has Professor Jefferson explain just what it is an Africanist does: 'One who specializes in Africa [...] Africa is now an area justifying advanced study, you know' (WAWSB, 95-96). Armah makes the giant leap from Africa's having no history,

⁴⁶ Abena P. A. Busia, 'Parasites and Prophets: The Use of Women in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels', in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. by C. B. Davies & A. G. Graves (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), pp.89-114 (p.89).

⁴⁷ Busia, p.99.

⁴⁸ On the cover of the 1974 edition.

and bestows on it an American specialist. Professor Jefferson possesses power in the form of knowledge of Africa.

Of Parasites and Prophetesses: Armah's Women.

I: The White Woman as Parasite

In a near inversion of the sexual configuration of slavery, where the white master sexually dominated the female slaves, in this story Professor Jefferson may possess knowledge of Africa, but Modin's power is in his very 'presence [which is] loaded with the heaviest fears known to white men's minds' – he possesses Jefferson's wife (*WAWSB*, 136). But there is a twist. Modin does not initiate his relationships with white women. He merely responds to Sandra's and Aimée's advances. Only in the brief liaison with the African American, Naita, does he seem mildly to assert himself. But Modin *is* attracted to Sandra Jefferson (*WAWSB*, 104). Vulnerable, having just rejected Mr Oppenhardt's money, and craving companionship, he capitulates to her advances. Sandra Jefferson dominates the liaison, and her irresponsible ebullience (or perverse sense of loyalty) has disastrous consequences for Modin. As he reflects on his narrow escape from a murderous attack by Professor Jefferson, Modin muses on similar earlier encounters which did not end quite so dramatically. In this adulterous affair Mrs Jefferson is initiator, and finally victor. The audacity of the affair itself is remarkable. An incident in the Jeffersons' car on the way to the Africanists' conference in New York shows that they respect neither the Jeffersons' daughter nor the Professor himself. Pretending to be cold, Mrs Jefferson covers both herself and Modin with a blanket on the back seat of the car where they proceed to fondle intimately. In the front seats of the car are her family: her daughter Molly, immersed in a journal, and the professor, who drives 'with fierce concentration' (*WAWSB*, 106). But his focus is clearly not all on his driving. He has been observing his wife's face in the rearview mirror and remarks her heightened colour:

'Don't read the thing if it makes you blush' [...].

'I haven't been blushing'

'You should see yourself now. I've been taking a look now and then. It's over an hour since you started blushing. I don't know why you go on if it embarrasses you'. (WAWSB, 108)

They do go on, unembarrassed. Mrs Jefferson even laughs out loud and pretends it is from the content of Molly's journal:

'Hey, Molly, this stuff of yours is hot!'
 'Mummy, I don't read it for pleasure.'
 'Can't see you reading this as punishment.' (WAWSB, 108)

How *can* one read Mrs Jefferson's seduction of Modin in the back seat of the car, or indeed Aimée's quest for pain/sensation at the labs, and how is Modin, significantly black and male, implicated in this pathological behaviour? Modin observes:

These women I have known have had deep needs to wound their men. I have been an instrument in their hands. The men have reacted to me with a fear difficult to hide, and I should have known my annihilation would be a cure for part of their disease. (WAWSB, 132)

Although Modin clearly abdicates responsibility, Sandra, a white woman, is conventionally the victim here. Her action can be best understood within the larger motif in which she, pure and untouchable, can flaunt convention yet remain protected by it. Modin admits to using her to escape his own isolation. As he explains:

Mrs Jefferson was a long free slide along slippery paths, but I did not care about the danger. What I wanted to flee was loneliness, and she helped me do that [...]
 Now that disaster has given every past event a meaning, I see my manic pushes to the point of danger clearly: I have hidden despair from myself, but lived it. Each push was another point in a search for self-annihilation. I have wanted to destroy myself, but so well hidden has the desire for suicide been, its temptations have always looked like extreme pleasure offered, taken, tasted. (WAWSB, 127)

What Lazarus reads largely as Armah's setting up of *Why Are We So Blest* ? as a moral manichaen dichotomy with white consistently evil and black virtuous is circumvented by the absence of consistent morality on either side. Sandra emerges as selfishly adulterous and immoral, while Modin is driven by a primal and almost noble need to connect with

humanity, to escape loneliness.

Sandra confesses to her husband about the affair, precipitating an attack on Modin that almost costs him his life. But even as he lies in hospital, her confession to betrayal freshly delivered, she asks: 'Modin, do you love me? Modin, say you love me. Say it, please.' (WAWSB, 123)

This bizarre cycle is repeated in the closing chapter of the book, which climaxes in an incident described by Maja-Pearse as 'certainly one of the most unpleasant scenes in the entire corpus of modern African literature'.⁴⁹ It demonstrates Armah's sense of the extremes to which the irrational white male fear of black sexuality can be pursued. Modin is finally murdered. What the dramatic scene demonstrates once again is the centrality of the white female to the white males' perception of black male sexuality. The Frenchmen attribute the fixation with black male sexuality not to the black males, but to their own wives. Their conversation goes like this:

The first one said: '*Tu sais, à en enendre parler...*'

The other one said: '*C'est pas les nègres qui en parlent tant, voyons.*'

'*T'as raison. C'est surtout nos chiennes de femmes.*'

The perceived phallic threat is reduced in a sentence: '*Ce n'est pas tellement gros, son truc*' (WAWSB, 231). The historical action which now implies complicity and guilt of white men that is the undertow of this novel if assumed, is not stressed at this point. White women are, of course, innocent in all this. Their complicity in white male intercourse/rape of black women that has contributed to this white female/black male fixation is conveniently erased from the moment.⁵⁰ Interestingly, even with this 'evidence' that Modin is not well-endowed, and even though they declare him impotent –

⁴⁹ Maja-Pearse, p. 141.

⁵⁰ On the use of black women for the satisfaction of 'base and sensuous' depravity, and simultaneous elevation of white women to a status of purity see for instance bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1981). Armah's objectification of Aimée is a reversal of the objectification of female and male slaves by white masters and mistresses.

'*C'est un impuissant, tiens*' – it does not prevent their sexual mutilation of him.

The description of Modin's mutilation is itself truly grotesque and nauseating, and Maja-Pearse is right in saying there is nothing to match the horror of this scene.⁵¹ After extensive torture in which Aimée is used to excite him, he is finally allowed release in a sickening parody of orgasm:

Modin started bleeding. The blood curved out in a little stream that jerked outward about every second. I reached him and without thinking of what I was doing I kissed him. His blood filled my mouth. I swallowed it. I wanted him to speak to me. He groaned a little when I took him and kissed him, but he said nothing. (WAWSB, 234)

In this scene Aimée eschews rational thought and exacerbates Modin's torture, even in this final humiliation complicit in the death to which she has finally brought him. As he suffers, she demands from him affirmation of her desirability and dominance: 'Do you love me? [...] 'Say you love me Modin, please' (WAWSB, 234).⁵² Armah is perhaps invoking the Akan saying that love is death.

This scene is an exaggerated version of the earlier scene in which Sandra Jefferson, unthinkingly, almost has Modin killed. Just as Sandra confesses her affair to her husband in a rush of emotion, Aimée is, of course, 'responsible' for delivering Modin into the hands of the Frenchmen. She accepts a lift already rejected by Modin, and the driver, piqued at Modin's rejection drives off and returns with three men who proceed to participate in the scene described above. Modin is symbolically left in the desert, a prelude to *Two Thousand Seasons*, the first line of which reads: 'Springwater flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration' (TTS, ix). They leave him there to die.

⁵¹ Maja-Pearse describes Modin's death as a crucifixion, and evokes the Christian model. Thus, in a possible parody of Christian ritual, Aimée literally 'sucks the lifeblood from the African crucified on the altar of Europe's destructive urge' (p.14).

⁵² Curiously, Armah seems to be suggesting a kind of power invested in the action of Modin withholding his love. And even Maja-Pearse's 'snivelling Solo' in his impotence is given power as 'dispassionate narrator' (p. 21). Future researchers might be interested to pursue Armah's treatment of the African male against this seductively egocentric position.

II: The Myth of Black Women as Prophetess

Although Armah's portrayal of the white woman is harsh, I argue that he fails to engage in any meaningful way with the black woman in this novel. Because she is cast as destructive, it is easy to underestimate the coercive power with which Aimée is invested, and that underpins the story. It runs unchecked (until Solo confiscates the diaries, his most assertive action), and is surely a clear indicator of the conceptual gap between black and white women. As Aimée powers her way through the novel, Naita quietly disappears, leaving no forwarding address. Even in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah evokes the romantic effusiveness of the poets of Negritude, cheaply idealising and unrealistically elevating black womanhood. Kirsten Holst Petersen identifies the root of the fundamental problem generating the distance between these 'sisters under the skin'.⁵³ In post independence Africa, the urgency of resolving issues thrown up by a shared, colonial oppression, on the basis of colour is keener than that of seeking a more general gender-based identity. Kumari Jayawardena situates women of the majority world in the context of national liberation. She says: 'movements for women's emancipation and political participation took place within a context of nationalist struggles aimed at achieving political independence, asserting a national identity, and modernising society.'⁵⁴ The problem for black women is twofold. In the fight against political, economic and cultural imperialism, Petersen notes the manner in which her image has been 'conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence'.⁵⁵ Petersen also notes the difference, rather than similarity between the aspirations of black and white women, as observed at a conference at which the complexity of attempting to apply western feminist criticism within the African context became apparent. The title of her essay comes from a poem by the Malawian poet, Felix Mnthali, 'Letter to a Feminist Friend'. Mnthali invokes the shared history of humiliation and oppression at the hands of the West suffered equally

⁵³ Kirsten Holst Petersen, 'First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature', in Ashcroft and others, *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.251-55.

⁵⁴ Kumari Jayawardena, 'Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World' (1986) in 'Feminism', *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, ed. by Joel Krieger and others (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 298.

⁵⁵ Petersen, p.253.

by black women and men. It is this heritage that in his view binds African men and women close together; it is the power of these experiences that are more compelling than any appeals to a shared sisterhood or affinity under the banner of feminism:

My world has been raped

looted

and squeezed

by Europe and America

and I have been scattered

over three continents

to please Europe and America

AND NOW

the women of Europe and America

[...]

should [...] be allowed

to come between us?

You and I were slaves together

uprooted and humiliated together

Rapes and lynchings—

the lash of the overseer

and the lust of the slave owner

do your friends 'in the movement'

understand these things?

[...]

No, no, my sister,

my love,

first things first!

[...]

When Africa

at home and across the seas

is truly free

there will be time [...]

to share the cooking

and change the nappies—

till then,

first things first!⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Petersen, p.253.

And Mnthali is not alone. In African writing, the issue is further complicated by the fact that notable male African writers have been at the forefront of articulating the need for the recognition of black women's rights. Ngugi, for instance, has declared that there can be '[n]o cultural liberation without women's liberation'.⁵⁷ Armah is himself the product of a powerful matrilinear culture. Abdulrazak Gurnah points out the dearth of African women writers in the immediate post-independence period, which has in turn led to the male writers, in spite of their being gender conscious, presenting patriarchal structures as unproblematic, delaying the politicisation of gender in African literature.⁵⁸

Nowhere is the paradox of the black male/white female more significantly played out than in the real life examples that have influenced Armah. I have touched on Senghor and Negritude. Senghor exploited the image of the black woman, but in practice married a white woman. Even more crucial is Fanon, who famously said: 'about the woman of colour I know nothing about her', a statement that has undoubtedly affected the perception of black women's role in revolution. He proceeded to vote with his feet (*BSWM*, 179-180).⁵⁹ These men represent political and ideological black leadership. Armah has himself singled out Senghor's choice of a white partner as ill-judged, but the majority of first generation African leadership had interracial relationships.⁶⁰ And Armah curiously respects Fanon's identical choice. Even as Armah insists on the impossibility of such fusion in the novel, he is acutely aware that his own real life heroes failed dismally to separate the

⁵⁷ Petersen, p.254.

⁵⁸ Gurnah, p.v.

⁵⁹ It might simply mean he could find no written sources by or about her, as was available by and about white women. He quotes from two of these, Helene Deutsch's *The Psychology of Women* (1944-45) and Marie Bonaparte's *Female Sexuality* (1953).

⁶⁰ Kenyatta, for example, abandoned his British wife for the leadership. The intricacies of the relationships between the first crop of African leaders and the white women who helped them in their struggle while abroad is one of the major themes of Peter Abraham's *A Wreath For Udomo* (London: Faber, 1965). According to Jeremy Murray-Brown in *Kenyatta*, Abrahams based this novel on Jomo Kenyatta (p.222). An anonymous reviewer in *West Africa* (November 21, 1964), describes Udomo as 'a tissue of contradictions [who] tyrannically loves his black Africa, and he loves a white woman' (p.1315).

revolution they espoused from the women they loved.⁶¹ Aimée represents a truth that Armah cannot, after all, escape.

Armah is trapped in the paradox described by Cornel West in his analysis of black men and women with regard to the ways in which their sexuality is perceived, and the strategies they devise to contain it within white America. West says of black women:

The dominant myth of black female sexual prowess constitutes black women as desirable sexual partners – yet the central role of the ideology of white female beauty attenuates the expected conclusion. Instead of black women being the most sought after ‘objects of sexual pleasure’ – as in the case of black men – white women tend to occupy this ‘upgraded’, that is, degraded, position primarily because white beauty plays a weightier role in sexual desirability for women in racist patriarchal America.⁶²

It is only against this contradictory positioning that Armah’s portrayal of Aimée can begin to be understood in all its complexity. Armah’s apparently harsh picture of white women seems biased, even misogynistic. But is the focus on Aimée achieved at the expense of the erasure of alternative feminine presencing? Is it possible to read the proactive (if destructive) role given Aimée as an act of privileging, and is this achieved through the erasure of black women? (Naita vanishes, to reappear only as the absent recipient of Modin’s self-absorbed confidences). Black women have, of course, argued about the race specificity of western feminism – ‘the incapacity of the binary to accommodate “other others”, leading to the silencing of their experience and existence’.⁶³ It is such omission that acts as an important pointer to the conflict between the western feminist, and their counterparts from the South.⁶⁴

⁶¹ In ‘Armah: The Reluctant Novelist’ (1987), Igwe describes Armah’s own wife: ‘a Senegalese, [she] stands like a carved symbol of negritude: dark, tall, slim, with sharp penetrating eyes and sparkling teeth adorning a beautiful face and tiny braided hair’ (p.17). Interestingly, Léopold Senghor, whom he criticises for marrying a white woman was first married to a Guyanese, Ginette Eboué, but the marriage failed (‘Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-)’, *Postcolonial African Writers*, pp.425-437 (p.428).

⁶² Cornel West, p.129-130.

⁶³ Nada Elia, p.166.

⁶⁴ The African American woman writer, Alice Walker, speaks of ‘Womanism’ as the black woman’s answer to white women’s Feminism, insisting on the distinction to draw attention to the double yoke of racism and sexism lived by the former.

Modin and Aimée

Modin is caught up in the complex paradigm in which he is programmed to embrace the West. His life has systematically led him towards this intimate destiny so that to reject it is the aberration, not the natural action. He falls in love with Aimée:

Things had been changing in me. The disgust I had felt, and my decision to avoid personal involvements here, seemed merely a natural part of my convalescence. I felt well. Every time I looked at Aimée, physically, I found her attractive. In other areas we were already becoming friends. (WAWSB, 148)

Modin is initially repelled by Aimée's barrenness, but gradually, he writes in his diary:

The disgust I began to feel with Aimée is gone. A tenderness I cannot explain has replaced it. I thought I would put her out but in the end I just talked to her. I asked her if she really knew what she'd been doing. She cried and said she had always been told she was bad. She kept using the word monster. Her tears disturbed me. She is not someone I expect to cry easily, and I am always taken by surprise in such situations anyway. (WAWSB, 171)

He reads in his sexual conquest and fulfilment of Aimée the end of her quest, and it is on the basis of this misapprehension that he is sucked into her insatiable vortex. By triggering the life impulses back into her dormant centre Modin mistakenly thinks he has restored wholeness. Aimée exploits his inflated sense of his function, a notion not peculiar to him alone. And yet they share a peculiar tenderness that prompts the hardened Aimée to concede: 'If I was stupid I'd be in love' (WAWSB, 153). Even the sceptical Solo concedes the presence of a shared duality, possibly reciprocity. He says: 'In these notes I have seen a canny complementarity. His vision was a complement to hers, hers to his' (WAWSB, 94). But Aimée can no longer generate the self loss, idealism and romanticism that love demands. And Modin's personal love of Aimée is a public act of treachery. According to Booth,⁶⁵ it represents the draining of Africa's creative life blood into the destructive service of both Europe and America: 'Of what other use have Africa's tremendous energies been these many centuries but to serve the lusts of whites? [...] Ah, Africa' (WAWSB, 170). It is worth repeating here the first line of *Two Thousand Seasons*:

⁶⁵ Booth, p.61.

‘Springwater flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration’ (*TTS*, ix).⁶⁶

Modin satisfies an egotistical and cruel need in admitting the black woman, Naita – muse, lover, mother – into the intimacy of his liaison, even if only within the private pages of his diary. It is to her that he appeals for understanding and possibly forgiveness. The depth of his spiritual and emotional connection with Aimée is now the most powerful force he has ever experienced, and it is mutual. As he tells it:

Naita, that look between us is like another sense of touch.

[...] From her eyes to mine the connection was so real [...] its force frightened me. [...] It had so much power I was not certain it could all be good. [...] the same strength has possessed her. That energy [...] in its potency [...] came from us, but we had become merely a part of it. (*WAWSB*, 158-159)

The forces here are compelling and potentially destructive – ‘I was not certain it could all be good’. But it is the absence of reciprocity that eventually leads to Modin’s annihilation. Keenly disappointed by his failure to join the revolution in Laccryville, he withdraws into himself, leaving Aimée in control of the decision making and ultimately their (his) destiny. Where Modin’s leadership was tempered by love, Aimée’s dominance is characterised by its absence. Aimée betrays the ideal of the yang/yin. Solo, distressed at Modin’s blindness to Aimée’s destructive potential laments that: ‘His gentleness should not have gone to feed her hardness’ (*WAWSB*, 94). And what he cannot forgive himself and ‘cannot escape [is] the chagrin of not being able to stop (Modin’s) destruction’ (*WAWSB*, 94).

‘Love. A fusion, a confusion of the self with another self’ (*WAWSB*, 114) – this is the paradoxical attraction/repulsion relationship that drives and characterises the uneasy post-slavery and post-colonial relationship. The tension between the masculine and feminine principles and between black and white, prevents an easy fusion. Modin and Aimée, like

⁶⁶ This recalls the point made by Aimé Césaire at the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists (*Le Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs*), September 19, 1956 at the Sorbonne. He said, ‘The well-being of the colonised is desirable only in so far as this well-being enriches the dominant country, the necessity of which is simply to remain dominant’. Quoted in James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1961), p.39.

Sylvia and Solo before them, do not achieve harmony. The use of the sexual relationship as a motif for, or a method of resolving issues of race and gender produces palpable tensions even in those relationships that can be viewed as successful, and particularly in those that fail. Over the years the chichidodo, which first appears in *The Beautiful Ones* has held a fascination for me. It is the motif that underpins the 'postcolonial' struggle, encapsulating the contradictions, the ironies and the tragedy that is the colonial legacy. The chichidodo, according to Armah, is the bird that hates excrement but feeds on maggots from the lavatory. It is an effective metaphor for the relationship between Aimée and Modin.

*

Armah's thrust is clearly against the failure of African men to wrest their independence from the North, and in this respect he displays a near-contempt for the emasculated Modin and snivelling Solo that borders on the homophobic. Ultimately, Modin refuses to acknowledge what Aimée represents, while Solo has a nervous breakdown just contemplating the enormity of the work ahead. Visionaries once, they are destroyed. Armah 'see[s] in each happy black man carrion' (WAWSB, 217). In *Two Thousand Seasons*, having given up on the men and looking for a way out of the impasse arrived at in *Why Are We So Blest?*, Armah ascribes to black women the regenerative role of healing:

In the end it [...] was hot greed itself that destroyed the power of the men. [...] It was left to women to begin the work of healing. It was not any violence from women that cracked the rule of fathers. It was the fathers themselves who, splitting in their headlong greed for power [...] broke each others strength and left themselves impotent. (WAWSB, 14)

The personal and the political are curiously estranged even as they are inextricably intertwined.

Racism and Culture

The colonial world is a manichean world (WOE, 41)

Our victims know us by their scars and by their chains, and it is this that makes their evidence irrefutable (WOE, 12)

One of the dilemmas that Armah has clearly battled with in writing about racism is how to express the idea of oppression to an oppressed people conditioned to *think in the same way* about their oppression as does the oppressor. Like Fanon, it is the race factor that has perhaps brought into sharpest focus for Armah the meaning of being colonised, and black. Unlike Ghana, in America colour underpinned everything. In Ghana one could retreat into non-racialised rural spaces, impossible in America. The rural South was constructed in relation to slavery. Now unable to shake off this linkage, it developed into a racially confining enclave for blacks, who subsequently sought freedom and anonymity in the urban North.⁶⁷ The sociologist Henry F. Osborne says of race:

It has played a far larger part than either language or nationality in moulding the destinies of men; race *implies* heredity, and heredity *implies* all the moral, social and intellectual characteristics and traits which are the springs of politics and government.⁶⁸

It is in these implications that our interest lies. Another sociologist, Van den Berghe in *Race and Racism* describes racism as:

Any set of beliefs that organic, genetically transmitted differences (whether real or imagined) between human groups are intrinsically associated with the presence or absence of certain socially relevant abilities or characteristics, hence that such differences are a legitimate basis of invidious distinctions between groups socially defined as races.⁶⁹

Again, it is this marginal or grey area that concerns us most. Because of the different myths surrounding and mystifying difference, Western imperialism was able to exploit

⁶⁷ Dseagu, p.46. According to Dseagu, after the coup that toppled Nkrumah in 1966, Armah retreated from the urban center and went to teach at Navrongo Secondary School in the North of Ghana. This may have provided him with the idea for the location of the University at Manda in *Osiris Rising*.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p.14.

⁶⁹ Pierre van Den Berghe, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, 2nd edn (New York: John Wiley, 1978), p.11.

them. The myths usually focused on such negative aspects of the other as that they were lazy, stupid, not intelligent, dirty, immoral – all qualities from which the West wanted to distance itself. Such myths were widespread, and according to Matthew O. Buyu, became even more so with the birth of the novel in the eighteenth century.⁷⁰ Through the centuries there have been a number of different attempts to establish theories built on racial difference. Most of these speculations, be it the misappropriation of Darwin and Freud to myths regarding the physical prowess of black men, are, however, more pseudo- than really scientific.

Racism in America is the legacy of two critical events, both ultimately determined by colour: the first was the slaughter and removal of *red* peoples, the second the enslavement of *black* Africans. These grotesque events resulted in a nation securely built, socially and economically on racism. According to Banton, Abraham Lincoln the president credited with the emancipation of blacks after the American Civil War was, 'contrary to all evidence [...] offended when he was accused of abolitionism',⁷¹ emphatically declaring in 1858:

I am not, nor ever have been in favour of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office ... I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together, there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as *any other man* am in favour of having the superior position assigned to the white race.⁷²

⁷⁰ A thorough analysis of the growth of this racial myth in the European novel from its inception can be found in Chapters 1 and 2 of Matthew O. Buyu, 'Racial Intercourse in Joseph Conrad's African and Malayan Fiction', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex (1987). Chinua Achebe in 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' in *Hopes and Impediments* also discusses Conrad's complicity in the purveyance of these myths. In *Myth Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), Soyinka argues that even black writers, seduced by this myth, added to it (p. 108).

⁷¹ Michael Banton, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, 2nd edn (New York: John Wiley, 1967; repr. 1978), pp. 78-79.

⁷² In Banton, *Race and Racism*, p. 79.

In referring to 'any other man', Lincoln was appealing to a national consensus: but he was not thinking in terms of the black or American Indian men, and probably not of women.

Armah comes from a culture that still bears visible scars of slavery and colonialism. The extent to which these two major historical upheavals have impacted on the native people of Ghana has not been fully appreciated. One of the defining moments of Modin's life is described early in the text as a visit to Christiansborg Castle. The Castle was the final holding place on the continent before the slaves were shipped out on the middle passage. Boakye remarks on the thickness of the walls in the small room commanding the larger spaces where the slaves were held, and hence on the factor they protected. From this important room, an equally important function was performed. This is how the guide explains it:

The factor – he was a very important person, the one whose job it was to get the slaves from inland, and keep them in a place near here till there were enough. When the Europeans were ready to buy, the slaves were brought into the castle. This room is where the factor, the slave dealer, stayed while bargaining with the Europeans about the price of the slaves. You have seen the thickness of the walls. You have seen how narrow the sighthole is. The factor could see the slaves and bargain with the Europeans for the price he wanted for them, but the slaves could not see him. That protected the factor in case some slaves escaped, or there was a rebellion here. (WAWSB, 63)

The teacher breaks the silence maintained about factorship by asking a funny question:

'The families of the factors – are they still around?'

The guide said: 'It is not part of my job to talk about such things'. (WAWSB, 63)

If in Africa the complicity of the factor has been submerged, in America, he has borne the brunt of black resentment, and been a convenient scapegoat for whites. Today in America, however, the urgent question remains what to do with the not-Americans.

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Nowhere in the entire body of African writing is the truth of Ngugi's statement regarding

Fanon's influence – that African writing in the sixties was only a series of imaginative footnotes to Fanon – more clearly demonstrated than in the works of Armah. It is an intellectual debt Armah acknowledges: 'That Fanon influenced my thinking is a matter of course'.⁷³ Of equal importance is the influence that Fanon exerted over the reception of Armah's writing. Fanon legitimised protest. Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* was acknowledged even by Armah's African critics to be unapologetically racist, as was *Two Thousand Seasons*. But they were also read as a necessary prelude to reconstruction and regeneration. Appraising *Two Thousand Seasons*, Soyinka places Armah's work within a sub-genre concerned with the 'process of desuetude', of whittling away at old myths and recreating new ones. He stresses that context is crucial:

Failure to see the process of racial retrieval in one comprehensive whole, to see the process of anti-colonialism as one which ends with far greater ramifications for society *in depth* than the rejection of *one* self-assertive set of values, suggests a lack of faith in, or a half-hearted attempt to re-discover and re-examine the matrix of society that preceded the violent distortions.⁷⁴

Soyinka writes in one of the most quoted critical affirmations of Armah:

Two Thousand Seasons is not a racist tract; the central theme is far too positive and dedicated and its ferocious onslaught on alien contamination soon falls into place as a preparatory exercise for the liberation of the mind. A clean receptive mind is a prerequisite for its ideological message, and there is no question that this work is designed for the particular audience of Armah's own race.⁷⁵

The novel is seen ultimately as 'a passionate, often beautiful testament of socio-racial faith',⁷⁶ as 'secular and humane'.⁷⁷ This is in contrast to the ironic reference to neo-colonial states in which institutionalised racism has gone undercover, camouflaged as

⁷³ Armah, 'One Writer's Education', p.1752.

⁷⁴ Soyinka, p.108.

⁷⁵ Soyinka, pp.11-12. This statement now carries the authoritative weight of one of Africa's nobel laureates.

⁷⁶ Bai Kisogie, 'A Plague on Both Your Houses: Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*', *Transition*, 45: 9, ed. by Wole Soyinka (Kampala, 1974), p.75.

⁷⁷ Kisogie, p.75; Soyinka, p.114.

'democratic and humane'. The phrase is Fanon's.⁷⁸ The context is that radically influenced by readings of Fanon.⁷⁹ Soyinka situates Armah's novels within the paradigm of Jean-Paul Sartre's anti-racist racism: as a huge and violent response to a huge and violent crime. He does not neglect the downside, nevertheless, acknowledging that:

there still remains a feeling of discomfort over the actual language of confrontation and the dramatic devices in which the victims of the author's ire are trapped. [But] Armah's work is intensely committed to the substitution of another view of active history, with re-creating humanist perspectives as inspirational alternatives to existing society. His vision consciously [...] frees itself of borrowed philosophies in its search for a unifying, harmonising ideal for a distinctive humanity.⁸⁰

More recently, however, Abdulrazak Gurnah insists on the need to revise this reading of Armah.⁸¹ He queries the climate that allowed aspects of Armah's work to be approved while they glided over the argument that to him so clearly underpins the novel. He says:

it is remarkable that writing such as Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) and his grotesque novel *Two Thousand Seasons* (as well as Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*), should have been able to speak with such racist reductiveness, and yet so self-righteously, without any serious protest being made.⁸²

If 'serious protest' was not registered, it is because Armah reflected the mood of the time, itself one of protest. What is remarkable is that within such a short period it is possible to forget the racially charged and oppressive climate in which these novels were written. I read in Gurnah's outrage the success of two things: one, postcolonial theory has enabled

⁷⁸ Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', p.126.

⁷⁹ Today, Maja-Pearse is scathing in his criticism of Soyinka for applying the term 'humane' to Armah's project, even though Soyinka does concede that 'the humane sensibility tends to recoil a little [...] there is no redeeming grace, no event is permitted to establish an exception' (*Soyinka*, 111). I note that *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) was published soon after Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1971), and Soyinka's appraisal of *Two Thousand Seasons* should be read within the context of its comparison to this text. The mood prevalent at the time (and which Gurnah now queries) was one of intensive subversion and revisionism.

⁸⁰ Soyinka, p.110.

⁸¹ Abdulrazak Gurnah, 'Introduction', in *Essays in African Writing: A Re-Evaluation 1* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), pp.v-xiv.

⁸² Gurnah, p.xii.

the critical interrogation of the paradoxes presented by historical oppression. It is no longer sufficient to 'intone the colonial litany'; the debate is now concerned with ways in which to manage the present.⁸³ The other is the critical distance provided by migration which has enabled Gurnah himself to move beyond the horror which in reality was, of course, more horrific than anything Armah might imagine. In a perverted sense, writing about the legacy of colonialism has become a matter for more concern than what colonialism itself actually *did*.

In the 'Introduction' to this collection of essays, Gurnah presents Adewale Maja-Pearse as starting the process of re-evaluation of Armah's work in 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Harbingers of Death'. Adewale Maja-Pearse says of Armah's vision:

It is racist [...] his admirers notwithstanding, and racist in the sense that his vision is exclusive *in human terms*: black people, African people, are different from white people, European people, and this difference is not merely one of colour but a profounder difference of sensibility, of which colour is an outward symbol.⁸⁴

He notes the strategies that have been devised to engage with the work especially by non-African critics. Contrasting the approaches taken by two Western writers, Robert Fraser in *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* and Derek Wright in *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction*, he reads Wright's concentration on form and structure (and indigenous history) as an avoidance of confrontation with the potentially explosive issue of race. To him, Fraser is the braver of the two, striking a balance by engaging equally with the motivation behind the writing of Armah's novels, as well as the narratives and their literary strategies.

Maja-Pearse insists that 'any racialist vision is reductive, whatever its ostensible justification' and protests at Soyinka's application of the term 'humane' to Armah's

⁸³ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.3.

⁸⁴ Adewale Maja-Pearse, 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Harbingers of Death', in Gurnah, p.17. Maja-Pearse is of interracial parentage.

project.⁸⁵ Part of his concern is that Armah does not attempt to penetrate 'the verities of white existence', just as Soyinka argued for Armah that:

The quest for and the consequent assertion of the black cultural psyche began as a result of the deliberate propagation of untruths by others, both for racist motives and to disguise their incapacity to penetrate *the complex verities of black existence*.⁸⁶

The result of this is that Armah, perfectly placed and specially suited to the task of handling the subject is ultimately unable to 'transcend the same sickness that demands of him a true vision'.⁸⁷ Armah demonstrates perhaps more clearly than any writer the intense scarring of the colonial subject against the presumption that he can rise above the uglinesses of colonialism at will. Maja-Pearse demands of him a 'true' vision, one presumably untouched by the ugliness that characterises colonialism. Much is demanded of the African writer,⁸⁸ who, like everybody else is subject to the same violent legacy as well as neuroses they attempt to transcend. How *can* one respond in a manner seen to be fair to the enormity of the legacies of Slavery and Colonialism in the same space in which these events once dominated and continue to control. How, but by overturning the self-same structures which have consolidated their hold over time and that continue to hold sway.

The 'African American'

In 'Fanon, Oppression and Resentment', Floyd Hayes situates the African American within the structures of institutionalised underprivileging. He says:

As historic bearers of racist oppression, black people have had to struggle with the long

⁸⁵ Maja-Pearse, p.22.

⁸⁶ Soyinka, p.107.

⁸⁷ Maja-Pearse, p.22.

⁸⁸ Chinua Achebe, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', *African Writers on African Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp.7-13. Achebe has himself addressed this issue considerably, in such essays as above, and also in 'Africa and her Writers' and 'The Novelist as Teacher' both in *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, and in 'The Writer and His Community' in *Hopes and Impediments*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988). In 1985, Ngugi addressed the same issue in 'The Writer in a Neo-colonial State' in *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: EAPH, 1993), pp.60-75. The titles of these essays suggest just how over-determined the function of the African writer is.

nightmare of living desperate lives as outsiders within the crucible of western civilization. In the particular case of the United States of America, the native African-American experience is unique, for its origins are characterized not by immigration but by chattel slavery. Moreover, no war of independence liberated African Americans, thereby creating their own sovereign nation-state. Rather, native African Americans have remained largely marginalized, ambiguously and simultaneously excluded from and included in the America political community.⁸⁹

In *Why Are We So Blest?*, Dr Earl Lynch is just such a man. He is married to Virginia, a white woman, a fact that within his context represents the triumph over repressive race laws that had hitherto prohibited interracial marriage. But his marriage also represents his need for affirmation and acceptance by the white race. Indeed, his position is paradoxical on both the personal and professional levels. His character personifies the contempt that Armah feels for the American system, particularly its tendency to exclude; but at the same time Armah treats his attempts to integrate with denigration and disdain. Lynch is clearly not accepted by his academic colleagues. They whisper behind his back that, 'in twenty-five years perhaps he might qualify as the first black full professor at Harvard' (*WWSB*, 22). This is qualification based not on academic competence, but on white favour; on racial type.

Armah ironically uses that 'whatchmecallit', the Ananse to reflect on Lynch's position in relation to the establishment. Ananse is described in the novel:

The design was a mask: a pained human face, a huge head, huge bulbous, all-seeing eyes, pained distorted ears open to all possible sounds, superimposed on a shrivelled mouth and nostrils cramped with hard control. The limbs – emaciated, reduced to spindly lines – were attached directly to the human spiderhead. The design gave the creature no chest, no stomach, no groin. From its existence of pain the faculties lodged in those organs had been subtracted by the carver. There were just eight crawly, elongated little limbs about the spider face. (*WWSB*, 22)

Ananse is the trickster in the oral narratives of the Akan. Efua Sutherland describes it as a kind of 'everyman, artistically exaggerated and distorted to serve society as a medium of

⁸⁹ Floyd W. Hayes, III, 'Fanon, Oppression and Resentment: The Black Experience in the United States' in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.11-23 (p.15).

self-examination'.⁹⁰ Ignorant of the meaning of the mask, Lynch, whose attitude to Africa is that it can teach him nothing, arrogantly claims it to be meaningless. He cannot not see himself reflected back in this caricature. The idea that he might be reflected in this ball of pain is inconceivable. He therefore distances himself from it and reduces its potentiality by containing it within its materiality, as a meaningless artefact collected from just somewhere, 'I forget where' in West Africa (*WAWSB*, 23). Its full irony therefore eludes him, and he fails to be self-critical or reflective.

Lynch's self-delusional ignorance is destructive, and he is consequently referred to as a 'suicide' (*WAWSB*, 21). He is of the American system, but is tragically rejected by the same system. Modin says of Lynch: 'That man, a black man irretrievably caught in total whiteness, is humanity at its most destroyed' (*WAWSB*, 132). Remarking on the strategies that Lynch has resorted to for survival, there is pity and contempt for his pathetic yet futile efforts to preserve a sense of dignity. His 'rebellion' consists of a 'secret' arsenal, a private library that contains books he perceives as so subversive he describes them as 'dynamite' (*WAWSB*, 133). These books are equally available openly. Next is his secret ideological weapon, Marxism. Referred to here as 'the whitest of philosophies', Modin remarks: 'What utter loneliness: to think Marxism was his secret discovery' (*WAWSB*, 133). Armah's assessment of Marxism in 'Masks and Marx' is that it is irrelevant to the African revolution. In the sixties, Marxism was, nevertheless, *the* revolutionary solution to the overthrow of Western imperial power. Lynch is trapped in a cul de sac.

If you see destruction ahead, and you know there's destruction behind, it's no mere tropism to go ahead. There are more directions than ahead and behind. Minds are for finding direction.
(*WAWSB*, 133-4)

It is to the use of this faculty, intelligence, that Armah appeals in *Osiris Rising*.

⁹⁰ Quoted in 'Efua Theodora Sutherland' (1924-1996), *Postcolonial African Writers*, pp.455-459, (p.456).

Chapter Eight

'Yet will I leave a remnant'

THE IMPACT OF SETTLEMENT IN KENYA

One of the most significant differences between Kenya and Ghana is that of colonial settlement. Ngugi grew up in a settler country, and at the very heart of the settled area. Armah did not. What did this mean for the development of the two writers? In Chapter 2 I discussed the impetus behind, and nature of colonial settlement in Kenya, and how native response to the injustices of settlement culminated in the war of liberation known as Mau Mau. The fragmentation of Ngugi's history, of family, even future all stem from the colonial incursion into his home: it is a result of the settlement of Kenya. *Matigari* is the novel in which Ngugi returns to this site in the knowledge that it is 'not yet uhuru.'

I have already touched on the reasons leading to the settlement of Kenya, but Trzebinski's reminder of the circumstances obtaining at the time helps situate this chapter. At the turn of the century, the Kenya-Uganda railway was constructed with the aim of opening out communication and hence attracting trade. But this proved to be a miscalculation. The almost 600 mile track cost £10 000 a mile to build, and no trade appeared to be forthcoming. The Foreign Office had to justify this kind of expenditure to the British taxpayer. And so the idea of inviting settlers to come by enticing them with unimaginable adventure and the promise of cheap, choice land, close to the railway, was conceived. Through the development of an Agricultural industry, loosely mediated and assisted, the British Government hoped to recoup some of this expenditure. Kenya was subsequently marketed as an attractive area for European settlement, with an agreeable climate and agricultural potential quite similar to the best available at home.

The politics of settlement, even amongst the settlers themselves, was complicated. The first group who came before the wars regarded themselves as true pioneers, carving out 'a wilderness, establishing a new society'.¹ Those who came afterwards in search of fresh challenges and adventures are quite often regarded as a profligate lot, with lax morals and drink and drug habits. They are the infamous inhabitants of the so-called 'happy valley'. It is from this group that Berman and Lonsdale, who analyse their nature and impact, get the title for their study of settled Kenya: *Unhappy Valley*. All sought escape from bureaucratic control in their own countries.

Then there were the demobilised soldiers from World Wars I and II. The soldier resettlement schemes devised to assist the process of rehabilitation were particularly suited those to whom peace had become an unlivable anti-climax. Ngugi in *Weep Not Child* (1964) deftly captures their dilemma in a description of Howard, an ex-soldier turned settler who had been permanently destabilised by the experience of World War I:

After years of security at home, he had been suddenly called to arms and he had gone to the war with the fire of youth that imagines war a glory. But after four years of blood and terrible destruction, like many other young men he was utterly disillusioned by the 'peace'. He had to escape. East Africa was a good place. Here was a big tract of wild country to conquer. (WNC, 33)

To native Kenyans, the settlers were nevertheless perceived as a homogeneous group: they were all Europeans.

Because it was so common, the colonial experience is often viewed, quite erroneously, as an inevitable 'rite of passage' in studies of post-independence African writing; as something that perversely 'prepared' Africans to deal with the present. Most of the African writing done in the first two decades of independence, based on this assumption popularised the view of independence as a prelude to prosperity, for which the new nations had in some way been prepared by colonisation. Inevitably, these writers ended up disillusioned by the failure of independence to 'deliver'. Neil

¹ Errol Trzebinski, *The Kenya Pioneers: The Frontiersmen of an Adopted land* (London: Mandarin, 1991), p.4. Trzebinski has analysed in depth the different groups of White settlers that came to Kenya, impressively chronicling their hardships and triumphs.

Lazarus captures the essence of the expectation read into this event, and particularly the potential with which it was invested. He cites Ngugi:

Kenya regained her Uhuru from the British on 12 December 1963. A minute before midnight, lights were put out at the Nairobi stadium so that people from all over the country and the world who had gathered there for the midnight ceremony were swallowed by the darkness. In the dark, the Union Jack was quickly lowered. When next the lights came on the new Kenya flag was flying and fluttering, and waving, in the air. The police band played the new National Anthem and the crowd cheered continuously when they saw the flag was black, and red and green. The cheering sounded like one intense cracking of many trees, falling on the thick mud in the stadium.²

What Lazarus describes as 'the single "lost" moment of political independence'³ marks, for Ngugi, the beginning of national identity, of 'Kenya'. Ngugi, always in search of 'scraps, patches, rags of daily life [to] turn [...] into the signs of a coherent national culture',⁴ insists on the usefulness of an inventive history that is patriotic and progressive. It is this myth that provides the 'cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism' to validate itself.⁵ The imagined perception of Africa as the dark continent is symbolically subverted when the light is turned off, as if to shut down an unpleasant historical, *colonial*, episode, and switched on again to symbolise a bright, new and hopeful start. Although the melody of unification, the National Anthem, and the flag, essential emblems of national identity,⁶ are as yet new, and unfamiliar,⁷ in this moment they replace the Union Jack, and 'God Save the Queen'.⁸

It is against this background that Ngugi wrote in his earlier novels. Armah too draws

² Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.2.

³ Charles Cantalupo, 'Introduction', *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1995), p.2.

⁴ Bhabha, p.145. Carol Sicherman in the article 'Ngugi and Kenyan History' also points to the fact that while in prison, Ngugi researched more widely on Kenyan history and took the opportunity to fill in gaps in his previous scholarship. His nationalistic outlook broadened considerably even as his focus appears to have narrowed.

⁵ Quoted in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.142.

⁶ Bryan Appleyard, 'Monarchy in the UK' in 'The Sunday Times Magazine', 21 April, 1996, 32.

⁷ Bhabha, p.9.

⁸ Elijah Muriithi, an old boy of the Alliance School (1975-1980) remembers 'God Save the Queen' (no.318) from the Church Hymnary, King James Version at the Alliance. It is a statement of belief in the Empire.

on assumptions of the significance of this event in *The Beautiful Ones*, against which the critique of the post independence Ghanaian story is told. They know now the emphasis is unjustified. The potential of the moment to transform was compromised, and my examination of *Petals of Blood*, and *Why Are We So Blest?* show Ngugi's and Armah's literary struggles to find different ways of thinking about independence. These novels suggest a more pragmatic approach to handling the transition and engaging with imperialism. Ultimately, of course, Armah's project has been the panoramic recreation on an epic scale of an essentially African past and projected future free from the paralysing influence of the coloniser. But the Kenyan context can not provide a similar platform from which Ngugi's imagination may soar.

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In 1986, now in exile in London, Ngugi has moved to the 'centre'. It is from here that he returns to the problems he had taken on board twenty-two years before.

Geographical and historical distance from the subject enable different methods and perspectives. By avoiding the techniques of western realism, Ngugi is able to configure the narrative as a confrontation between the dominant outsider wanting in, and the owner of the land, paradoxically still dispossessed. (It can be seen, after all, as one of the triumphs of divide and rule, of the unacknowledged apartheid of Kenya, that four distinctive groups of people continue to inhabit the same space, while living in disparate worlds). Ngugi's protagonist in *Matigari* is an extension of the Ngotho of *Weep Not, Child*. And yet he is faced with a contradiction.

When we first meet Ngotho, he is a peace loving man, who lives for the land. Ngotho is overwhelmed by the massive force of Imperialism, and thankfully maintains contact with his own land albeit in the much reduced status of labourer, in the hope that with the coming of independence, the land will revert back to the rightful owners. As is already apparent to his son, with whom he subsequently argues interminably, more is clearly demanded of him. But he shies away from the inevitable confrontation with Mr Howard. Soon, however, comes betrayal by Mr Howard which ends in the death of Ngotho's son. It is through this personal loss and betrayal that Ngugi transforms this

man into the avenging Matigari, at the same time retaining a sense of continuity and credibility. The politicisation of Ngotho can be understood against the background of a struggle for survival in which the Kenyan freedom fighter was represented as barbaric, irrational and murderous. Ngotho is none of these things. It is the emasculation he experiences at the hands of Mr Howard that provokes his transmutation into the freedom fighting Matigari. It is not simply a question of chronological development, it is rather a strategic tool, to focus attention on the process of change.

Matigari extends Ngotho's story only in so far as he demonstrates the hardened resolve that comes with the knowledge that Mr Howard is here to stay. Ngotho turns squatter on Mr Howard's land, his devoted labour an added bonus to Mr Howard. In a final symbolic confrontation with Mr Howard/Settler Williams, Ngotho/Matigari does what he should have done from the beginning: he fights honourably for the rights to his land.⁹

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The further Ngugi has written away from colonialism, the more he has found that it is the very basis on which Kenya is founded. He has become increasingly didactic in his attempts to break the impasse. In *Petals of Blood*, he attempted to do this by constructing an ideological solution, in direct opposition to the capitalist paradigm operational in Kenya. *Matigari* represents a notable shift in that it eschews the notion of independence as having been achieved, and instead queries the continuities in colonial patterns and especially the persistence of land alienation. Ngugi constructs a revolution, refusing to move falsely forward, or to extend the debate until he has dealt with the contradictions of colonially constructed Kenya. Before this dialogue can begin, he must go back to the immediate post independence past in order to understand the present and imagine a future. Ironically, as he points out in his 'Note on the English Translation' in the text, *Matigari* proved to be prophetic and in a sense even made things happen.

⁹ As Kenyatta has pointed out in *Facing Mount Kenya*, an honourable fight was made impossible because of the deceitful means through which colonial concessions were won (p.37).

The whole concept of settlement is best appreciated in light of the settlers' own position in relation to the lands they left and to their adopted land. Their memory of 'home' is paradoxically invested with desire, and has retained an acutely healthy centrality to all issues to do with the new areas of settlement. A sense of imperialistic hegemony continues to permeate the relationship of these settlers to their adopted lands. How can imperial settlement be justified? How should we approach such absurd notions as that the new lands were 'unoccupied', and that the people that happened to live alongside (?) these empty spaces could be co-opted into working on these same lands, as labourers, for the new owners? The colonial period overlapped with that of slavery, and it is against this backdrop that it must be understood. Slavery proved a damaging precursor.

After slavery, colonialism '[is] the most crucial event in African history'.¹⁰ The racism on which it was based is the great issue of this century. And colonial settlement, everywhere it has occurred, has exacerbated the problem, unarguably causing permanent social disruption and significant geopolitical changes. It took place on the terms of the colonisers, even as it transformed itself into the uneasy peace that characterised the transformation of initial settlement into a deceptively benign, yet perpetually provocative, presence. The colonial presence was, however, always potentially explosive and post independence Kenya is inevitably marked by this persistent nervous tension. Patrick Brantlinger in 'Victorians and Africans' seeks an explanation for the myth of the inferiority of the dark races, on which the pattern of race relations of the settlers was based. He cites Nancy Stepan's interrogation of the development of racism and her engagement with the fundamental question underpinning this phenomenon. She queries 'why it was that, just as the battle against slavery was being won by the abolitionists, the war against racism was being lost'. As she goes on to say, 'The Negro was legally freed by the Emancipation Act of 1833, but *in the British mind* he was still mentally, morally and physically a slave'.¹¹ The settlers, some of whom had travelled northwards from Southern Africa, where African

¹⁰ Trzebinski, p.2.

¹¹ Patrick Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans: the Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', in 'Race', *Writing and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp.185-222, (p.187).

labour was co-opted, counted on having African labour because they simply could not manage to work the large farms on their own. Hence taxes were imposed in order to co-opt local labour.

Even as the settlers consolidated their position in Africa, the idea of decolonisation was gaining popularity in Britain where public opinion continued to exert pressure on Government. Soon, the idea that settlers 'were merely exploiting that which was not theirs and that the Africans were the real owners of the country' became more widespread, causing genuine consternation among the settlers, who had worked hard and felt entitled to be a part of the country. One of them, Cranworth, wrote in 1958 that 'this is the most outstanding change that I have seen in fifty years, and I find it as unpleasant as it is unexpected'. According to Trzebinski, most of the settlers were 'puzzled and hurt' by this change.¹² In earlier times they had been praised for their enterprise and hard work. One of their most treasured memories was of a visit to Kenya in 1909 by the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. He told them:

You young people are doing a great work of which you have every right to be proud. You have brought freedom where there was slavery. You are bringing health where there was disease. You are bringing food where there was famine. You are bringing peace where there was continual war. Be proud of yourselves, for the time is coming when the world will be proud of you.¹³

Their mission had been clear – to build the Empire. It was a mission of which they were proud. They had in time consolidated their position by creating a powerful, highly centralised monopoly network that ensured their control of agricultural production and distribution, which formed the basis on which the Kenya economy was established.¹⁴ Because the process was gradual, they could neither understand just how the tide had turned, nor share in the optimism of the indigenous Kenyans as a result of this shift in mood which only came to manifest itself as organised anti-settlement action at a later date. It had not occurred to them that the expansionist

¹² Trzebinsky, p.8.

¹³ Trzebinsky, p.8.

¹⁴ See Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

policies of Empire were not universally acceptable, or that they could be vulnerable to challenge.

*

Assumptions about the meaning of an independent Kenya are questioned as *Matigari* sets out to show up the illusion of independence. The name itself has several meanings: firstly, the literal meaning that signifies the dregs or leftovers of a meal.¹⁵ Within the context of the struggle for independence, *Matigari* signifies a more complex configuration. In Gititi Gitahi's analysis of the function to which Ngugi puts the term, it embodies not only 'the people', as seen at the present moment. In a compound sense, it also carries their past experiences, and contains 'the memory of the peoples struggle'.¹⁶ Always concerned with the inconsistencies of independence, Ngugi attempts to arrive at an understanding of the vibrancy of this myth even as all evidence points to the continuities and inequalities that maintain the power relations between those once colonised, and those who colonised them. Ngugi revisits and reconfigures the struggle for independence, showing casing the intervening years as tragic in their consolidation and perpetuation of the colonial dynamic. In this context *Matigari* can be read as a project whose aim is the interventionist reexamination of that period of transition when a revolutionary upheaval was poised, but evidently failed to occur. It is in this sense that Simon Gikandi describes *Matigari* as 'a trope mediating the colonial past and the post colonial moment'.¹⁷ *Matigari* functions in this interstitial space to reenact what should have been done, in this way calling attention to the incompleteness of the project of liberation. And as *Matigari* exits the text, Ngugi does not provide closure: as Muriuki unearths the weaponry from under the Mugumo tree, ready to resume the struggle, victory can only be imagined as something of the future.

The circumstances surrounding Ngugi's return to this postcolonial moment are, of course, significant. In the decade before he wrote *Matigari*, he had acted on two

¹⁵ Simon Gikandi, 'The Epistemology of Translation: Ngugi, *Matigari* and the Politics of Language', *Research in African Literatures*, 22 (Winter 1991), 161-7, (p.161).

¹⁶ Ann Biersteker, '*Matigari ma Njiruungi*: What Grows from Leftover Seeds of "Chat" Trees?' in, *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo, pp.141-158 (p.147).

¹⁷ Gikandi, 'The Epistemology', p.161.

momentous decisions taken much earlier. He had decided to stop writing in English and start writing in Gikuyu. I have already discussed the long and circuitous, but now keenly critical and conscious route by which he returned to his people, his community and his language. After a long and rich preparation, he was determined to use the people's language, and theatre as his means of focusing on contemporary problems as far as was possible.¹⁸

This proved complicated. As he has himself said many times, while he was criticising imperialism in his writings, he was celebrated as a fine Kenyan writer. But the same criticism, now levelled at local government, met with stern censure. Away from the urban, bourgeois comforts, life had not changed significantly for those who had been at the very heart of the fight for independence. Whereas Ngugi had harboured hope on the wave of the excitement caused by independence, his disillusion was now keen, having witnessed the betrayal of promises made on such issues as land, social issues like employment, and the fairer distribution of wealth. If the earlier inequalities were founded on imperial structures, with their overthrow there was still nothing to suggest that a change had occurred. Ngugi's critique of the local takeover is tinged with the bitterness of betrayal by kin.

In *Matigari*, Ngugi, now a writer in exile, undergoes a radical reassessment of the circumstances of independence, starting by addressing the issue of land, on which he undoubtedly feels all else rests. In a curious reversal, while in London, Ngugi maintained his use of the Gikuyu language to write *Matigari*. This is both an ironical, and cruel inversion of what Ngugi had been struggling to achieve. He wanted to communicate with his people by living amongst them and speaking to them in their own language, eschewing the alienating distance that the use of a foreign medium bestowed on the African writer writing in English. While in Kenya he was acutely aware of the paradox of writing in English for people the majority of whom did not

¹⁸ Simon Gikandi, 'Travelling Theory: Ngugi's Return to English', *Researches in African Literature*, 31: 2 (Summer 2000), here points out the near impossibility of the task Ngugi set himself. He draws attention to Ngugi's post-declaration publications in English, such as *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, and a recent essay / lecture at Clare Hall, Cambridge, published in *Researches in African Literature*, 31: 1 (Spring 2000), 'Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship'.

speak the language. Now in London, the irony of writing *Matigari* in Gikuyu while marooned in the linguistic prisonhouse of English, the very language he sought to liberate himself from, cannot have been lost on him. And yet it confirms the argument that Ngugi himself had set out in the first place, and that forced him away from the novel as his preferred form to seek other mediums through which to communicate. Not only was writing a solitary act, far removed from its oral African antecedents that thrived on interaction, interplay, and intervention to enrich and inform the very act of creation. It also set the writer apart from those for whom he wrote, splintering communication by establishing an artificial distance. And yet Ngugi *did* write, producing a text that defied the geographical rift and impacted so resoundingly in Kenya that it was taken to represent the man, and its arrest ordered.

Employing the critical judgement afforded by time and distance, Ngugi sets *Matigari* in the post-independence era, but inserts it at that very troubled juncture of struggle. Here the limits of possibility have not yet been fixed by the cynicism of knowledge. *Matigari* takes on Settler Williams and his servant John Boy. With hindsight, the need to destroy the enemy in order to ensure liberation is clear. Any conciliatory action short of a complete break guarantees the neo-colonial and other marginalising continuities. It is in this sense that *Matigari* carries a harsh message not only for contemporary Kenya, but for other countries still struggling to stop the downward spiral away from hope and future. Colonialism was not a historical mistake. Liberation will not be an accident, marked by the symbolic lowering and hoisting of a flag. In a significant departure from *A Grain of Wheat*, where this ceremony symbolises beginnings, in *Matigari* Ngugi starts from an end point: the slaying of Settler Williams is the key to the reclamation of independence. The failure to visualise the magnitude of the task has time and again resulted in building upon a false premise.

Mjenga nyumba halele, yulele ukimbizani

Muyaka

(The builder of a house does not sleep there, he sleeps outside on the verandah)¹⁹

There have been many different readings of *Matigari* and I do not intend to rehearse all of them here.²⁰ But what emerges almost as a general consensus is that it is a sophisticated allegory that draws from, and brings together, the most important issues that Ngugi has engaged with since the publication of his first novel. The biblical idea of a remnant is carried in the title and enacted in the text by Matigari. In the epigraph of *Petals of Blood* is prefigured the mythical return of an avenging remnant, a 'matigari':

And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and he that
sat thereon had a bow: and there was given unto him a crown:
and he came forth conquering, and to conquer...

While the invocation of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse may suggest the ultimate salvation of the Second Coming after a period of violent struggle and destruction, in *Matigari* salvation is as yet deferred. As Matigari disappears, and Muriuki (meaning 'resurrection and rebirth'),²¹ prepares to take over, a riderless horse 'gallop[s] past him' (*Mat*, 3). This calls in notions of disorder and lack of control. But Ngugi refuses to allow his horse to be pinned down: 'No, I have no idea what it means [...] It could be anything!'²² With the riderless horse, Ngugi seems to suggest that salvation will not come from the outside. The rider must come from the community, which must wake up to its mission. As Matigari is thrown off, Muriuki girds himself for return.

Although Ngugi insists that the story is not set within any specific culture or country, Ann Biersteker, for instance, having attempted to deviate from populist readings with a purely socialist reading of the novel admits the impossibility of isolating the story

¹⁹ This translation, based on that by Mohamed Abdulaziz is cited from Ann Biersteker's '*Matigari ma Njiruungi*', p.142

²⁰ See Biersteker for a discussion of the different readings of *Matigari*.

²¹ Ann Biersteker in Cantalupo, p.150.

²² 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o', *Talking With African Writers: Interviews by Jane Wilkinson* (London: James Currey, 1990 and 1992), pp.123-135, (p.134)

from its 'Christian and Kenyan terms'.²³ In one sense, *Matigari* can be read as the culmination of a singular historical process, and in this way it fits in chronologically with Ngugi's literary development. It focuses the interrogation of the post independence Kenyan story, at the tail end of what can be perceived as an 'age of hope.' Three decades after independence, it represents a revolution come full circle – a return to the war of liberation that has in the intervening period collapsed into compromise with colonialism, and the disenfranchisement, particularly of those who actually fought in the war. The novel signals the urgent need for a reappraisal, dismantling and restructuring of the system if it is to be saved from impending collapse.

Matigari is structured around the idea of reclamation, a harking back to that single 'lost' moment of independence that Lazarus identifies. Ngugi develops this idea by liberally employing the techniques of orature, particularly repetition and refrain. *Matigari*'s analysis of what has happened to him and his country is presented directly, in the dramatic confrontation between settler and un-settled. Ngugi repeats it often (*Mat*, 63, 96, 97, 113), building up the frustration and marginalisation felt by *Matigari*. This version of the story as told to Muriuki and Ngaruro is starkly compelling:

You see, I built this house with my own hands. But Settler Williams slept in it and I would sleep outside on the veranda. I tended the estates that spread around the house for miles. But it was Settler Williams who took home the harvest. I was left to pick anything he might have left behind. I worked all the machines in all the industries, but it was Settler Williams who would take the profits to the bank and I would end up with the cent that he flung my way. I am sure that you already know all this. I produced everything on that farm with my own labour. But all the gains went to Settler Williams. What a world! A world in which the tailor wears rags, the tiller eats wild berries, the builder begs for shelter. One morning I woke up from the deep sleep of many years, and I said to him: Settler Williams, you who eat what another has sown, hear now the sound of the trumpet and the sound of the horn of justice. The tailor demands his clothes, the tiller his land, the worker the produce of his sweat. The builder wants his house back. You have hands of your own, you cruel and greedy one. Go build your own! Who deceived you into thinking that the builder has no eyes, no head and no tongue? (*Mat*, 22)

²³ Biersteker, p.143.

With the sentence, 'I am sure you already know all this' Ngugi invites the reader to acknowledge their complicity in the story. This story is brought to a brutal climax with Matigari's realisation that in spite of having been stripped of all dignity, once he acknowledges and confronts the unjustness of his position, as 'the scales of a thousand years fall from [his] eyes', he regains his *humanity* (*Mat*, 22). But why should his humanity be attendant on the death of Settler Williams? What factors have made co-existence neither desirable, nor possible? These questions are raised early on in *Weep Not, Child* where Ngotho, while recounting to his children the creation story of Gikuyu and Mumbi, suddenly realises that maybe the patient waiting game he has been playing as his land stays occupied by Howlands is an abdication of the responsibility placed upon him by the gods, to be caretaker and guardian of the ancestral heritage.

Throughout his work, Ngugi consistently depicts the position of the peasant as close to unbearable and unsustainable. Opposed to this is the permanence of settlement. In *Weep Not, Child*, Mr Howard has stopped thinking of England as home. As he emphatically puts it to Ngotho, 'My home is here!' (*WNC*, 34) Howard, whose experience in the World War I proved disorientating, has also lost a son to the Second World War. In overcompensation he forms a fiercely protective and proprietorial bond with the land, which represents the only pleasure he has left in life, and which for him becomes life itself. He worships the land (*WNC*, 35-36). In *A Grain of Wheat*, even Thompson who is only on a tour of duty as an administrator forges a bond with the country that he is reluctant to relinquish. Ngugi is sensitive to what is clearly a traumatic leave-taking, and draws the reader to empathise as Thompson feels keenly:

that silent pain, almost agony that people feel at the knowledge that they might not be indispensable after all; that [whatever] they have left [...] would accept new men, however reckless and irresponsible, without regrets, as if they had never existed, as if they had never made their mark on the things they used to call their own. (*GW*, 57)

Ngugi's stern representation of Howard, the settler, can be read against the more sympathetic presentation of Thompson, the administrator. Whereas Thompson *is* going away, Howard is not. Both men are, nevertheless, part of the same process of

dispossession. Thompson's individual withdrawal from the system he safeguards is insignificant. Thompson's parting shot, that the new crop of African administrators might be 'reckless and irresponsible' is indicative of his contempt for those he administered as surely as is the settlers for the indigenous people. These paradoxes of representation reflect the palpable tensions also existing not only between the different groups of Europeans noted by Trzebinski, discussed earlier in this chapter, but also between the Europeans and Africans.

Ngugi exploits the paradox that in order for Matigari to lay full claim to his humanity, he has to vanquish the oppressor. Matigari accepts with courage what he has to do to ensure his survival. This is, of course, the tragedy of the entire colonial enterprise. It robbed native people of their humanity; and to regain it they have had to resort to the very deeds they abhor. Decolonisation, like colonialism, is violent. And to succeed it requires the same single minded dedication that was instrumental in making the colonial project so successful: the belief in an idea that will propel the people beyond their little concerns to grasp the possibility of freedom on a much grander scale. For Ngugi, this freedom is represented in *Matigari* by the overthrow of Settler Williams, and by the regaining of the rights to land and liberty.

In all Ngugi's novels encounters between white and black are marked by suspicion and tension. An incident in *A Grain of Wheat* has Dr Lynd contemptuously castigate Karanja for upsetting her dog, notwithstanding the fact that the bull mastiff was about to bite him! (*GW*, 49) In the same novel, Mwaura describes an incident in which a European returning home shoots all his pets because he can't 'bear to leave them alive without a kindly helper' (*GW*, 183). The response provoked by these humiliations are intense. Dr Lynd's houseboy abets two men in her rape, and then kills her dog. But the narrative shows a man violated and driven to callous retaliatory violence to counter humiliation and restore dignity. The excessive and uncharacteristic retribution is a measure of his dehumanisation. Ngugi creates dramatic enactments of the inhumanity practised on one group by the other, confronting the repercussions in all their uglinesses and distortion. He draws the reader into the tensions and tragedy of the colonial encounter. The white settlers have the power. But the force of African

resentment festers in the privacy and protection of their own community.

But this protection is not completely guaranteed even in indigenous communities. Even greater than the tragedy of a successful colonisation is the complicity and betrayal of their own by a fifth column, by the enemy within. This is the tradition of collaborators, turned homeguards, turned partners, upholders of neo-colonialism. On the verge of vanquishing Settler Williams, Matigari is obstructed by John Boy, the Settler's servant, *whom he later kills first*, before he can confront Settler Williams himself. This excessive zeal to protect is one that has been observed in history as one of the characteristics of the hopelessly oppressed. The tragic reality is that John Boy cannot conceive of a future without Settler Williams. Their lives have become intimately intertwined over time, as has the pattern of their relationship, with Williams in the privileged position of coloniser and John Boy the subordinate one of colonised.²⁴

In the beginning was the Word: Ngugi and the Bible

Both Ngugi and Armah are radical writers, but in significantly different ways. While Armah recreates mythical pasts to counter the Imperialist notion that Africa is a newcomer to the world, Ngugi has throughout his work developed a progressive, but at the same time, measured protest against colonialism and imperialism. This has peaked in a radical re-reading of the Bible, the 'text of terror', of colonisation, with which he has consistently engaged. Read against the violence of Mau Mau, as national struggle and personal tragedy, Ngugi has found it impossible to accept the centrality of the Bible, ambivalent, and contradictory, in post-independence Kenyan life.²⁵ And yet Ngugi remains curiously bound by his earlier commitment to the Christian faith. It is this commitment, conversely, that transmogrifies into a devastating critique of one of the fundamental pillars of colonialism, Christianity. From his intimate knowledge of the text, Ngugi now interrogates its inconsistencies, and subverts the myth that has most successfully bound the colonised to the psychological prisonhouse of

²⁴ Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) describes clearly the process of colonisation, through which these positions are created and consolidated.

²⁵ Gikandi, p. 147, talks of the keen awareness of the penalties of protest in Ngugi's home area.

Imperialism. He seizes the divine word, as found in the Bible.

There are two main ways in which Ngugi has found the Bible to be of unparalleled pragmatic use. It has reflected back the failings of Imperial Christendom in the very process of Christianising the colonised. Crucially, it has also provided Ngugi with an established platform, courtesy of the missionaries, of a shared, national outlook from which to reach his fractured society. Kenya is a predominantly Christian country, and Ngugi uses this commonality to bridge ethnic and linguistic fragmentation.

By *Matigari*, the use of Christian metaphor is readily identifiable with Ngugi. Christianity is itself common in Kenyan cultural practice to the extent that Biblical allusion unremarkably underpins many references. And *Matigari* could well be the Christ:

‘Don’t you know that the Bible says he shall come back again?’

‘Do you mean to say he’s the One prophesied about? The Son of Man?’

‘Why not’? (*Mat*, 81)

This dialogue, one of many, shows a people familiar with Biblical mythology, transposing it to their own circumstances with ease. Such allusions serve Ngugi well, since he is obviously himself well versed in biblical lore, which he employs with consummate skill. An interstitial space is opened here by the rhetorical question ‘why not?’, that creates the probability of ameliorating or rehabilitating this myth from a Middle Eastern tradition, to the very immediate circumstances. The need for redemption by a people betrayed by independence is limited only by one’s own imagination. It is part of his project to rout out the enemy within, and he finds the answer to *kikulacho* echoed in the Gospel of St Matthew, in chapter eighteen verse eight: ‘Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire’. The revolutionary, and uncompromising stance that Jesus assumes serves well as a response to the betrayal that pervades Ngugi’s novels. Unlike the missionaries, who control by emphasising angst and guilt,

it is to the dynamism and transformative potential of the historical message that Ngugi is drawn. Employing the metaphors best known and most widely engaged in pacifying the colonies, he subverts colonial usage and makes it his own. Just as Christianity transforms from within, it is from within the logic of its own discourse that it is best confronted.

*

In *Matigari*, the idea that: 'too much fear breeds misery in the land' is iterated with many variations (*Mat*, 87, 90, 112, 171). But no amount of stealth or indeed surreptitious subversion saved Ngugi from the wrath of the political establishment. The accusation made against Matigari, that he was a Rip Van Winkle who slept while the country 'progressed' (*Mat*, 118) has a real historical equivalent: this was the charge that was levelled at Bildad Kaggia in a presidential speech in which Kenyatta's coarseness shocked the public. Kaggia had written a controversial letter to Bruce Mackenzie, Kenyatta's minister for Lands and Settlement, complaining about the retention of lands by the settlers. He said:

Everyone in this country is well aware of the landhunger that has existed among Africans as a result of the robbery of their land by the British colonial imperialists. The logical method to solve the problem posed by this robbery would have been to nationalise all big estates owned by the Europeans and make them either state farms, so as to alleviate unemployment, or hand them to co-operatives formed by landless Africans.²⁶

After receiving veiled threats, in writing, from Kenyatta for this questioning of his land policies, Kaggia resigned. In the novel, Matigari tries to question the Minister for Truth and Justice about the real issues that have led to the present unrest. He asks about the possible alleviation of the oppressive conditions established by John Boy Junior and Robert Williams (or what they represent), such as the long working hours with low pay for multinational companies. The Minister does not answer their questions. He does not need to. First, there is the tiny detail of the 'donation' for handicapped children through the presidential fund, and the shares in the company, for

²⁶ William R. Ochieng', 'Structural and Political Changes', in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya 1940-1993*, ed. by Bethwell Ogot and William R. Ochieng', East African Studies (London: James Currey, 1995), pp.83-109 (p.95).

the Minister and the President. Secondly, the Minister for Truth and Justice has 'right' on his side. He has recourse to the law, ironically one of the most important tools retained by the Kenyatta Government from the colonial State, and furthermore, one amended by him at will.²⁷ Ngugi highlights two particular statutes, treason and sedition, that underpinned any criticism of the system. It is almost impossible to prove innocence against the charges of *treason* and *sedition* (*Mat*, 110). This is even truer in this oral society, where *uvumbi* or *ruma monga* (rumour) are part of the accepted information network (*Mat*, 104).

The Minister for Truth and Justice can cloak himself with the veil of the Presidency – this empowers him to mete out instant justice in the farcical circus described by Ngugi – punctuated by biblical quotations from the church minister, serenaded by anthems from the professors, the Permanent Professor of the History of Parrotology, the 'Ph.d' in Parrotology and the Editor of the *Daily Parrot* who represent the historical, philosophical and journalistic arms of the group. As happened with the traditional court griot, the media is co-opted into disseminating official views. The Minister's ideas are instantly hailed by the sycophantic trinity, whom we see 'clinging to the hymn book as though their lives depended on it' (*Mat*, 104). When the minister bans the singing of all other songs connected with insurrection, and proceeds to ban dreams as well, he exhorts his 'subjects' (*Mat*, 101) to toe the party line with an extract from the Kenya national anthem: 'Let us with one accord...' to which he adds, 'like loyal parrots...' (*Mat*, 118). This is a criticism of the forced consensus, written with Ngugi's persistent blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. All the Minister's actions are also immediately rubber stamped or accorded legitimacy by the sitting 'independent' judiciary.

This is, of course, comic, but the text provides a frisson of real horror even as it shows that power of life and death is in the hands of a monstrous caricature. As if this

²⁷ Ochieng', pp.93-95. The structures for ensuring Law and Order (provincial Administration, police, army, judiciary) were preserved almost intact by the Kenyatta government. Kenyatta even went as far as to retain 'the services of Ian Henderson, the police officer who had prepared a case against him at Kapenguria, and Whitehouse, the District Commissioner who had been his gaoler at Lokitaung' (93). In all Kenyatta made thirteen amendments all largely to do with the consolidation of power with the presidency. The first seven were made within three years of independence (p.94).

is not enough, the Minister self-indulgently reminisces with John Boy on their time abroad, establishing their privileged position as been-tos. He hints at the more sinister silencing of the Goan lawyer, Pinto, a fellow student and friend in Islington, also described in *Petals of Blood* as having campaigned for a greater social equality in independent Kenya. In a cruel inversion, the Minister speaks of the rights of the majority, not to be compromised by the selfishness of the few. The farce continues as the Minister says that '[no] Government can allow 0.0001 per cent of the people to disrupt the rights of the other 99.9999 per cent' (*Mat*, 111). This is precisely the minority that he represents. He is oblivious to the culpability and complicity of his own position in relation to the ordinary citizenry gathered in the community hall. It is their interests that are disproportionately under represented, and upon which the backlash subsequently breaks. The Minister is the presidents mouthpiece, vested with presidential authority and expressing presidential desire. It is a farcical enactment of the limits of freedom of expression. When Ngaruro wa Kirirot stands up to make the case for the workers, he is instantly and unceremoniously bundled out, tried, and found guilty of treason for opposing a presidential decree. With his sentencing to a mental institution, the argument is stilled. His power to disagree is invalidated. The parameters of the discourse are shifted to a different level – a level wherein reason has no place, well within the 'constellation of delirium' (*Mat*, 116) or neurosis. The place Fanon situated those unrepresented by the system.

*

In this meeting of the forces of Government, and the 'subject' peoples, the Minister strenuously accentuates his legitimacy by claiming it to be mediated by the Law, itself presented as a bona fide institution that has served well since colonial times. This Law is significantly multiracial – 'In the rows immediately behind the minister there sat some white, brown and black men, dressed in judicial robes' (*Mat*, 101). It is also supposed to be impartial. The Minister variously points to its attributes in a lengthy soliloquy, to somehow establish it as its own *raison d'être*:

without the rule of law -- truth and justice -- there is no government, no nation no civilisation. The rule of law is the true measure of *civilisation*. I should know. I was

brought up in the law. I abide by the law, and the law abides in me. I have been taught the law, and I staunchly believe in it. I am the guardian of the law today. I make the law, and I ensure that it is kept.

He harks back to its being a family tradition:

My father was the first person in this country to advocate loyalism to the crown at the beginning of the century. Some might wonder : Loyalty to whose law? The colonial law? Let me tell you: Law is law. Those who realised this from the beginning are the only people of any worth in this country today. (*Mat*, 102)

The Minister goes on to make an even more invidious suggestion, one unfortunately borne out by the conditions of independence. His line of argument is supported by what he interprets as the neutrality of the law, to the extent that he transforms complicity with the colonial master into a positive strike for freedom:

In fact, it is we who abided by the law who prevented the country from being destroyed. If you look at the situation dispassionately, without the kind of *distortion* you find with some of these *fiction* writers, you can see that it is those who obeyed the colonial law who brought about independence. (*Mat*, 103, emphases in text)

This is ironical indeed in view of the farcical Kenyatta trial. The Minister rewrites the narrative of independence, trivialising, even subverting, the role of the freedom fighter.²⁸ Consequently, read against the polarity of the text, the entire thrust of native resistance to domination is neutralised. The very suggestion that such insignificant action could attempt to challenge the constitutional agenda is reduced by the minister to a ridiculous and redundant pretension. His attitude in turn raises questions regarding the actual role played by the 'matigari'. Did their intransigence threaten the colonialists' philanthropic generosity, and therefore delay the realisation of African freedom? The text doesn't leave these questions open. To the Minister, the 'matigari' really are of no consequence, and must be shunted to the fringes of society, to the areas of madness where such disruptive elements belong. Having played no role in the procurement of independence, they deserve no share in the 'spoils'. Independence here is a short term

²⁸ Ochieng', pp.92-93. Ochieng' observes the marginalisation of the freedom fighter in his analysis of the independence day celebrations in Kenya. Whereas the Ugandan Premier, Milton Obote, praised and thanked freedom fighters for their role, Kenyatta notably ignored them, making no note of 'the people who laid down their lives for the struggle' (p.92) and instead emphasising the now contested view that *everybody* fought. It is ironical that settlers who were packed and ready to leave were so reassured by Kenyatta's conciliatory overtures at independence, they subsequently took Kenyan citizenship on the basis that 'Everything will be alright so long as the old man is there'. (p.93)

vested interest, not a long term sustainable desire for peace and prosperity that will require hard work and sacrifice to secure.

The Minister also speaks of obedience, another powerful legacy of colonialism. In Kenya, the law has been used mercilessly to curb dissent, thereby creating an illusion of compliant civil obedience. In remarkable contrast, of course, is the use of the law in the Ghanaian situation, both before and after independence, where its practitioners constituted a significant lobby, and were at the same time active participants in tough negotiations with the British that were crucial to the attainment of independence in that country. There, the law was seized upon not as a means of constraint, but as an instrument of liberation. This attitude has created a different ethos as far as civic and civil liberties are concerned in both countries that has survived to the present. The Ghanaian establishment did not respond to Armah's harsh criticism in *The Beautiful Ones*, by intimidating or seeking to restrain, or incarcerate him. The critics fought him on the terms and terrain on which he had declared battle: in the literary arena. In Kenya, a warrant was issued for the arrest of *Matigari* in 1987 (*Mat*, viii), just as one had been issued for Ngugi himself a decade earlier, in 1977. The line between fact and fiction, between the private and public is here blurred by the insecurities of a nation suspicious of the self-reflexive criticism of its own citizens, mirroring its lack of ease with itself.

Lewis Nkosi sees in *Matigari* Ngugi at his satirical best.²⁹ Islington, where Pinto, in the 1950s, argued the strengths of the socialist views of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin to his erstwhile colleagues, affords Ngugi a degree of artistic license: it is difficult to imagine him putting his ideas down on paper with the same biting clarity in Kamiriithu. Within that geographical context, the inbred fear, for Ngugi confirmed by his own imprisonment, would most certainly have dictated a different text.

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In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi cites the popular Kiswahili saying, '*kikulacho kimo*

²⁹ Lewis Nkosi, 'Reading *Matigari*: The New Novel of Post-Independence', in *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Cantalupo, pp.197-205, (pp.202-203).

Nguoni mwako' (GW, 173), which means 'what ails you is within' as a figure for the many acts of betrayal in his novels. These include betrayal in relationships, as in that between Mumbi and Gikonyo, or of even greater magnitude, the betrayal of the community by Mugo. The recruitment of homeguards to enable the policing of the African community from within was one of the disingenuities of the policy of indirect rule. It placed the enemy within the gates. One of the most complicated problems that Kenya inherited after independence was the presence of this group of people, and one of the singularly Kenyan ironies was that being educated, they formed the new administration, and set a tone of reconciliation and forgiveness to diffuse the strong anti-colonial sentiments of the time. Already part of the system, they were in a position to strengthen their hold without significantly altering their views. The settlers enjoyed a similar privilege. They, more than any other sector of the community, had been represented by the colonial government. Despite the tensions of their relationship with this administration, and their hankering for independence from 'mother', when it actually came, the compromise of the settlement was seen partly as betrayal, even abandonment. To them, Kenya was white man's country; it was *their* country.

By the time Ngugi came to write *Matigari*, it was clear to him that the only way forward was by an overthrow of the unequal structure on which the Kenya nation was based. This is the idea at the centre of the story. Settler Williams is undeserving of his position of ownership of this country, as is his faithful servant, John Boy. Ngugi's argument is based on the firmly held belief that Settler Williams has no legitimate claim on the land. As Matigari sees it, Settler Williams and his like stole the land from the people (*Mat*, 8). Matigari tells and retells the story of his dispossession, in varying forms, throughout the text. The story is interspersed with Matigari's recurrent question, and built up to lyrical refrain so that towards the end of the book, Matigari is completely suffused with this thought, he formulates it into a defiant song that constitutes a firm refusal of his position as the exploited, and sings it over and over:

The builder shall live in a decent house,
 The tailor wear decent clothes,
 The tiller eat a decent meal?
 No, the producer refuses to produce for parasites to harvest.
 We the toilers refuse to be the pot that cooks but never eats

the food.

Every human being has a pair of hands. (*Mat*, 160-161)

In *Matigari* then, Ngugi engages in a multidimensional struggle. There is the essential struggle with language. In the isolation of a small flat in Islington, as he wrote the novel in Gikuyu, he must have felt keenly the irony and absurdity of his position, and appreciated the peculiar colonial circumstance that created such a bizarre situation. Not only was he removed from his primary linguistic community, but he was by the same action of writing in Gikuyu retreating into an embryonic place, contested by the allegories of nationalism, and now, globalisation. As Ngugi further examines the post-independence conditions in the fictive country in which *Matigari* is set, he does so from the very heart of Empire; paradoxically, from the relative safety and sanctuary of Settler Williams's abandoned home. It is in this sense that *Matigari* demonstrates 'how fully the shadow of the nation falls on the condition of exile'.³⁰ This is in one sense a reversal, but one that is informed and mediated by the residual guilts and anxieties of the colonial power over the colonial project. The post independence position is beleaguered, trapped as it is between the necessity of total withdrawal from its former oppressor, and the need for assistance as it struggles even with itself, to achieve uncompromised freedom and self-assurance. It is a curious position indeed.

Ngugi's second hurdle is the urgent issue of dispossession, and subsequently the questions of reclamation and reallocation, of land. This is a subject at the very heart of what Ngugi's life work has been about, and extends beyond the safe pages of text, and of literary rhetoric. *Matigari* is elided into the Mau Mau movement as embodying its entire spirit, as an active revolutionary, but also as an effective remnant whose job it is to restore or reclaim the victory already won. In the country of Ngugi's choice, the 'matigari' have of course remained an unacknowledged presence. In this country, the ideal achievements of independence, that is, peace and prosperity, are vigorously touted. The fallacy of this independence, the false premise on which it is predicated tries to deny the necessity for the kind of revolutionary re-examination, and action, suggested by Ngugi.

³⁰ Bhabha, p. 141.

Thirdly is Ngugi as artist. His creative impulses infuse the polemical message that he wants to communicate. As he explores both new, and old forms, so as to tell his story, Ngugi weaves elements of the oral tale with traditional aspects of Western fable and narrative to produce a new and exciting fabric. The mysticism of the mythic edges towards the grandiose formations of the epic. In conception, it is a huge project, and Ngugi uses allegory to represent the stock conditions of oppression, and protest. Referring to Ngugi's use of these old forms, and the fusing of the mystical, and polemical, Cantalupo says of this strategy, the 'resulting style might have been thought not only to be outdated for now, but outdated forever'.³¹ The overtly allegorical form, if unfashionable, is appropriate to Ngugi's project. In 1963, Kenyans would have balked at the suggestion that independence might remain an illusion over three decades later. The imperfections of his artistic project reflect the imperfections of the world Ngugi struggles to master.

Like Armah's one-legged patient in *Why Are We So Blest?*, Matigari is searching for a simple explanation for the dynamics of struggle, and its outcome. When he returns to find that the house he has spent years in the wilderness fighting for is still occupied, by the next generation in an identical pattern of exploitation he wants to know – 'who gained, who won?' In the fight between the oppressor and the oppressed, who wins?

The romantic mist through which independence was once viewed has long dissipated, and Lazarus in *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* has argued effectively on both Ngugi's and Armah's reassessment of that view. As in all his work, in *Matigari* Ngugi once again addresses the theme of betrayal, and the possibility of reinstatement. As happened in *A Grain of Wheat*, we find that independence is betrayed from the inside, by the servant, John Boy. Even as Matigari moves to make the victory strike that will relinquish his house, John Boy emerges to his master's rescue. John Boy and his master are in effect joined at the hip. The downfall of the master means the downfall of John Boy.

And yet here, in *Matigari* for the first time is also an acceptance that the house was

³¹ Charles Cantalupo, 'Introduction', *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, p.9.

built on a faulty foundation. Nationalism, itself a colonial construct, may well be the problem. It brought together disparate ethnicities, bound by no common purpose other than the struggle against external/internal forces of oppression. The retention of political and economic systems designed, not for progress, but for dependency, have created a predicament that can only be ignored at the peril of any real and lasting freedom. But Matigari must dislodge the squatter, Settler Williams, before he can dig up of a new foundation. Only then can he build a new house. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta retells the well known parable of the elephant, and other animals of the jungle that sought shelter from the rain in each successive hut a man built, pushing him out into the rain and gaining sole occupancy of the hut each time. The story illustrates the misplaced generosity of the Agikuyu when the first pioneers arrived on the land. The man eventually worked out an ingenious plan in which he built a hut big enough to house the elephant and his cronies, and then set the hut on fire.³² This is the idea behind Wanja's liberation in *Petals of Blood*. Many generations later, Ngugi returns to the beginning, and decides to set fire to the occupied hut, to settled Kenya. It must be remembered that compromise was the basis on which Kenyan independence was negotiated. The African demand for political representation had to somehow be reconciled to the settler determination to 'preserve white rule': and these desires were mediated by a Colonial State that thought it sufficient to provide the Africans with 'a vent', in the African District Councils.³³ This makes Ngugi's proposition an essentialist, even if revolutionary, one indeed.

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In 'The Politics of Knowledge', Edward Said argues persuasively that the politics of national identity grows out of the imperial experience, what he calls 'the epistemology of imperialism'. This assumption draws from the idea that:

everyone is principally and irreducibly a member of some race or category, and that race or category cannot ever be assimilated to or accepted by others – except as itself. Thus came into being such invented essences as the Oriental or Englishness, as Frenchness, Africanness [...] as if each of these had a Platonic idea behind it that guaranteed it as pure and unchanging

³² *Facing*, pp.47-52.

³³ B. A. Ogot & W. R. Ochieng' (eds), p.33.

from the beginning to the end of time.³⁴

Said identifies nationalism as one of the by-products of this project. By creating the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised, imperialism gave rise to resistance based on these large categorisations. Said reminds us of Fanon's warning to independence movements in *The Wretched*. He emphasized the limitations of resistance as an end in itself, and urged for the forging of lasting ties based on more enduring common interests, predicated on the development of a 'social consciousness' (*WOE*, 23).

When the Minister in *Matigari* gives his speech to the workers assembled in the hall, he totally denies any role the 'matigari', those in the liberational struggle may have played in the run up to, and attainment of independence. The company that employs these workers, on strike for better pay and conditions, benefits from this system of patronage. Ngugi is caustically ironic in this scene. The Trade Union movement, led by Tom Mboya in the sixties was crucial to the formation of an economically based unity across ethnic lines, and did much to impress upon the colonial Government the readiness of the Kenyan people to run their own affairs. In its time, it was a powerful lobby for wide ranging interests, most especially those to do with independence. And yet in this hall, as in the subsequent reality, Trade Unionism's role in fighting the corner of the worker has been so distorted and thereby diminished, it is completely robbed of any power. In the 1980s Trade Unionism in Kenya was 'legitimised', and therefore diffused, by being amalgamated with government.

A philosophy concomitant with the Gikuyu world view, and shared by other ethnic cultures in Kenya, and with Armah's people, is the belief in the cyclical nature of existence. This is a pattern both central and crucial to the understanding of how these communities work (without life insurance policies, or bank accounts, or savings, for example!) There is a system of self-sustaining and fundamental dependency that binds the people together in a continuum of the unborn, the living, and the ancestral dead. This is the motif at the heart of *Matigari*. At the start of the book, as Matigari, having at long last vanquished Settler Williams, stands all armed and ready to lay down his weapons so as to gird himself with the belt of peace 'a riderless horse galloped past him. It stopped, looked back at him for a while and then disappeared into the woods'

³⁴ In *Raritan*, 11:1 (Summer 1991), 17-31 (p.21- 22).

(*Mat*, 3). At the end of the book, we have come full circle. As the young Muriuki stands there, having recovered Matigari's buried armoury, ready to resume battle, the sequence is repeated: ' [...] it was only a riderless horse. It galloped past him. It stopped for a brief while and gazed at him. Then it disappeared into the forest' (*Mat*, 175). As Matigari the old, yet not so old man, who fought for freedom vanishes into the water, his mantle is taken over by Muriuki, the one reborn, whose legacy it is to continue with the struggle.

In a revisitation of his pet themes, Matigari can only have a homecoming after the death of Settler Williams. Before this, they pursued each other in the forest 'in order to clear any doubts as to who the real master was' (*Mat*, 22). Matigari says:

It was only yesterday that the doubts were cleared. Settler Williams fell. I slowly crept up to where he lay, just in case he was pretending to be dead. I placed my left foot on his chest and raised his weapon high in the air, proclaiming victory. (*Mat*, 22)

Matigari has every reason to be cautious. This is the second time round that he is fighting this battle, having been lulled into a false sense of security the first time, and been betrayed. As it is, the scene in which Matigari enacts his solitary victory is a curious anticlimax. In a dramatic and defiant, yet solitary, gesture he raises his weapons as a sign of victory. It is an isolated and non-public action, and the victory is actually written as a very private act between Matigari and Settler Williams. It is only after this almost narcissistically heroic action that Matigari goes in search of his people, so as to share *his* victory, which must then somehow be transmogrified into their victory. As it happens, this eventually turns out to be a premature celebration. Somehow in the English translation, that aura of gender indeterminacy, and collective action that Ngugi says is the informing motivation of this work is difficult to grasp.³⁵

And when he does return to his society, Matigari finds that his battle with Settler Williams does not seem to hold the same significance for his people that it does for him. A peculiar understanding has developed amongst those of the new generation.

³⁵ Ann Biersteker says Carol Sicherman drew her attention to the fact that in the English translation, Wangui wa Goro tried to maintain this gender indeterminacy by avoiding English pronouns marking gender, but somehow, it is difficult to think of Matigari as other than male, in spite of the inferred plurality (p. 147).

Matigari is consequently weighted down with guilt for his primary failure, onto which is now added the new problems of independence: the ethnic tensions, the corruption, and dispossession of those already at the fringes of society.

Abdulrazak Gurnah has argued that land alienation did not cause as significant a rupture as Ngugi consistently demonstrates in his fiction, indeed that 'land has come to acquire a metonymic function, signifying a wholesome mythic past whose retrieval is paralleled by the desire for the lost land'.³⁶ But the Agikuyu are an agrarian based society and for them, land is everything, *Wiyathi*. Their displacement from it has only sharpened their land hunger. Geographically situated at the centre of settlement and urbanisation, they experienced the rupture, or delinking of town and village, and the restrictions governing movement between the two areas. They had to carry the pass or *Kipande* as did black South Africans during Apartheid. I have highlighted Ngugi's attachment to home. His working in Nairobi shows a man straddling two realities that have been denied him, and also claiming both realities in a society that still finds it unusual to claim the city as 'home'.³⁷ The Wamboi/Otieno burial saga wrote into the Kenya national debate the long unproblematised and probably for the most part unstated understanding of the differences between 'House' (to signal transience) and 'Home' (to indicate permanence and belonging), a colonial legacy of exclusion that led to a near obsessive concern with one's foothold in an originary village. This tendency to cling to parental rootage persists even in young people born outwith these villages, still unsure of the legitimacy of their status in the towns. It is a condition that has been recently exacerbated and villified by exercises in ethnic cleansing and threats of repatriation to ethnic areas of origin (*majimboism*) by the current government, and the issue rears its head every time there is a 'national' crisis.

Ngugi does not exaggerate the land problem. He insists, in all his works, that it needs to be addressed. In *Matigari* it is made clear that the expectations of independence remain unmet, just as in *Petals of Blood* community action also failed to procure for

³⁶ Abdulrazak Gurnah, 'Transformative Strategies in the Fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', *Essays on African Writing 1: An Re-Evaluation* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), pp.142-58, p.143.

³⁷ This was demonstrated by the notorious S.M. Otieno burial saga. His clan refused to let his wife, Wamboi, bury him at his town 'house' in Upper Matasia, but insisted he be buried at his 'home' village in Umira Kager.

the dispossessed a share of resources now 'nationalised'. In *Weep Not, Child*, Njoroge, still a schoolboy, muses over his role in the liberation of the country. He tells Mwihaki, 'The country needs me. It needs you. *And the remnant*. We must get together and rebuild the country' (WNC, 106). It is in this remnant that Ngugi now invests the future. *Matigari* is a story of personal and plural fragmentation, and of loss in which Ngugi's experience of diaspora adds to the urgency to claim home. *Matigari* fails, but other 'matigari' are already primed and poised to continue with the struggle at the appropriate time.

Chapter Nine

OSIRIS RISING: RE-VISIONING PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE

The Conception and Publication of *Osiris Rising*

Armah's last book to date, *Osiris Rising: A Novel of Africa Past, Present and Future*, was published in 1995. And yet in some recent criticism of his work it is not unusual to find continued reference to *The Healers* as his last book.¹ Its publication in Popenguine in Senegal by Per Ankh, a relatively small and new publisher, is a significant step away from the mainstream publishers normally associated with his work. It coincides with Armah's intention, signalled in 'Dakar Hieroglyphs', to pursue the study of Egyptology.² He was drawn to Senegal and the promise of tapping into the legacy pioneered by Cheikh Anta Diop at the University of Dakar.

Arguably the African writer most concerned with the politics of writing and publication, Armah has actively explored different ways of making his work accessible to a wide African readership. Armah always responded to the specificities of place in his novels. His keen response to Ghana, to North America and Algeria in his first three novels led Bernth Lindfors to speculate on what the Tanzania years would yield in the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons*. As Armah's readership braced themselves for a bruiser in his inimitable style, Lindfors expressed the anxieties of many: 'What would he dig up in Tanzania? What could he find to be disillusioned about there? What targets would he choose for his next attack?'³ The intentions of his

¹ In Derek Wright, 'Current Work and Conclusion', *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction* (London: Hans Zell, 1989), p.308. Derek Wright refers to the widely spread rumours that there are two novels after *The Healers* which 'for one reason or another [Armah] has not seen fit to publish'. As he points out, Armah had himself referred to work in progress consisting of 'notes for several novels, short stories and essays' in 'The Lazy School of Literary Criticism' (1985, p.355). If *Osiris Rising* is one of those rumoured novels, its appearance has taken seventeen years since the publication of *The Healers* in 1978.

² Ayi Kwei Armah, 'Dakar Hieroglyphs', *West Africa* (May, 1986), 1043-44.

³ Bernth Lindfors, 'Armah's Histories', *African Literature Today*, 11 (1980), 85-96 (p.85).

move to Senegal are clearly stated. *Osiris Rising* is the first of the results of his time in Popenguine. In the order form from the publisher *Osiris Rising* is described as: 'the first of a planned list of titles from Per Ankh [...] an African printing and publishing company founded and managed by friends committed to the emergence of a quality African book industry'.

Armah has previously indicated his unease with mainstream publishing companies and the formation of Per Ankh seems a natural progression in his struggle to control what and how he writes, because of *why* he writes. Per Ankh has an agenda. Its challenge is defined in the additional information contained on the order form: 'to research information vital to end Africa's information drought and start future healing work; to refine it in a professional writers' workshop; and to publish the results in attractive forms accessible to all readers'.

The issue of publication is one that has long concerned Armah. At a 'Meeting of African Writers' held in Accra in June 1975, at which the 'Union of Writers of the African Peoples' was established, Armah was on the coordinating committee that included Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Dennis Brutus and the Francophone writers, Eduard Maunick, Cheikh N'Dao and Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard. One of their resolutions addressed the issue of publication:

We find that the establishing of an African Co-operative publishing House is indispensable to the healthy development of African Literature and educational texts; to the development of indigenous publishing Houses; the protection of African writers from further exploitation and, the general promotion of an authentic literary culture. We consider also that the most favourable location for such an enterprise is Senegal. To this end the Senegalese members of the Union have been delegated to approach President Léopold Sedar Senghor with this proposal, bearing in mind the various aspects which have been emphasized as essential to this project; a strong continent-wide distribution system; a low-priced sale policy to remove the stigma of privilege in literacy and culture; a translation bureau, bearing in mind the existence of and possible collaboration with the Ghana Institute of languages and its school of translators; insistence on an all African copyright; collaboration with smaller indigenous publishers; full control over an integrated, modern printing press.⁴

It seems to be only Armah who has tried to adhere to these resolutions, seeking different ways in which to make his work available to an African audience. For him

⁴ 'Meeting of African Writers', *Transition*, 50: 9, ed. by Wole Soyinka (1975) 14-15, (p.14).

publication is about the production and control of one's culture. In an interview with the Nigerian dramatist and novelist, Femi Osofisan, Armah discussed his reservations about the international market:

No, I have not fallen silent. I'm writing all the time. It's just that I have not been publishing. In fact I have completed three novels, but I've not been able to find a publisher [...] It's true. [...] Or would you have me continue to give my works to multinational companies? If we as writers denounce our politicians for their links with these foreign parasites, how can we in all honesty continue ourselves to patronise them?'⁵

The establishment of Per Ankh is a critical and strategic landmark in the process of the struggle to liberate African writing.

The choice of the name – Per Ankh – for the publishing house for *Osiris Rising* is also significant. In Ernest Budge's *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* Per Ankh means the 'house of life'.⁶ The reference here is to the temple or seat of the gods, to the source of being. It is a powerful metaphor, and resonates through Armah's new work. The notion of 'house' has its links in the mythical house or temple of life, out of which Armah will issue books. The first, *Osiris Rising*, is a book about life even as it is paradoxically also a book about death. In this celebratory book about a murder, the rising of Osiris is a triumph over death, here seen as a necessary prelude to rebirth. The major themes are subsequently about resurrection, return, rebirth, and the reestablishment of connections. Armah's purpose is to restore to Africa the dignity and self respect lost over time and circumstance. In *Osiris Rising* Armah is concerned to establish longevity and permanence in the future. He enlists the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris, invoking its most powerful deities, as well as lesser personages/gods.⁷ He transfigures the most powerful of these into contemporary characters from Africa and her dispersion and in this way constructs memory and metaphorical linkage between

⁵ Quoted in Adewale Maja-Pearse 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Harbingers of Death', *Essays on African Writing 2: Contemporary Literature*, ed. by Abdulrazak Gurnah (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), pp.13-23 (p.23).

⁶ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1920).

⁷ Armah chooses the most powerful figures to tell his story. Per Asar is the name of the many sanctuaries of Osiris; Per Ast is the temple of Osiris near the great pyramid. These with Thoth and Horus were the main deities within the Egyptian pantheon. Per Ankh, the house of life is closely intertwined with Per ankh – the city of the dead, or deadland. Armah believes in dualities – in each thing as inherently infused with its opposite, a theme that runs through all his work.

the ancient world, modern day Africa and North America. Armah suggests continuities as well as possibilities for the future. In the ancient method, intention and hope for the afterlife was written in the papyri referred to as the book of the dead (Per-em-hru). Armah refers back to this method and shifts the concern from these funerary writings for the afterlife to a revolutionary revision of the present and for a future in this life. Asar and his new community use a similar convention to communicate in the present: 'An article had been placed on the *obituary* page. The content, however, was no funeral message but a call to bring murdered souls back to life' (*OR*, 278, my emphasis).

The book of the dead referred to writings buried with the dead, that have been retrieved from the ancient tombs. Armah presents his version of the 'book of life' to issue out of the house of life – Per Ankh.

*

This chapter will now focus on two interrelated issues: I will examine Armah's privileging of Ancient Egyptian culture as the ancestor of pre-colonial African custom and culture. I will discuss how Armah invests this past with the potential to restore self-respect and recognition to Africa at local and global levels. Armah has come to this method from two different, but related, cultural centres. His interest in Egyptology was first aroused in America. The concern of the African American with establishing heroic pasts to offset the gloomy present and future was imaginatively expressed in their struggle to belong in America. W. E. B. Dubois was one of the first African Americans to associate and extend African ancestry to ancient Egypt. And through the Francophone Senegalese writer and historian, Cheikh Anta Diop, Armah refined his focus and studied Egyptology and hieroglyphs to gain a broader knowledge of African histo-cultural antecedents, as well as to gain access to texts /papyri in the original. *Osiris Rising* is one manifestation of this involvement with ancient Egypt. It must be noted that the claims he makes of and for Egypt are not uncontested. Though an 'anglophone' writer, Armah is fluent in French, which has allowed him direct access to the extensive resources available in the Francophone

world, where philosophical, as well as other, research and writing have addressed seriously the issue of race.

Armah has gradually reached the position that regeneration of Africa is only possible once it has owned its past, both ancient and modern. For Armah projections into post-colonial possibility only make sense if counterbalanced by reaching back into pre-colonial antiquity: we can only move forward by going back. This argument is advanced against the not entirely unfounded perception of post partition Africa imagined as a contemporary western creation. While other cultures have been energized by pasts and cultures that they believe, on more or less solid evidence, to be their own, Africa remains uniquely cut off from its own pre-colonial origins. Within the modern context, it has yet to mount a constructive challenge to external definition, as well as internal configuration of itself. Armah has spent a long time trying to extricate Africa from the subordinate status it has come to occupy in relation to the rest of the world after centuries of subjugation and conquest – first by the Arab, then the European. It is part of Armah's project to restore to Africa a history and past, not as a western concession, but as rightfully African.

Osiris Rising is partially the result of Armah's keen interest in the work of Cheikh Anta Diop. Diop insists on the need to study African literature and culture from its own origins and on its own terms rather than as an antithesis to the European or western tradition. The novel plays on an understanding of the concept of other worlds within the story, but from an even broader perspective than that made available by Armah's Akan heritage. This is indicated by the choice in name of the two main characters. The story is developed around one of the oldest myths, the ancient myth of Osiris/Asar and Isis/Ast, the paramount deities in the Ancient Egyptian pantheon. In this way, Armah gives his modern story a grounding in ancient history and myth. Armah projects the myth, through such strategies as the naming, thus conferring on the story a remarkable sense of cohesiveness and continuity that carries it from the centuries before Christ to a twentieth century post-colonial location. As with *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, the breadth of his scope, both within and outside the mythic, is remarkable. Armah privileges the idea of the possible by anchoring the

contemporary to the past, while collapsing time and bridging historical fissure. He chooses an all powerful symbol, that of 'life' itself, ubiquitous within Egyptology, to carry this idea. Armah is not romantic in his portrayal of pan-African unity, an idea that has infused all his work. He is from Ghana, the cradle of contemporary post-independence pan-Africanism. He has lived and worked in numerous African countries, and is hence more aware than most of significant transnational differences, as well as the doubtful premise of an assumed homogeneity of an Africa read against other cultures.

The Story

Osiris Rising is a love story. It is about an African American woman, Ast, and her return to Africa to reclaim a heritage she has been promised. Whilst still at University in America she meets two African students, Asar and Seth, who subsequently play an important part in the unfolding of this destiny. On completion of their studies, they both return home, to Hapa.⁸ It is to this place, which becomes the locus of the action, that Ast is drawn when she receives a circular postmarked 'Hapa' branded with the ankh, the life sign that her grandmother Nwt⁹ had indicated to her symbolised her heritage. The ankh serves as the unifying motif in the story. This is Asar's invitation to Ast to share in his mission to work towards liberty and justice in his country.

The action is centred at the University in Manda, which Armah significantly locates away from the capital, at the heart of the community, establishing Armah's linkage of education with other natural processes of existence. Asar, who sees it as the most effective means of reaching a majority, establishes it as the base for his restructuring of the system, and society. Together with like minded teachers and members of the community, he aims to re-educate the people for independent and productive lives. His network extends beyond the boundaries of the institution to include Ama Tete the historian, who upholds the links between past and future as well as modernity and tradition, and also Netta, who can no longer function as a teacher within the system, and so now runs the hostel at which Ast stays when she first arrives.

⁸ 'Hapa' means 'here' or 'this place' in Kiswahili.

⁹ Could it be significant that these are also Ngugi's initials?

Seth Spencer Soja (SSS) becomes a bureaucrat on his return. As the Deputy Director of the Centre for Security (DD),¹⁰ his main task is to insulate the government from criticism and subversion. Armah shows the tensions and conflict present at different levels: Seth and Asar are antagonistic at the personal and political levels. They are both sexually attracted to Ast; and each has his own agenda for the management of the country. In carrying out this management duty, as in his personal life, Seth finds himself in conflict with Asar. Seth is unscrupulous and cunning. His jealousy of Asar's relationship with Ast leads to the climax of the story: he murders Asar in the hope that Ast will now turn to him. Ironically, she is pregnant with Asar's child, in whom is invested the future.

While the University is functional and interactive with intelligent communities at the local level, the government, now run by the security services,¹¹ is figured as alienated not only from the people it purportedly represents, but from the environment as well. In the barren ecological disaster that is the Deputy Director's headquarters is the (ivory) tower. There is no visible human presence here – everything is done by remote control. The inaccessibility of those in power is emphasised by the absence of door handles or such protrusions to jar the smooth lines. It is also well-insulated against outside intrusion, creating an aura of 'sumptuous claustrophobia' (*OR*, 27). There are no natural or human resources here to tie it to an environment in which it neither belongs, nor functions harmoniously, but over which it exercises terrible control.

In the novel return is configured as opportunistic as well as productive. The story of the diaspora is peopled with such minor figures as Cinque, one time Civil Rights activist, also returned to reclaim lost ancestral glory, and Earl Johnson, who takes on a

¹⁰ In the text his name is abbreviated to either SSS or DD, depending on his function. In his official capacity he is DD, and in his (semi) private life he is SSS. When he goes to Manda to frame Asar and abduct Ast, for instance, we read how 'SSS the DD tried to act cool, and failed' (p.293).

¹¹ Alfred Zack-Williams also makes the observation that security is the obsession of most African governments in 'Specificity of African Wars in the Post-Cold War Era', unpublished paper, 1999.

new identity as Prince Wossen of Ethiopia.¹² These failures in North America, now fugitives from their questionable pasts, hope to find in the reverse crossing the glory that has eluded them at 'home'. Armah suggests that Africa, not the new world, is the land of opportunity. The humorous treatment of the tensions of survival, seen in the sometimes exaggerated actions of the Cinques and Johnsons as they struggle to find an accommodation within either world, rescues the novel from the seriousness of its concerns. Failure in America does not translate into success in Africa, however, as Johnson, now Rodney Jones, comes to realise. He undertakes a third crossing.

It is with these three broad concerns – what he perceives as the hijacking of Africa's mythical and historical pasts; the introduction of a relevant education and to dismantle obsolete systems that perpetuate negative perceptions of Africa; and the sham of post-independence government that Armah engages. The intellectual challenge mounted by Diop to the question of origins gives Armah a handle on the connections between the Western obsession with rootage in antiquity and the subsequent relegation of Africa, because of this lack, to a footnote in the Western text. The rewriting of this history has perforce to invoke the mythic to bridge the cognitive as well as ontological gap. The linkage of slavery to the establishment of an African diaspora prefigures the argument for a reunification of the African people and restoration of their racial dignity.

The Myth of Osiris and Isis

The Isiac (Isis/Osiris) myth is undeniably old and has found its way from its origins in Ancient Egypt into the legends of the Greco-Roman periods, and beyond. Some of its symbols, such as the ankh, which represents life in its entirety, have become ubiquitous to the extent that even within Egyptian mythology its presence is assumed,

¹² Pierre van den Berghe, 'Neo-Racism in the United States of A', *Transition*, 41: 8 (1972), 15-18. Van den Berghe talks of the emergence of this type of figure, 'fanciful[ly] search[ing] for royal ancestry in Africa', from the mid nineteen sixties in America. Van den Berghe situates this yearning within a similar, much earlier context, that of 'Anglo-Americans hiring genealogists to invent impressive family trees, or purchasing the portraits of so-called 'ancestors' in flea markets (p.16).

rather than remarked.¹³ Osiris/Asar/Asare was an African god, possibly from the Upper Egypt region who is best known as the guardian of the underworld.¹⁴ There are numerous versions of the love story between him and his sister/wife Ast/Isis in the mythology of Ancient Egypt. Asar was a benevolent ruler under whose reign the kingdom thrived. He was interested in Agriculture and taught his people to grow food, live in harmony and revere the principles of morality, justice, truth and righteousness. His kingdom prospered as a result, and he soon felt the need for expansion.

Subsequently he left home so as to spread his benign influence (a benevolent Imperialism?) over a wider area, and left Isis, his extremely capable, and very beautiful, wife in charge. Osiris had a brother, Set, who was not only jealous that Osiris was King, but also envied him his wife, Isis. With Osiris away, Set stood to claim both the kingdom and the wife. He hatched a plot in which he implicated all the members of the King's court. He had a coffin specially built to Osiris's specifications. Then, on Osiris's return, through a carefully masterminded challenge in which all the courtiers attempted to, but could not, fit into the coffin, he tricked Osiris into lying in the coffin. Of course he fit. Set and his co-conspirators quickly entombed him with lead, and according to one version disposed of the coffin in the Nile. Isis searched for, and found the coffin and buried Osiris. She later, through powers given her by the god Thoth, brings Osiris back to life, and they conceive Horus, the son

¹³ Jacke Phillips, an archaeologist at Cambridge University, pointed this out to me at a discussion at a seminar she presented on 'Egypt and the Horn of Africa: Blinkered Views, New Perspectives and the Importance of Continuity' in the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow, 14th May, 1999. Also see Appendix V for her photograph of the Ankh, taken at Abydoa.

¹⁴ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 2 vols (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1911), I, p.xviii.

who eventually avenges his father's death.¹⁵ When Horus is on the point of vanquishing Set, Isis feels a sudden compassion for her brother-in-law, and intervenes to save his life.

Africa and Egypt: Cheikh Anta Diop and the Search for the 'Missing Pages'

Some of the most radical and dynamic challenges to the western way of viewing Africa have come from the French speaking world. As I have shown in the analysis of Frantz Fanon's influence on Armah in Chapter 5, it is the ideas that centre on the question of whether Africans are human or not that have inspired the most spirited response. Such movements as Negritude, the establishment of *Présence Africaine* and the later development of a Black Aesthetic are all replies to doubt over the humanity of the African. They have done much, but not enough, to restore a sense of pride and purpose to the African, as other conditions have remained significantly unaltered. A firm foundation on which Africa, like the rest of the world, can draw must first be established, following the failure of the most heartfelt poetry, or indeed the attainment of flag independence to challenge adequately the basis on which Africa has historically been disrespected. Slavery, and colonialism have done their damage, and various attempts at decolonisation have often meant the replacement of oppressive colonial administrative structures with equally, if differently oppressive African ones. And yet it is not on the overtly political front that the most successful and enduring aspects of

¹⁵ Budge notes that there are many different versions of the myth of Osiris. In one of these versions, Horus is conceived after the resurrection of Osiris. In Julius Firmicus Maternus's telling, Isis and Osiris are brother and sister, and Set (or Typhon) the wronged spouse who justly murders his wife's lover (p.14). Contrary to the purpose to which Armah uses this myth is Budge's observation that 'Osiris was white and was the personification of good, Set was black (or red) and was the personification of evil' (p.xxiv). This schism between bad and good, black and white has been carried over into the present. Its manichaen nature has been popularised by Christianity, and it is indeed one of the peculiar legacies of Christianity combined with Imperialism, made necessary by the unique brutality of the European slave trade. Robert Palter in 'Eighteenth Century Historiography in *Black Athena*', *Black Athena Revisited*, ed. by Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp.349-402, points out that before the Western intervention there was widespread and largescale slavery within Africa. The difference lay in the alienation of Africans from their homes, and the underlying racist ideology that assigned to them inferior status (p.366). For the non-racist community of ancient Egypt colour did not signify the same thing as it does today. *Osiris Rising* demonstrates that myth can be appropriated for racial retrieval, even where it has previously been used to oppress. One of the qualities of myth is, of course, versatility, a factor that Armah exploits in this novel.

the degradation of Africa have occurred. It is in scholarship, which argues for its own objectivity and disinterestedness, that the most enduring damage is sustained.

Armah and Aboubacry Lam stress the impact of the German philosopher, Friedrich Hegel, whose assertions that Africa had no history held sway in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: they quote his claim that the Africans were 'wild and untamed' and in the African was to be found 'nothing harmonious with humanity'.¹⁶ Some of these views have been repeated this century. In 1963 the Regius Professor of History at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, reiterated this position. He said: 'Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness [...] and darkness is not a subject of history.'¹⁷

He did not need to justify his assertion afresh because it was a view already familiar, and, therefore, not novel within European scholarship. Amilcar Cabral noted the prevalence of this misconception even amongst radical Africans in the colonies. Soyinka quotes Cabral as saying in Milan in 1964:

There is a preconception held by many people, even on the left, that imperialism made us enter history at the moment when it began its adventure in our countries: this preconception must be denounced. For somebody on the left, and for Marxists in particular, history obviously means the class struggle; our opinion is exactly the contrary. We consider that when imperialism arrived in Guiné it made us leave history—our history.¹⁸

Robert Young in *White Mythologies* highlights one such instance of the interrelatedness of the Eurocentric view. He looks at Hélène Cixous' critique of Eurocentrism,¹⁹ and focuses on how she links it historically with this Hegelian

¹⁶ Ayi Kwei Armah and Aboubacry Moussa Lam, *Hieroglyphics for Babies: A Drawing and Writing Manual for Preschoolers, Parents and Teachers* (Dakar: Per Ankh, 1997), p.6.

¹⁷ Quoted in Ali Mazrui, 'Ancient Greece in African Political Thought', *Présence Africaine*, 61 (1967), 68-93 (p.85).

¹⁸ Quoted in Wole Soyinka, 'Guiné Bissau: An African Revolution', *Transition*, 45: 9 (1974), 9-11 (p.11).

¹⁹ In 'Theorizing African Women', under 'Discourse and Feminism: Voice and Agency', Siga Jagne refers to Cixous as 'an African by geographical location (a fact that is never factored into her identity in Euro-American academe)'. In *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp.6-17, (p.7).

assertion that underpins Hegelian Dialectic, which has in turn fed into such theories as Marxism. Marxism, especially during the Cold War, has, of course, been appropriated by critics of Western imperialism for its radical and liberating potential. But Cixous argues that:

insofar as it inherits the system of the Hegelian dialectic, it is also implicated in the link between structures of knowledge and the forms of oppression of the last two hundred years: a phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentrism.²⁰

Achebe in 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' sees this assertion as applicable in literature as well. Taking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an example, he situates it within the eurocentric framework in which Africa is read as antithetical. This novella, first published in 1902 and now a classic 'displays that western desire [...] to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of grace will be manifest.'²¹ Western superiority was also anchored by claims to superior civilisations in antiquity, and as the discussion above shows, part of this project involved the repeated marginalisation of Egyptian (African), and reaffirmation of Greek and Roman (Western) influence on Western culture. Nevertheless, the Egyptian question has vexed and challenged scholars across disciplines from the Humanities to the Social Sciences.

Cheikh Anta Diop was the first African Egyptologist. At the University of Paris, which he attended, much emphasis was placed on theory, an approach favoured by French universities at the time. He subsequently left well-grounded in theoretical issues and with a firm grasp of Greco-Latin history, philosophy and prehistoric archaeology. Immanuel Wallerstein in *Africa: The Politics of Independence* sees Diop's as 'perhaps the most ambitious attempt to reconstruct African history'.²² In 1966, his contribution was recognised at the First World Festival of Negro Arts. He

²⁰ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.2.

²¹ Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p.2.

²² Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa: The Politics of Independence: An Interpretation of Modern African History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p.129.

received jointly with W. E. B. Dubois a special award 'as the writer who had exerted greatest influence on Negro thought in the twentieth century'.²³ He had presented as his PhD thesis the work for which he was largely honoured, although he was not awarded the degree. It was subsequently published as *Nations, Negres et Culture* in 1954. I want to suggest that it is this failure to attain the ultimate French accolade that clouded his otherwise impressive achievements as far as Léopold Senghor was concerned, and led to Senghor's confinement of him to the margins of academic as well as public life in Senegal until his retirement. Ironically, the highest institution of learning in Senegal was subsequently renamed in his honour in 1987. A Frenchman by education and preference, Senghor, poet/president, and champion of Négritude upheld French institutions. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon demonstrates how difficult it is to shift this perception.

With the publication of *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, Diop nevertheless did for Africa in Archaeology what Edward Said was to accomplish for marginal 'others' within literary theory with his *Orientalism* (1978). Diop's research raised fundamental questions, underlining the need and indeed right of Africa to self-determination. He brought up such issues as whether Africa could be perceived as other than a western construct. In *Orientalism* Said proposes that the idea of the Orient was a construction, indeed fantasy, of the West, and that in fact the Orient did not exist in that form at all. With Diop, as with Said,²⁴ the intertwining of politics and scholarship is demonstrated not only by their work but especially by responses to it. It is in the responses to their work that the clearest indicators of conflicting interests, as well as the real stakes, are exposed. And just as the deconstruction of the Orient is necessary, if it is to understand itself on its own terms, Jan Nederveen Pieterse in 'Unpacking the West: How European is Europe?' has talked of the need to 'unpack'

²³ Mercer Cook 'Introduction' to Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilisation: Myth or Reality*, ed. and trans. by Mercer Cook (Westport: Lawrence, Hill and Co., 1974; first publ. Présence Africaine, 1955), p.ix.

²⁴ In *Racism, Modernity and Identity on the Western Front* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), the editors, Ali Rattansi and Sallie Westwood in the introduction, 'Modern Racisms, Racialized Identities' mention the advances made by Said, as well as other post-colonial critics, in demonstrating and exposing the inseparability of politics and scholarship (p.6).

the West as well.²⁵ By this he proposes that the degree to which the West is composed of borrowings, both in antiquity as well as in the present should be interrogated so as to dispel any notion of self-generated sufficiency or indeed, homogeneity.

In the discussion of *Osiris Rising* that follows, I will touch on some of the responses that have come from the West, in particular from North America, where Ancient Egypt has been appropriated because of its age and superiority of culture as well as humanistic ideals. *Osiris Rising* is situated at the very heart of the debate over the centrality of Africa to its own discourses, a debate that engages with the question of Egypt. It is concerned with the role of the intellectual in the theoretical reconceptualisation of the African world. Where Damfo in *The Healers* is a traditional herbalist, and Isanusi of the eastern forest in *Two Thousand Seasons* holds cumulative knowledge handed down from the ancestors, in *Osiris Rising*, Ama Tete, the keeper of the 'house of life' (per ankh) is formally educated and holds a Ph.D. She has nevertheless felt compelled to drop the 'burden' of an education that insists that 'The world has a history to the extent that the West incorporates it' (OR, 250), because her own experience of a different world has told her a different story. It is on completion of her doctorate in history within the conventional system that Ast also comes to Manda, as she puts it, "To learn [...]. And teach" (OR, 250, my emphasis).

Armah's harnessing of intellectual energy reflects of the pragmatism of Fanon, who admitted that 'all the proofs of a wonderful Songhai civilisation will not change the fact that today the Songhais are underfed and illiterate' (WOE, 168). The structures by which Africa is constrained have to be challenged with the necessary tools. A position of respect within the global structure can only be achieved by working through and patiently dismantling and re-visioning the myths and histories that have created a negative image of Africa. To this end, much work has already been done by non-

²⁵ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Unpacking the West: How European is Europe' in Rattansi and Westwood, pp.129-149.

African,²⁶ and African scholars.

In *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality*, Diop starts from the premise that 'to be or not to be does not depend on whether one knows Europe or not'.²⁷ He instead argues that many of the ideas used today to persuade mankind of the superiority of Western civilisation were actually derived from a cumulative and compound process that dates back to Ancient Egyptian and Phoenician civilisations, and even beyond. When Diop started his work, the debate about the 'colour' of Egypt had not yet reached the proportions it has today. Egypt has remained a contested area, not so much because of the perceived ambiguity of its position in terms of its geographical antiquity as well as its racial composition. Its present geographical position in underdeveloped Africa was the issue. Diop's project, not surprisingly, has met with rigid opposition.

Egypt's great antiquity has not always been celebrated. Its long and stable history was once read negatively as static and sterile,²⁸ and seen to put it *behind* later civilisations. This view was enabled by the dynamism and rise of Greek and Roman culture. In the eighteenth century the rise of racism added a new dimension to the potential of Egypt, and 'the ambiguity of Egypt's "racial" position allowed its supporters to claim that it was essentially and originally "white"'.²⁹ It is this claim that Diop queries. Based on his reading of the Greek historian Herodotus,³⁰ who acknowledged the indebtedness

²⁶ Basil Davidson, for instance has made an outstanding contribution to the the writing of African-centred African history, for which he was honoured in 1976 at a conference at the Centre for African Studies in Edinburgh to mark his 60th birthday. The proceedings were published as *African Studies Since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson*, ed. by Christopher Fyffe (London: Longman, 1976). Fyffe noted then that 'the approach tended to be more Eurocentric than was perhaps appropriate for a celebration to honour the proponent of an Afro-centred focus in the study of Africa' (p.2). One of the few delegates to attend from Africa was Lalage Bown, then of Ahmadu Bello University.

²⁷ Diop, *The African Origin*, p. xvi.

²⁸ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece*, 2 vols (London: Free Association Books, 1987), I, p.189.

²⁹ Bernal I, p.189.

³⁰ Mary Lefkowitz points out that Herodotus' reading of Ancient Egyptian culture was not reliable and claims that Diop's interpretation of classical history is suspect, *Not Out of Africa* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p.157. Snowden's 'Bernal's "Blacks" and the Afrocentrists' *Black Athena Revisited*, ed. by Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp.112-128, accuses Diop of failing to distinguish between Egyptians (as non-black) and Ethiopians, literally 'burnt-faced peoples' (p.113).

of his culture to Ancient Egypt, and others, Diop proposes that:

Ancient Egyptian civilisation was not an accidental foreign implant on African soil. It was an African civilisation, originated and developed by Africans for thousands of years before internal decay and external aggression destroyed it.³¹

Most of Diop's original arguments have been repeated by other scholars in the various challenges to hegemony rooted in antiquity. Diop, himself once marginalised at home (ironically the original home of Negritude) was invited to contribute a chapter to the eight volume *General History of Africa* sponsored by Unesco to project 'the African point of view'.³² The project was first discussed in 1961 at the inaugural meeting of the International Congress of African Studies in Accra. In a review for *Présence Africaine*, J. H. Clarke singles out Diop's rigorous contribution as exemplary.³³ Diop submitted 'Origin of the Ancient Egyptians' to the second volume, *Ancient Civilisations of Africa*.

It is within this framework that Armah in *Osiris Rising* takes up the Diop challenge, drawing upon and building on his foundation. In response to a question asked by Ast as to the specific course of action proposed by Asar in the modification of the syllabus at the University Asar outlines the three points he considers most important:

One, making Africa the centre of our studies. Two, shifting from Eurocentric orientations to universalistic approaches as far as the rest of the world is concerned. Three, giving our work a serious backing in African history. The last would mean placing deliberate, planned and sustained emphasis on the study of Egyptian and Nubian history as matrices of African history instead of concentrating on the European matrices, Greece and Rome. We would also bring in Asian and pre-Colombian history, something the old guard is ignorant of and hostile to at the same time.

'Cheikh Anta Diop?'

'He's an inspiration, yes. Williams too. But what we need more than old idols is new work in the direction they pointed out'. (OR, 104)

³¹ 'Dakar Hieroglyphs', p.1043.

³² John Henrik Clarke, 'Ancient Civilisations of Africa: The Missing Pages in World History', *Présence Africaine*, 130 (1984), 148-158 (p.149).

³³ Clarke. p.148. Clarke reviewed the volume for *Présence Africaine*. He quotes from *Preparation of a General History of Africa* the rationale for the project:

In 1964, the General Conference of UNESCO, as part of the Organisation's effort to further the mutual understanding of peoples and nations, authorized the Director-General to take the necessary measures for the preparation and publication of a General History of Africa.

A positive image of Africa has to be first drawn from within Africa itself.

*

The question ultimately, of course, goes beyond the simplistic replacement of one type of reading and interpretation with another. Ernest Gellner talks of a 'transvaluation of values'³⁴ – as exemplified by Senghor, assimilated Negritudist, for instance. What may have started as the domination of one people by another – be it slavery, or imperialism, also oversaw the dynamic transformations of the societies involved from one form to another, for example from pre- to industrialised, or from the ethnic to the national. Gellner pinpoints 'this deep metamorphosis and the difficulty of finding a viewpoint from which to judge it' as the real problem'.³⁵

But this is the next stage. It is through such action as the abolition of slavery that people were forced to rethink and modify their practice. At the same time, such cultural shifts as that occurred with the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century heralded new possibilities and responsibilities for (Western) man. And yet the abolition of the slave trade did not change significantly the attitudes of the white race towards the black. Robert Palter cites S. Drescher to this effect:

If racial attitudes were altered temporarily by the ending of the [slave] trade, we must still deal with the contention that the entire abolitionist process altered the path of racism very little. For those who see late nineteenth century racism largely as the continuation and intensification of earlier xenophobia and arrogance, towards blacks in particular, abolition was hardly more than a dramatic, quite anomalous interlude in a pattern of general hostility.³⁶

This view is sustained by Rattansi and Wood. They see the uninterrogated face of western modernity as deeply damned by:

its close involvement with, indeed legitimisation of Western genocide against aboriginal peoples, slavery, colonial domination and exploitation, and the Holocaust, in all of which

³⁴ Ernest Gellner, 'The Mightier Pen: The Double Standards of Inside/Out Colonialism', in *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp.159-169 (p.159).

³⁵ Gellner, p.159.

³⁶ Palter, p.368.

western doctrines of 'racial' and cultural superiority have played a constitutive role.³⁷

These arguments do not go unchallenged. Robert Palter proposes that for abolition to have been achieved, there must have been considerable opposition to both racism and slavery within eighteenth century Europe itself. He cites Samuel Johnson as an example of this opposition. According to Palter, Johnson is well remembered for once proposing a toast 'when in company with some very grave men at Oxford [...] "to the next insurrection of the Negroes in the West Indies"'.³⁸ The response of Snowden in 'Bernal's "Blacks"' and the Afrocentrists' is to seek to establish that there is nothing uniquely machiavelian about the Western mindset or intention. He argues that slavery in different forms has been part of African life long before the trade crossed the Atlantic into Europe and America.

Léopold Sedar Senghor

Léopold Senghor, in his public and private life has repeatedly succeeded in thwarting the development of a muscular revolutionary sequel to Negritude, demonstrating the tension between politics and scholarship in Africa, as elsewhere. The relationship between Diop and Senghor is perhaps the clearest demonstration of the success of Assimilation as colonial policy within French speaking Africa. In this case, as with his retirement to France, Senghor has demonstrated the consistency of his 'tigritude'.³⁹ From 'African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific' published in 1969, and thirty years on, in 'Hieroglyphics for Babies' (1997), Armah has levelled by far the most sustained and intensive criticism of Senghor, partly for his failure to acknowledge Diop's innovative contribution to African studies. In a position to institute change, Senghor failed chiefly because of his acceptance of inferior status. He said:

We had been taught, by our French masters at the *lycée*, that we had no civilisation, having been left off the list of guests at the Banquet of the Universal. We were 'tabula rasa', or better still, a lump of soft wax which the fingers of the white demiurge would mould into shape. The only hope of salvation you could hold out to use (sic) was to *let ourselves be*

³⁷ Rattansi and Westwood, p.3.

³⁸ Palter, p.369.

³⁹ Wole Soyinka famously said of Negritude: 'A Tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces', Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *Wole Soyinka* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1998), p.7.

assimilated'.⁴⁰

Senghor also obstructed scholarship that might redress the historical prejudice against the African continent. Diop is the 'ridiculed minority of one' to whom Armah refers in the passage from *Osiris Rising* below, as Asar describes Senghor's action to safeguard the status quo:

The old guard is losing ground. They've hit back with some meanness. Promotions withheld for years. Attempts at slander. Its a funny place, the academy. Far, very far from rational. Still, from a ridiculed minority of one, we've now got equal votes. (*OR*, 104)

We know from 'Dakar Hieroglyphs' that it was not until Senghor's death that Diop was finally awarded a long overdue professorship in spite of the broad international reach and recognition of his work. The University of Dakar has also been renamed The Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar in his honour. Armah ironically invokes in the final sentence quoted above Senghor's emotional appeal. In response to Descartes' equation of thought to being, coopted by the West as an intrinsic part of Western heritage, Senghor countered 'L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison hellène' – 'Emotion is Negro, as Reason is Greek'.⁴¹ In *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality* Diop alludes, also ironically, to Senghor, that 'Black African poet [who] expressed himself in a verse of admirable beauty [even while subscribing to] those Nazi ideas in an alleged duality of the sensitive, emotional Negro, creator of art, and the White Man, especially endowed with rationality'.⁴² Soyinka, building on Diop's critique is more scathing – 'Africans neither think nor construct, but it doesn't matter because – voilà – they intuit!' ⁴³

To Soyinka, Negritude not only failed dismally to argue the case against racism, it

⁴⁰ Ayi Kwei Armah, 'African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific', *Présence Africaine*, 64 (1967), 6-30, (p.18)

⁴¹ Quoted in Armah and Lam, *Hieroglyphics*, p.7.

⁴² Diop, *The African Origin of Civilisation*, p.25.

⁴³ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), emphases and exclamation Soyinka's, p.129.

capitalised on the spirit of the time that gloried in the grandiose gesture.⁴⁴ Its response was not proactive; Soyinka argues convincingly that 'it trapped itself in what was primarily a defensive role, even though its accents were strident, its syntax hyperbolic and its strategy aggressive'.⁴⁵ Armah's ironical barb finds its mark – the academy is very far, indeed, from rational. In *Hieroglyphics for Babies*, Armah claims that it was this statement from Senghor – 'Emotion is Negro, as Reason is Greek' – that 'gave the racist Hegelian division of the world its most fervent echo'.⁴⁶

Twenty five years after his original statement, in 1964, Senghor attempted to modify his statement, claiming that he only meant to make generalisations by emphasising qualities dominant to each type, and that all human beings possess largely the same attributes, only differently apportioned. It is a concession that proved too little, too late.⁴⁷ As Armah rightly observes, the effects of Senghor's long held and well publicised views have been far-reaching, as well as 'devastating', instilling into the African 'a crushing intellectual and spiritual burden'.⁴⁸

Within Africa Diop's work is regarded seriously, as both Armah and Molefi Kete Asante (formerly Arthur Lee Smith) point out, as much for its achievement as for breaking new ground and for the potential it invites. Diop almost singlehandedly challenged a way of thinking about Africa that was not only suspect, it was impossible to sustain. In *Osiris Rising* Armah deals directly with the debate regarding Africa's position, but suggests that the work already done by Diop, the African American scholar Chancellor Williams, and others does not serve as an endpoint, but rather as

⁴⁴ In the 'Introduction' to *Essays in African Writing: A Re-evaluation*, Abdulrazak Gurnah remarks the 'curious' hostility to Negritude of Anglophone African writers (vi). As I have already discussed, Negritude, and the journal *Présence Africaine* were originally very much a Francophone enterprise, and were at the forefront of the interrogation of Europe's representation of Africa. Armah is equally at ease in both linguistic worlds.

⁴⁵ Soyinka, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Armah and Lam, *Hieroglyphics*, p.7.

⁴⁷ Diop, *The Origins*, p.280

⁴⁸ Armah and Lam, p.7. Senghor displayed remarkable ingenuity in reconciling his two worlds. Fanon cites the 'fierce words' of the nationalist Senegalese when faced with Senghor's agility at handling his assimilation: 'We have demanded that the higher posts should be given to Africans; and now Senghor is Africanizing the Europeans' (*WOE*, 35). Notably one of the first of the African presidents to relinquish power voluntarily, he has since retired to a farm in the South of France.

the beginning of serious research, from an African perspective, into what defines Africa, and why it continues to occupy such an ambivalent position in the world.

Egypt in America and Europe

If Egypt is an enigma in world history, it is an enigma by design and created by Western historians, travellers and adventurers.

John Henrik Clarke⁴⁹

Egypt has been a contested category in the racial politics of America for over a hundred and fifty years.

Robert Young⁵⁰

All that lives is twin.

Ayi Kwei Armah⁵¹

The special characteristics of Egypt lie in the fact that it was successively invaded and colonised for over two thousand years. The Assyrians invaded in 671BC followed by the Persian Achaemenians, and finally the incursion of Alexander the Great. The African American historian, John Henrik Clarke, claims that to lose sight of this leads to a misreading of what Egypt has meant in the past, as well as of its significance as one of the ancient precursors of modern civilisation. Out of this colonisation has, according to Clarke, arisen one of the most injurious fallacies of our time – ‘the myth of the invader and conqueror as “civilizer”’. Egypt was well established long before these invasions, which as history attests, eventually led to its decline. It is Clarke’s contention that ‘invaders and conquerors never spread civilisation: rather, they spread a way of life at the expense of vanquished people’.⁵² Egyptian culture was diffused into the Greco-Roman world through this contact, which ultimately impacted on both coloniser and colonised.

It is extremely difficult to draw a line dividing contemporary debate over Egypt into

⁴⁹ Clarke, p.149.

⁵⁰ Robert Young, ‘Egypt in America: *Black Athena*, Racism and Colonial Discourse’, in Rattansi and Westwood, eds, p.159.

⁵¹ From *Two Thousand Seasons*, p.xi.

⁵² Clarke, p.158.

clear compartments, one African, the other North American. Diop has come to represent both challenge to the European American appropriation of Egyptian mythology, as well as the African-American re-visioning of 'black' contribution to world culture and civilisation. The establishment of Egypt as central to studies about Africa though not a new concept, is one of the motivations of Afrocentricity, an idea that has as its *raison d'être* 'the wish to reclaim Africa's contribution to world history and human knowledge'.⁵³ In *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*,⁵⁴ Molefi Kete Asante, professor in African American Studies at Temple University, Philadelphia, and the man behind the current resurgence of interest in an Africa centred approach, 'which looks at Africa as the origin of human civilisations and its advances'⁵⁵ and which has subsequently been read, incorrectly, as inferring Black dominance, has proclaimed the current period of inquiry and re-vision as 'the Age of Diop'. This is in recognition of Diop's pioneering work in opening the area of Egyptological study to challenge.

Not Out of Africa: The Classics and the Afrocentrist Idea

The impassioned, even hostile, responses to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* by American classicists indicate the contested nature of Bernal's (and by extension, Diop's) claims. Bernal questions the very basis of the American Academy, challenging its foundations by proposing a reappraisal of the history and method of such established disciplines as the Classics and also Anthropology and Archaeology. He says:

the formation of classics as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century was based on the deployment of a new form of historical scholarship that significantly modified the story of the origins of Greek civilisation that had hitherto been accepted for the previous two thousand years. In the place of the 'ancient model' of the dependence of Greek on Egyptian

⁵³ In Alfred Zack-Williams, 'Development and Diaspora: Separate Concerns?' *Review of African Political Economy (ROAPE)*, 65 (1995), 349-358 (p.351).

⁵⁴ Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ In Davleena Das, 'Brown Hosts Afrocentrism Debate', *Brown Daily Herald*, 4 October 1996, p.1. It must be noted that the whole idea of Afrocentricity is highly contested. In this thesis, the Bernal/Lefkowitz debate is used to illustrate the intense as well as polarised nature of the debate rather than as an attempt to demonstrate the 'truth' of either position.

culture, nineteenth century academics substituted what Bernal calls the 'Aryan model' which denied that the Greek had received any cultural influence at all, either from the Semitic or African cultures of the Phoenicians or from the Egyptians, and held instead that Greek culture was, essentially, self-generated. This is the paradigm which, he alleges, with its cultural and racial assumptions intact, has broadly speaking stayed in place ever since.⁵⁶

These were disciplines developed in the nineteenth century at a time of 'European expansionism, racism and growing anti-semitism'.⁵⁷ Their beginnings, far from being objective and factual, had both a cultural and political interestedness. Mary Lefkowitz has levelled charges of cultural relativism and historical negligence at the Afrocentric idea. She responds to Bernal in two books, *Not Out of Africa* (1996), and with others in *Black Athena Revisited* (1996). In *Not Out of Africa*, Lefkowitz minimises ancient Egyptian influence on Greek culture in her claim that for a considerable time the West's notion of Egypt was a Greek and early Christian construction which mistook the real nature of Egypt. She argues that it is these mistaken notions, rather than anything essentially Egyptian, that form the bedrock of western culture. However, the findings of her elaborate and extensive research sometimes refute, rather than support her claims, as in the case of the Egyptian ancestry of the American masonic movement.⁵⁸

In *Black Athena Revisited* the focus shifts to the separation of ancient Egypt from Africa. The 'Afrocentric' reader is instead pointed to Nubia undoubtedly black, and African.⁵⁹ Lefkowitz reasserts the Western claim to Egypt on the basis of two points: that the West got there first, and that they have been there a long time. Her argument is fundamentally undermined by a suspiciously subjective, and certainly provocative conclusion:

Egypt has always been admired by Europeans for the antiquity of its civilisation and for its artistic and architectural remains. Why focus on one African (!) nation which has won European admiration for its achievements?⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Young, pp.154-155.

⁵⁷ Bernal I 'Whose Greece', p.17.

⁵⁸ Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), pp.107-110.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Frank Snowden, 'Bernal's "Blacks" and the Afrocentrists', p.121. He quotes T. Kendall as saying that Nubia 'really was a black African culture of enormous influence and power'.

⁶⁰ Lefkowitz, p.156. My exclamation.

Her position is well summarised by the title of her book, surely an ironic inversion of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*. From the point of view of the Afrocentrists, however, the West puts up with cultural relativism when it suits its self-conception, and abandons it only when it seems to privilege 'the other side'. I now turn briefly to Bernal's *Black Athena* in order to situate the debate.

Martin Bernal and *Black Athena*

Martin Bernal has written two contentious volumes under the overall title *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. The first: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* covers ground later reconsidered by Lefkowitz; the second: *The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* covers ground already discussed by Diop.

Black Athena is a radical critique of Eurocentric historiography. In the first volume, Bernal is concerned with interrogating the shift in emphasis from what he calls the 'Ancient model', a system that saw Greek culture as hugely indebted to that of Egypt, to the self sufficient 'Aryan model' in which Greek culture and its antecedents are contained within the West. As Bernal says:

the Ancient model was destroyed and replaced by the Aryan model not because of any internal deficiencies, nor because the Aryan model explained anything better or more plausibly; what it did do, however, was to make the history of Greece and its relation to Egypt and the Levant conform to the world-view of the nineteenth century and, specifically, to its systematic racism.⁶¹

In the second volume of *Black Athena*, Bernal gives his evidence, from across the disciplines, to support the position taken in the first volume. He has received considerable criticism for this work, as above, because of his subversion of standard interdisciplinary boundaries and his focus on the race question.

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Bernal's work has refocused the debate on race in America with a remarkable and unpredictable intensity. At the epicentre of this reawakened debate are Egypt and

⁶¹ Bernal I, p.442.

Africa. It is with such claims as Lefkowitz's apparent assumption of a largely uncontested and Eurocentric ownership of historical 'truth', knowledge and even interpretation that Bernal takes issue.⁶² African America needs the myth of a mighty Africa, but European America cannot ratify a myth that might undermine its very foundations. Interestingly, in building up a case for strongly refuting the myths of origins in *Not Out of Africa*, Lefkowitz advances a persuasive reason for Egypt's centrality to American scholarship, and why in subsequent years it has become so important to cast doubt on the whole concept, and indeed resonance of 'Egypt'.⁶³

The Question of Race

The question of race is as highly sensitive as it is problematic. Indeed most people prefer to avoid it. Bernal is no exception, although he places it firmly on the agenda in his argument about Egypt. His choice of title – *'Black' Athena*, in racially polarised America has provoked the hostile⁶⁴ response from Lefkowitz and others. This response indicates the contested status of Ancient Egypt, as well as its perceived significance in the balance of the racial power equation especially in the US today. The term 'black' has been so politicized in America that to use it as Bernal does, in a discussion of origins and histories, is, to put it mildly, to court controversy. Aware of its potential to polarize, Bernal remains non-committal on the question of colour, saying in a 'guarded remark'⁶⁵ that 'the Ancient Egyptians [...] though their colour was uncertain, lived in Africa'.⁶⁶ Ultimately, 'Despite its critical significance for the argument of the book, Bernal plays down the question'.⁶⁷

⁶² Bernal I, p.17. This is, of course, part of a much larger issue, calling to question the idea of objectivity in academic inquiry, as well as the purpose of such inquiry.

⁶³ In *Not Out of Africa*, Lefkowitz talks of 'Mystical' Egypt, 'to distinguish it from historical Egypt' (p.106). In *A Study of History I* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), Arnold Toynbee coins 'Egyptiac' (from the Latin *Aegyptiacus*), in order to avoid the ambiguity of the geographical adjective 'Egyptian' (from the Latin *Aegyptius*), p.128. He also distinguishes between contemporary and this 'Egyptiac' Egypt.

⁶⁴ Young, p.155.

⁶⁵ Young, p.157.

⁶⁶ Bernal I, p.440.

⁶⁷ Young, p.157.

White Mythologies

One of the most critical interventions in this debate is that of Robert Young.⁶⁸ Arguing the case for the rootedness of most scholarship in ancient Egypt, he explores the rationale behind the whitening of Egypt.⁶⁹ While the Classicists either minimised the impact of, or claimed Egypt, the Anthropologists and Archaeologists privileged the scientific concept of polygenesis, as opposed to the monogenetic theory which consequently allowed them to flout the clause in the American constitution that considers all men as born equal.⁷⁰ It also removed the moral challenge to the white man of the practice of slavery. Starting from the premise that all knowledge is interested, Young emphasises the 'insider' threat posed by Bernal's flirtation with the 'disturbing possibility that all Western knowledge is, directly or indirectly, a form of colonial discourse'.⁷¹ It is from this context that Bernal has, not surprisingly, and in an ironical appropriation of the phrase been hailed by black Afrocentrists as 'the great white hope'.⁷²

Young confronts the race question that is central to the debate. He argues that although the term black could not possibly mean the same thing in antiquity as it does today, 'this very identification of the Egyptians as African and Black was itself the reason why they were written out of European cultural history in the nineteenth century',⁷³ pointing to 'racialism as a *theoretical* discourse of the nineteenth century'.⁷⁴ Today, the links between this theoretical position and contemporary cultural discourses are not

⁶⁸ In 'Egypt in America', ed. by A. Rattansi and S. Wood, pp.150-169.

⁶⁹ See Young, p.159, for a detailed discussion.

⁷⁰ Young, p.160.

⁷¹ Young, p.154.

⁷² In Frank M. Snowden Jr., 'Bernal's "Blacks" and the Afrocentrists', *Black Athena Revisited*, p.116. This phrase derives from boxing. John Arthur Johnson was the first black man to win the world heavyweight boxing championship in 1908. Thereafter, the search for a white contender to beat him resulted in the period being referred to as the 'White Hope era'. In 1915 in Havana, Cuba, he deliberately lost the title to 'white hope' Jess Willard. His reasons for throwing the fight are of interest. Convicted in 1912 for crossing a State line with his white fiancée, he jumped bail and fled to Europe. He evidently thought that by conceding the title his sentence might be commuted. In the end he served the time (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*).

⁷³ Young, p.158. According to John E. Coleman, 'Did Egypt Shape the Glory that was Greece?' in Lefkowitz and Rogers, pp.280-302 (p. 294), it was the Greek tendency to label non-Greeks as barbarians that served as a precedent for Western racism.

⁷⁴ Young, p.159.

so easily recognised or made in the West, because of the prevalent attitude that considers 'the racist assumptions of the Victorians to be so morally wrong, the most objectionable part of their culture'.⁷⁵ Young has emphasised that the rationale for the 'whitening' of Egypt was very specific. It was 'not in a general conspiracy of European racism in nineteenth century academia, but in the particular concept of nineteenth century American racial theory in its attempt to justify and rationalize slavery in the years leading up to the American civil war'.⁷⁶ The reluctance of scholars to tackle the race question is only counterbalanced by the urgency of confronting the race issue. Bernal structures the debate over Egypt into competing paradigms – the Revised Ancient model and the Aryan model.⁷⁷ These are predicated on the race question. Indeed, in Young's opinion, 'Bernal's most significant intervention [...] is the fact that he places race, racism and the racialization of knowledge at the core of his argument'.⁷⁸

The British scholar and collector of antiquities for the British Museum, Ernest Budge, in tracing the origins of Osiris at the beginning of this century draws attention to the Sudanic or Nilotic origins (ie, Southern, rather than mediterranean) of indigenous

⁷⁵ Young, p.159.

⁷⁶ Young, p.161.

⁷⁷ Coleman, p.292. In *A Study of History* 1, Arnold Toynbee suggested this polarity when he described, in highly poetic terms, the competing tensions between what he called the Seleucid Monarchy, 'the bridal chamber in which the Hellenic and Syriac civilizations were married' (p.5), and the Ptolemaic Empire, the result of the joining of Hellenism and the Egyptiac civilization. In his view 'the first union produced titanic offspring' and was for nearly two centuries 'the greatest field of creative human activity that existed in the world' (p.5). In comparison, he casts the Ptolemaic union as 'unfruitful', its legacy limited to 'introducing into the Roman Empire the worship of Isis and of certain forms of economic and social organization'. But instead of reading into the availability of written records advancement (Papyrus was after all one of the compelling attractions of Egypt for the Romans), Toynbee sees it rather differently. He says:


Owing, however, to a climatic accident the amount of raw information regarding these two monarchies which happens to be accessible to us is in inverse ratio to their intrinsic importance in history. The dry-as-dust soil of upper Egypt yields the scientific Western excavator a wealth of papyri, beyond the dreams of the scholars of the renaissance, and these papyri afford minute information [...] whereas the history of the Seleucid Monarchy has to be pieced together from scattered coins and inscriptions and from fragments of literary records. The significant point is that the Ptolemaic papyri have attracted almost all the spare energies of Western scholarship ... [which has tended as a result] ... to measure the historical importance of the Ptolemaic Monarchy by the amount of raw material accessible [...] and by the intensity of the labour which they themselves have devoted to this reconstructive work' (6).

Thus the Asiatic civilisation was privileged in another Western discipline, Ancient History.

⁷⁸ Young, p.156.

Egyptian culture and belief.⁷⁹ In his opinion, some of the Classical scholars such as Plutarch or Herodotus, unable to read the original papyri in hieroglyphics, might have overlooked this detail. Also, some of papyri only came to light at a later date. But as shown by Lefkowitz, and differently by Young, by far the biggest problem Budge sees as hindering their scholarship was in that they could not contemplate the idea of African antecedents to the Greco-Roman tradition, which was rather belatedly presumed to be Asiatic in origin, and therefore did not look for it.⁸⁰ According to Young, Bernal also moves the debate from the Orient, placing 'the question of Africa [at] the centre of both historical and intellectual enquiry in the history of Western knowledge'.⁸¹

II Reading *Osiris Rising*

Osiris, represented by the symbol  is the 'Truth-Speaker'.⁸² He has been identified as many things, the sun, the moon, the many-eyed, and has come to signify many aspects of Egyptian mythology. Nevertheless, his enduring appeal lies in his representation as a 'Beneficent Being' ⁸³ lent immanence/divinity by the paradoxical conjunction of humanity and immortality. The job of administering justice to the wicked and reward to the righteous also lies with him. Isis, his wife, (and sister within certain versions of the myth) also contains within her deity a multiplicity of meanings, from the ancient one, the moon, earth,⁸⁴ to the strong one, the mighty one.⁸⁵ Together they epitomize the complementarity which for Armah represents the most desirable and harmonious state. Armah mirrors quite closely aspects of the original myth, but reimagines it as a contemporary drama that spans Africa and her diaspora, cutting through space and time. Thus, the conclusion of Armah's story, like

⁷⁹ Budge, I, p.vii.

⁸⁰ Budge, I, p. xiv.

⁸¹ Young, p.153.

⁸² Budge, I, p.xiv.

⁸³ Budge, I, p.54.

⁸⁴ Budge, I, p.4.

⁸⁵ Budge, I, p.25.

a number of ancient versions, takes place on water.⁸⁶ In the closing incident of the novel Asar draws near to a patrol boat which he believes is manned by a friend and it is shot down by the Deputy Director of Security and his crack unit while Ast watches, having failed to give him ample warning of his impending death. In original versions, he was first tricked by Set into getting into a coffin in which he was subsequently asphyxiated, and then he was thrown, in certain versions whole, and in others in fourteen or more pieces, into the river Nile. Here too, Asar's death is dramatic and reflects the myth: he exploded silently into fourteen starry fragments, and the pieces plunged into the peaceful water' (*OR*, 305).

Osiris' significance arguably lies in Armah's placing of this story within the context of two of the most powerful deities in ancient African history and mythology. He reaches even further back than in *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons*, the works that resemble this last book most closely in terms of vision and scope. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, recollection is made within historical time:

Remembrance has not escaped us. Trapped now in our smallest self, we, repositories of the remembrance of the way now violated, we, portion that sought the meaning of Anoa's utterance in full and found another home on this same land, we, fraction that crossed .. mountains, journeyed through forests, shook off destruction only to meet worse destruction, we, people of fertile time before these schisms, we *life's* people, people of the way, trapped now in our smallest self, that is our vocation: to find our larger, our healing self, we the black people. (*TTS*, 13, my emphasis)

At this stage, Armah refers to the migration of peoples and the more recent colonial partition of Africa. It is only a fragment of the vast story of the continent, which he qualifies in the next paragraph. The picture is still incomplete:

Of the time still known as the time of men our knowledge is fragile. The time is bound in secrets. Of what is revealed, all is in fragments. Much of it was completely lost in that ashen time when loneliness, bringer of madness, nearly snapped the line of rememberers. (*TTS*, 13)

In *The Healers*, the work of healing, began by the women in *Two Thousand Seasons*

⁸⁶ Benaouda Lebdaï, 'Osiris Rising. History Revisited by Ayi Kwei Armah', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 21:1 (1998), 31-36.

continues (*TTS*, 14). The earlier Armah was satisfied with an ideological gesturing towards the Eastern forest or an imaginary grove, but in *Osiris Rising* he appropriates the same mythology that the West has used to establish its dominance and recreates the two most powerful Egyptian deities as contemporary characters in the drama. The four centuries that separate their origins are swept away, their relationship constructed as a mutual affinity and recognition, a predestined meeting of soulmates. In *Why Are We So Blest?*, the fleeting relationship between the African American Naita and Modin, impossible in the context of race and politics in America prefigures that of the diasporic Ast and the continental Asar. An historic reunion of epic significance, it is much more than an ordinary sexual relationship between an African and an African American. It is a fulfilment of destiny.

The idea of a return to Africa, attempted by Marcus Garvey, Martin Delaney and in spirit by others, is also informed by the unresolved guilts and tensions over slavery, and a celebration of material well-being within America today. Africa, considered part of the so-called 'third world', that 'unassimilable excess, surplus to the narrative of the West'⁸⁷ attracts few disciples, or admirers. Poverty, disease and the begging bowl today counter past greatness. And yet the terror of racism in America, as Modin finds out, easily eclipses this for some on the continent. The forces that have acted in both creating, and maintaining the fissure between the diasporic peoples, in Africa and outside have not surprisingly been formulated by the systems of transmitting knowledge. The settlement of America by Europeans was particularly harsh, involving as it did the extermination of native Indians and the importation of slaves to kick-start as well as sustain the economy. Once settlement was established, however, the need to utilise scholarship to validate and legitimise was particularly strong. It is here that myths, particularly of origins, assumed great importance in this young society.

Nevertheless, Bernal himself argues for a return to an ultimate historical truth if academic inquiry is to achieve anything. Toni Morrison has observed that the white

⁸⁷ It is thus described on back cover of Robert Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 1990.

academy has turned to postmodernism 'because of the impossibility of history'.⁸⁸

History itself is a problematical concept. In *Osiris Rising*, Ast observes that it is not the aim of European American scholarship to seek to arrive at truth, because 'In America truths about origins stink' (OR, 270). She asks the rhetorical question: 'Can you imagine a nation built on genocide and slavery having much use for historical truth?' (OR, 270). It is because of its inability to own up to its history and address, as well as redress, the wrongs on which it was founded that America has become a cauldron of racial tension. The ex-slaves, the African Americans, have employed different strategies through time to try and find an accommodation within the system. They have also sought external solutions to their problem. Here again, at the end of the twentieth century, Armah proposes a return to Africa as the only way out of the racist impasse in America. Within Africa itself Armah's vision of redemption is inclusive. It is configured as a concerted effort incorporating diasporic as well as continental Africans.

*

...but

What are myths and
paradigms
but psychic feet and hands projected
through the universe
to help us move
from what happened to us
to what we need to be.

Ayi Kwei Armah⁸⁹

Without history, people are without direction. History [...] is the compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography and [...] the clock they use to tell their special time of day. History tells a people where they have been and what they have been; where they are and what they are. Most important, history tells a people where they still

⁸⁸ In Conversation with Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p.179.

⁸⁹ From 'Seedtime' in *West Africa*, 23 May, 1988, p. 926.

must go and what they still must be.

John Henrik Clarke ⁹⁰

A people's view of themselves as well as the world has to be a long one if they are to be more than a footnote in history. To reconstruct memory is to invoke possibilities and accent permanence.

Kofi Anyidoho⁹¹

Osiris Rising is a book about Africa and her diaspora. In this regard, the book is closest to *Why Are We So Blest?* It retains its sharp critique of American society, founded on 'Amerindian land emptied through genocide' (*OR*, 2), and built by slavery. Ast is unable to function in this debilitating environment, but her childhood under her grandmother Nwt's tutelage and her formal intellectual journey have already readied her for a return to Africa. Her return is mythically configured as part of the story of Esi Mansa, an African woman taken as a slave to America. Mansa tries to escape six times, and on her seventh attempt is once again caught, but this time she is blinded, her eyes gouged out. With her blinding, she cannot see to escape, and stops trying. Thereafter she serves as a lesson to all who might share in her desire for freedom. The slavers call her 'The African' because of her determination to return to Africa (*OR*, 2). With the symbolic removal of vision a barrier is erected that deflects the gaze away from Africa. Nevertheless the desire for home and for the possibility of a now imagined life survives in a remnant, anchored by the symbol of life itself, the ankh. This is the story about the settlement of the slaves, the story-within-the-story as it is recounted to Ast by her grandmother, Nwt. In her telling of this story, Nwt underscores the significance of the sign of life while demonstrating the power of the forces that act to control and even stifle it. The ankh symbolises 'home', continuity and propagation. Through Nwt, Ast has also learned the ancient language of the goddess Isis and developed a yearning for freedom.

The novel opens with a description of the symbol:

⁹⁰ Clarke, p.158.

⁹¹ In 'Slave Castle, African Historical Landscape and Literary Imagination' in *Drumspeak: Journal of the Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast* 1 (March 1996), 21-36 (p. 22).

From far off, it looked like an ellipse mounted on a cross. Close up, it was a female form, arms outstretched, head capacious enough to contain the womb. The day she asked its name, her grandmother Nwt turned an incredulous smile on her. 'Ankh. Life.' Ast asked where it came from. 'Home,' her grandmother said. Then her face hardened as if the answer had closed a window on it. (*OR*, 1, See Appendix V)

Ast comes to symbolise the restored vision of the ancestral and now mythical Mansa. She is destined to complete the circle by returning to Africa and bringing the Ankh back home.

The ankh assumes a central position in the plot and structure of the novel, interweaving the two, and distinguishing between the different types of slave: those that were sold into Slavery, and those that became slaves by different means. It is the different ways in which various characters became slaves that forms one of the key storylines, culminating in the highly dramatic showdown between two African American returnees in the Eastern forest. A sharp contrast is drawn between Ast, sincere and committed, and her antithesis Cinque, manipulative, opportunistic and destructive. Their context is that of the Isiac (Isis/Osiris) myth. Each, significantly, is backed by the same symbol – the ankh, one in affirmation, the other in treacherous opposition. Without reducing characterisation to representative types, Armah makes these two constitute a manichaen dichotomy, the sharply opposed polarities that are for Armah contained in all aspects of human interaction. If indeed the aim of a reclamation of history is to enable progress, Armah here presents us with a vindictive historical memory in which over a four hundred year period, the sins of the ancestors are preserved intact, and visited on the generation that finally make the return. The differences that characterised their going continue to hold. This image is of an unforgiving Africa with a long memory, demanding its dues. The unsuspecting Cinque is a villain in an ancient, and new plot which unfolds dramatically during the revelation with the seer, Tete, at the village. Return is but continuation.

Ast and Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano represent, respectively, those who were forcibly captured and have stayed true to the African desire for wholeness, and those who sought refuge with the slavers, having betrayed their people. Their names are carefully chosen. Ast is named with an uncluttered economy that belies the monumental legend

that she embodies. We read her within her historico-mythical legacy, as well as in her function and potential within the text. She is the bridge between Africa and the African-American diaspora, with an acute understanding of both, and eventually, invested with the task of literally carrying its future in her womb. Ast is of the lineage of the creators, the inspirers, those concerned with wholeness. Her return is neither condescending nor triumphant. Armah presents it as the natural progression of one who has been prepared from early life to pursue just this destiny, indeed to fulfil it. In the following incident, Armah re-establishes her contact with the community for which the ankh is both sacred and practical. It constitutes the central support of Tete's dwelling, duplicating Tete's role as anchor of the questioning community. This is how Armah describes Ast's homecoming, her first contact with the original ankh:

She wondered why she felt so strongly that she knew this place [...]

Ast opened her eyes expecting to see Asar, and found herself looking straight up at the thatch above her. In the dark cone where the roofbeams came together, there was a carved object with a familiar shape. She closed her eyes, then opened them to make sure this was not an illusion brought on by the play of shadow and light above her. The way the ankh was placed, it formed a centre-piece holding the roofbeams together. When she looked down she saw Tete holding out a frosted glass of lemon juice. [...]

‘Excuse me,’ Ast said, seeing she’d kept Tete waiting.

‘Thats all right,’ Tete said. *‘You looked hypnotized for a moment.’* Ast could think of no appropriate answer. ‘I’m glad you came, both of you,’ Tete said to Ast. ‘You know I used to carry Asar on my back when he was a child, here. But tell me, are you a tourist or are you coming back?’

Sudden as the question was, it did not surprise Ast. “Not coming back,” she said. ‘I am back’. (OR, 252, my emphasis)

Ast is in a trance, as if transported to a rendezvous with the destiny she came to find. At the same time, her acceptance as well as lack of fear of what is new and yet so old within her, speaks of the familiarity already there, the result of years of preparation with her grandmother, Nwt. This conversation establishes not only Ast's belonging within this community, but reaffirms that of Asar as well. It consolidates further the idea of their being soul mates, separated by centuries and the slave trade, who nevertheless find their way to each other in time to fulfil their destiny. Tete, the intellectual seer and repository of history and culture, says to Ast concerning her

meeting with Asar: 'Asar has done the right thing just knowing you' (*OR*, 253). The crucial connection has been made. In the ancient myth the union of Isis and Osiris is as intense and complementary. It also yields a son, Horus, who is conceived after the death and resurrection of Osiris. His birth confirms the resurrection of his father.⁹² The merging of fantasy with fictional reality occurs as Armah presents the plot through the filter of historical myth. Ast is represented as believing that it is her destiny to seek reconnection with her people's origins and she does so with both humility and determination.

Cinque's names are in complete contrast to Ast's, and have been chosen by Armah to underscore his arrogance, and ignorance of radical African history. Originally named Sheldon Tubman, Cinque had been active in the movement for Civil Rights. In an interesting twist we get to know him through mediation by Ast, who admired, and as an undergraduate based her dissertation on his role in the liberation movement: 'Sheldon Tubman: A Civil Rights Career' (*OR*, 89). It is the events of this life that led the unreconstructed African American to seek to reinvent himself. Tubman had the mistaken 'impression that the damage of centuries could, why not ? be abolished in one fabulous social push' (*OR*, 89), but reality quickly disabuses him of this notion. The historical Cinque heroically led a revolt on the slave ship, the *Amistad*, off the Cuban Coast in 1839, and although not much can be ascertained about his life on returning victoriously to Sierra Leone in 1842, one story has it that he turned slaver. It is this story that Armah privileges.

Sheldon appropriates the names of seemingly important Africans – names that might invoke recognition and confer status: Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano. Here, as in his other novels, Armah uses names to indicate character or predilection/idiosyncrasy. Cinque's names symbolise 'moments' in culture and history, gesturing towards more than the individual characters. He privileges names that may within Africa today be read rather differently, and not for any heroism assumed for them in European writing about Africa. Indeed, to Armah they represent appropriation by, or collaboration with the

⁹² In another version of this myth Horus is born before the death of Osiris, and together with his mother searches for his father's body, and subsequently avenges his death. Armah models his story on a version between these two.

forces of oppression:

Now, his multiple conversions seemingly over, here was Sheldon Tubman strutting his slow stuff along this African beach, breathing heavy life into names better left to rot in peace: Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano. Ras the oblivious little emperor, Jomo the tribalist dictator serving Africa's enemies, Equiano the blind victim, medium of European stereotypes, Cinque the freed slave turned slaver. Now on the rebound from his first-love whites, posing as guide to Africa. (*OR*, 96)

In this passage, Armah appends Cinque to a list of historical characters whom he reads as having in some way compromised African integrity or freedom. Ras invokes the diminutive Ras Tafari, who became Emperor Haile Selassie ('Power of the Trinity') of Ethiopia, in whose time Ethiopia was successfully invaded by Italy, and who in a sense presided over the decline of a once formidable Empire. Jomo is Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, whom Armah regards as having sold out to the colonial settlers and set Kenya on the path to neocolonialism. Olaudah Equiano, who wrote *The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano* is the ex-slave famous for one of the earliest instances of African writing. Armah is highly critical of what he perceives as his apparent acceptance of his assimilation and his effusive praise for a system that only half accepted that he was human. As Armah tells it, Cinque's is a tragic story that turns farcical as he attempts to magnify his own importance by cultivating a following.

In Chapter six, 'Iarw',⁹³ there is a description of Cinque going to one of his meetings, preceded and serenaded by three beautiful women, who, of course, are his wives:

The drummer beat out a graceful solo, pitch and rhythm soaring to a peak. The congregation rose. The drumbeats lost intensity. When they were almost inaudible a different sound merged with them, then rose in a smooth swell. The congregation was chanting:

Come, Ras,

Come, Ras, Come, Ras.

Seven times the invocation was chanted. It peaked in a collective shout. *The light grew brighter.* The chant dropped back to a whisper. The congregation turned to face the main building. Framed in the entrance stood Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano, *arms upraised in papal benediction.* As he crossed the yard, like heliotropic plants the congregation kept their faces turned to him, arms raised high, palms facing him. He climbed onto the platform, mounted the dais, strode towards the throne. After him came the three sisters, doing their intricate

⁹³ In *Osiris Rising* Armah describes *Sekhet Iarw* as 'perfect place, evergreen fields of the wandering soul returning home' (*OR*, 7)

walk behind their man. (my emphases, *OR*, 138)

This is a fairly popular misconception in the African American imagination of what a return to Africa might yield.⁹⁴ The excesses of the late Emperor Bokassa of The Central African Republic's court, however, eclipse anything found in fiction and confirm the possibility of excessive indulgence, as does what Armah calls 'the Kamuzu problem' in *Two Thousand Seasons*.⁹⁵ Cinque has no political base and no money. He has instead a belief in a heritage mistakenly rooted in a broken ankh. He can only topple from such a pretentious pedestal.

In one sense Tubman represents the desire for success and the belief in individual power over destiny that is an essential part of the American myth. While in college, he plays race politics, joining the all white influential Yorker club by employing a doggedly cunning strategy, at the expense of the proposed African and Afro-American Association, which he condemns as clandestine and racially exclusive. Tubman not only joins the all-white club as the first and only black member, he succeeds in having the African and Afro-American Association banned. In his narratives Armah consistently exploits and curtails such raw ambition, what he calls 'headlong flight'. The disrupted flight motif may well derive from his original strictures about Senghor, whose path to success Armah charts as: early missionary contacts and education, a European adventure crowned in its initial stages with blissful abandoned success, then the traumatic *failure to arrive*.⁹⁶

Sheldon's engagement with the white cause is broken by racism painfully masquerading as love. He gets involved with Adele Morgan, a European American, and does not realise that she only sees him as an object in her research. He manipulates his way to the very top of elitist white society by denigrating African-

⁹⁴ In Eddie Murphy's popular film, 'Coming to America' the African prince of Zamunda is serenaded by just such fanfare.

⁹⁵ The late 'president-for-life' of Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda had his private estate in Malawi reconstructed as a replica of what he admired best in the United Kingdom. Complete with a version of Eton, it was totally removed from the lifestyle of the Malawian people.

⁹⁶ Armah, 'African Socialism', my emphasis, p.18. In real life, Senghor *did* get the best of both worlds. He retreated into Negritude, where to quote Armah, he 'swooningly extoll[ed] the beauty of black womanhood [while] settling down to the practical business of wooing and marrying a Frenchwoman whose whiteness could not be gainsaid (p.19).

American associations. In his final year he is selected to make the representative speech for his class, and at the end of the day he leaves college with the white girl, Adele. It is only when he reads her diaries and discovers that to her he is merely the object of an academic study that he recognises the impossibility of integration in America. The Sheldon/Adele association echoes that of Modin and Aimée in *Why Are We So Blest?*, only Sheldon is American while Modin was African. Sheldon eventually attempts suicide on discovering the betrayal by Adele, who has all along generously shared her data with a fellow European American, David Weiss. His journey to recovery is long and desperate, and according to 'rumour' it leads him from one extreme to the next: he joins a Trappist monastery in Canada, a Baha'i gathering in Bhutan, an Authentic Yoruba Village 'founded on principles of Negritude' in the Mississippi delta, and he at one stage converts to Islam (*OR*, 95). By the time he arrives at the African solution, a desperate last resort, he has also assumed the trappings of a messianic return. He cannot conceive of himself in other than these lofty terms in relation to Africa.

In the same way that Ast is prepared by her grandmother for her destiny, Cinque is cast as having inherited his ancestors' betrayal down through the centuries without his knowledge. He carries a broken ankh, ignorant of its meaning. His fate is predetermined and unalterable. His choices make him culpable – he demonstrates inherent selfishness especially in his dealings with those of his race. Armah has previously been accused of being crudely deterministic in his characterisation, and Cinque falls victim notwithstanding the poetic polarities allowed the reader in judging character. Armah compounds Cinque's tragic legacy with a stubborn arrogance irresistibly provocative to the gods. He creates a structural juxtaposition out of Ast's and Cinque's understanding and interpretation of the ankh to build up to the dramatic climax when the imposter is outed. Cinque insists that his ascendancy is announced publicly despite Tete's attempts to spare him the painful truth connected to his possession of a broken ankh. He comes to Tete not to seek the full meaning of the symbol, but to seek confirmation of the status it accords him (*OR*, 253). For the second time he comes face to face with an unbearable truth, and once again flees from the humiliation, this time of his ancestral legacy. As Ast observes, 'So sad [...] the

slave yearning to be revealed a king' (*OR*, 182).

Had Cinque been aware at all of the true nature of the ankh, he might have recognised the incompatibility of his own desires with this vision based on egalitarian and communal principles. While attempting to explain its significance to his followers, he implicates himself in his ancestors' treachery:

'In ancient times the rulers of Africa ran the continent through secret societies. Membership regulations were a closely guarded mystery. Heredity was the key. It was important for all members of the secret societies to be of royal blood, that is to say, to have in their very nature the experience of ruling people.

'Now the most powerful of these secret societies was the society of the ring. It was the highest ruling group in Africa, in the times before slavery destroyed our ancestral way of life. Nothing on earth was higher than the society of the ring. You understand, then, that members of this society had to be of the purest royal blood. Kings and emperors, people in whose veins flowed royal blood from both sides, from their mothers and fathers. These were people whose royal roots reached back beyond antiquity.

'The society had a sign: the ring from which it took its name. On one side of the ring there was a cross. Yes, brothers, a cross. Are you surprised? This African sign older than Christ by centuries, already had the cross built into it. All I have to add is that the sign you see here in my hand is Africa's sign of power.

Now some of you may wonder: How'd this dude manage to get a hold of such a powerful sign? Well, I am going to answer your question. This sign comes to me from my family. Yes from my family. In spite of slavery, in spite of our sojourn in the fire of white man's racism, my family kept this sign. For generations they preserved its meaning in the minds of growing young men. I, Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano, am the last repository of that secret knowledge in our family. I am the Keeper of the Sign'. (*OR*, 143-144)

As the sign, a family heirloom, is passed down the congregation, Ast, whom Cinque has requested to be there, recognises it as one half of the ankh. Cinque's explanation for being in possession of a broken ankh rests on 'the ancestral belief that if half the symbol was buried at home, like a navel, whoever travelled with the other half would eventually return, because the symbol must be complete in the end' (*OR*, 145). Armah introduces a traditional practice found in some African cultures, and hence creates a plausibility that heightens the extent of the betrayal, when he finally describes the slow and deliberate process that constitutes the severance from the community of one who betrays it. Tete explains:

'To turn the whole ankh of companionship into the broken ankh of betrayal, each accusing member had to burn away a tiny part of the dividing line. Only when the final burn was made could the broken ankh be sent as a summons to the accused and a date for the trial fixed'. (OR, 265)

Enlisting the compound cultural heritage to which his naming makes him privy, Cinque transposes one aspect of culture to explain another. It is this eclecticism that exposes his ignorance of the heritage he has come to claim, and contributes to the dramatic tension of the ironical climax, the biting humour and ridicule as he retreats, exposed as a charlatan. This is nothing compared to the fate of the original betrayers, who were subsequently 'invited' to commit suicide. Cinque gets off lightly.

In contrast to this the true meaning of the ankh is described by Ama Tete, and is personified by Ast. The ankh, described as one of Africa's oldest life symbols, represents companionship. Far from its being royal, secret and exclusive, as suggested by Cinque, the ellipse symbolised the linking up of everybody in the joint function of propagating and extending life. As Nwt says at the beginning of the text, in Egyptian hieroglyphics the sign simply translates as 'life', the common denominator of all being. Whereas social hierarchy is pyramidal in nature, resulting in the domination of those below by those above, this ellipse stands for an egalitarian 'circle of souls'. As described by Tete, the membership of the companionship was impressive, its aims admirable:

'[It] was rumoured to contain the most inventive people of the age: astronomers, scientists, builders, scribes, artists, keepers of the calendar, dedicated knowledgeable people averse to life in palaces. Not a blood circle this, but a circle of souls, the friendship of committed souls, the companionship of minds and bodies connected to the source of humane life, our continent, through the source of civilization, the idea of justice, Maet'. (OR, 262-3)

In *Osiris Rising*, Cinque is forced to confront at the personal level the dilemma of difference, predicated on race, in America. The same impasse was arrived at by both Solo and Modin in *Why Are We So Blest?* Slavery was premised on the absence of humanity in the African, a view that still persists in attitudes and behaviour towards the free black person. This is what sends Cinque over the edge: there can be no compromise over humanity.

As well as Cinque, others also attempt the reverse crossing. We first meet Prince Wossen of Ethiopia when he comes to Netta's hostel. He is a gross aberration of a proud and princely people, an image to invoke ridicule rather than invite admiration. He appropriates 'Ethiopia', symbol of unconquered Africa, but himself caricatures this dynamic culture.⁹⁷ He becomes Cinque's sidekick, a hustler from New York in search of the cheap kind of celebrity the first crop of African 'been-to's used to expect. He is described in detail as he makes his 'ponderous' entrance:

He might have been of middling height, but he was so solidly rotund he looked shorter. He was involved in a scarlet robe so long its hem swept the tiling every time he took a step. His hair fell in rasta tresses of a rusty brown much like his complexion. Atop the tresses sat a tight woollen beret of yellow, green, red and black bands culminating in technicolor tuft. Rows of colored beads hung from his neck, a couple reaching well beneath his knees. In his left he carried a horsetail fly whisk which at frequent intervals he flicked with studied solemnity. In his right he bore an ebony staff a trifle taller than himself. [...] he cut a leisurely circle in the air with his fly whisk and then, lifting his ebony staff above the table, brought it down to rest on it, erect, majestic. (*OR*, 79)

The stately bearing is quickly shattered when the purpose of his pretentiously grand mission is revealed. He is here to find out if the American junk food, that he and his boss, 'His Highness Cinque Equiano, the Elect' (*OR*, 79) like so much, has arrived at the hostel. When the proprietress, Netta, tells him that their shipment – including the all-important ketchup – has not arrived yet: 'The envoy nearly lost his grip on the staff of office. "Damn," he muttered. "No ketchup!"' (*OR*, 80). The scene is farcical.

Bailey, an artist Ast meets at Cinque's residence, identifies the fake Ethiopian as a small time New York gangster called Earl Johnson. Johnson is consistent. No matter what side of the Atlantic he finds himself on, he is a small time gangster. Much as he desires to become a real African prince, the point that Armah makes so memorably here is that the crossing from America to Africa does not induce miraculous

⁹⁷ In 'Ancient Greece' Mazrui further discusses the concept of 'Ethiopianism'. It was an African response to the Judeo-Christian 'sense of sacred superiority' that came to Africa 'wrapped up in Europe's cultural arrogance' that assumed the African could not understand complex configurations like the Trinity. Those who rejected Christianity were seen as regressing to a cultic Ethiopianism (p.73).

transformation. Johnson has done well here, ironically becoming '[...] the messenger of the messenger of God' (*OR*, 129). But he is tripped up by his nostalgia for home and its comforts, masked as desire for cheap junk food.

Armah, always the intellectual, suggests resolution through an institution as old in Africa as it is new in Manda, the university. Here, a communal think tank draws up a proposal for meaningful changes to be introduced in the preparation of students to live and function within their own country. The aim is to break the patterns of dependency and unreasonable expectation that have come to characterise the educated, and to prepare them for the responsibility of managing their own lives, ultimately on terms agreeable to themselves. These are some of the issues with which Armah struggles in *Osiris Rising*, issues that define the debates around which contemporary post-independence African States function. These aims generate tension between a government that has learnt to secure itself against its own people, as well as to benefit from the continued state of dependency it induces and a people determined to make real independence a realisable goal. It is in dealing with these issues that Armah brings the text into confrontation with very real contemporary problems of post independence African states. Of colonialism, and the 'independence game', DD makes this dangerous claim:

'It's a layman's misunderstanding to consider independence a revolt against white power. We – the authorities in Africa – we accept the framework established by the Western powers. There was only one thing wrong with colonialism. It denied responsible Africans participation in managing the system. At the elite level. Independence solved all that.' (*OR*, 36)

Deputy Director, explaining the situation to Ast proposes that the system has, of course, been modernised. And 'what do you achieve by overthrowing a working system?' (*OR*, 37)

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Armah addresses himself to misconceptions about what constitutes 'civilisation'. In *Osiris Rising* he establishes Ancient Egypt as the backdrop to his reconstructed myth.

Armah fictionalises the gods Isis and Osiris, in Egyptian translated as Aset and Asare, and situates them as the central figures of his novel. This embracing of Egyptian deities is prefigured in 'Masks and Marx', in which Armah casts Isis and Osiris as repositories of humanity: 'Asare and Aset, known to the West as Osiris and Isis, made the cultivation of humanizing values a permanent aim of the arts and sciences'.⁹⁸ Lebdaï notes in '*Osiris Rising: History Revisited by Ayi Kwei Armah*', 'Ast and Asar [...] strongly resemble the historical characters Isis and Osiris'. Isis, in the legend, is the goddess of kindness and magic, of healing and knowledge. She returns 'to the source to defend her origins, her history, her land and her people' (35). Osiris 'is given the role of defender of the arts and defender of the rehabilitation of the centrality of Africa in World History'. Lebdaï sees Armah as aiming for a 'reappropriation' of a confiscated history' by building on the work of Diop.⁹⁹

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The figure that is suggested by, and that defines the book is the phoenix, the mythical bird of Arabian legend, worshipped in ancient Egypt, that burned itself approximately every 500 years only to rise rejuvenated from its ashes. The analogy that Armah uses allows for the rise and fall, and rise again, of ancient and modern kingdoms. The mythology of Isis and Osiris is itself significant. Long before before Christianity, which was to define and distinguish Christendom and lend civility to modern Imperialism, Osiris had already civilised a vast 'empire,' stretching from Arabia through Asia and Europe, conquered death, was risen and sitting in judgment, as keeper of the mystery of death and the underworld.¹⁰⁰ In some of the papyri illustrations his soul is depicted as a man-headed hawk.¹⁰¹ The recycling of this myth in subsequent cultures emphasises the consistency of the questions that have engaged human beings through time and diverse circumstances. Underlying all this is a tacit recognition and acknowledgment that knowledge and culture are cumulative.

⁹⁸ 'Masks and Marx', p.35.

⁹⁹ Lebdaï, pp.34-35.

¹⁰⁰ Budge I, p.11.

¹⁰¹ Budge I, p.8.

But knowledge and culture in this form have been distorted in America, a country in which everything has become a commodity. Early in *Osiris Rising*, the author of *Journey to the Source* ¹⁰² who has learnt the art of survival in America explains to Ast the nature of the foundation on which America has been built. They have the following conversation in which he tells her:

'[...]a commodity is precisely what our history is. [...] You and I don't live in some peasant society where such matters are still obscure. We've been here for centuries, and hey, this is the late twentieth. Whatever has any value is a commodity. Your sweet soul is a commodity. If it's poorly packaged no one notices it. It stays invisible.'

'Are we to see human beings as commodities too?'

'Right on. It's not a matter of what we choose to see. It's what is. We are products. How do you suppose we got here in the first place? As commodities. That's how we survive, live, thrive. Here in America. Now.' (OR, 6)

The author has come to accept fully the conditions that allow for survival in America. Consequently, he is able to rationalise enslavement, by looking at it in terms of progress, measured by the degree to which one is allowed to collude. He responds to Ast's summation of his analysis which implies the continuing enslavement of the African American in his most cynical statement yet:

'I wouldn't be that simplistic. Slaves had no say in their packaging and sale. That's a key difference. There's freedom in the power to participate in our own packaging. We bargain about conditions of sale. That is empowerment.' (OR, 6)

Armah is blisteringly ironical. His acute analysis of the transformation of slavery into neo-slavery is intensely and distressingly accurate, if only in some respects. These two issues, commodification of history, and culture are the subject of the great American debate on ancient Egypt. This debate takes place against a background in which colonialism has created a new paradigm, that of the coloniser and the colonised.

¹⁰² The choice of this title should be read as a harsh criticism of the antithetical position ascribed this author by Armah. It is, of course, an allusion to, and parody of Amílcar Cabral's *Return to the Source*, the essence of which is described in the book's 'Introduction' as 'of no historical importance (and would in fact be political opportunism) unless it involves not only a contest against the foreign culture but also complete participation in the mass struggle against foreign political and economic domination.' Biodun Jeyifo in 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and Predicament of Obierika' in *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* refers to the idea of the return/journey to source as 'a reassertion or reinvention of traditions which colonialism, not without considerable success, had sought to destroy or devalue' (p.52). The peasant society referred to in the quotation that follows is then Cabral's Guinéan peasantry.

In this relationship the brokerage of power is skewed in favour of the coloniser, who subsequently exerts overall control in all areas: social, historical, cultural, political, and economic. Whereas in America an acceptance, and method for negotiation has been perfected by people such as the author, a private individual, in Africa the same game is grotesquely played out in the public, political arena, where the not so new African leadership is still attentive to neo-colonial control. The violence done to Africa has not even begun to be assessed in all its ramifications.

Rather than set or follow the trend for a case situated within contemporary 'postcolonial' confusion, Armah remains in Anglophone Africa one of the writers most insistent on peeling back the layers to establish cause; on probing ancient 'memory'. He insists on making the connections, between chattel and administrative slavery, and the different forms of racism found both in Africa and her diaspora. He also insists that the disconnection of Africa from her past, and dislocation of her history, overseen from the nineteenth century by European scholars, was a deliberate attempt at stripping Africa of the layers of meaning that held her together, shielding her from attack from a hostile world.

The conception of a new syllabus, designed to shift this perception is outlined in specific detail. There is a brief summation of its aims, starting with making Africa central to an understanding of itself (*OR*, 104). In Chapter eight, 'Reswt', an informal dinner party hosted by Asar turns into a working committee that completely reorganises its former critical approach, and instead comes up with a practical proposal for workable change within the key departments at the University (*OR*, 183-193). In Chapter nine, 'Ienw', the committee shows that it means business. The senate, which has pointed out the impracticability of previous proposals (*OR*, 188), is caught off guard when a well constructed document outlining the new suggestions is tabled. This document, 'Proposals For a New Curriculum' (*OR*, 213-223), is detailed and thorough. It is broadly conceived, covering the areas of African Studies (Sociology, Economics, History, Philosophy, Science and Culture), and more generally, History, and Literature. The proposal is well-balanced, emphasising its own position, and proportionately including the rest of the world – Asia, the Americas, the Pacific and

the West (*OR*, 222).

Its reception is far from enthusiastic. The reaction of Professor Woolley is given in detail. He is one of the 'resident operatives', that is, a spy for the government. He is caught of guard, since he has in principle committed himself to the support of these changes. But the manner in which the department of African Studies is formed is of even greater interest. It was clearly formed as a concession to the idea of an African independence that no one really believed in. The idea of African Studies was stranger still. Woolley, an ex-soldier turned colonial administrator but now unfit for anything else, got the job because:

no scholar was found to accept a post as Head of African Studies at Manda. As a British joke of the time had it, that would be too obvious a sinecure: there never would be anything African worth studying. (*OR*, 224)

Even he only took the job because it was more attractive than returning home to a small pension and obscurity in England. No longer directly desirable as a reminder of imperial power but at the same time unable to reintegrate into his own society, he creates a niche for himself, as an expert, within the educational system. He reinvents himself as 'Professor in African Studies and Head of Department at Manda, at a consolidated tax-free higher salary than his last colonial payslip showed, all in addition to his pension' (*OR*, 224). This redeployment, in its retention of the very ideological positions that independence sought to overthrow was transformed into one of the most successful avenues through which neocolonialism has been propagated. Education, as noted earlier in the thesis, is a key area of potential indoctrination, influence, and control. In this Woolley, of course, also follows a pattern popular in the ex-colonies after independence. Now that the African Studies Department was being restructured from below, the Professor is determined to defend his last bastion. He makes the defense of his contribution to this 'godforsaken place' (*OR*, 225) a matter of honour.

Professor Woolley subscribes to the school that held the traditional western belief that Africa was a blank map with the pink areas waiting to be filled, the tabula rasa with no history and therefore no foundation, the one that awaited the will of the West. And what Asar and his colleagues are proposing is a very foreign Africa, one that could set

its own agenda, as well as claim historical legitimacy. As to the historical separation of the African people, Ast addresses this issue with direct simplicity:

‘In the end, my being born in America doesn’t make a lot of difference. It means my great-great-great grandparents were captured and transported over there. Yours [Asar’s] weren’t. I prefer not to forget several thousand years of our common history because of a few centuries of separation.’ (OR, 102)

Armah’s aim here is to bridge the historical gap that occurred during the period of the slave trade by reuniting those of African descent. Regardless of where they are, their experiences are distinguished by, and predicated on a common denominator, that of race. What essentially unites has been vested with a cruel significance that resonates powerfully through time and place.

Conclusion

Osiris Rising surpasses all Armah’s fiction to date in claiming for a beleaguered Africa an ancient and glorious past, rooted in ancient Egypt but at the same time one with a realistic and modern agenda for change. Because Armah situates his novel in the interstitial spaces, where Africa meets its diaspora, as well as where the ancient folds into the modern, his work is inevitably imbricated in the debates in these spaces: about links and disjunctions, but also about creative and productive continuities. *Osiris Rising* combines the legacy of an ancient past with the experience of diaspora, and it is from this fusion that he projects his pragmatic proposals for a post-independence future.

In 1963, Basil Davidson, addressing Hugh Trevor-Roper’s remarks on the ahistoricity of Africa said that one day it might be possible to laugh at the absurdity of it all – all things having been made equal. In North America, they too may one day chuckle over the absurdity of the entire debate centred around the place of Africa in the formation of America, a debate that started in the 19th century with the question, posed in all seriousness about the humanity of the African.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Landeg White in ‘Like What Our Peasants Still Are’, a review of Stephen Howe’s *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes* in the *London Review of Books*, 13th May 1999, p. 7.

According to Charles S. Finch , 'Myths are not fictions'. In the United States of America, which is itself built on myths, national myths have been used to 'demonstrate the essence of a people'.¹⁰⁴ Central to *Why Are We So Blest?*, is the Greek myth of Olympus, which excludes as effectively as it celebrates. It is such exclusive mythology that has provoked the search for alternative myths by those that are excluded. The African Americans have sought validation in Africa, and made it the mythical centre of their being in America. It is against this background that *Osiris Rising* is best understood: as a novel that attempts to bridge the physical, and ideological divide caused by slavery, and affirm and restore to those in Africa and her diaspora the pride and dignity eroded by centuries of oppression.

¹⁰⁴ In Davleena Das, 'Brown Hosts Afrocentrism Debate', p.1.

CONCLUSION

Enemies locked in close combat form a stronger bond between themselves than friendship could ever forge; any movement from one dictates an adequate response from the other.

Chingiz Aitmatov¹

This thesis has been concerned with comparing some of the diverse ways in which Anglophone African writing has developed. I have looked at the impact and influence of this colonisation through the novels of one East African, and one West African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah. Because the aim was to situate through an interweaving of the historical, social and political circumstances, I have selected what I consider the texts that best represent the junctures at which Ngugi and Armah translated their fears about the inefficacy of the literary to fully express their engagement. The transformative strategies that each employs are generated by important considerations that form, and inform their writing. They signal the end of one kind of perception, as well as indicating the beginning or continuation of another.

Petals of Blood demonstrates Ngugi's disillusion with the neo-imperial ideologies of independence in Kenya, to which he responds with a stylistic restructuring of his novelistic form to carry the new sense of community through multivocal narration. In *Why Are We So Blest?* Armah explores the extended issue of diaspora and looks at the nature of the relationship between the North and Africa. It is in this novel that we begin to see how the image of Africa in North America has been formed by Slavery, and how subsequent relations are still bound by this master/slave construct. Armah attempts to free Africa from this bondage, but at the same time demonstrates just how complex and intricately binding the ties are on both sides. The centre becomes a creation of the margins as much as the margins are of the centre. Modin may reject the affirmation and conditional acceptance from this centre, but he fails to realise that the problem goes beyond geography, beyond location; Modin carries the embodiment of the culture he attempts to flee back to Africa with him, and in this action conversely invites the oppressor to take part in his liberation. He compromises and neutralises his protest.

¹ Chingiz Aitmatov, 'The Intellectual Crisis, the Demise of Totalitarianism and the Fate of Literature', *World Literature Today*, 67:1 (Winter, 1993), 11-17 (p.15).

Modin dies in the attempt to sever himself from the 'enemy'. He is himself, of course, part of the problem. Partially assimilated, he carries the centre within himself, and cannot distinguish the boundaries. Desire for Aimée becomes a metaphor for the desire for nurture, and fulfilment. It is a complex love/hate relationship, in which a separation signals Modin's inevitable destruction. Modin and Aimée are like Siamese twins; but the life sustaining organs are on Aimée's side. Armah demonstrates just how implicated in the culture of the centre those on its margins are, (and vice versa) how even a rejection of the North can only be partial, insofar as it is mediated by the same North.²

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi does two things: he questions what appears to be an inevitable post-independence slide into neo-colonialism, how a foreign imperialism has translated so neatly into a local one; he also queries the role of the capitalist ideology that underpins Kenyan underdevelopment, while attempting to construct a communalist alternative. As Patrick Williams has observed, the collective voice that Ngugi attempts to forge is dominated by Munira, but Ngugi nevertheless succeeds in giving the reader a sense of multiple voices by having the narrative, mediated through Inspector Godfrey, unfold as retrospective statement by all suspects. Ilmorog, the centre of the action is really an all but forgotten backwater until Wanjia returns and rediscovers Thengeta; until the new highway snakes its way close by, drawing all to itself and spawning extensions of the old. From this comes New Ilmorog, a commercial clutter of shops that now overshadows the previously organic, and now vanishing community. Communication makes Ilmorog accessible, therefore exploitable. The margin takes to the centre with the murders of Mzigo, Kimeria and Chui. Content to sample occasionally from Ilmorog they fail to recognise their complicity in the destruction, and formation of this new construct designed to exploit, not nurture. In the end it is through Wanjia, most exploited, that an ironic redemption

² In Bogumil Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, 'For Said', *Transition*, 63 (1994), 34-50 (p.41), for instance. They note that it is quite acceptable for the North to absorb the Other's popular culture, and give the examples of Rushdie and Naipaul. Yet, they continue to argue, one of the enduring problems of scholarship is the lack of recognition of reciprocity, a manifestation of the investment of power in the North. They give an example that contrasts the French practice of Assimilation to the aloofness of British hegemony: 'While Senghor's induction into the Académie Française did not raise the question of the Académies authenticity, the reclaiming of Shakespeare as a cultural authority in Kenya or India, or the portrayal of Sartre as a philosopher of *négritude* are challenged on their supposed inauthenticity'.

is realised. Ngugi alludes to the biblical purging by fire to mark an end to exploitation, and signal new beginnings. This is similarly the metaphor used by Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya* (47-52), as a strategy for the destruction of the oppressor.

Regeneration, restoration and hope are invested in the fusion of revolution and rebellion, in Abdulla and Wanja's baby. In their intense commitment, *Petals of Blood* and *Why Are We So Blest?* convey Ngugi's and Armah's uncompromising determination to provoke with their art, to use their writing as a substantive intervention.

It was also because of an apparent sensitivity to the nuances of gender that Ngugi and Armah were selected for this research. African women have been little represented, and if so only marginally by either male or female African writers. On closer examination however, in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi's perception of women emerges as fixed by one of two extremities: woman is either heroine or whore. Therefore, although Wanja provides us with the moment of denouement in *Petals of Blood*, read within the Gikuyu moral and cultural context, as prostitute and barmaid she is as nothing. Within the postcolonial context it is a different matter altogether as with the altered landscape so also is her role transformed. She revolutionises her function within the bar trade, from exploited dispenser of drink and other favours to an important entrepreneur within the industry. When the men, who have always exploited her body, now threaten her means to freedom from them, she kills them. It is a heroic action, and if she feels compromised by her guilty secret, it is at least a first, and necessary step towards challenging the idea of the naturalness of male dominance, as well as the male right to enjoy this dominant position without the guilt that should attend *their* acts of exploitation. Read against the Biblical moral framework that permeates the novel through Munira's narrative, Wanja's recovery is figured in the forgiveness assured by her baptism of fire.

Armah's task in *Why Are We So Blest?* is a difficult one, and probably most successfully portrays the intensive and extensive ambiguities and tensions of the postcolonial relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. And just as Wanja comes to know her enemy well, playing on their vanities as a prerequisite to her destruction of their hold over her, Modin and Aimée's relationship is a gross

enactment of the formidable bond between enemies described by Aitmatov in the epigraph. Modin gradually and paradoxically comes to love Aimée even while recognising that an association with her can, and does lead to his destruction. In this novel the power invested in the white woman, as representative of the west, is as diabolical as it is inescapable. Aimée uses attributes associated with her gender to insinuate herself into Modin's affections and in this way gains control of him. Although antithetically portrayed, the white woman as location of dominance marginalises even further the black woman, once worshipped in the temples of Negritude as life force, as mother. In the new configuration, even such token invocation that at best recognised, at worst romanticised the role of black women is lost. Armah nevertheless incorporates issues that have marked the meeting of the races from Slavery, through to the emotionalism/reason of Negritude, and on to the rejection of racism in its present form, compelled by imperialism, as the inevitable basis for postcolonial global interaction. But to place the west at the centre of decolonisation is clearly disabling. The experience of Negritude however demonstrates the paradoxes of separation. Senghor, Negritudist poet/president of Senegal, rather than seize independence instead chose to strengthen ties with France. Wole Soyinka famously said of Negritude 'A tiger does declare its tigritude. It pounces.' Senghor pounced westward. Afrocentrism might learn an important lesson from Negritude, where cultural nationalism surrendered political autonomy.

Armah and Ngugi come from diverse backgrounds, linked only by their experience of colonialism and the fact that they were both born in the regions of their country that suffered the highest levels of European intervention. In settler Kenya, held in imperial imagination as well as in practice as 'White man's country' there was little room for Ngugi, the peasant. One of his earliest memories is of the singularly violent and personal experience of childhood displacement. It is this severance, equally from place, from culture and from language, that has concerned him most throughout his career and that reverberates through his work. It has created in him an anxious need to maintain a nurturing connection to his roots even as he has been ever further removed from them. There is keen disappointment in the leadership of Kenyatta, whom he perceives as having betrayed the possibility of the development of a truly national Kenya by playing tribal politics. Kenyatta is also responsible for the postponement of

resolution to the issue of Mau Mau, and subsequently the issue of land; for glossing over the real racial inequalities that were there at independence, and for maintaining the structures of imperial oppression while engaging in a rhetoric that promised much, yet delivered little in the way of revolutionary reform to the system. It is his legacy that continues to plague a floundering nation. A keenly felt conviction that (western) education was the best means to compete for self actualisation has gradually been replaced by a more specific demand for a relevant education.

Armah was of royal descent on his father's side and came from a country that had challenged and defeated the British during the Ashanti wars, was rich in gold, and happily protected from settlement by the malarial mosquito. At the Sekondi-Takoradi coast, where Armah was raised, the resonance of the slave trade continued to be felt in the Forts that served as monuments to, and constant reminders of, a history of slavery. According to Kwadwo Opoko-Agyemang, attempts to distort or forget this grim history persist. He says:

The slaving experience transmogrified the African societies and affected life such that there is nothing the mind can imagine today so tragic and so horripilating that it has not already been suffered by Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora.³

The Castles represented the severance (or, now, continuity) of kinship ties, and eventually drew Armah overseas to America, almost in a ritualistic reenactment of the original voyages of the Slave Trade. The enticement now, pursued by choice, was education. Like Ngugi, for Armah the continued culmination of African education in the North (or westward) is one of the legacies of a system that succeeded in creating the necessity for just such a pilgrimage. The West in this sense is a sort of finishing school for the African: it affirms or ratifies African credibility in the global arena where power still resides, unarguably in the North.

Like Ngugi, Armah at first rejected this inevitability. He did not complete his first degree at Harvard, even though he went on to complete his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at Columbia. The world was unevenly skewed to favour the North, but in order to

³ Kwadwo Opoko-Agyemang, 'A Crisis of Balance: The (Mis)Representation of Colonial History and the Slave Experience as Themes in Modern African Literature', in *Nationalism vs Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, ed. by Wolfgang Zach & Ken L. Goodwin (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996), pp.219-228 (p.226).

confront it, a strategic engagement might yield more than self righteous withdrawal. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, his harsh critique of newly independent Ghana, was written in this first flush of clarity, observed partially through the eyes of an affluent and stable America. And yet his disappointment in America was just as keen. America stood for much. As Fraser has indicated, the Ghanaians saw the choice of America as a powerful protest against the British colonial system. Where once Ghanaians believed that a good education must be completed if not at Oxford, Cambridge, or even Edinburgh then as close to these three institutions as possible, they now radically politicised the issue.⁴ To be pro-America in this context was to be anti-Britain. But if America, then it had to be Ivy League. Ironically, it took a long time to wean themselves off this arrogant conviction, and Nkrumah is perhaps the best example of one never quite able to get away from the stigma of intellectual mediocrity associated with his having studied at a black college in America. Armah arguably fails to fully conceptualise the paradox that Nkrumah represented, or indeed, to acknowledge that he negotiated difficult and uncharted terrain. The forces acting against Nkrumah were much more complex than Armah suggests, but in his nurturing of the pan-African ideal Nkrumah has fostered one of the most hopeful, and indeed powerful avenues for regeneration.

Armah's disillusionment with Nkrumah emerges as more acute than does Ngugi's with Kenyatta, possibly because of the unique historical position Nkrumah occupied with regard to the independence not only of Ghana, but of Africa. He may have sacrificed the success of Ghana at the altar of pan-Africanism, a vision admirable in both retrospect, and prospect, but one practicably impossible given the conditions obtaining at the time. A beneficiary of Nkrumah's comprehensive strategy that from the outset privileged an inclusive national alliance, Armah's engagement is consequently as expansive as Ngugi's is specific. Whereas Ngugi insists on starting from a particular that he still struggles to claim, Armah seeks a broader alliance. His Akan identity is assured, and therefore the anxiety of that particularism removed. It is from this legacy that Armah springs and draws, and from here that he projects a vision encompassing all Africa and her diaspora. The loss of independence is conceived as an African loss. His perception of Africa within the global system is drawn from and

⁴ Professor Thurstan Shaw indicated that, as teachers in Ghana, it was to these schools that they thought of sending their students (Personal Interview, University of Cambridge, 25th April, 1995).

highly influenced by the microcosm provided by North America. The radicalism to which he was exposed here in the 1960s provides the basis of his critique of the system in *Why Are We So Blest?*

It was the educational 'middle passage' that made of both Armah and Ngugi 'men who question'.⁵ What western education served to highlight, conversely, was not so much the assimilation into the dominant culture, but rather their alienation from this culture, as well difference from their own. The famous Macaulay Minute on Indian Education of February 2, 1835 named the state of mediator, of go-between, indeed of factorship that an educated Indian native middle-class was expected to serve. It translates well into what happened in both Kenya and Ghana:

We [British] must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, [African] in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect.⁶

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Homi Bhabha who incisively interrogates the state of postcoloniality suggests two critical aspects to the problem: first, he suggests that imperialism was a constitutive and coherent project that can be traced through various sources. To trace it requires an interdisciplinary approach. It is an elaboration of this interconnectedness that Edward Said, for instance, explores in *Culture and Imperialism*. Bhabha also tries to show how academic discourse is complicitous with power. It is in this sense that it is now necessary to declare one's enunciatory position, the location from which one speaks.

As Armah had done in America, Ngugi in Leeds also found himself unable to complete his formal studies and largely for the same reasons. His attitude towards the importance of western certification was transformed by the realities of the world in which he now found himself. George Lamming, on whom his dissertation was based, had already arrived at the conclusion that integration was neither possible, nor a solution to the problem of decolonisation. Ngugi found inner city Leeds far removed

⁵ Echoing Fanon's final cry in *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'O my body, make of me always a man who questions!' (p. 232).

⁶ John Clive, 'Indian Education: The Minute', *Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp.342-399 (p.376).

from the beauty of the England of his imagination, of 'home' as extolled in much of the English poetry and writing he had read, as well as in the nostalgic evocation of the British in Kenya. His disappointment in the centre was keen. He returned from Leeds with no degree, but with a much clearer understanding of the impetus behind the colonisation of his homeland. The writing of *A Grain of Wheat*, a novel that examined Kenya on the eve of independence focused his analysis with a clarity that he might not have achieved from within Kenya. This was the last novel he wrote in the realist style in which he started writing while at Makerere.

After America and Leeds Armah and Ngugi confronted the paradoxes in their experiences at home and abroad. The fact that they were not inclined to fulfil the liminal role that seemed to have been assigned them, led them to question, and ultimately to challenge, the ordering of the system, specifically to question the function of education as well as the residual place of imperialism within the cultures of new nations. Their experiences moved them ideologically closer. Whereas Ngugi was a victim of racism in his own land, and had tentatively questioned its overarching impact on the issues that concerned him, he had not cast it as an all-pervasive and systematic project. He had indeed in some ways benefitted from the system. Armah's experience in race driven America, however, was more clearly defined, leaving him in no doubt about just how complex and all-consuming racism is. It is here that we see the development of remarkable differences in emphasis, method and outlook between these two writers, curiously, as they both encountered the ideas that were to shape their ideological outlook so significantly. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, the book that set the tone for literary 'protest' in the late sixties and early seventies influenced profoundly, yet differently, Ngugi and Armah. While Ngugi found that the chapter 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' answered most of the questions that disturbed him concerning the issue of nationalism in Kenya, for Armah the intrigue lay elsewhere. The more personal evolution of Fanon as a man of colour in a white world that started in *Black Skin, White Masks* and that led to Fanon's damning conclusions about America in *The Wretched of the Earth* confirmed his experiences of America, and inspired him to make something of the African world. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon, intent on freeing himself from the oppressive past, equivocates over what Said calls its 'pastness':

–The discovery of the existence of a Negro civilization in the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me. Like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment.

–The Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past.

–I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for my destiny.

Am I going to ask contemporary white man to answer for the slave ships of the seventeenth century? [...]

I am not the slave of the slavery that dehumanised my ancestors. (BSWM, 225-230)

But Fanon finds that it is to the past that one must ultimately look for leverage into the future.

This incident is a clear demonstration that questions of alienation and exile remain close to the surface and firmly on the agenda. Homi Bhabha, more clearly than most has named the neither here nor there status of critics such as Spivak an 'inbetweenness'. More recently, with the coming to prominence of such critics as Said, and indeed Spivak, and the flourishing of a vibrant and engaged immigrant culture, the site of postcolonial debate which was for a long time marginal to the discourses and theoretical debate within the Western academy with its focus on its own classical tradition, is now emerging within mainstream debate. The British Empire was huge: and there will be a great deal of writing back and forth, using the handle provided by postcolonialism for a long time to come. Already, anthologies such as Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Criticism* (1997), and the *Introduction to Postcolonial Theory* of Child and Williams (1997), have (re)visited sites familiar to those already engaged in the debate, tracing the genealogy of postcolonialism, and expanding the debate. Not only have they found Fanon prominently situated at the nerve centre, linking thoughts about liberation to action towards their realisation, they have also reignited the old arguments that were in evidence at the outset of African decolonisation – the arguments about alienation, exile and racial essentialism. The arguments are being reexamined within the freshly constructed theoretical context that interrogates the postmodernist master narratives and makes room for cultures formerly perceived as the '*connexes et marginales*', those dependent upon, and/or located at the fringe of mainstream western or European cultures.⁷ The entire colonial experience

⁷ Louise Fiber Luce, 'Neocolonialism and *Présence Africaine*', *African Studies Review*, 29: 1 (March, 1996), 5-11.

was an exercise in alienation, even within the new formations that were constructed locally to contain the interests of the controlling powers. It is this artificial hold that Fanon was determined to make apparent, and to break.

As the arguments continue to rage about the part that Fanon has played within the postcolonial debate and in the determination of his allegiances, his work has nevertheless had a profound impact on the Africa that emerged from colonial domination. Moore-Gilbert et al have sifted out as his most important contributions to our understanding of postcolonial theory the linking of mental disorders to Imperialist domination. In so doing they have acknowledged, and highlighted the correlation or connection between the psychological and political, at once showing how colonialism affects individuals as well as societies.⁸ Ann McClintock in *Imperial Leather* suggests a psychoanalytic approach to studies of colonialism. In literary practice, Amah probably more than any other African writer focuses on the trauma experienced by those in contact with colonialism, exploring fictively the lives of the psychologically maimed that informed Fanon's impassioned protests in such articles as 'The North African Syndrome'.

Theory is refocusing its attention on psychoanalysis as an important method in reappraising the postcolonial condition, and in this way acknowledging the destructive role of the imperial project, and this is largely due to the contribution made by Fanon. Yet it is important to note that in the writing from the areas impacted upon, the trauma has remained firmly fixed. It is contained in the themes that recur; particularly in questions concerning identity, alienation, or exile (both within and outwith society): the literature reveals communities not merely dealing with change as a developmental process. It reveals an anxious crisis of confidence that at its most extreme, has led to the 'death wish' described by Fanon as the stage arrived at by those of marginal cultures who in the final analysis recognise that their destiny does not lie in Europe, having been led to believe the contrary. Even as the Assimilationist policy (or policy of association), one of the most successful models of integration appeared to successfully surmount the cultural divide, it also threw up most sharply race as the

⁸ Moore-Gilbert, p.12.

eternal barrier. Ironically, it is within the all-embracing ambit of this practice that rejection first led to a re-examination of the assumptions of the colonised, and reassessment of their position within the colonial matrix. Not just in terms of the bigger issues such as political independence, which with its broader aspirations focused on the system rather than on individual responses to the culture of colonialism, but in terms of how it impacted on the personalities emerging from the experience. And it is this pause that started off the process of shifting the balance, and eventually privileging and consolidating an indigenous point of view. As part of the process of reclamation of identity, it *was* necessary for Soyinka's post-colonial tiger to proclaim its tigritude – it had, after all, too long been conditioned into mistakenly thinking itself some other creature!

Armah left North America disturbed by the manner in which the issue of race overdetermined everything. Trapped in an historical past in which Slavery and Imperial conquest set the stage, the only way forward was through a reclamation of part of this past. Having bridged the middle passage, he developed the firm conviction that what unites blacks is bigger than what separates them; that they are one people. It is to this racial link that Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki refer, collapsing the dispersion and colonial into the postcolonial present. They say: 'at the end of the 20th century, the reality of Diaspora bears witness to the postcolonial situation'.⁹ The past contains within it the potential to both liberate and enslave. It is to its liberating potential that Armah appeals as a means for the present and future.

The legacy and continuing impact of slavery on the present assumes an urgency that for him cannot be ignored if a meaningful interactive future is to be achieved by the people of the different races. Armah finds his concerns over the racial fissure that characterised American society answered by Fanon's defiant refusal to be 'slave of the Slavery that dehumanised [his] ancestors' (*BSWM*, 230). The absence marked by the Forts Armah had left in Ghana was finally filled with these kinspeople, not yet settled four centuries after their displacement, still struggling for ways to lay claim to a common humanity. For Armah, America stood for an obstinate refusal to

⁹ Bogumil Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, 'For Said: Why Even the Critic of Imperialism Labours Under Western Skies' (A review of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*), *Transition*, 63 (1994), 34-50 (p.36).

accommodate those whose lives it had taken in its making. It thrived on a dehumanising selective cultural hegemony. Armah was shamed by the betrayal of the race, and determined to challenge the premise on which black people remained on the margins in the new world. The pessimism implicit in the titles of Armah's first three novels: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest?* signal his anxiety over the place inhabited by black people. In his mission to reclaim a dignified presence, he draws on all the resources at his disposal, past and present, seeking reconnection with the ancient myths as well as insisting on an intelligent reappraisal of the post-independence situation. With the last four novels he confirms what he could only grope towards in the first three: that the issue in Ghana and Africa was not one of a presence, but of an absence. The African Diaspora resonates with all that has been systematically leached from its shores. Armah taps into what Kofi Anyidoho calls 'the still centre of [this] historical storm'.¹⁰ If *Why Are We So Blest?* was about cutting a path through a racially determined world, a kind of exorcism of the demons unleashed by racism, the purpose of his work since *Two Thousand Seasons* is one of reclamation and restoration. As, with time, Armah's perception of the magnitude of the original betrayal has grown clearer, his determination to make a meaningful intervention has become keener. In *Osiris Rising*, determined to bring his people home, Armah reverts to cyclical inevitability: kingdoms fall only to rise again.

While Slavery, and the absence it created, formed the single most compelling rupture for Armah, for Ngugi what mattered was a presence: that of white settlement. The intrusive and oppressive presence that displaced and marginalised Agikuyu in their own home is a recurrent and unifying theme in Ngugi's writing. He projects this primary displacement, extrapolating it to reflect the ways in which contemporary corruption has led to new forms of displacement, his own exile being a case in point. As it is, underpinning both Ngugi and Armah's writing is an acute awareness of the corruption pervading all areas of post-independence life. In independent African and other Majority World countries is one of the enduring legacies of the colonial period that must be addressed. The foundations on which the structure of the modern African State is built are flawed, and so the State can neither cultivate nor indeed sustain the

¹⁰ Kofi Anyidoho, 'Slave Castle, African Historical Landscape and Literary Imagination', *DrumSpeak: Journal of the Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast*, 1 (March, 1996), 21-32 (p.32).

integrity necessary for longevity. It is probably in this legacy that the imperial project has survived its own original agenda. Ngugi demonstrates, with the highly experimental fusion of ideology and community in *Petals of Blood* his determination to find new ways of writing against the system in addition to a proactive participation in its restructuring. In exile, he retains the same thematic concerns, and finding himself in Prospero's country, clings even more determinedly to the idea of language as crucial to identity. As he says in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* 'The interpreter facilitates his own slavery through language' (81). Ngugi's conviction in the truth of this statement has grown almost proportionately to time spent away from home, as shown by his ever deepening commitment to Gikuyu.

In one sense it is the language question that unifies and establishes the basis for comparison in this thesis: the fact that Ngugi and Armah *are* considered Anglophone writers. It is a dominant anxiety, and for Ngugi central to his literary and other concerns, while Armah writes from within its veil. The difference in attitude is contextual. Armah more than Ngugi demonstrates a self-assured and creative use of language, bending and twisting it to reflect the finest, and crudest, in writing. He does not question his ownership of English, which through long usage is now classified as a 'Ghanaian artifact'.¹¹ He possesses it, consumes it, spits it out, transforms it.¹² Armah turns his concerns to the politics of publication, and to the distribution and consumption of his product. Having decided why, and for whom he writes, he proceeded to take the necessary steps to ensure availability, accessibility, and most importantly, control of his material. Towards this end he has serialised his work in African newspapers, has since his third book used only Africa based publishers, and finally in 1995, opened Per Ankh, a publishing House committed to catering first and foremost for his African readership.

Language is, for Ngugi, a vexed issue. He is acutely aware of the linguistic rift between Africa and her Diaspora, which he describes as being a profoundly bigger

¹¹ Emmanuel Quarcoo, 'The English language as a Modern Artifact in Ghana', *Journal of Black Studies*, 24:3 (March, 1994), 329-343. Quarcoo appeals to the fact that English has been in Ghana for nearly two centuries and so qualifies for localisation, yet strangely, when Ghanaians argue about it they still view it as an alien tongue in spite of a good number using it as a first language. It also continues to be associated with the desire to be white.

¹² Willy Maley refers to the cannibalism of the English language, its insatiability. Here we see that the interaction is reciprocal. The margins own their 'english' (in the sense of Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 8) just as much as the centre claims its English.

chasm than the Atlantic. In this fact, Ngugi rightly reads the triumph of British Imperialism which succeeded in severing the vital codes between the colonised peoples, but at the same time succeeded in retaining intact those of the plantation owner to his linguistic base in Europe.¹³ The politicisation of language in Kenya meant that Africans were excluded from power on this basis. In one of the rare instances in which Ngugi criticises Armah, it is for failing to address what he himself perceives as the question fundamental to writing: that of choice of language. Speaking about *The Beautiful Ones* in *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (1998), Ngugi fails to understand how:

a text which is so scornful of the adopted Oxbridge accent of the Ghanaian middle class should be conspicuously silent on the question of English as the language used, irrespective of the accent of the speakers.¹⁴

Ngugi now writes in Gikuyu, an accomplishment that is admirable as an act of both resistance and retrieval. He has single-handedly, through the translation of his own writing shown that it is possible to salvage, painstakingly, from the wreckage of colonialism. His work is an indication of the enormous effort required to inhabit two unequal worlds meaningfully, simultaneously. His achievement for African writing is that he enables it to express itself in its own language within its own context, on its own terms (as far as that is possible). He challenges the postcolonial inevitability of the use of such inclusive concepts as 'Anglophone' with their in-built hierarchies. Resonant with colonial hegemony, such terminology stakes a claim, reinforcing the spirit of dominance. Ngugi insists on the removal of this proprietorial umbrella if indigenous languages and cultures are to flourish.

Armah stages his own coup. He demonstrates with an ease and confidence the coming into its own of English on the continent. His writing reflects a real transformation in the perception of language, which he uses as a means to express some of the most incisive criticism of those who own it.

Ngugi's concerns with linguistic hegemony are affirmed by the increasing dominance of English in Global interaction. His anxiety finds an echo in Ato Quayson's

¹³ In *Penpoints* Ngugi notes that: 'except for the very rare case of Afrikaans in South Africa, the colonizers themselves never lost their linguistic linkages to their home base' (p.82).

¹⁴ *Penpoints*, p.78.

demonstration of the relation of knowledge to power that so concerns Ngugi. Quayson cites an 'orientalising'¹⁵ instance from cyberspace, humorous but at once serious, in which American chauvinism is now, ironically, posited linguistically. It dictates intelligibility on the very basis on which Britain has historically claimed superiority over 'others', and indeed dismissed America. Inimitably American, it is a campaign engaged with a brash panache:

CLINTON DEPLOYS VOWELS TO SERBIA

CITIES OF SJLBVDNZV, GRZNY TO BE FIRST RECIPIENTS

Before an emergency joint session of Congress yesterday, President Clinton announced US plans to deploy over 75,000 vowels to the war-torn region of Bosnia. The deployment, the largest of its kind in American history, will provide the region with the critically needed letters A, E, I, O and U, and is hoped to render countless Bosnian names more pronounceable. 'For six years, we have stood by while names like Ygrjvslhv and Tzlynhr and Glrm have been horribly butchered by millions around the world,' Clinton said. 'Today, the United States must finally stand up and say, "Enough." It is time the people of Bosnia finally had some vowels in their incomprehensible words. The US is proud to lead the crusade in this noble endeavour.' The deployment, dubbed Operation Vowel Storm by the State Department, is set for early next week, with the Adriatic port cities of Sjlbdnzv and Grzny slated to be the first recipients. Two C-130 transport planes, each carrying over 500 24-count boxes of 'E's,' will fly from Andrews Air Force base across the Atlantic and airdrop the letters over the cities. Citizens of Grzny and Sjlbdnzv eagerly await the arrival of the vowels. 'My god, I do not think we can last another day', Trszg Grzdnjkl, 44, said. 'I have six children and none of them has a name that is understandable to me or to anyone else. Mr. Clinton, please send my poor, wretched family just one E. Please.' Said Sjlbdnzv resident Grg Hmphrs, 67: 'With just a few key letters, I could be George Humphries. This is my dream.' The airdrop represents the largest deployment of any letter to a foreign country since 1984. During the summer of that year, the US shipped 92,000 consonants to Ethiopia, providing cities like Ouaouaoua, Eaoiua, and Aao with vital, life-giving supplies of L's, S's and T's. The consonant-relief effort failed, however, when vast quantities of the letters were intercepted and hoarded by violent, gun-toting warlords.¹⁶

As well as indicating the shift from the ideological concerns that marked the cold-war period, this passage shows other areas now crucial to the maintenance of power.

Underpinning the operation is the link between power (Operation Vowel Storm) and

¹⁵ As Quayson says, Edward Said has succeeded in popularising this terms usage to convey 'any attitude of knowing the Third World which is actually meant to serve Western interests' (p.4).

¹⁶ Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.5. He takes it from gr@pbs.port.ac.uk, but can not ascertain its original source.

language (read knowledge) (the distribution of vowels) .¹⁷ This linguistic configuration of hegemony infuses power into the word. The impact of the American imperialistic intervention is comprehensive, affecting all areas: material, social, and economic. The Bosnians, and presumably the Ethiopians are, of course, eager to partake of the American dream and to be made intelligible. By imposing intelligibility America reaffirms its oppositional and privileging authority as the coherent one. The tension stems from their refusal to play the American game of binaries, and the American presumption of just such a willingness. As Stuart Hall observes, political binaries neither 'stabilise the field of political antagonism in any permanent way or render it transparently intelligible'.¹⁸

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As I have indicated in the previous chapter the direct link between power and knowledge is clearly demonstrated by the Afrocentrism debate. In America this debate is highly polarised, coming as it does out of racial exclusion. But there is a seriousness to Bernal's inquiry quite apart from the questionable and even objectionable application of his ideas made by extreme Afrocentrists. In Africa the link is carried in the work of Cheikh Anta Diop. Diop explores the significances invested in antiquity, and their bearing on the construction of knowledge and power in the present. The past legitimates the present, and has been invoked to validate it. But it sometimes turns out that it contains no greatness, in which case the desire is to mask and forget – or to create. America, in its foundation lays claim to ancient heritages to both stabilise and legitimise. This is Mary Lefkowitz's world. In *Not Out of Africa*,

¹⁷ Quayson, p.5. Quayson argues from a Foucauldian perspective. In 'Signs of Silence, Lines of Listening' in *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, Iain Chambers, citing Martin Heidegger and others reminds us that 'the essential *being* of language cannot be anything linguistic'(p.50). Not only is language dependent on context, but it reveals *and* hides.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, When was "The Postcolonial?" Thinking at the Limit', *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.242-260 (p.244). The Kenya Government's marginalisation of Mau Mau demonstrates this point clearly. Resistance comes in all forms, not always neatly packaged, and almost always violent. History has shown that Governments ignore, or fail to represent these murkier aspects at their own peril.

she expresses her shock to find that this not the same world inhabited by a number of African American teachers. She says: 'In the fall of 1991 I was asked to write a review-article about Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* and its relation to the Afrocentrist movement. The assignment literally changed my life'.¹⁹ Lefkowitz observes in her 'Introduction': 'In American universities today not everyone knows what extreme Afrocentrists are doing in their classrooms. Or, even if they do know, they choose not to ask questions'.²⁰

Lefkowitz was distressed by what she found in Bernal's book, not because she had accidentally encountered an entire segment of the American population previously unrepresented, but by the manner in which this segment sought to legitimise itself in the very spaces in which their marginalisation was assured. Many of the suppositions on which white American dominance is built are anchored in Classical studies. The subversive assault on, and failure to hold as sacred, the beliefs that validated her world led Lefkowitz in this book, and in *Black Athena Revisited*, in which she enlisted the help of other scholars, to seek to disprove Bernal's arguments, both stated and implied. She takes the position of 'scientific' neutrality, and contends that, unlike Bernal, she maintains critical distance and intellectual objectivity. She cites unsound scholarly method, and lack of evidence as the greatest weaknesses of Bernal's work.

What is interesting is that Lefkowitz argues so vigorously against theories that she claims are baseless. And yet America is just one of the places in which rival narrative threads have been submerged by the narrative of a dominant Euro-American²¹ hegemony. In *Playing in The Dark*, Toni Morrison refers to her complete obliteration by this America, in which she defines herself and black people as the 'not-American'.²² Yet Lefkowitz's academic outrage perhaps underestimates the need of people who have been traditionally submerged to make loud, challenging noises that

¹⁹ Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basicbooks, 1996).

²⁰ Lefkowitz, p.1.

²¹ Iain Chambers fuses the two terms, referring to Euroamerica, but argues that one cannot assume a 'facile composite' for, say, Anglo-Indian or Asian-American, in which the oppositional tension is as yet unresolved. In *Osiris Rising* Armah insists on the hyphen for all, apart from the Amerindians. As Toni Morrison reminds us, in America, Americans usually refers to white.

²² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992), p.48.

demand recognition, at least dialogue, maybe even an alternative space.

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Imperialism disconnected Africa from the place and past that gave it meaning, and for this reason there is a continuing need to try and reconnect to, and claim this ancient world. In *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, Ngugi recalls Ali Mazrui's inaugural speech at Makerere University College in 1966, significantly titled 'Ancient Greece in African Political Thought'. Mazrui claimed that there was: 'a crisis of identity confronting every modern African University and the mystique of ancient Greece is at the heart of it'.²³ He proceeded to argue that it was this mystique that had 'contributed to the total cultural arrogance of Europe in relation to the rest of the world'.²⁴ From this position, 'it [was] inconceivable that the Negroes could ever have produced an Aristotle. The Negro stock could not even produce a language to compare with that evolved by the Greeks'.²⁵ One of the results of this cultural arrogance, backed by arms, was that it forced the African into a role of cultural defensiveness.²⁶ It is the reverse of this role that Lefkowitz now finds herself playing in responding to some of the questions raised by Bernal. Mazrui perceived Classicists as demonstrating a racist chauvinism in their view of Africa, judging African people on how much they could grapple with Greek thought, indeed on the impossibility of their doing so. It is this privileging of European antiquity and intelligence that has provoked Armah to go beyond the Greek and Roman antecedents to an even earlier time, making it his mission to remind Africa that if pasts are relevant to the present and future, then Africa too has recourse to an old and glorious one.

In *Penpoints Gunpoints and Dreams*, Ngugi figures the central allegory in Ayi Kwei Armah's most successful novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as that of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. According to Ngugi, Armah uses this

²³ Ali Mazrui, 'Ancient Greece in African Political Thought', *Présence Africaine*, 61 (1967), 68-93 (p.70).

²⁴ Mazrui, p.70.

²⁵ Mazrui, pp. 71.

²⁶ Mazrui, p.73.

allegory in part to interpret the post-colonial condition.²⁷ But it is the question that Ngugi asks that is of interest to this thesis: 'Why would a Ghanaian novelist in the 1960s turn to ancient Greece for an interpretation of the post-colonial position, and to Plato in particular?' (73-74) Ngugi's answer to this question is that of one to whom the fact that African writing has been denied any claims to this heritage is irrelevant. He proceeds to compare on the basis of the 'very interesting parallels between the Ghana of Armah's time and the Athens of Plato's youth' (74).

The question, really, is the much broader one – to what antecedents can the post-independence African writer writing today lay claim? And to what future purpose can they be applied. As I have demonstrated, Ngugi and Armah have gone about answering this question in very different, but also in remarkably similar ways. Ngugi sees ultimate unity as being achieved through the debunking of the place of privilege that English currently occupies by the promotion and owning of linguistic diversity. Armah, on the other insists on exploiting the unifying possibilities of a common language, and uses it to expose the processes through which Africa has been oppressed, and through which the west has constructed its myths of domination. This is not to suggest that Ngugi is guilty of evading social change by reverting to a desired past,²⁸ or that Armah elides over significant differences and difficulties. Ngugi has consistently embraced as well as initiated change. It is through working in the medium imposed by colonialism that he recognises as odd the continued attachment to and promotion of a language and culture that continue to dominate and oppress. The flip side of this campaign is of course, the reduction of African languages and culture to 'at home' and weekend status. They are pushed to the personal or private domain while a European language and culture continues to dominate and mediate in its public space. It is in this space that I, paradoxically, have access to both writers. It is the linguistic link that, overarching, defines and contextualises Ngugi and Armah. Armah gains control of his creativity through self-publication. And Ngugi refuses to be creative in an Other's tongue, on an Other's terms. He reserves the right to remain unintelligible

²⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Allegory of the Cave: Language, Democracy and a New World Order', *Penpoints Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards A Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.72.

²⁸ Graham Huggan in 'The Postcolonial Exotic: Salman Rushdie and the Booker of Bookers' suggests that 'The appeal to cultural diversity disguises the reluctance for social change: pre-existing hierarchies can be maintained through commodified gestures towards bilateral convergence', *Transition*, 64 (1994), 22-29 (p.27).

to a wide majority, conceding this only in the form of translation. It is subsequently interpretation that he proposes as a third way, a possible way forward.²⁹

²⁹ *Penpoints*, p.98.

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APPENDICES

I. A copy of shirt commemorating the 50th Jubilee of the Achimota School, Ghana (1927-1977). The design consists of shells against a blue background. It celebrates the three personalities most readily associated with Achimota, and who influenced education in Ghana most profoundly: James Kwegyir Aggrey, the Governor Sir Frederick Gordon Guggisberg and the Rev. A. G. Fraser. Britain was represented at the event by HRH The Prince of Wales, Prince Charles.

II. A copy of the Achimota school tie designed for the same event as in (I) above. It is an illustration of Aggrey's philosophy of interracial harmony. The black and white keys of the piano can make a tune separately, but become a score only when played together. The American educated Aggrey was, sadly, ahead of his time in this conception. A less qualified white man was elected Deputy Headmaster over him, Shaw speculates, to 'protect him, and Achimota from the charge that they had lowered standards for a black man'.

(I & II are courtesy of Professor Thurstan Shaw, former Master at Achimota School. From a personal interview at Cambridge University, 25th April, 1995).

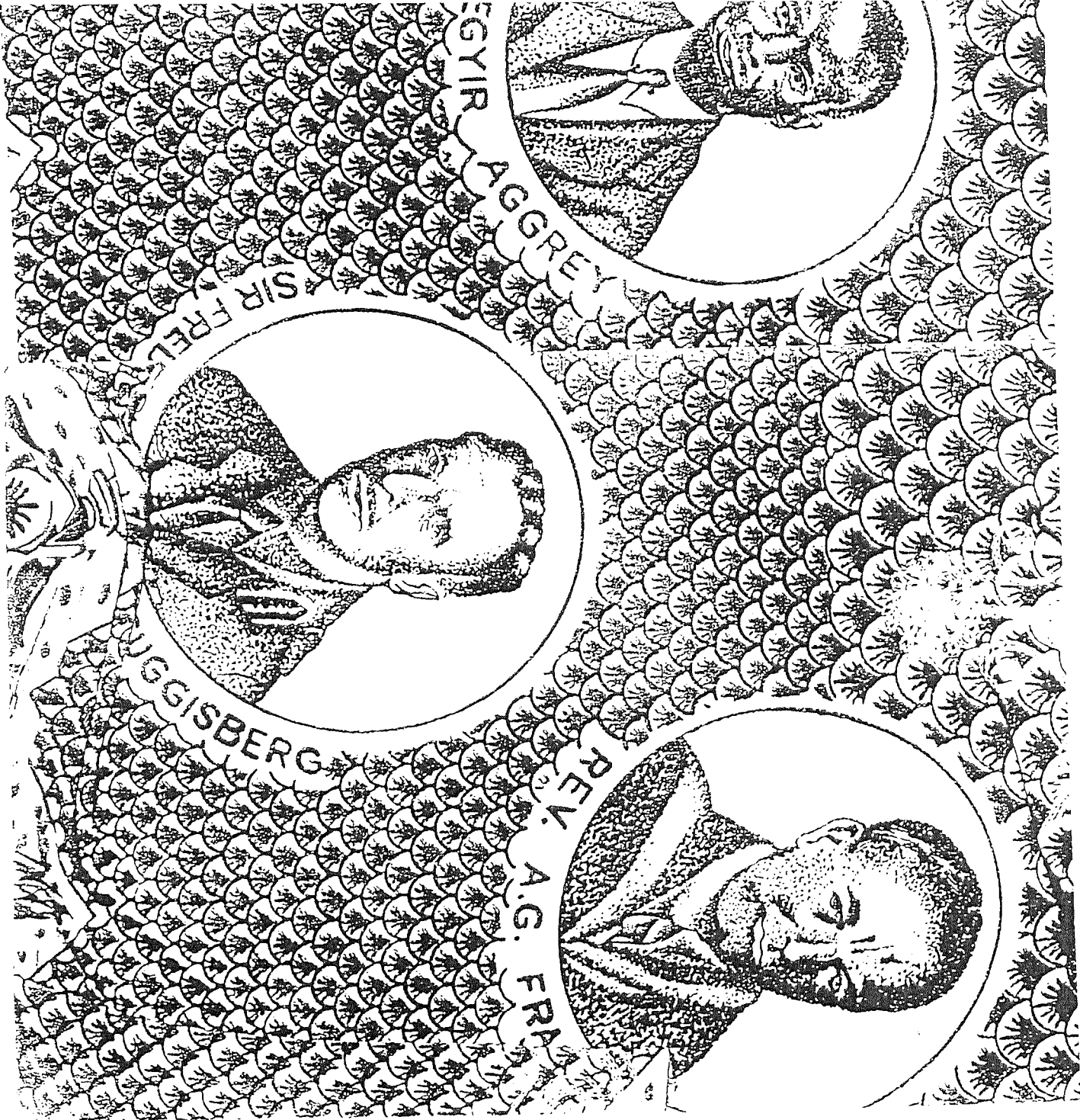
III. A commemorative tie for the 50th Anniversary of The Alliance High School, Kenya, 1976. In contrast to the Achimota markers, this conventional tie is an indicator of the cultural blandness that points to the success European settlement/Christian missions in Kenya. The Alliance was washed clean of indigenous cultural contamination by missionary zeal. (Also old Boys tie).

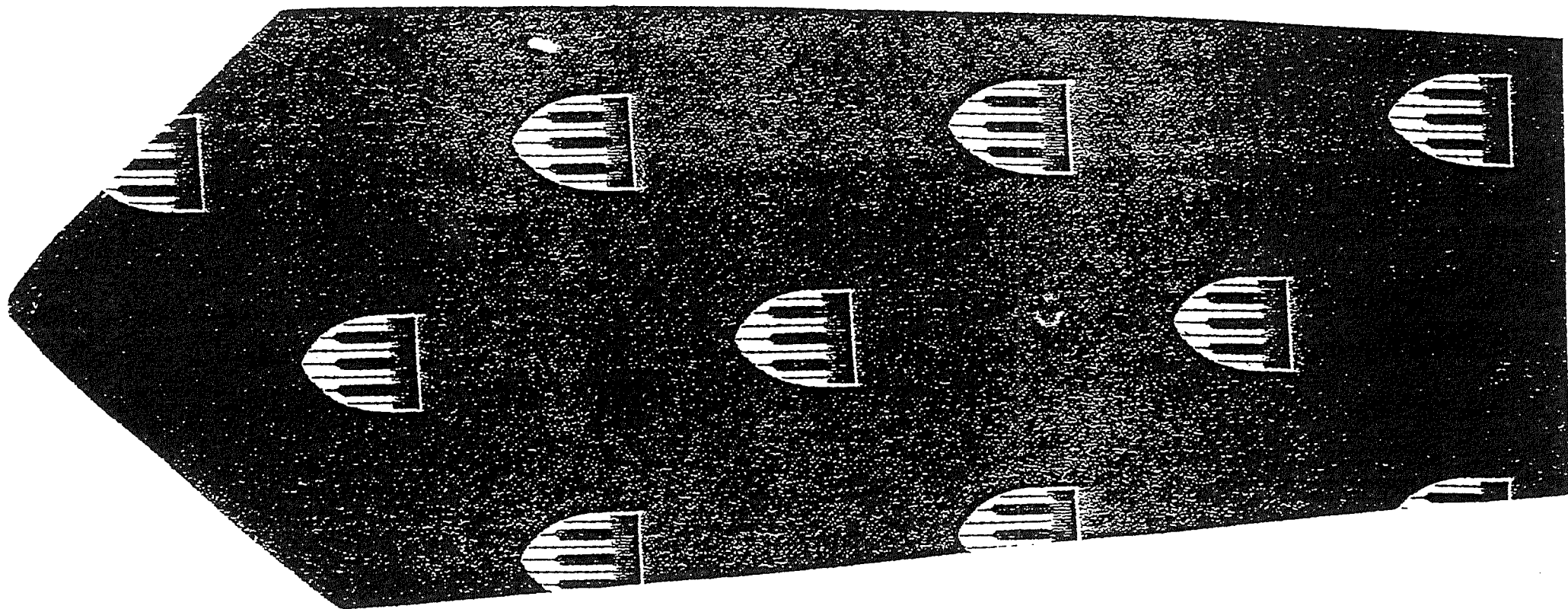
(Tie courtesy of Dr J. H. Oluoch, an old boy of the Alliance School, 1953-4).

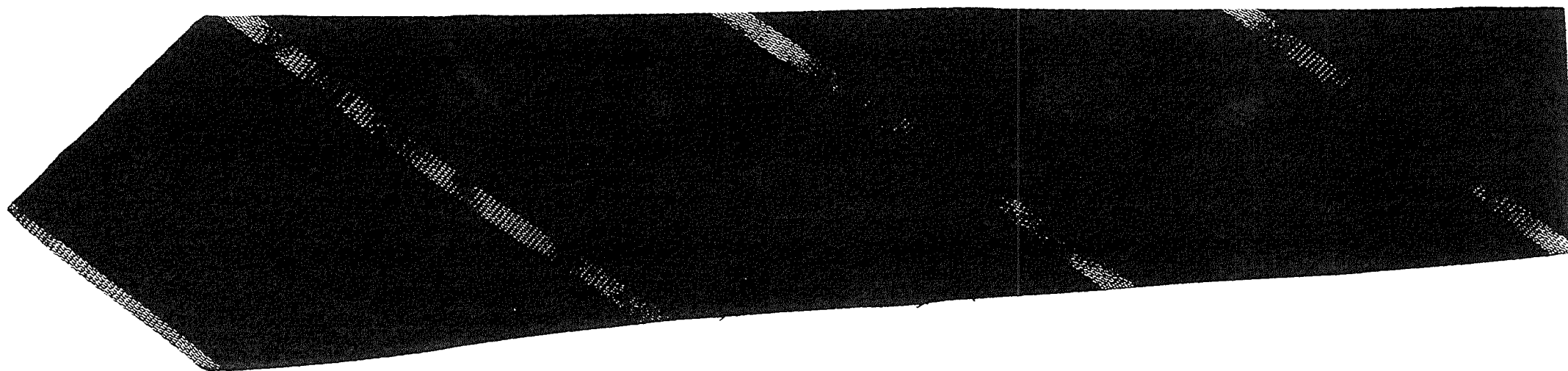
IV. This is a sample of the Order Forms circulated by Per Ankh, Armah's publishing company as an information and marketing strategy. A fairly small concern, Per Ankh does not have the distributional network of the larger, western derived companies.

V. An inscription of the Ankh, the Egyptian life sign, taken on site at Abydo. Armah uses it as unifying motif in *Osiris Rising*.

(Courtesy of Jacke Phillips, Department of Archaeology, Cambridge University).







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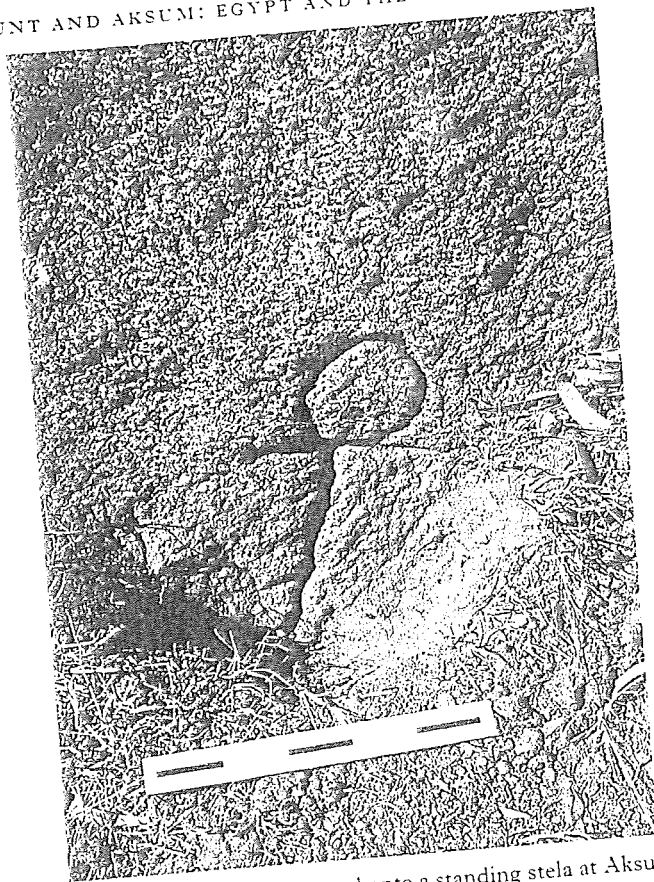


Fig. 6. Crudely formed *ankh* sign carved onto a standing stela at Aksum. The date of both the stela and its sign are uncertain, and need not be contemporary. Now half-buried, its intended level on the stela also is unknown. (Author's photograph.)

the Syrian monk Frumentius of Tyre.⁸⁴ Aksum is therefore almost the world's oldest official Christian state, following just a few years after Constantine the Great declared the Roman Empire so at the Council of Nicaea in 325. With this conversion to Christianity, initially as an official state religion and only later filtering down to the common population, came an unprecedented amount of Egyptian influence. Frumentius was a missionary of the Coptic church, headquartered in Alexandria, and the Patriarch there appointed him the first 'Bishop of the Ethiopians'. This practice of appointing a foreigner, from then on always an Egyptian Copt, as Archbishop of the Ethiopian church by the Patriarch in Alexandria continued down through the centuries, ending only in 1951. The modern Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in consequence, owes some of its liturgy and ritual to early Coptic

⁸⁴ Frumentius was Christian who had been shipwrecked as a child on his way to India with his uncle and brother; the uncle died but the brothers were brought to Aksum as slaves.