

The Work of Memory as a ‘Counter-Discursive Strategy’ in Ngugi’s, Armah’s and Morrison’s Fictional works

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the motives of the African and African-American writers’ work of memory. It focuses on both historical and cultural memory as counter-discourse. The major contention held in this paper is that these writers’ politics of memory has a subversive dimension. The paper argues that the African writers’ work of memory has a twofold purpose: to ‘strike back’ at the colonial powers and to ‘speak truth to power’. There is also an attempt at drawing a brief comparative study of the work of memory of African and African-American writers. The paper particularly focuses on these writers’ dramatization of the Middle Passage. It, besides, explores the issue of Afrocentric historiography as ‘counter-memory’. There is, further, an attempt at pondering the issue of objectivity in memory works.

Keywords: Afrocentric Historiography, counter-discourse, Memory, Mau Mau, Slavery .

The Work of Memory as a 'Counter-Discursive Strategy' in Ngugi's, Armah's and Morrison's Fictional works

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the motives of Ngugi's, Armah's and Morrison's work of memory. It argues that this work has a twofold purpose, to 'strike back' at the colonial powers and to 'speak truth to [national] power'. The paper particularly explores the issue of Afrocentric historiography as 'counter-memory'.

Whereas a historical work is based on data, often verifiable documentary evidence, memory work relies more on transmitted eyewitness accounts, both oral and written. In 'Les lieux de Mémoires', Pierre Nora maintains that "memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events" (Nora, 2005, p. 299). He further contends that history and memory are oppositional (Nora, 2005, p. 285), and that "History is perpetually suspicious of memory" (Nora, 2005, p. 286).

Memory narratives often have a marked 'affective' dimension. They are, besides, biased and motivated by ideological concerns. This, however, does not mean that historical narratives are not. A telling example is Eurocentric historiography, and it is mostly to challenge the latter that Afrocentric scholars produced counter-narratives such as George. G. M. James' *Stolen Legacy* (1954) and Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization, Myth or Reality* (1974), in which he defends his thesis concerning the 'Black origin of Egyptian civilization'. These African-centered works have had a major influence on African and African-American writers and account for their attempts to carry out the work of historical memory as a counter-discursive strategy in their fictional works. As Bill Ashcroft notes, the "re-writing of history is an important strategy in the process of discursive resistance" (Ashcroft, 2001, p.102).

The use of memory for subversive purposes, in African and African American literature, can be said to have originated with the early slave narratives, e.g., Equiano's. These narratives based on lived personal experiences were meant to acquaint their white readership, notably those who opposed slavery, with the horrors of the Middle Passage to make them campaign for its abolition. The subversive dimension of these accounts lied in that they unveiled some aspects of slavery that were concealed in the slave masters' narratives. As Toni Morrison points out in her 'The Site of Memory' (Morrison, 1998, pp. 183-199), the slave narratives themselves were selective and did not mention the most degrading aspects of the Middle passage (Morrison, 1998, p. 190). This self-censorship was most probably motivated by a fear of reprisals from their ex-Masters. In her essay, Morrison makes it plain that she is resolute to use her craft to unveil the atrocities of slavery. She remarks: "My job becomes how to rip [the] veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate' " (Morrison, 1998, p. 191). Yet, she reckons that to render the psychological turmoil of the victims she has to rely on her imagination, and she does so in *Beloved* (1987). Her work of memory is a form of historical revisionism and is, therefore, counter-discursive. As Bill Ashcroft observes: "historical re-visioning [is a kind] of writing back" (Ashcroft, 2001, p.102), and is a form of 'cultural resistance' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 15).

The use of historical memory as counter-discourse became more widespread among Diasporic scholars, following Garvey's pressing call for the rewriting of Black American history. One of the major goals of Garvey's historical reclamation was the cultural disalienation of the Black Americans. It was particularly meant to cure them of the 'double consciousness' syndrome from which they suffered. Echoing this view of therapeutic historical and cultural memory, Chinweizu proclaims, in *The Decolonisation of the African Mind* (1987): "history has to be used

as cultural therapy" (Chinweizu, 1987, p. 72). In line with Garveyite prescriptions, Afrocentric scholars undertook the work of memory for racial retrieval and 'collective catharsis' (Fanon, 1967, p. 145). Their first endeavour was to dismantle white supremacist historical discourse and to glorify their past for racial pride and self-esteem. Their memory works were deconstructive in that they reversed historical supremacy in their favour. To the Westerners' claim of 'White Egypt', they opposed the counter-claim of 'Black Egypt'. Their claims generated heated debates with classicist historians such as Mary Leftkowitz. The latter has taken the Afrocentrists to task for such claims in her *Not Out Of Africa* (1996), where she maintains that Afrocentric historiography is "myth and not history" (Leftkowitz, 1996, p. XVI) and that "the ancient Egypt described by the Afrocentrists is a fiction" (Leftkowitz, 1996, p. XVI). It should be noted that Afrocentric scholars and white classicist historians, often accused one another of racist leanings. The influence of Afrocentric historiography is particularly striking in Armah's late novels.

Historical memory has been a major concern for most African writers. This is the case of Chinua Achebe, who wrote *Things Fall Apart* (1959) to show his people "where the rain began to beat them", and to show the whites that his people were not 'cultureless', as they claimed. In fact, this novel was meant as a counter-discourse to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In his essay: "An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", Achebe maintains that Conrad "was a thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe, 1989, p. 11). Ama Ata Aidoo, was, similarly, concerned with historical memory, as it shows in her play *Anowa* (1970), where the issue of slavery is highlighted. In this play, Aidoo reminds her fellow countrymen, through the example of Kofi Ako, of their participation in the slave trade.

In this paper the focus is, however, on Ngugi's and Armah's work of historical memory. Whereas Ngugi focuses on local history, i. e., his country's history and notably the Mau Mau struggle, Armah focuses on racial history, and specifically on slavery. Armah's prime concern is racial redemption and Pan-Negroism, as it shows in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973). His work of memory fits in with the logic of 'writing back', or rather 'striking back', at Empire. As it appears from his racist rhetoric and satirical portrayal of the Westerners, and the Arabs, his memory work is motivated by a vindictive spirit.

Ngugi's memory work, like Armah's, has a vindictive dimension. He attempts to pay back the Kenyan authorities for his imprisonment. His memory work is also motivated by the need to "speak truth to power", as Said puts it (Said, 1994, p. XIV). His dramatization of the Mau Mau episode is meant to subvert the state version of history. In most of his novels, one protagonist carries out the task of pedagogical memory by narrating stories of lived experiences during the Mau Mau struggle to a younger audience. This is the case, for instance, of Abdulla in *Petals of Blood* (1977) and Matigari in the novel bearing the same name. Through these protagonists, Ngugi carries out the duty of memory to raise the historical consciousness of younger generations and to fight historical amnesia. As Pierre Nora notes memory relies on the "will to remember [and] to block the work of forgetting" (Nora, 2005, p. 296).

Ngugi's work of memory is also motivated by a desire to denounce the neo-colonial bondage of the Kenyan regime both under Kenyatta and Moi. This is evident in most of his novels, notably in *Devil on the Cross* (1982). It is also evident in his plays. In both *I will Marry When I Want* (1977) and *Mother Sing for Me* (1986), he uses historical events metaphorically to denounce social injustice in post-independent Kenya. In carrying out the Mau Mau memory work, Ngugi insists on the betrayal of the loyalists. In *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* (1987), he emphasizes the contrast between the wealth of the loyalists and their past as

traitors for subversive purposes. In *Devil on the Cross*, he gives the example of Gitutu who has become a rich landowner after independence, whereas he “used to convict and sentence Mau Mau adherents to death” (Ngugi, 1982, p. 106), and his father “was one of the elders who were used by the colonialists in the purges of the Mau Mau followers” (Ngugi, 1982, p. 101). In *Matigari*, for instance, the Minister remarks: “Yes, we loyalists are the ones in power today. Long live loyalism” (Ngugi, 1987, p. 102) and he refers to the Mau Mau struggle as a ‘nightmare’ in their history. Similarly, Nditika, in *Devil on the Cross*, remarks: “Let’s all forget the past. All that business of fighting for freedom was just a bad dream, a meaningless nightmare” (Ngugi, 1982, p. 177). This is, clearly, a hint to Kenyatta’s condemnation of Mau Mau, in 1962, when he proclaimed that “Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again” (Sabar-Friedman, 1995, p. 104). Ngugi insists on the fact that the Loyalists consider the ex-Mau Mau fighters as ‘murderers’ (Ngugi, 1987, 123) , and ‘terrorists’ (Ngugi, 1987, p. 102), to fuel the latter’s hatred at their longstanding enemies. He blames the Kenyan authorities for undermining the heroism of the Mau Mau fighters and puts this on the account of their neo-colonial bondage.

Ngugi’s Mau Mau memory work is also undertaken to rehabilitate the image of the ex-Mau Mau fighters by emphasizing their heroism. He does so in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), and in *Matigari*. In the latter, the heroism of Matigari, the ex-Mau Mau fighter, is highlighted through the manner in which he defeated Settler Williams before independence, and through his challenge of the Kenyan police (Ngugi, 1987, p. 31) and Minister (Ngugi, 1987, p. 112). Clearly, in this novel Ngugi uses history for subversive purposes. In *Moving the centre* (1993) He insists on the fact that ‘history is subversive’ under Moi’s regime and to support his argument, he gives the example of Kinyatti who was imprisoned for collecting data from ex-Mau Mau fighters with the purpose of re-writing this episode of Kenyan history to counteract the official version. Ngugi, like Kenyatta, is concerned with historical revisionism to subvert the historical discourse of both state and empire. In the preface of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi and Micere Mugo make it plain that their major concern is historical revisioning. They state: “the challenge was to truly depict the masses (symbolized by Kimathi) in the only historically *correct* perspective; positively, heroically and as the true makers of history” (Ngugi and Mugo, 1976, p. V). Their historical revisionist attempt is, for instance, expressed through Kimathi’s remark: “We must kill the lie that Black people never invented anything” (Ngugi and Mugo, 1976, p. 68). In his fiction, Ngugi dramatizes the Mau Mau fighters as driven by nationalist and humanistic concerns, to reverse the Westerners and the Kenyan regime’s representation of these people as ‘barbaric’. Matigari, for instance, remarks: “When we were in the forest we never killed any animals at any cost unless we were hungry and had run out of food. Even when we came across an injured animal, we would mend its broken limbs” (Ngugi, 1987, p. 143). In the main, Ngugi’s memory work has a subversive end.

Armah’s memory work, on the other hand, relates to ‘psychological location’ and responds to Molefi Asante’s expectation of the Afrocentric literary work. Asante notes: “an Afrocentric literary text must give attention to the idea of psychological or cultural location” (Asante, 2005, p. 3). He uses the motif of slavery for therapeutic purposes, both on the personal and the communal level. Indeed, he seems to dramatize the slave-trade episode to get psychological relief, both through an exteriorisation of an obsessive nightmare, and through the satisfaction of carrying out the duty of ‘memory’.

The re-enactment of the slave-trade episode in *Two Thousand Seasons*, for instance, has a cathartic function. It is meant to help his audience get over the trauma of the memory of their forebears' misfortune. The emotional impact of the slave trade memory is dramatized in *Fragments* (1970), through the case of Baako who is frightened by the sight of a ship. In *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), Modin experiences fright when the guide tells him and the other pupils about the ordeal of the slaves, "they were kept for weeks, sometimes months, till the ships came, and then they were taken out for loading" (Armah, 1974, p. 77).

In *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah stresses the importance of historical memory when he writes: "You [...] imaginers, thinkers and rememberers [...] are called to link memory with forelistening [and] to pass on truths of your origins" (Armah, 1979, p. IX). He, further, makes it clear that the remembrance of the 'Black holocaust' is the duty of the 'survivors', both as an homage to the memory of the victims of the slave trade, and as an attempt to keep their memory alive. In his preface, Armah makes it plain that the records of that span of the black people's history should be undertaken by the black intellectuals whom, he calls the 'rememberers' or the 'utterers'. He expects the latter to record it from an African perspective. His concern for historical reconstruction is also motivated by a "commitment to correct the history of Africa" (Asante, 2005, p. 2), one of the paradigms of Afrocentricity. Armah Afrocentric allegiances appear in his endorsement of the Diopian thesis of the Black origin of Egyptian civilization expressed in such statements as: "close to [the desert] we brought a fecundity unimagined there now" (Armah, 1973, p. 6). This Afrocentric belief of the precedence of Black civilization over the Western one is also expressed through the following statements: "We are not a people of Yesterday" (Armah, 1973, p. 1), and "Do they ask how many single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now? We shall point them to the proper beginning of their counting" (Armah, 1973, p. 1).

Armah's endorsement of the Diopian thesis is also apparent in his novel *Osiris Rising* (1995). The fact that the novel is based on the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris is quite significant. The Afrocentric dimension of this novel lies in that the major protagonists Ast and Asar want to reform the syllabus and give it an African-centeredness. Asar defines their goals stating: "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" (Armah, 1995, p. 104). This is what Armah himself is attempting to achieve through his fictional works.

Like Armah's late novels, Morrison's *Beloved* is an attempt at historical retrieval for therapeutic purposes. It highlights the power of memories and their influence on the present. It emphasizes the haunting memory of the past, notably the Middle Passage, for Diasporic Africans. Through the experience of Sethe who is haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter, Morrison suggests that historical consciousness is important. In *Beloved*, Morrison is concerned with historical reconstruction. Her novel is, therefore, a telling example of memory used as a 'counter-discursive strategy'. In her essay, 'The Site of Memory', she refers to her endeavour to write memory works as 'literary archaeology' (Morrison, 1998, p. 192), and notes that her prime concern is to 'fill the blanks' (Morrison, 1998, p. 193) of historical narratives of the Middle passage. In *Beloved*, Morrison makes it clear that for the African-Americans, the memory of the historical trauma of slavery will never fade away. She does so through Sethe who tells Denver that their past will always haunt them: "When you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else [...] It's never going away [...] The picture is still there [...] it will

happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you [...] Because even though it's all over -- over and done with -- it's going to always be there waiting for you [...] that must mean that nothing ever dies" (*Beloved*, pp. 43-44).

In the main, through *Beloved*, Morrison wanted the trauma of slavery to be 'truly felt [and] wanted to translate the historical into the personal' (Morrison, 1993). She does so in her novel, *The Bluest Eyes* (1970), where she explores the consequences of racism on African Americans, through the case of her protagonist Pecola Breedlove, who yearns and prays to have blue eyes, since that is considered as a standard of beauty. In this novel, Morrison demonstrates how entrenched are white stereotypes, e.g., "black is ugly, and dirty", in the African-Americans' psyche, and how destructive they are. Pecola's obsession with white beauty and her inability to acquire it, and acquire and identity, make her go insane. As Morrison remarks, "When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble" (Morrison, 1974, p. 89). In her novel *A Mercy* (1988), set in New York in the 17th century, she, again, focuses on the twin issues of slavery and racism and attempts to trace their origin.

On the whole, since Morrison's and Armah's memory work is concerned with a dramatic and traumatic episode of their race history, it is tinted with their emotional response to the event. As Bhabha remarks, *Beloved* is "a narrative of an affective, historic memory" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 8). Similarly, Ngugi's memory work betrays his emotional involvement and is tinted with his patriotism and radicalism. In *Moving the centre*, he maintains that the historian should be patriotic. (Ngugi, 1993, p. 99). He, besides, observes that the historian should reflect the history of class struggles (Ngugi, 1993, p. 96). In the main, Ngugi views history from a Marxist perspective. As Pierre Nora rightly observes, "Memory insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it [and that] it is blind to all but the group it binds" (Nora, 2005, p. 286).

To conclude, one might say that being ideologically-driven and emotionally-laden, memory narratives can but be biased, and therefore subjective.

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