

HISTORY AND FICTION: ACHEBE, OUOLOGUEM AND ARMAH

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"The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with the thing that has been, a struggle, as it were to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history."

Ngugi Wa Thiongo

African novelists, fully aware that man lives in and is shaped by history as well as of the special relevance of this fact for African peoples, have shown a marked historical consciousness in their works. The vivid historical vision which informs a significant part of modern African fiction has been a predominant determining factor in the various works, both from a thematic and a stylistic point of view. While it can be said that the various writers have all undertaken "the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of social direction", the outstanding differences in imagination, interpretation and expression are worthy of note. The novelists Chinua Achebe, Yambo Ouologuem and Ayi Kwei Armah are representative exponents of this historical imagination. It is a truism that, by its very nature, a historical theme poses the fundamental problem of artistic freedom in creative literature. With writers like Achebe and Armah, the historical consciousness is balanced by a corresponding artistic consciousness. Armed with a sensitive vision, the works of these writers include and transcend history.

Achebe

Much has been written and published on Achebe's works, especially his classic first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, based on a crucial historical moment

involving the clash of two opposing cultures. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no full-length discussion of the relationship between history and fiction in this novel, more so from the comparative viewpoint adopted in this study. Achebe has been very vocal, too vocal for some, about his intentions and objectives as a novelist. For my part, I consider his declarations regarding his creative works as well as those of other African artists to be of invaluable help to the critic. With particular reference to the present study, his utterances have been most welcome, witness the following statements:

“At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary’s much praised *Mister Johnson*) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how well-intentioned. Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son.”¹

“I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”²

Joyce Cary’s *Mr. Johnson* mentioned above belongs to the large stock of colonial literature which portrayed Africa as a land of darkness, inhabited by savages and barbarians. This image of Africa was a justification for the imperial and colonial enterprise, which was supposed to bring the light of civilization to Africa, “the heart of darkness”. I shall not dwell much on this subject which I have treated extensively in my book, *Africa in French and German Fiction* (University of Ife Press, 1978). Indeed, Africans had subsequently been made to believe the worst things about themselves, as a result of the distortion of their history by succeeding generations of European scholars and writers. According to Hegel:

“Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up, it is the Gold-land compressed within itself – the land of childhood, which lying beyond the days of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of the night.

1 Chinua Achebe: “Named for Victoria, Queen of England”, *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, London/Ibadan, Heinemann, 1975, p. 70.

2 Chinua Achebe: “The Novelist as Teacher”, *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, p. 45.

The Negro as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.

At this point we leave Africa never to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world... What we understand by Africa is the unhistorical under-developed spirit, still involved in the condition of nature... The history of the world travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning.”³

In the light of the foregoing, it is easy to understand why Achebe set out to recreate the image of his past, the African past, in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in order to help his people regain belief in itself and “put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement”. These two novels bear eloquent testimony to Achebe’s historical consciousness. In *Things Fall Apart*, which depicts Africa’s encounter with Europe, he successfully evokes the period preceding the arrival of the first white men among the Igbo people as well as the consequences of their arrival on Igbo society and institutions, both from a personal and a communal point of view. *Things Fall Apart* is the story of a historically active and self-conscious people, who have no need to define or assert their humanity. As the story unfolds, we see the people living in close and meaningful harmony with their environment in a given age, with social values, institutions and world-view. Okonkwo, the hero of *Things Fall Apart* is both a tragic victim of the historical process and a significant maker of history.

The first of the three parts into which the novel is divided deals with the period just before the arrival of white men. The story opens with an account of how Okonkwo became famous by throwing Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling contest. Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, was a failure and this further enhanced his fame as he achieved success after success. Having become famous as the greatest wrestler in all the nine villages, he also became a wealthy farmer, married three wives, took two titles and exhibited exemplary valour in two inter-tribal wars. With so many achievements to his credit, Okonkwo soon became one of the elders of his clan. He had washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders. In this eminent position, Okonkwo was entrusted with the care of Ikemefuna, a young boy offered along with a virgin by the neighbouring clan of Mbaino as compensation for the murdered wife of Okonkwo’s clansman in order to avert war and bloodshed. Unlike the rationalized counterpoint of the academic historian, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is a highly sensitive and dramatic recreation of

3. Quoted by Ngugi Wa Thiongo in *Homecoming*, London/Ibadan, Heinemann, 1972, pp. 41-42.

everyday reality and value system of pre-colonial Africa. As we observe Okonkwo's activities in his household, we become aware of the relationship between the husband and his first and other wives in a polygamous set-up, between the wives, between the father and his first son, his sons and daughters, etc. One is also given an insight into the informal education of the children, with some difference for boys and girls in consonance with their future roles in the society. Okonkwo's activities both in his household and in the wider community reveal to the reader how the economic and social life of the people is dependent on the seasons. Whether he is depicting the significance and cultivation of yams, the New Yam Feast, the Week of Peace, a marriage ceremony or Ekwefi's relationship with Ezinma, her only surviving child or the settlement of disputes by the assembly of nine *egwugwu* representing the nine villages of Umuofia, Achebe always makes us share in and feel in a pulsating manner the life-style of his ancestors. From Achebe's presentation, Okonkwo is both an individual and a type. Having risen from nothing to occupy an enviable position in his community, he becomes an embodiment of the values of that society and consequently the main protagonist in that society's colonial experience, symbolic of Africa's tragic encounter with Europe.

In true tragic form, Okonkwo is struck at the height of his glory by the hand of fate. He inadvertently kills the sixteen year old son of a dead kinsman at a burial ceremony and has to go into exile for seven years, as tradition dictated. Okonkwo fled with his wives and children to his motherland, Mbanta. Okonkwo's long absence from Umuofia is a clever ploy by the novelist to give the missionaries time to establish themselves there, thus paving the way for the inevitable conflict between two different world-views between the old and the new. The drastic historical change resulting from the intrusion of a foreign culture into Okonkwo's self-sufficient world and the shattering effects of same on his individual psyche and its prop, the traditional Umuofia community, precipitate events which culminate in his suicide at the end of the novel. Okonkwo's flight and sojourn with his mother's kinsmen marks the beginning of a decline from which he could never recover:

"His life had been ruled by a great passion — to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on to a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not

true — that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation."⁴

The tragic flaw in Okonkwo's character is his unshakeable attachment to the old way of life. It is to Achebe's credit that in reconstructing pre-colonial Igbo society, he has accomplished his task with admirable objectivity. While showing that society had great dignity, he did not in any way try to hide the imperfections of that society. The new religion, the Christian religion, logically exploited those social imperfections to win their first converts and thus shatter the homogeneity of the traditional society. None of the early converts was a man whose words were heeded like Okonkwo's in the assembly of the people. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, aptly described them as the excrement of the clan and the new religion was a mad dog that had come to eat it up. People, who abhorred the destruction of twins in the old set-up, were attracted to the new faith. The *osu*, outcasts in traditional Igbo society, were welcomed by the missionaries and became ardent adherents. The most significant conversion, however, for the further development of the plot was that of Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye. His young soul responded to the new faith which seemed to provide him the long awaited answer to the haunting question of abandoned twins crying in the bush and the murder of his innocent friend, Ikemefuna. Okonkwo again saw in the loss of his son to the new faith the unfortunate hand of fate. On further reflection the gravity of Nwoye's crime struck him like a thunderbolt:

"Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god."⁵

Things really fell apart with the conversion of Okonkwo's first son to the new religion. It is a fatal blow to a man like Okonkwo, an embodiment of traditional values. With that event, Okonkwo had a score to settle with the new religion and government and the ensuing events up to the end of the novel simply act as catalysts to hasten the inevitable confrontation and denouement. When Okonkwo returned to Umuofia at the end of his exile,

4. Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*, London/Ibadan, Heinemann, 1969 (1958), p. 119, p. 41.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

his clan had changed a lot. The new religion, government and trading stores had captured the people's attention as they followed their establishment and growth. In the prevailing atmosphere, Okonkwo's exile in Mbanta was to continue in Umuofia after his return. It was no longer physical exile, but the more painful and untenable, spiritual phenomenon impelling its victim to violent actions, in this case murder and suicide.

Things Fall Apart is a successful attempt by Achebe to relive in his imagination the old traditions of pre-colonial Igbo society and the tragic encounter of Africa and Europe through the experience of that society. Without idealizing the African past, Achebe succeeds in correcting certain prejudices and misconceptions about the black man's history, thus helping his people to regain their dignity and self-respect.

Ouologuem

After the initial excitement and enthusiasm aroused by Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence (Bound to Violence)* soon after it was published in 1968, the book was bedevilled by serious charges of plagiarism. I shall, however, avoid the big temptation to be drawn into that debate here and concern myself with Ouologuem's treatment of African history in his novel. The first striking feature of the novel is its broad historical sweep. Whereas Achebe's story covers the short but crucial period from about 1850 to 1900, Ouologuem's chronicle of the legend of the Saifs runs from 1202 to just after the Second World War. Ouologuem's story comprises of a series of episodes from the Empire of Nakem, situated in the Western Sudan and subjected to the long tyrannical rule of the Saifs, each more ruthless than his predecessor. The history of this fictitious Empire which in Ouologuem's words is supposed to represent that of "thirty African republics" is one long night of slavery and savagery. On its publication, Ouologuem's novel received abundant praise from enthusiastic critics as well as the coveted Renaudot Prize. In the midst of the excitement, praise and success, Abiola Irele rightly objected to the book's presentation of African history as "a meandering succession of sordid happenings, excesses and extravagances, presented as a fictitious narrative of a fictitious but 'typical' African empire", thus pretending to prove that "the past has only bequeathed to the present generation of Africans a legacy of crime and violence"⁶. Ouologuem himself has since admitted that it was his intention to demonstrate in his novel that the character of the present generation of West African blacks owes much to their long history of violence, i.e. they are bound to violence. Ouologuem's thesis seems to endorse what Achebe set out to combat and

⁶ Abiola Irele: "A New Mood in the African Novel", *West African World* 20.9.69, p. 115.

correct in *Things Fall Apart* ten years earlier — the racist theory that black is evil and that Africa is the heart of darkness. How can one explain this reversal? It is possible to find a plausible motivation for Ouologuem's position in the general disillusionment which resulted from the ugly experience of the first decade of post-independence African politics.

Ouologuem claims to have spent two years collecting material for the historical background of his novel, an admirable mixture of history, legend and myth. The harrowing incidents and episodes carefully extracted from the accounts of Arab and European historians, the communal memory and the griots and other sources are modulated, orchestrated and amplified by Ouologuem's most inventive and creative imagination. The link from century to century is the unbroken reign of violence of the African overlords, the Saifs. The Saifs, of Negro and Jewish stock, had subjugated and colonized the blacks long before the hey-day of their colonialist rivals, the Arabs and Europeans, whom they outwit to perpetuate their reign of terror founded on slavery, intrigue, torture, assassination, etc. The Saifs reduce their subjects to "zombies" and liquidate their enemies with the aid of vipers trained to bite designated victims.

There is no respite for the reader of Ouologuem's account of the bloody adventure of blacks from the beginning of his novel to the very end. The book opens with an image of the Empire of Nakem which contradicts or makes a caricature of the "great" African empires of Songhai, Ghana, etc. which thrived in the Western Sudan at about the same period:

"What strikes one, when the elders, notables and griots, peering wide-eyed into the bitter deserts, speak of that Empire, is, the desperate flight, before God's implacable blessing, of its population, baptized in torture, hunted as far as the Rande, dispersed along the barrier mountains of Goro Foto Zinko, strewn about the islands of the Yame River for a distance of more than fifteen hundred miles downstream from Ziuko, occupying more remote frontiers on the Atlantic coast, scattered over the savannas bordering on Equatorial Africa, forming groups of varying sizes, separated from one another by all manner of tribes-Radingues, Fulani, Gonda, nomadic Berbers, Ngodo-torn by internecine rivalries and warring with one another for the imperial power with a violence equaled only by the dread it called forth.

By way of reprisal the Saifs — with cries of 'For the glory of the world' — stained their assegais in crime and tribal exactions.

In that age of feudalism, large communities of slaves celebrated the justice of their overlords by forced labour and by looking on inert as multitudes of their brothers, smeared with the blood of butchered children and of disemboweled expectant mothers, were immured alive --- That is what happened at Tillaberi-Bentia, at Granta, at Grosso,

at Gagol-Gosso, and in many other places mentioned in the *Tarik-al-Fetach* and the *Tarik al-Sudan* of the Arab historians.”⁷

I have quoted the above passage at length because it clearly sets the tone for the whole book and because it is a vital point of reference for illustrating the important difference between Ouologuem’s historical vision and Armah’s. I shall return to this comparison later. The above accounts of slaughter continue with tales of rape, despair and suicide. The black victims, terrorized and terrified, lived in breathless resignation:

“For two more centuries the heart of Nakem bore such humiliations and ignominies with patience; the Crown forced men to swallow life as a boa swallows a stinking antelope, and rolled from one inglorious dynasty and sibylline genealogy to another, falling lower with each new act of vileness ... Against this background of horror the destiny of Saif Isaac al-Heit stands out most illustriously; rising far above the common lot, it endowed the legend of the Saifs with the splendor in which the dreamers of African unity sun themselves to this day.”⁸

Yambo Ouologuem hits out not only at the African past but also at its future. He envisages African unity as a theory for dreamers, ignorant of Africa’s abiding principle of violence. For him, as it is, so it was and ever shall be. As for the past which is the main focus of his book, it is a long tale of woe, of incredible acts of man’s inhumanity to his fellow being, of the horrifying experiences of blacks in Africa, of the more terrible experiences of black slaves taken by Arab slavers across the Saharan desert and by Europeans across the Atlantic to America. Fathers selling their sons, brothers selling their brothers, incest, cannibalism, nothing is left out which could render the African past as bleak as possible. To deal a finishing blow to any notion of a noble African past, Ouologuem adroitly launches a scathing attack on Fritz Schrobenius (Leo Frobenius), who popularized the view that “African life ... was pure art, intense religious symbolism, and a civilization once grandiose – but alas a victim of the white man’s vicissitudes”⁹. Ouologuem focusses his vitriolic, satiric verve on Shrobenius, whom he accuses of “secreting his own myth” and mystifying his fellow whites who in their enthusiasm raised him to a lofty Sorbonnical chair;

7 Yambo Ouologuem: *Bound to Violence* (tr. by Ralph Manheim), London, Secker & Warburg, 1971, pp. 3-4.

* I have altered the Opening phrase of Manheim’s translation in accordance with the original text.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

the latter is also accused of turning into a money making enterprise the numerous masks and various art treasures donated by or acquired from credulous Africans, “too pleased to hear from the mouth of a white man that “Africa was the womb of the world and the cradle of civilization”.

“This salesman and manufacturer of ideology assumed the manner of a sphinx to impose his riddles, to justify his caprices and past turnabouts. And shrewd anthropologist that he was, he sold more than thirteen hundred pieces, deriving from the collection he had purchased from Saif and the carloads his disciples had obtained in Nakem free of charge, to the following purveyors of funds: the Musée de L’Homme in Paris, the museums of London, Basel, Munich, Hamburg, and New York. And on hundreds of other pieces he collected rental, reproduction, and exhibition fees. (...) he perorated in the castle that negro art had earned him ...”¹⁰

Thus, according to Ouologuem’s vision of African history, Frobenius’ much lauded thesis of a rich and glorious African past with grandiose empires in the Middle Age was simply a myth created and shrewdly exploited by Frobenius to enrich himself. Ouologuem goes on to show how, when it became difficult for his disciples and descendants to enrich themselves in like manner, people started burying and unearthing slapdash copies which were then said to be “charged with the weight of four centuries of civilization” and sold to credulous customers. Here, of course, fiction rhymes with reality; present practice seems to correspond with that of the past and of the foreseeable future.

As for the future course of African history, Ouologuem leaves his reader with little or no hope of a better deal for the majority of the African population than what they had for centuries under the Saifs. Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, “a child of violence”, a child of two worlds, distinguished himself at the white man’s school early enough in his career and attracted the attention and patronage of “Saif, who regarded him as his property by virtue of his birth, his education, his heredity, his future, and as an instrument of his own future policy, heaped him with favors and saw to it that the serfs treated him with respect”¹¹. Like the other members of his generation, the new indigenous leaders of post-colonial and “independent” African states, Raymond-Spartacus was manipulated by local and foreign interest groups for their separate benefits:

“The life that Raymond lived ... was the life of his whole generation – the first generation of native administrators maintained by the notables in a state of gilded prostitution – rare merchandise, dark

10 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

genius manoeuvred behind the scenes and hurled into the tempests of colonial politics amidst the hot smell of festivities and machinations – ambiguous balancing acts in which the master turned the slave into the first of the slaves and the arrogant equal of the white master, and in which the slave thought himself master of the master, who himself had fallen to the level of the first of the slaves ...”¹²

The novelist, however, gives us sufficient background information on Raymond-Spartacus to justify his pessimistic view of a future Naken, under his leadership. Due to his colonial experience and education, Raymond had been “smitten by Europe”. The white man had temporarily crept into him physically in his homosexual deals, but on a rather permanent basis ideologically, thus making him a traitor to the true interests of his people:

“The white man had crept into him and this white presence determined even the moves that he, a child of violence, would make against it. Despising Africa, he took giant strides to diminish the gulf that separated him from the splendors of white civilization. But a simultaneous grasp of twenty centuries of history, or of their residue, was still beyond his reach: where he should have discovered – may the Evil One be banished! – he accepted.

And so, taking refuge beneath the dead tree of academic complacency, a mage of knowledge without hearth or home, living amidst the dead carcasses of words, Raymond Kassoumi, after a period of apathy in which he took on the accent of a Paris wise guy, gave himself up to a literary drivel, turning his learning into a demagogic ventriloquism and sinking under its weight.”¹³

In the above passage, and in the following pages, Ouloguem makes admirable use of his satiric gifts. After years of an obscure and difficult life as a student in France, Raymond, the “black pearl of French culture” (Ouloguem’s phrase), qualified as an architect.

Like a true *assimile*, Raymond married a poor Frenchwoman with a “mind as simple as two and two make four”, whose gossiping mother, Madame Teysseidou, a former laundress now tending the dying in her neighbourhood, sewing them up in steaming sheets which they were never to leave, “had the spacious udders of a buffalo cow”, “was stubborn and narrow-minded”, etc. Then came the outbreak of the Second World War and Kassoumi threw himself body and soul into the defence of invaded France. He fought in several places before being separated from his regiment as he was presumed dead under the ruins of a house near Mehun-sur-Yevre.

Having managed to extricate himself from the rubble, Kassoumi, *French subject* as his passport indicated, spent eighteen months wandering in the French countryside and living like a wild beast “on leaves and wild fruit; on rats and roots.” When the wind of change blew across Africa after the war, obliging the French like other colonial powers to introduce legislative reforms, Saif and his councilors for whom the end justifies the means, saw Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi as the man of the hour and aided by the colonial administration, used orthodox and unorthodox means to bring him to power. Ouloguem judiciously says of the new leader, the alienated Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, “for him and his Africa it was in a sense a duty to be revolutionary. But how ...?” In the least chapter, ironically entitled Dawn, the author speaks of “a false window offering a vista of happiness” and concludes that “the golden age when all the swine will die is just around the corner”.

Armah

We have already noted the objective nature of Achebe’s recreation of the African past in his successful effort to correct historical distortions. The same claim cannot be made for some of his predecessors and imitators. Ouloguem, for his part, is obsessed by the fact that “since the Schrobeniusologists, with their shrewd mixture of mercantilism and ideology, had watered at the mouth over the splendors of black civilization ... a cult of the good nigger had arisen, a philistine Negromania without obligation or sanction”.¹⁴ If *Le Devoir de violence (Bound to Violence)* is Ouloguem’s attempt to sanction the cult of the good nigger, i.e. the sin of idealization and over-idealization, his vision of black civilization is also a historical distortion in the opposing direction of self-vilification and self-mockery. Ouloguem certainly echoes and amplifies the colonial image of Africa – a fact which helps to explain the innumerable and unending attacks against him by his fellow Africans, both writers and non-writers. A close reading of Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) seems to justify the suspicion that the novel was written as a counterpoint to Ouloguem’s *Bound to Violence*. In this novel, Armah’s fourth, he “forsakes the documentary for the wider vistas of historical chronicle.” As Robert Fraser has rightly observed, *Two Thousand Seasons* “directly challenges the distorted view of African history conventionally put about by earlier European scholars – abetted to a certain extent by such indigenous sophisticates as Yambo Ouloguem”.¹⁵ Armah himself is quite explicit at the beginning of his

12 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

15 Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*, London/Ibadan, Heinemann, 1980, p. 82.

novel about his artistic purpose to challenge and correct the distortion of African history:

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

Pieces cut off from their whole are nothing but dead fragments. From the unending stream of our remembrance the harbingers of death break off meaningless fractions. Their carriers bring us this news of shards. Their message: behold this paltriness; this is all your history. Beware the destroyers"¹⁶

Like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Two Thousand Seasons* is a therapeutic work to cure Africans, and blacks in general, of a long cultivated self-distrust, thus leading to regeneration. Achebe speaks of "the work of regeneration that must be done" and Armah of "regeneration, the rediscovery of our way, the way" on page VIII of his novel. Indeed from the standpoint of goals, historical vision and art, *Things Fall Apart* and *Two Thousand Seasons* have much in common. One striking difference, however, is that while Achebe's novel concentrates on a crucial historical period of about fifty years, Armah's, like Ouloguem's *Le Devoir de violence*, goes very far back in time, a period of one thousand years (two thousand seasons). Beyond this broad historical sweep, *Two Thousand Seasons* seems to be the express antithesis of *Le Devoir de violence*.

Unlike Ouloguem who seems to wish to absolve foreigners, especially Europeans, of all guilt with regard to African and black historical experience, ignoring all opposition between black and white, Armah founds his novel on the antithesis between white and black. Ouloguem's novel is a very sly attack against Europe-oriented protest; it is an attempt to free himself from other writers' preoccupation with racial and cultural confrontation. In Armah's view, the opposition between black and white is fundamental for any meaningful illumination of African history. The subtle play on the colours black and white in the novel is a rich source of imagery, appropriately exploited by Armah to create artistic unity and aesthetic pleasure. White here represents the destroyers/predators, i.e. oppressors and exploiters; it embraces Arab/Muslim and European/Christian. Black is for Africans, the gullible victims of white destroyers and predators. While

Ouloguem's novel gives the impression that early migrations, dispersals and slavery were due to internal conflicts within the Nakem Empire under the centuries-old reign of terror of the Saifs, Armah's novel attributes these occurrences to natural causes and the inherent predatory nature of whites. Unlike Ouloguem's unmitigated long tale of woe, Armah's story begins with an age when the Africans lived a harmonious life according to their way, the way, before the fateful encounter with predators. The predators, of course, soon found ready collaborators in some African "fatted chiefs ... injected with the white people's urge to devastation", but the shift of blame and emphasis is clear. This does not minimise the guilt of the Africans because, according to Armah, "No one sold us but our chiefs and their hangers-on" (p. 229) Ouloguem focusses the readers attention on the forces and agents of oppression and Armah on the victims of history.

Moreover, unlike Ouloguem who regards African unity as the theory of dreamers, Armah presents his readers with a picture of a time in the past when Africans lived united and in harmony with one another and their environment. The novelist's Pan - African outlook and aspiration for African unity is reflected in the amalgamation of names and incidents taken from various parts of the African continent at various points in the novel:

"Tawia", Kamara said. "...Isanusi came to know Juma, came to know Kimathi, Soyinka, Dedan, Umeme, Chi, Mpenzi, Inse, Nandi, Kibaden, Kima, Mensa, Ngazi, Kisa, Tete, Kesho, Irele, Okai, Ankonam, Akole, Kakra, Nsa"¹⁷

Armah attaches great importance to group consciousness as opposed to individual consciousness, to "connectedness" as opposed to "unconnectedness" and fragmentation, because he sees in the unity of all victims the only sure way to destroy the destroyers and ensure the triumph of the way, a life of reciprocity and justice. The above names, most of them clearly identifiable with well-known Africans are those of "hearers, seers, imaginers, thinkers" - militants trying along with Armah "to communicate truths of the living way to a people fascinated unto death" (p. IX). We also see the same device of accumulation at work in the following lampoon of the new African leadership:

"What spurious praise names did we not invent to lull
Kamuzu's buffoon spirit?"

Osagyefo!

Kantamanto!

Kabiyesi!

Sese!

17 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

16 Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, Nairobi, E.A.P.H., 1973, pp. 1-2.

Mwenyenguvu!

Otunfuo!

Dishonest words are the food of rotten spirits.

We filled Kamuzu to bursting with his beloved nourishment."¹⁸

This criticism and others in the book do not lead Armah to end his novel on a note of despair like Ouloguem's. In spite of Africa's bitter experience in the past as well as in the present, Armah envisages a bright and glorious future for exploited blacks and all the oppressed peoples of the world:

"But still, in the present, what a scene of disintegration, what a bloody desolation the whites have stretched over this land! What a killing of souls!

(...)

Against this, what a vision of creation yet unknown, higher, much more profound than all erstwhile creation! What a hearing of the confluence of the waters of life flowing to overwhelm the ashen desert's blight! What an utterance of the coming together of all the people of our way, the coming together of all the people of the way."¹⁹

One last major difference between Armah's novel and Ouloguem's is that Armah's African characters are not passive victims of the historical process. The two thousand seasons covered by the story consist of a thousand seasons of increasing enslavement and subsequently a thousand seasons of resistance.

History and Fiction

Academic historians are not mere scribes or record keepers as people like Tacitus and Plutarch realized ages ago. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, aesthetic concerns even tended to dominate the books of historians like Gibbon, Tocqueville and Ranke. There are, however, fundamental differences between historiographical devices or techniques and the principles guiding the composition of works of fiction. The end-products of the two processes on a given theme are also different because the creative artist has to subordinate historical truth to artistic truth in various ways, depending on his creative genius.

Historical accuracy is rarely compatible or synonymous with artistic truth. Any work of fiction, such as the ones we have examined above, thus

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

has to include and transcend history, given the greater and predominant aesthetic concerns of the novelist, who is free to express facts, half-truths, mangled facts, rumours, impressions, and can even create his own myths. It might be necessary at this point to state that I have been mainly concerned in this study with the use of history by African writers in their works of fiction, and not with the analysis of the specific literary genre, known as the historical novel, which imposes certain constraints on the writer. Of Armah's five novels to date, it is his latest, *The Healers*, which bears the subtitle of historical novel. If my intention was to study this genre in African writing, I would have focussed my attention on Armah's *The Healers* and not on *Two Thousand Seasons*. The genre is implicit in all the novels discussed above, but they are not historical novels in the purely technical sense. Achebe, Ouloguem and Armah have, each in his own way, tailored history to suit their particular vision. They have "altered and transposed and invented incidents" to suit their purpose and design.

The historical consciousness of our three novelists is paralleled by a vigorous artistic consciousness. They recreate sensitively the everyday reality and values of pre-colonial Africa. In the case of Achebe, the authenticity of his reconstruction is heightened by the use of Igbo words, syntactic structures and proverbs. In Achebe's novel, the social life of the community is dependent on the seasons. Similarly, Armah's novel is titled *Two Thousand Seasons*, being one thousand years computed according to the traditional African way of recording time. Each year is reckoned as two seasons, the wet and the dry. In pursuit of their aim of curing their fellow Africans and other victims of colonization of self-distrust arising from lack of confidence in their distorted culture, Achebe and Armah have adopted literary devices inherited from African oral tradition in the composition of the works examined in the present study. This is also a means of reconciling and restoring the African character to his history. Armah, in particular, achieves a sort of artistic revolution in *Two Thousand Seasons*. In this novel, he seems to have completely revised the stylistic emphasis of his craft as well as the sensibility informing his art. The artist figure of his earlier novels disappears here in favour of a plural voice. He is no longer preoccupied with individual states of mind like that of "the man" in his first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. There is no basis for accusing him of overburdening this novel with a "foreign metaphor" in the existentialist or any other mode, as Achebe did in the case of *The Beautiful Ones ...*²⁰ The adoption of the plural voice in *Two Thousand Seasons* is in complete harmony with Armah's exploration of the communal memory, with his search for "connectedness" and reciprocity, with his desire for unity among all the victims of the historical process to "destroy the destroyers".

²⁰ See Chinua Achebe, "Africa and her Writers", *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, p. 26.

Conclusion

The three novels highlighted in this study exemplify the pervasive sense of history in modern African literature. The admirable interplay of imagination and experience, the happy marriage of historical and fictional elements in the works of the writers, bear eloquent testimony to their creative genius. In addition to helping to determine the aesthetic canons of African writers, as we have demonstrated above, the ethical, social, political and nationalistic relevance of the historical consciousness cannot be underrated in the context of contemporary African aspirations and future well-being, for in the words of T.S. Eliot:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.