Review Articles (Ayi Kwei Armah)
Armah’s Politics in *Osiris Rising*:
The African Diaspora Reversing the Crossing

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Ayi Kwei Armah has very early appeared as a maverick among African writers. His first novel disturbed many a reader. His reserve, self-effacement and distance from conferences and interviewers have given him a reputation of a marginal. Achebe could not help hailing him as a brilliant novelist while taking issue with what he calls Armah’s first novel’s universalist (existentialist) pretensions and its ‘cosmic sorrow and despair’ (25). Armah’s fiction evolved from the dejection in the first two novels, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, that focus on isolated individual subjects’ disillusionment and angst in the early post-independence period to the thwarted expectations of African militants in search of a seemingly elusive
revolution in *Why Are We So Blest?* The following two, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers,* convey a far more optimistic perspective, and they creatively revisit history for lessons and guidance.

Soyinka offers a most perceptive study of Armah’s literary and social vision that is relevant to our purpose. He locates him in the school of iconoclasm, which practices assertive secular vision. Soyinka notes:

In contrast to Ouologuem, however, Armah’s work is intensely committed to the substitution of another view of active history, with re-creating humanistic perspectives as inspirational alternatives to existing society. His vision consciously conforms to no inherited or imposed religious doctrine and attendant ethics, frees itself of borrowed philosophies in its search for a unifying, harmonizing ideal or a distinctive humanity (86-87).

This pertinent appraisal and accurately characterizes Armah’s continuing production. *Osiris Rising* refracts the aesthetic standpoint that guides his former work. Moreover, what Kofi Anyidoho has termed Armah’s ‘particular dialectic of historical reconstruction and mythopoesis’ operates within it (41). Indeed, this novel remains true to the ideological perspective Anyidoho identifies here:

The argument, to put simply, is that Armah’s chosen objective is a revolutionary and visionary ideal; the visionary ideal is not simply a retrieval of a past ideal but a reshaping of a future world free from the destructive factors of past and present conditions. A historian with his eyes on the future is under no obligation to merely reconstruct past events (41).

Similarly, in Isidore Okpewho’s typology, Armah features in the trend *tradition revised,* characterized by an intensification of the critical spirit and ‘an energy directed at creating a new mythology that would offer for the projected or emergent society a firmer road to self-realization than could be found in old traditions’ (279). Consequently, he regards Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* as the work that best demonstrates the urge to revise the old mythic tradition and furnish new hopes. I would argue along the same lines with respect to *Osiris*
Rising in this discussion. It condenses a revolutionary vision that seeks to be innovative, and attempts to rebuild new roads to a better future free from the shackles of present-day Africa and the African Diaspora.

Readers of Armah’s works puzzled over his years of silence as regards fiction writing. Since The Healers (1978), Armah had seemed to have turned away from literature to expository writing, just as he did on entering Harvard by opting rather for social sciences. In his article, ‘One Writer’s Education’, he tells us that his ‘center of interest shifted from the contemplation of arrangements of symbols, images and words, to a scrutiny of the arrangements of the social realities buried under those words, images and symbols’ (1752). In like manner, he wrote various essays and articles on issues of personal and general interest. As a result, Neil Lazarus, voicing the mind of many critics and readers, admitted to Armah’s unassailable significance and conjectured about his being ‘stuck’ in his thinking; in which case African literature would have lost one of its more distinctive voices. Besides, this scholar’s reservation that ‘until or unless a sixth novel is published, however, more than this cannot be said’ is interesting because of its being predicated on expectation of new ideas from Armah (233-234).

Osiris Rising, published in 1995, responds to these conjectures; it remains in the precinct of Armah’s views deployed in his non-fictional publications in the years ‘in-between’ and sparsely present in some of the other novels. It furthers the thematics of the histories based on Africa’s encounter with the West. Such ideas are grounded on the concept of slavery, which is an overriding motif in the narrative, important variations on the theme include the effects of the Middle Passage and the manner in which the Diaspora comes to term with displacement and re-connection. Of equal importance is the figurative new slavery, neo-colonialism, which affects current African politics. Ancient Egypt, or Kemt, functions as the creative and inspirational source, which is novelty in African literature. So far local customs and traditions have been the creative well from which writers have watered their gardens. This new
turn in poetics deserves attention. This essay intends to explore the connections achieved by way of the mythology of Kemt and the emblematic constructions based on it, and to chart the possibilities suggested or otherwise expressed in the novel with respect to the Diaspora’s relation to Africa and Africans and conversely. By the same token, this study addresses the political and ideological issues and stakes involved and pertaining to the predicament of present day Africa in which is woven the diaporan question.

Ayi Kwei Armah has consistently made reference to Slavery in all of his novels. The concept’s semantic load varies according to its intended function in each text, but it basically refers to the corrupting effect of power and money. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the former revolutionaries metamorphosed into a new political bourgeoisie living on people’s sacrifice are assimilated to ‘the ancestral chiefs who have sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade’ (154). The kinship between slavery and modern exploitation and power thus established in the first novel is prolonged into *Fragments* where the family’s material greed caused the death of the baby whose fate symbolically ties in with the main protagonist’s. To Naana,

the baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that began the same long destruction of our people when the elders first - may their souls never find forgiveness on this head - split their own seeds and raised half against half, part selling part to hard-eyed buyers from beyond the horizon (284).

*Osiris Rising*, revisits the issues of slavery, hence the Diaspora and Africa. At the core of its mythopoetic discourse are the fragmented minds of the Diaspora hankering for healing following ‘the wreckage of our people’, as the narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* puts it (2), coupled with the acrimonious post-independence experience of African countries. The novel ensures continuity in Armah’s fictional production and themes. It develops events and experiences dealt with earlier while introducing fresh elements. A paramount feature of these is Ancient Egypt, as the titular phrasing indicates. Armah’s interest in
Egyptology has been clearly expressed in such essays as ‘Masks and Marx’, ‘Dakar Hieroglyphs’ for example. This fictional work delves far beyond the spatial and temporal scope of Two Thousand Seasons and draws from the most ancient culture of Africa. The text emphasises that common Ancient Egypt ancestry may be redemptive to both the ‘Africans at home’ and the ‘Africans abroad’ who return to Africa, the Motherland, or maintain a bond with it. The view that informs the novel reiterates the Pan-Africanist ideal found in the history novels and in Why Are We So Blest? The latter offers a glimpse of the Diaspora in America, while the latest focuses on it.

Osiris Rising tackles a topic crucial to the African Diaspora seeking its roots in Africa, and the means to re-connect with it. This desire has long been felt before Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line project. Nowadays, it is consciously cultivated and materialized in many ways, through reading, discussion groups, lectures, travelling, and in various other ways. Armah subjects it to scrutiny by the lens of fiction, however distorting it may be. The characters he constructs illustrate and even discuss the problems related to this re-connection, the manner in which it is effected, the motives that impel it, and the expectations behind it. His book reflects the issues as they can be imagined, and of course it retains the creator’s license to transform and use the material for a purpose.

Among Armah’s constructions, Ast, the African-American female protagonist, enjoys prominence and centrality; she is the nexus of the story and the medium by which the African Diaspora is viewed. Ast’s journey to Africa prolongs Juana’s in Fragments, but differs from it. With Juana, Armah deals with a particular attempt at homecoming beleaguered by anxiety. Juana’s is a case in which return to Africa is prompted by disappointment in love, which makes her adjustment strained. Her place of exile, Ghana, is no different from her home country, Puerto Rico. Quite suggestively, when taking stock of her situation, slavery looms in her gaze in the shape of the distant old slave castle. ‘The small form of the distant castle brought memories, and again her doubts returned: why had she really come back?’ (30). Her life in the Motherland rests
on two crutches, ‘adjustment’ and ‘survival’. Juana represents a paradigm of the African Diaspora coming home. Her mood and perception of the land, her doubts parallel Baako’s trauma on returning home from America and facing the degrading values that have now currency in his society such as greed and corruption, reminiscent of the covetous complicity which helped the slavery enterprise of old. The contiguity of the two protagonists and their apprehension of the social environment they live in illustrate the longing of the Diaspora to re-connect with Africa and the difficult relationship that may prevail in the attempt to do so. The two characters of *Fragments* appear as forlorn subjects drawn to each other for self-fulfilment and healing of their fragmented beings. Their relationship is intertextually reviewed in the making of *Osiris Rising* in the guise of the bond between Ast/Isis and Asar/Osiris, her African former course mate.

With respect to her prospective return, Ast’s drive is shown as being more rational and committed than Juana’s. Her decision to leave for Africa derives from two concurring incentives not associated at the beginning, but which rejoin and appear both sentimental and political. Way into the novel, she is depicted in an idyllic, but not starry-eyed, state of fulfilment buttressed by involvement in a shared cause:

Here she’d find the beginnings of an inner peace she’d only imagined, never experienced in America. Under this sky, with these stars that seemed to exist not so much above her as around her, on this grass that also beckoned her to rest, she knew she was home. Her mind came to rest with Asar, the comfort of his presence. Here was a life lived with a commitment so steady it created no anxiety. Against the beauty of her hope, present realities could look unbearably ugly. She would have been happiest working with a universe of minds like this, committed to the search for justice - moral beauty, and for the beauty of the mind – intelligence. Conflict there would be, of course. But it would be about ways to mix life’s routines with greater equity (233).
Significantly, her Grandmother Nwt provided the initial impetus. Her choice was prompted in early childhood by her proximity to Nwt who is steeped in Ancient Egyptian culture and language. In this transplanted African, is recognizable the figure of Naana in Fragments, both of them function as custodians of ‘wholeness’ in the face of fragmentation. Nwt reaches far beyond Naana in the language Armah devises to encapsulate the central idea of his novel that the roots are deeper and extends as far as Kemt.

In Armah’s fictional archaeology Nwt - the mother of the original Ast, who is commonly known as Isis, in Kemt mythology - becomes made Ast’s grand-mother, a trope consonant with the ancestors’ mediating role that Naana embodies. The idea of wholeness and circularity she advocates in Fragments is also present in the myth involving Geb, Nwt and Ra. Nwt feeds the dead, she is described as their friend and protector (Mercatante 109-110). This figure appears in the iconography as a woman with a vase of water upon her head, holding a papyrus in one hand and the ankh in the other. These symbols are indicative of her attributes. She links the world of living, the dead and the unborn. In quite the same way, the fictional Nwt secures the connection between Africans at home and abroad, she keeps cultural memory alive as bequeathal to her grand-daughter, to whom she also imparts the knowledge of hieroglyphs. Besides, the narrator tells us: ‘Ast found out it was Nwt who had resisted the family’s desire to name her after some European saint, and had given her the African Ast, most intelligent divinity, as namesake. Ast liked the sound. When she understood the meaning she fell in love with it’ (7). Nwt works as a prime topos in the novels in the tradition of the African grandmother whose stature resembles the emblematic sycamore tree of the goddess Nwt, and who is also celebrated by diasporan scholars and writers. Armah fictionalizes the concern for re-connection to the Motherland by re-crossing the Middle Passage, a wish embodied by the many slaves who killed themselves to escape doom. The text recreates the back-to-Africa dream.
through Ast who fulfils it owing to the agency of Nwt portrayed as the holder of traditional knowledge and representative of the unbroken link.

In this respect, the opening chapter, Nwn, begs attention both on account of its impressive introduction of the ankh in various angles of view and the condensing its meaning in three major terse and eloquent utterances: ‘Ankh. Life. Home’. These monosyllables decrypting the sign are pregnant with significance as regards the handling of the fiction ahead. Nwn, as craftily conveyed in the heading of this chapter, connotes the beginning, the root. Nwn was the primeval deity, the ocean, which is the source of creation and also wraps the world. He is the ‘father of gods’, all springs from him, water and the River Nile itself. Nwn in the text summons forth Africa as the source, the roots of the displaced Diaspora, of Ast and Nwt. This idea is coupled with the yearning for return as it is expressed from the outset in a synoptic tableau inspired by Kemt pantheon, which and develops in Ast’s prescient musings regarding the stakes in the story.

The proleptic ending of the first chapter displays her angst in her visionary review of Egyptian culture. Her mind visits its cosmogony that constitutes the backdrop against which Armah portrays politics in neo-colonial Africa and the implication of the Diaspora. The novel addresses the return home question in its different conceptions through various characters. In so doing, it supports the congruous vision represented through Ast. Armah creates an African-American woman who holds a doctorate (on Ancient Egypt studies) and is endowed with the qualities of the original Ast, creativity and intelligence, as one example of the Diaspora’s homecoming in earnest. Thus, the novel emphasizes a kind of motivation different from a typical one embodied by Cinque, a name Ast discovers in her research. She functions as a medium for debating the issue of roots and return and that which it involves, as it happens in her discussion with Asar where the scaring American approach to the search for roots comes up, especially that which pertains to ostentation and
commodification. Roots are exported from Africa to America for Television shows and adornment, which is a waste, the matter is deeper in Asar’s view:

It is not what roots look like that’s important. It’s what roots do. If we let them do their work, they’ll send amazing springs of creativity into the universe. But I’ve seen Americans scratch around hoping to dig them up for exhibition. It’s one more way we keep rehearsing our murder (243).

Ast’s identity quest and resolve project a view that might remedy the African Diaspora’s cultural lack, and dramatize a chapter of connection and commitment to Africa through the study of African history and Egyptology. Furthermore, such a deed needs to go along with action in the political and economic life of the continent as asserted via Ast’s voice: ‘It doesn’t matter how clear my vision of Africa may be. If I can’t connect through work, the vision is useless’ (244). In this manner, Ast tries to solve the problem in her response to what she perceives as the missiles Asar aims at her in this mock-debate between Africans and African-Americans that the text dialogizes through them. It flows from it a will to know and to act which is presented in stark opposition to the rash and destructive drive of Aimee in *Why Are We So Blest?* Ast expresses this candidly:

I know I want to do the kind of work you describe even when you’re just talking casually. Innovation, creation, revolution, everything necessary to remake Africa. Using, as you say, living essences brought up from hidden roots (243).

Ast holds together the different frames of the narrative and acts like a metaphorical bridge between Africa and the Diaspora. Ast’s treatment subverts the Negritude figment of Europe fecundating Africa, the female. Here a woman of the Diaspora comes back home to assert her assumptions and work for the Motherland. Her being introduced as Ast and African-American assumes profound significance; her characterization serves to convey major points among which the common plight of Africans and the Diaspora that Fanon
encapsulated, and of which Armah reminds us in his essay ‘Fanon The Awakener’:

The Negroes who live in the United States and in Central or Latin America in fact experience the need to attach themselves to a cultural matrix. Their problem is not fundamentally different from that of the Africans. The Whites of America did not mete out to them any different treatment from that of the Whites who ruled over the Africans (36).

Armah’s project while creating and naming the characters around which he weaves his narrative is congenial to the strategy of the harbingers of change in the story itself. The novel implements the politics it advocates; it treads on the creative paths it signposts, and this is tantamount to an aesthetic statement consonant with the proposals by the teaching staff for a new curriculum at Manda Teacher Training College.

Considering Armah’s aesthetic and political concerns over the years offers valuable insight into Osiris Rising. The fact that it is published under the imprint of Per Ankh reflects in sundry ways its orientation with regard to the commitment that directs the narrative. Clearly, the novel runs along the tenets of Armah’s political and cultural principles and invites a joint reading of his non-fictional and creative writing. The book fuses the issue of the diasporan return with the odds against which African countries struggle, as embodied in the oppositional movement to the sempiternal neo-colonial regime, now stock-in-trade of post-independence African fiction. It blends various strands of writings, figurative, analytical, and documentary. At its climactic moments, in such events as the drafting of the curriculum at Manda Teacher Training College, the text resorts to the language of document drafting to enhance realistic meaning, just as it does with the ankh group’s manifesto early in the story. The significance conferred on these particular instances epitomizes the intentionality that informs them whether as professions of faith in fiction form, promoting new directions in a sector of African higher education and culture. It extends to further metaphorical boundaries.
The academic establishment of Manda is representative of a type of self-seeking academics perpetuating neo-colonial educational practices and hostile to progressive changes such as those meant by the forward-thinking committees of teachers and students. The teachers organized around Asar stand up against an allegoric irrelevant system supported by flunkies subservient to the local despotic power. The strain at the Manda campus is metonymic of the overall situation in the country, and in turn, encompasses the whole of Africa. The teachers dedicated to the cause of African Studies belong by names to the various parts of Africa. This device, earlier met in *Two Thousand Seasons*, stresses the Pan-African dimension of *Osiris Rising*. It erases imposed national boundaries; its setting is constructed in such a way that sites are not germane to a single country. Sahelian and equatorial flora and scenery mingle to create an all-African aspect. Through Asar, Armah constructs a revolutionary, committed to Pan-Africanism; he takes part in the liberation struggle in former Rhodesia and South Africa. He refrains from sentimental involvement and shuns family duties; with respect to his own pursuits, a wife and family may hinder his freedom of movement and action.

The type of revolution proposed here is modeled on the inheritance of the companionship of the ankh. This movement stood against the Slave Trade and fought the destroyers and their local factors. Isanusi’s idea of the ‘way’ stalks *Osiris Rising*, the disease is endemic. Against the disease Isanusi saw the cure: the hope of the way, creation of what is necessary, creation sufficient for sharing, creation that makes sharing easy, natural, reasonable, not unbearable sacrifice, creation for community (*Two Thousand Seasons* 314). However vague in its ideological contours, the ‘way’ opposes the forces of destruction. Armah attempts other ways of seeing in his historical novel, and explores grounds for helping the solution to the damage done by slavery and its offshoot, colonialism. *Osiris Rising* pursues this aim. Critics have found his view strange, romantic, even essentialist, messianic or partyist (Lazarus ch. 2, 5). It is because
Armah’s creative and resistive mind challenges the normative canons, as it were, witness his writing back to the most established school of thought.

In ‘Masks and Marx’ he carries out a deconstructive analysis of Marxism and points to its fetischisation by African Marxists too reverent to question its misconceptions about Africa and Asia. Marxism, from a hegemonic position, construes Africa as existing because of Western imperialism, hence the West brought Africa into history. Armah confronts the issue headlong:

Marxism in its approach to non-western societies and values is decidedly colonialist, Western, Eurocentric and hegemonist. Marxists do not present their philosophy as a Western variant of communist theory which would be the accurate, intelligent and honest thing to do. Marxists in Africa exhibit a desire to institutionalize Western communist hypotheses as the only correct philosophy. Some of the most enthusiastic believers go as far as to pretend to think that Marxism is not just a philosophy but a science, the only correct science of liberation (41).

Although Armah does not mention Hegel, there are overtones of the Hegelian view of Africa in the Marxist treatment of non-Western world that Armah takes exception to. Marx seems to have uncritically accepted Hegel’s assumptions while reworking his philosophy to elaborate his own theory of historical materialism. Hegel conceived of Africa as the land of childhood, outside history, deprived of movement and of any development. He considered Africa ‘the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature’ (91, 99).

Armah’s commitment to African revolution is boldly inscribed in Osiris Rising. The novel propounds an ideology traceable in his expository writings, and Ancient Egypt plays an important part therein. That Armah makes the ankh the emblem of the resisters reminiscent of the seers, hearers, and utterers bears manifold significance. Aside from its being associated with Kemt, the ankh constitutes the driving force of the story in that it ties all the protagonists.
The revolutionaries have it as logo in their pamphlets. It assimilates with a precious icon in the African-Americans’ search for historical roots concentrated in Ast and Cinque. The Ankh functions as a potent motif the narrative uses in connection with the Asar and Seth, the Manichaen entities representing light and darkness between whom the fate of the people is being contested. The opposition between Ast and Cinque follows a similar binary pattern, Ast stands in opposition to Cinque in every way.

Armah builds on this structuring principle based on binary oppositions mirroring the Fanonian Manichaen conception of the colonial world prolonged into neo-colonial politics:

The colonial world is a Manichaen world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. The native is declared insensitive to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil (41).

In post-independence dictatorial regimes the same Manichaen politics is implemented by ruling powers towards opposing trends. These are demonized just as the native was in colonial times. Osiris Rising revisits this dichotomy by secularizing the mythological deities. The progressive forces pool around the positive eponymous hero while those of evil act under Seth who is intent on conquering and subduing his opponents. This novel enacts the combat between the two sectors in the manner Armah considers the stakes involved:

‘Manichaeism’ is a philosophical perspective characterized by the division of reality into two polar exclusive opposites. The purpose of Manichaen division is not coexistence but the destruction of one pole and the domination of the total field by the victorious sector, no longer just a pole ('Marx and Masks' 37).
The struggle in the novel embodies a view of the political combat in Africa which involves an entrenched oppressive power structure thriving on allegiance to neo-colonial interests and an opposing force that endeavours to organize in order to neutralize it. In this deadly struggle the violent pole connotes demonic power, represented by Seth. In Ancient Egypt mythology, Seth is the god of evil and darkness. He is brother to Asar, or Osiris, Lord of creation and teacher of civilization, father of the gods who had given birth to him, and the father of the past and the present. Asar, Seth and their sister, Ast, were born of Geb, the earth, Nwt, the sky. The sun god Ra, husband to Nwt, according to one myth, decreed that the unfaithful Nwt would never bear children in any month of the year. Their children were born thanks to Thoth, also named Jehwty, who contrived an extension of the temporal realm to allow Nwt to conceive them. Jehwty is part of the figurative characterization in the novel appearing in the features of Ama Tete whose function will be discussed later. The latter also attracts all the protagonists and assumes a significant part in this narrative of Africa and the Diaspora, namely as the key to the ankh riddle and Cinque’s lineage.

Early in the narrative, the image of Cinque gathered from Ast’s research foreshadows the individual she is to meet later in Africa:

What he wanted was to change his fate. And if he could build his freedom on someone else’s enslavement, he was ready. Ast wanted to follow her soul to a different outcome, a reversal of the crossing and its motivation, both. Yet she suspected that in its ten thousand disguises Cinque’s zombi corpse still ruled Africa; that those working to remember the dismembered continent were still fugitives in need of sanctuary from the storm troopers of destruction. How much longer? (11).

Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano, whose name is historically suggestive, is antithetic to the genuine returnee. He appears as a demythologizing artifact, pictured in a world of self-mystification and delusion. As an archetypal creation, he illustrates a common mistaken identity search and confusion loudly suggested
in the name he is given and which is purposefully designed to sustain the concept of the zombi-ascari in modern times. The conglomerate appellations and titles ridicule the histrionic and megalomaniac type he represents. Each of the names conveys referential codes concealed in its own history. Ras refers to the part of Rastafarian philosophy that deifies an oppressor. Jomo alludes to the betrayal of Kenyan national hope. Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavo Vassa The African, is described in a shaft of sarcasm as ‘the blind victim of European stereotypes’ (96). Cinque’s medley worship that Bailey, an African-American artist, dubs ‘a funky mix of Christianity, Islam and Negritude’, is characteristic of the ideological muddle in which some returnees can find themselves, if they do not care to study African culture prior to making choices (125). Failing to do so, they may wallow in what the artist Bailey terms ‘our diasporan confusion’ (129).

As customary with Armah’s work the artist is a most perceptive observer, Baako and Solo come to mind; likewise Bailey, despite his short appearance utters fundamental statements in his conversation with Ast. His voice links the diasporan and African issues. It recalls neocolonial plots against patriots like Patrice Lumumba who can be recognized as the one he mentions: ‘At independence, a patriot talked of helping make a society where people would share everything, benefits and pain. His people loved him. The American, German and French called him a communist and had him killed’ (130). To her question on the issues of diasporan life and Africa, Bailey’s answer seems to epitomize sound views. In theory he sees no separation but in practice the connection between Africa and the Diaspora is rough, and the truth is hard to stare at, in Liberia he sees the connection lived as a ‘simple reproduction of American master-slave patterns’ (129). This structural relationship echoes Cinque’s presumption, even though he has no significant economic standing and is subservient to the unpatriotic African power structure. By representing him and his attendant, the fake Ethiopian nobleman - a former drug-peddler - as phonies, the text puts on equal footing these African-American thugs and
their African counterparts, the political rogues, and unveils the mystification that obtains.

According to the logic of the novel, Africans can be purblind, especially the neocolonial leaders who maintain easy relationship with the likes of Cinque. The treatment of this character indicates that all that comes home is not necessarily wholesome. The collaborative attitude of Cinque towards the oppressive state is presented as a manifestation of his sycophancy and need for valorization that caused him to turn away from the Black cause while at University. The novel carries further its indictment of this kind of behaviour in his journey to the Motherland that does not purge him of his complexes. He instead lives in a fanciful world filled with false values and irrelevant stereotypical assumptions of grandeur and kingliness.

*Osiris Rising* ridicules such chimera through the ankh topos as it draws Cinque in the archetypal quest by means of the broken ankh he conceives of as a family regalia. This narrative device bespeaks the hazards of unknown history. Not unlike the mortals of Soyinka *A Dance of the Forest*, Cinque unearths an odious past and an infamous forebear where he hoped for a reputable and princely one. The object of his search, Apo, is shown as a factor one of ‘the human bridges of death’, Tete exposes as ‘those of our people who welcomed the slavers, helped them, served them in their enterprise of destruction, now smilingly called development’ (264). Cinque’s depiction is clearly a means of disparaging collusion between diasporan returnees and local corrupt power systems. He discharges the neo-factor’s duty, as an agent working for the annihilation of progressive forces, embodying thus the tie between slavery and neo-colonialism. The duet, Cinque and Wossen, the fake Ethiopian nobleman, together with the power structure represented by Seth are the literary expression of Armah’s point in ‘A Mystification: African Independence Revalued’ that bears on the current neo-colonial rule the novel represents as new slavery:
The European presence in Africa was as a rule limited to the maintenance of small corps of highly militarized personnel in fortified castles, land-holds serving as a safe deposit system for slaves. Most of the business end of the system was left in the hands of a tellingly effective network of agents and local factors who stored and traded slaves, middlemen who peddled incentives manufactured in the European metropole and its American extension, and African chiefs, leaders, dignitaries and what else who produced the necessary disintegration, hence slaves, in their eagerness to acquire these incentives and thus aggrandize themselves (149).

Cinque’s return ‘to re-establish the contact between me and mine’, as he phrases it (259), assumes parabolic value just as it contributes to the suspense in the story. The historical revelation comes from the archival chamber of Jehwty, as Tete’s house could be referred to. Tete features in the chapter ‘Jehwty’ as a representation of Thoth also named Jehwty, the god of science and wisdom, arts, speech and hieroglyphs. Tete acts like Thoth, the ‘excellent scribe whose hands are pure’ as he describes himself in the Book of the Dead authored by him. Reading Tete conjointly with Thoth, it appears that Armah feminizes the deity to re-affirm the centrality of women, as previously seen with Naana, Anoa, and Adawa. The narrative discourse is indebted both to Ancient Egypt and oral tradition through reference to Tete’s grandmother and to Ast’s, namely Nwt. The text empowers women: Ast, Tete, the female teachers at Manda, such as The Mystic Comrade, and Netta, the hostel keeper, all locate themselves in the camp of the resisters against the neo-colonial ruling order. Tete acts as Thoth (Tehutu/Jehwty) the ‘measurer’. She is discreetly active and pivotal in the underground organization seeking to terminate the dictatorship. These words from the Book of the Dead endorse Armah poetics in this novel:

I am Thoth . . . who makes iniquity to be destroyed; the scribe of right and truth, who abominates wrongdoing. . . . I am Thoth, the lord of right and truth for the gods; the judge of words in their essence, whose words triumph over violence. I have scattered the darkness; I have driven away the whirlwind and the storm; and
I have given the pleasant breeze of the north wind unto Osiris, the beautiful being, as he came forth from the body of her who gave him birth (Mercatante 189-190).

Tete is also fundamental in the development of Asar just as Thoth was instrumental in the life of the primeval Asar. Thoth, we recall, helped Nwt escape Ra’s decree and conceive Asar/Osiris and Isis/Ast and their siblings. He also helped Ast resurrect Asar. Tete is symbolical of life as shown by the linkage of the ankh to her, she induces Asar to marry and father a child to be born after his death. In the myth Thoth is also called Wep-rehewy, the judge in the great battle between Seth and Horus, son to defunct Osiris, avenging his father. Significantly, Tete is a link in the chain of custodians of oral tradition that she inherited from her grandmother; in addition, she holds a Ph.D. in history. She implements the idea of justice, Maet, by delivering the verdict of betrayal and collaboration perpetrated by Cinque’s forefather; in like manner, she judges between Ast’s and Cinque’s ankhs exposing the why and wherefore. The showdown takes place in this momentous chapter where Tete lifts the shroud from the dead and unveils the truth about the broken ankh, the heirloom to which Cinque clings for confirmation of his belief that it “was handed down from father to son, a symbol of royal power. The ‘power of kings and queens’ (259). Tete’s speech mediates awareness not to proffer a romanticized image of the past and a need to distinguish between potential ‘makers, creators’ and ‘finders, consumers’ (261). Similarly, it posits:

No one bent on rebuilding Africa wants to discourage African-Americans from working and living here. What does it matter if some ancestors were destructive? Many more were creative, and it is to them we look in our work (269).

There goes also a reply to the diasporan grudge that Africans sold them. The conflict in the story is thus seemingly resolved, and the political layer fully surfaces.

Tete and Asar’s political meaning can be read in the light of Amilcar Cabral’s notion of the petty bourgeoisie’s mandatory suicide for the cause of
the people. Cabral submits that in order to fulfil its role in the national liberation struggle, this class should acquire and develop revolutionary consciousness. The revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be capable to commit suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong’ (Revolution 110). Tete is an exemplification of such a suicide by renouncing to the middle-class privileges granted by her education. This is also shown as reaction to a system imposing on creative students the burden to keep what they know to themselves and to repeat what is given them in the syllabus, an idea the authorial ideology supports. Working as a farmer and teaching children is how the text shows her kind of commitment, but it also protects her covert work toward the rebirth of the land. Bara, her abode is in all likelihood the sanctuary of the modern ankh companionship, synonymous with the cultural movement the narrative designs as the oppositional power that keeps at bay the neo-colonial police state assimilated with Seth. Her philosophy echoes Cabral’s view:

A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture. Thus, it may be seen that if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture (Return 43).

An orthodox radical reading of Osiris might question the alternative it offers to counter the destructive neo-colonial forces spearheaded by Seth, in so far as the focus is intensively on culture and the active agents in the struggle are mainly intellectuals. The workers are absent. The peasants whom Mao and Fanon view as a revolutionary class when duly prepared are not present either, albeit Armah attacked Marx for his contempt of the peasantry. Revolutionary battles are fought in the academy as can be seen in the struggle between innovators
and academic dinosaurs. The novel privileges the need for raising the petty bourgeoisie’s consciousness and to draw and keep it in an African-oriented socialist revolutionary movement the tenets of which are mediated through Tete in her talk to Ast and Asar. They are grounded on principles of anti-elitism, sharing and equity already voiced in *Two Thousand Seasons* and presented here as those of the old companionship of the ankh whose scheme of a classless society challenged the existing pyramidal social order:

This… was no royal society. There were farmers and princes and potters in it, there were masons and cobblers and aristocrats and fishers in it, there were priests and scribes in it. They were in the companionship not because they were peasants or princes or aristocrats or scribes, but because they agreed to work to its aims. The companionship belonged to no particular portion of our people, to no family, no clan, no tribe, no nation. It embraced all our people (p. 263).

Besides, the companionship is also described as a large body of people including astronomers, scientists, and was not a blood circle, even though it worked as a secret society committed to justice through the source of civilization. The new ankh organization’s agenda stipulates the same goals to which Asar relates his action in the southern Africa liberation wars he describes as helping with long preparatory work needed throughout Africa.

The companionship is committed to an African socialist revolution. The socialism that Armah suggests would differ from the various African socialisms he regards in his essay ‘African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?’ as a mixed reaction to Scientific Socialism, informed in its most candid manner by a felt need to adapt socialism. Armah argues that the nationalist movement opposing the colonialist enterprise sought an ideology, but some veered away ‘from the most spectacularly successful counter to Western capitalist thought… the system comprising all the variants of Scientific Socialism’ out of ignorance and suspicion resulting from indoctrination against Scientific Socialism (15). This doctrine required discipline, sacrifice and principled revolutionary dedication but the prevailing nationalist prospects were basely consumerist, and the
nationalists meant to be independent and original. From this, Armah singles out three attempts at creating indigenous ideologies. Senghor’s African Socialism, the political derivative of Negritude, bears no relation to practice, and it puts under erasure all class conflicts within the nation for the sake of a harmonizing wholeness (20). His ‘praxis, in effect, is unambiguously that of the colonial boss, necessarily Janus-faced, guiltily hating and despising his black roots but being pushed back into them, and having to live with them’ (21). Armah calls Consciencism, the theoretical formulation of Nkrumah’s socialist project, ‘an effort to formulate a philosophical myth system hopefully both socialist and originally African’ (22). Its relationship to African Personality parallels that of Senghor’s Negritude to his African Socialism. Consciencism postulates a three-stage variant of Scientific Socialism comprising communalism branded by the tendency to romanticize African past, colonialism, and socialism in which communism is collapsed. Anti-colonialist struggle is expected to lead to a rebuilding of communalism. Armah finds fault with its being based on uncritical fabulation and unhistorical past glamour just like Negritude. Nyerere’s type of socialism suffers from a denial of social conflict and chauvinistic assertion that Africans have nothing to learn about Socialism. Armah deems all these attempts as ‘an aggressive affirmation of Africanness, coupled with the defiant invocation of a revolutionary system opposed to the former masters’ (27).

In Armah view, African socialism is bound to disappear with the class of the nationalist leaders that created it. Its formulations are flawed by their downplaying the reality of class struggle, as Armah notes, the leaders took an evolutionary situation and pretended it was revolutionary. Thus, despite his attack on the Eurocentric hegemony of Marxism Armah argues for scientific socialism and the class struggle applied to the African context. The positive alternative to the orientation provided by the outgoing leadership consists in turning away from the backward retrenchment ‘for which the colonial and post-independence experiences have been preparing Africa’ (‘African
Socialism’ 29). In Armah’s terms, it boils down to a revolutionary structuring of lines of authority, a recognition of class reality, social difference, unequal access to assets, and the discontent of the hordes of poor people. Only consciousness is lacking and these conditions favour its growth. The revolutionary agitator might then strike a spark. This seems to be a rather hasty development: although consciousness emerges from material conditions of existence, it has even to be stepped up in some cases, and it is to the revolutionaries to transform spontaneous consciousness and action into an organized whole. Armah conjures up the mind he has been thinking through while building his own arguments, Frantz Fanon, the one he who has worked out consistent formulations of such a revolutionary restructuring of African society.

The novel promotes re-Africanisation in the light of Fanonian thinking. In ‘Masks and Marx,’ Armah describes this process as positive and having ‘an inherently revolutionary dynamic because it winnows out merely tribalistic values, leaving positive, inclusive values as basis for future development’ (60). The modern ankh organization, the teachers, and the students ‘discussing the relative merits of Mao, Marx, Fanon and the Tokugawa group as theorists of revolution’ in the novel (235) are the fictional embodiment of the ‘innovative minority’, that Armah refers to. They ‘will make common cause with the African people and so discover (in praxis) abandoned or even unsuspected values and social practices of a highly positive nature’ (‘Masks’ 60). This group will have to counter the alienated Westernized elite who are in complete support of Eurocentric philosophies and feel endangered by such a cleansing process, that is the native bourgeoisie which Fanon distrusts because of its tendency to accommodate the neo-colonial situation to preserve its immediate interests. Sembène’s Xala, Ngugi’s Devil on the Cross, among other works have provided literary portraiture of the parasitic nature and broker role of this class. Armah writes in this respect: ‘The most serious domestic obstacles facing re-Africanization is the elite itself which has a self-preserving habit of sabotaging any possibility of democratic decision-making. It prefers
mystificatory, colonial bureaucratic manipulation to voluntary participation’ (‘Masks’ 61).

*Osiris Rising* implies as much in the understatement regarding Asar’s work against the system, which is presented as a long process. The regime operating in the novel exemplifies a case ‘of backward retrenchment’. In Cabral’s theory this would equate with an arrested evolution of the *nation class* movement that operates in the colonial situation and works towards a nationalist solution, corresponding to independence. However, the neo-colonial situation in which the struggle is not merely against the repressive forces of the bourgeoisie of the colonizing country, but pitches the workers and their allies against the imperialist bourgeoisie and the native ruling classes, is not resolved by a nationalist solution. Cabral posits that ‘it demands the destruction of the capitalist structure implanted in the national territory by imperialism, and correctly postulates a socialist solution’ (*Revolution* 106).

In the Manichaen configuration of *Osiris Rising*, Seth and the power structure behind him endorse the values of the sold-out national bourgeoisie. This appears early in the book when he is shown in a cryptic scene that replicates the gadgetry of spy films. This event foregrounds the idea of a police state equipped by its neo-colonial masters. The forces allegorically concentrated in Seth Spencer Soja, or SSS, the Security chief, seek to negate the creative ones working for social liberation and welfare. Quite like his namesake in the Kemt pantheon, ‘he may be incompetent when it comes to creating something useful. But he’s capable of enormous destruction’ (208). Armah portrays the degenerate corrupt and corrupting practices rife in many such regimes. Seth is depicted as a diseased impotent rapist, humiliated in his rape attempt on Ast which also has allegorical overtones. His impotence refers us back to Semebene’s lampoon on native bourgeoisie in *Xala*. Seth embodies repressive regimes intent on neutralizing those working for democracy, and threatening and framing their adversaries. In his treatment of the evil forces supportive of
Seth’s plans and action Armah stresses the neo-colonial hold on culture and education.

Manda functions as the locus of such struggle as if to underscore the necessity to wage war in the cultural terrain at the same time as in the political. This appears clearly in Professor Woolley’s treatment in the text, he typifies the colonial timeserver and academic upstart. Commitment to neo-colonialism is effected through his watchdog role. Armah exposes old colonials in the academy using him in his position as Head of African Studies. His name suggests woolliness and slyness buttressed by self-seeking prospects. He is involved in intelligence work for the preservation of the old order he used to serve as Assistant Regional Commissioner. His conniving with Seth to frame Asar as coup plotter and murder him to annihilate innovative minds rehearses a familiar scenario in African countries.

The institutional battle opposing the curricular innovators to the academic rearguard assumes fuller meaning when its synecdochic value is stretched to the nation at large. Here, beside the implied notion that the intelligentsia has a role to play in the birth of a new era exempt of foreign dominance, there is a clear emphasis on culture as a parameter of the liberation program as theorized by Cabral:

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of the relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society, as well as among different societies (Return 41).

The ankh movement’s agenda runs close to these lines. A look at the manifesto presented on the outset of Ast’s journey to Africa reveals its bearing. This document inserted in the narrative epitomizes the thesis of the novel that Tete reasserts in her talk to Asar and Ast. It points out the will to rise from
oppression spurred by thinkers determined to stop the downward glide, ‘who get together to study the causes of common problems, think out solutions and organize ways to apply them’ (9). The statement not only revisits the destruction of Kemt, the slave trade by Arabs, Europeans and crumb-hungry Africans, colonialism and the neo-colonial acceptance of the carving up of the continent, but stresses the endeavors by those gone before to work out solutions. The palimpsest of history bears the signs of resistance. ‘The beautiful ones were murdered, the land poisoned. Now wherever future seed seeks to take root it strikes sand’. The task of the present generation is that of knowledge retrieval and networking by thinking Africans to end the past and current rule of slavers. The advocacy in the conclusion of the article sets the mission of the ankh organization:

We are not after the slave-foreman power that, under the killers’ continuing rule is blind ambition’s hollow prize. We are after the intelligent understanding of all our realities, not simply the politics of power. We are after the intelligent action to change these realities. For we intend as Africans, to retrieve our human face, our human heart, the human mind our ancestors taught to soar. That is who we are, and why. (10)

This profession of faith concurs with the action undertaken at the Manda teacher training college as the surface activities led by Asar. The happenings at the faculty meeting on curricular change seems to be of great import as regards the action implied in the novel in terms of resistance to the system. The proposal for a new curriculum, assorted with recommendations laid out as in their original form enhance the realistic documentary purpose of this subtext negatively reflected by Seth’s framed secret file on Asar. The academic proposals echo Armah’s own views regarding arts and education he disseminated in his various non-fictional writing. These ideas are narrativized in this novel. They are laid out in the Principles for a New Approach to Literature based on African Literature and the recognition of two of its major components: oral tradition and the literature of Ancient Egypt, the need for
training students in creative writing and for teachers to be producers of literature. The call for re-orientation of African studies, history and literature aims at removing the Eurocentric bias that affects curriculum design in Africa. A good deal of the proposals about literature is in tune with the call to decolonize African literature mainly.

The focus on Kemt ties with Cheikh Anta Diop’s proposal for Africans to return to Ancient Egyptian as a foundation for building humanities, just as the West did it from a graeco-latin basis. The kinship with African languages is unquestionable, according to Diop, thus any African language may be enriched from Ancient Egyptian (356). Armah, like his characters Asar and Ast, spent time learning Egyptian. His article ‘The Dakar Hieroglyphs’ emphasizes Diop’s hope that the most conscious African scholars consider a knowledge of Ancient Egyptian as an essential part of our intellectual resource, and pays homage to him:

The answer to the notion of an Africa without history or civilization, then, is not to be found in Western scholarship, but in an African approach. Such an approach, does exist, and the principal arena of its expression is in the field of Egyptology. In these past decades, the African approach has been most consistently articulated by Cheikh Anta Diop: Ancient Egyptian civilization was not an accidental foreign implant on African soil. It was an African civilisation originated and developed by Africans.

*Osiris Rising* participates in what Armah calls the debate crucial to the future of African studies and the Humanities that Diop’s thesis brought home to Africa. Armah airs his views in the new Manda curriculum design. He is aware that ‘informed participation in the debate depends on direct familiarity with the seminal record of Ancient Egyptian civilization, its history, philosophy, literature and science’. As a matter of fact, he begins his doctrinal essay ‘Masks and Marx’ with reference to Egyptian Mythology and literature. The challenge to the general acceptation of revolution and communism as primarily European is conveyed in a long quotation from Neferti illustrating Armah’s thesis that
these two concepts are world heritage. Thus, *Osiris Rising* samples Ayi Kwei Armah’s ideological perspective resting on Fanon, Cabral and Ancient Egypt. This book raises issues having currency in present day Africa. The view that informs the novel is consonant with the ideas propounded in his essays. Both the novel and the essays boldly assert alternative ways of looking at revolutionary changes for Africa. It is significant that although Armah’s distance from Marxism conforms to an Afrocentric approach, its proposition stresses the revolutionary institutional re-Africanization of the continent on the principles of the contributive work of Fanon and Cabral both of whom he extols:

> Both Fanon and Cabral specify, among these regenerative values, the practice of democratic discussion, self-criticism, open debate of a vigorous, frank tenor, collegial decision-making structures and collegial program design and communal construction [...]. These are the rules of communist democracy which selective use of other traditional African practices and values like universal age-group organization, democratic election and recall of administrators could reinforce (*Masks* 61).

*Osiris Rising* prolongs the trajectory of the three preceding novels. Its tone is varied, its mood ebbs and flows, optimism sides with pessimism, according to which pole of the Manichaen spectrum is dominant. There are moments of joys, parties, and celebration of victories. At times we are plunged in a detective or spy novel atmosphere, just as the novel delves into the past through referents both pertaining to the material world and the metaphysical. Armah balances cultural archetypes so carefully that the lay reader may get at the quintessence of the book, just as the informed one can make more of the network of referential codes. The bitter ending of the novel thwarts the optimistic augury the story bears until Seth and what he represents prevail. The refusal of the narrative to provide a happy resolution of the plot equates with not deluding the reader about the intense ideological conflict in the social formation in which it is cast. Seth’s destroying Asar reverts us back to Kemt mythology, and
Armah powerfully renders the scene in which Asar is blown over into fourteen pieces by the Seth’s gunmen just like Osiris was disjointed by Seth into fourteen fragments. But the myth restores Osiris, the fragmented body of Asar is collected and reassembled by Ast/Isis. Ast bears Asar’s child, a motif in literature that is indicative of hope, regeneration and continuity, and that contemplates a positive diasporan participation in the struggle of Africa to piece herself together. The original Asar returned from the dead, overcoming death and destruction as Ogun the Yoruba deity did, and so did Dionysos the greek closely associated to Osiris. In like manner, the revolutionary spirit infused in the people will not die, it will materialize: the victory of evil is only transient. Asar can be evocative of Lumumba, Cabral, Samora Machel and Thomas Sankara. Physical beings can be destroyed but positive liberating ideas outlive their bearers. Asar’s death might mean a sacrifice that marks new beginning, his blood will water the garden of the ceaselessly emerging shoots that counter neo-colonialism.

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