

Decolonization and Decoloniality in the African Academia

Fighting for Reforms in African Schools and Universities in Selected Works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah

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Abstract

This article examines colonial educational structures—both school-based and university-level—through the works of Ngūgī wa Thiong’o and Ayi Kwei Armah. It begins by showing how school administration, inherited from the colonial mission, imposed a Eurocentric curriculum and a hierarchical model of discipline. The author then retraces foundational debates—particularly the “Nairobi Literary Debate” (1968)—that called for the restructuring of English and African Studies departments into spaces grounded in African realities. By comparing these historical initiatives to the fictional reforms depicted in *Petals of Blood*, *Osiris Rising*, and *KMT*, the article highlights the epistemological, theoretical, organizational, and pedagogical conditions necessary for meaningful academic decolonization. Drawing on a decolonial perspective, the text interrogates power relations and the “coloniality of knowledge” to propose a critical rereading of current practices and emphasize the urgency of an authentically African educational governance that integrates oral traditions and indigenous epistemologies.

Keywords

Ngūgī wa Thiong’o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Nairobi Literary Debate, African curriculum, pedagogical reforms, colonial administration

Introduction

The decolonization of the African academia is quite an old enterprise. As early as 1962, when most African countries were achieving independence, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his colleagues from the University of Nairobi launched a fierce battle against what they termed a “eurocentric bend of the educational system”. Through what will be later recalled as “the Nairobi Literature debate”, they raised with a serious tone the need to decolonize the African academic space in order to free it from the shackles of mental enslavement resulting from the policies of a colonial-administered educational system. Part of

How to cite this paper:
Diallo, A. (2025). Decolonization and Decoloniality in the African Academia: Fighting for Reforms in African Schools and Universities in Selected Works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah. *Global Africa*, (10), pp. 69-82.
<https://doi.org/10.57832/e7c6-zc18>

Received: December, 4 2023
Accepted: May, 20 2025
Published: June 20, 2025

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what explains today the inadequacy of the African educational policies has actually much to do with the influence of a schooling administration that until today remains highly subjected to the hazards of the same colonial style which established it.

More precisely, in the twenty-first century, African scholars and policymakers are still grappling with the issue of establishing sound educational administrations that can help fully address the challenges the continent is facing and help its people meet their earnest aspirations. African intellectuals, in their mission to help the continent chart its own course after the burdening experience of colonization (Claude Ake), have played a leading role in helping debunk the education institutions. As a colonial product, the governance of the African schools and universities has had a lasting effect on the subjugation of Africans to European established tradition.

This paper is an incursion in the issues facing the administration of African school. It aims at retracing the attempts which have been carried out in the struggle to decolonize the African academy from European influence and its larger implications on the continent and its people. First, it strives to circumscribe the organizational management of school and universities as legacies of the colonial enterprise, and how they relate to the concept of public administration. Then it revisits the works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah in both their fictions and essays with the valuable decolonizing insights they offer as to how Africans will have to address the educational crisis in the continent which still awaits solutions. Lastly, it sheds light on reading the decolonizing of the African academy through the lens of decoloniality.

The Colonial School as an Institution of Racist Domination

The advent of the modern version of the African school is prominently a result of European penetration in Africa. School refers here largely to learning institutions from primary to higher education. While research has aptly demonstrated that Africans had their learning institutions prior to European conquest (Armah, 2006), the present-day African learning system remains a Western-imported product largely influenced by colonial and neo-colonial policies. Both Ngugi and Armah have dealt with these issues in their fictions lately complemented by incisive essay.

School as the house of the interpreters in Thiong'o

The modern fashion of African education started with the work of European missionaries who were carrying the ideals of Christianity in the conquered territories. Through this model, the African school was almost a church service, being mostly embedded in the premises of the religious institutions. Where it was not the church, the school itself learned heavily on Christian faith and discipline which made a strong ritual in the life of the schoolboys.

From its inception, the African school was administered by colonialists in a realm where reverends, priests, and expatriate teachers played a crucial role in running the colonial service. The moulding of the African school, along with its administrative system resulted from the ingenuity of the colonial administrators. Most of the time, the administration and the teaching overlapped, carried out by one person. This is aptly captured in the early writing of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (*The River Between* [1965], *Weep not Child* [1964], *Petals of Blood* [1982]) with the omnipresence of a colonial school, Siriana, which will continue to function even after independence as exemplified by *Petals of Blood*. To most critics, and even as Thiong'o himself acknowledges in his memoir, *In the House of the Interpreter* (2012a), Siriana school is an allusion to the famous Alliance School attended by the Kenya writer in his youth. In this outlook, the Reverend was the headmaster, inspector, and the teacher at the same time. This pattern leads to a reality where teaching and administration were confounded.

The confounding mission of the school, the church and the colonial administration is given ample description in the *River Between* and *Petals of Blood*. In the first novel, Siriana school is led by the Reverend Livingstone, who acts both as the headmaster and the teacher. Livingstone is clearly on

a mission that consists into expanding God's light in "the heart of darkness", as he admonishes Waiyaki and the schoolchildren against what he considers as the obscure cultural practices of the black people through the circumcision incident that causes the death of a school girl, Muthoni.

It is however in *Petals of Blood* where Thiong'o gives a more captivating picture of the colonial and neo-colonial school in its purely western fashion. The same institution, Siriana, is brought to the front through its hard-run administration and its eurocentric curricula. In this novel, Siriana school is not the single institution led by one headmaster as it is in *The River Between*. Siriana in *Petals of Blood* is an educational college, a boarding institution very much similar to what Thiong'o narrates in *The House of the Interpreter* when he recounts his passage at Alliance School. It is a complex institution with different courses and classes which witnesses the passage of three headmasters. The school is run on iron fist principle with an impressive church service. It shows utter reverence to the empire through the mythification or mystification of the British queen. The key pillars are centered around discipline, orderliness, cleanliness and punctuality. It leaves an unforgettable imprint on the minds of the young schoolchildren.

As a matter of fact, at Alliance School, the schoolchildren spend their day between the church, the classroom and the sports facilities. The famous motto of Alliance is "Strong to Serve". The early morning ritual consists into the lifting of the Union Jack flag amid the passionate singing of "God save the Queen" which made students submit to Britain grandeur and the eternal character of savior queen. Alliance School, as narrated by Thiong'o, was established to serve as a factory that was entrusted to train the African elite on some ideals on which the system could rely to sustain itself.

The schoolchildren worshipped God and the Queen of the British Empire. Praises and prayers calling for her Majesty's longevity marked the religious hymns. She was indeed presented in a pure and sublime picture. The children had to show their gratitude towards the colonial empire which was said to have saved them from damnation, darkness and punishment.

Besides, this high presence of Christianity is an omnipresent representation in Thiong'o's writings. The Empire was the centrepiece of the school life as witnessed by the year-long representation of Shakespeare plays by the students. As such, the type of education it offered univocally positioned Europe as the center of the universe. Children were taught British culture, geography, cooking or British lifestyle in short. This is how Thiong'o views it:

The educational system ... It encouraged a slave mentality, with a reverent awe for the achievements of Europe. Europe was the centre of the universe. Africa was discovered by Europe: it was an extension of Europe. So in history people learnt about the rise of the Anglo-Saxons as if they were the true ancestors of the human race. Even in geography, the rocks of Europe had to be studied first before coming to Africa (Thiong'o, 1972, p. 14).

Thiong'o attempts, as mentioned, above to represent Alliance School in *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*. In the second novel, the first headmaster of the school is Reverend Ironmonger, a character very similar to Reverend Livingstone, whose tenure is briefly mentioned in the plot. He preached for the love of God and insisted on the noble mission of the British to save Africans from damnation.

The second headmaster whose profile seems interesting to our analysis is Cambridge Fraudsham whose ironical name is highly satirized. Fraudsham, as the reader learns, is a former officer of the British army who came to Africa to serve the empire of her Majesty's the Queen. Fraudsham's full life has been a dedication to the cause of the British grandeur. His role as a headmaster is grounded on the utmost respect that is given to the British Empire and the savior Christian God. He charts out an administration sustained by two key rituals: Christian songs in the early morning and the salute to the British Queen he represented as a deity to be revered and held into high esteem. He had the same backward views on Africans and thought they needed to be docilized as he remarks upon his arrival at Siriana after Ironmonger retires. The narrators recounts the following:

That was just before the Ironmongers retired to their home somewhere in England to wait for death, as some students rather ingraciously remarked, and a Cambride Fraudsham came to the scene. Before we had any time to know him, he changed our lives. Fresh from the war, he already had firm notions how an African school had to be. Now, my boys,

trousers are quite out of question in the tropics. He sketched a profile of an imaginary thick-lipped African in a grey wollen suit, a sun-helmet, a white starched stiff collar and tie, and laughed contemptuously: Don't emulate this man. There was to be no rice in our meals: the school did not turn out men who would want to live beyond their means. And no shoes, my boys, except on the day of worship : the school did not want to turn out black Europeans but true Africans who would not look down upon the innocence and simple ways of their ancestors. At the same time, we had to grow up strong in God and the Empire. It was the two that had rid the world of the menace of Hitler (Thiong'o, 1977, pp. 34-35).

Fraudsham's representation of the Africans as described above rests in his belief that they are inferior and need a specific treatment to be educated with the utmost sense of discipline and orderliness. He calls clearly for the worship of God and the Empire, which is a plain appeal to uprooting Africans from their ancestral beliefs. To achieve his goal, Fraudsham actively works into implementing curricula that aims to transform Africans into Europeans in mindsets even though he refuses for them the material enjoyments as he insists in the above passage. Through Siriana, he is sure to achieve what Macaulay famously referred to as the harnessing of "a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". The administration of the school is anchored on British colonial principles in Africa where the subject has to learn and observe and accept the new life into which he is brought to. As Chui recalls about his passage to Siriana, he recounts:

The education we got had not prepared me to understand those things: it is meant to obscure racism and other forms of oppression. It was meant to make us accept our inferiority so as to accept their superiority and their rule over us (2012a, p. 197).

Fraudsham, as described in *Petals of Blood*, is a man who believes in utmost order and hierarchy. To him, order is the cornerstone of social life where the role of each individual is clearly defined and his relationship to his fellow precisely outlined. Upon his arrival at the school, he proceeds to the following warnings:

In any civilized society there were those who were to formulate orders and others to obey: there had to be leaders and the led: if you refused to obey, to be led, then how could you hope to lead and demand obedience? Look at heaven: there was God on a throne and the angels in their varying subordinate roles. Yet all was harmony (1977, p. 203).

Fraudsham's sense of harmony, as it can be guessed, lies in the sustenance of the colonial system. Africans, as subjects, have to obey to the orders of their masters and submit to their wills to perpetuate a colonial lifestyle. The colonizer is invested with the power to rule. His conviction on ruling on the school as if it were a mission entrusted by God. Here is how the students represent him as he tries to administer the school:

"Fraudsham is tough"; we all agreed. He would have been made a governor or something bigger than a headmaster, but he had refused, or so some knowing boys claimed. This increased our awe for the man. You should have heard us unravel the mystery around his life. We spun yarns and legends involving his life and love, though how anyone knew them was itself a bigger mystery. But he was the cleverest man of his time at Cambridge, this we knew, and even how he used to correct other lecturers. He was among the bravest, and he had fought in Turkey and Palestine and Burma and had held up a German tank all by himself: for this, he had received a medal or something from the King. In Burma a shrapnel shell caught him in the thigh and he was given leave. What was he thinking as he went back home alive and a hero? We could picture him taking out his wallet and gazing in an ecstasy of unbelief at the image of her who had given him strength through all those campaigns in the Saharan sands, through the dense Eastern jungles, through the roar of guns, shells, bombs and rockets. The train clanged along the rails: his heart throbbed: his imagination flew ahead. She was in his arms, but...when he finally arrived, he only sat and wept. Then he went to church and prayed. He prayed until he heard an answering voice. He would go to Africa to serve God and die there, living maybe a tiny trail of spiritual heroism and glory (1977, pp. 201-202).

In order to rule the school, Fraudsham deployed his influence and status. He is revered and feared by the students. His orders are unquestionable. The school is only governed by his own views and principles and the students have no say, whatever, about their schooling. Not only does Fraudsham rule over the students, but he even instead prays to the teachers who would hasten to throw their cigarettes upon seeing him coming from town. In the Fraudsham universe, the school and the system have only one God: it is the Empire. And the empire has its agenda in the colonial world.

This type of education was also carried out in African universities. As Thiong'o makes his way to the University of Makerere, which was a branch of the University of London at that time, he recounts eloquently in *In the House of the Interpreter*, and mostly in *Birth of a Dreamweaver*, how much the educational system was shaped by a colonial background. This reality underscores the level of the exposure of African students to a system designed to exploit the colonial, and later on, the neo-colonial world. A system that guided the administration of school life and which ultimately affected the way Africans would conduct their political, economic and social affairs.

The Whitecastle experience in Armah

Likewise, Ayi Kwei Armah has also dealt with the colonial and neocolonial education in his novel, especially in *Osiris Rising* (1995) and *KMT: In the House of life* (2002). The colonial system Armah represents in those novels is addressed in his memoir, *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006), in which Achimota College is a kind of Alliance school but in Ghana. If *Osiris Rising* brings to the fore the designing of a colonial education in African universities as epitomized by Manda College that Asar and the revolutionary group attempt to overhaul, *KMT* offers a unique incrustation in African schools through the representation of the *Whitecastle School* which is attended by Biko and Lindela, the heroine of the novel.

As Armah recounts in the memoir, colonial education is a kind "Going to meet Shakespeare". The way he labels the experience has mainly to do with its dependence of a system that is promoting the lifestyle of the colonial empire the school strives to indoctrinate on the students. Achimota was modeled under the British schooling system which docilized Africans to perpetuate the colonial system.

The Whitecastle School in *KMT*, as the reader discovers, is a perfect representation of Achimota. In many ways, it echoes the foundation of Achimota and emulates its mission which consisted into training an African elite ready to help support the colonial system. Whitecastle, as the narrator recounts, is founded by a group of people who, while they think they deploy outstanding generosity and philanthropy, are part of the colonial machine resolved to taint the mind of African children. The leading founder is a lady who wield her outstanding influence, encoded in a racial realm where different groups had assigned role and responsibilities. The thrust and scope of the schooling are designed by the trustees, who fund and maintain the school. Africans who are the main beneficiaries are required to learn and not to claim their grievance.

This structuring of the Whitecastle administration and learning system causes the rustication of Biko, Lindela's friend and one of the greatest minds of the school. Biko dismissal, as we will see, results from his challenging the status quo and the learning method and contents. It creates an environment of teachers and students with only one direction in the learning method. The student consumes whatever information and knowledge is given to him. Such knowledge is actually tailored to the interests of the colonizer whose objective is to convince the subject about his inferiority and the need to emulate his master. The master's life, his culture, country, literature and art are served on the minds of the learners who are not taught about their own origins and culture.

As a case of illustration, in the literature class, when Mrs Priscilla Snowden introduces the courses, she reminds the students that literature revolves only around one writer, which is Shakespeare, as she repeats the name of the English author three times. This scene is very similar to a real experience Armah shares in *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006), where the teacher sums up literature to the genius of the same author, and with the same vigor. Likewise, the same simplification is observed in other disciplines where every learning is centered on the Empire.

The colonial type of education in early school, precisely in primary and secondary school as epitomized in *KMT* through Whitecastle, is also prevalent in universities. In higher education, the curricula are European-centered, with lecturers, mostly European during colonization and the early years of independence, and African assimilated tends to perpetuate a learning system that strengthens the West to weaken Africa. Manda College, which Armah uses as the center of the revolutionary struggle, opposes the ancient guard against the new reformists. Manda is run by a group of hardliners, well versed in the European tradition in African studies, literature and history. They train young African students in the former colonial beliefs of a superior west and a needy Africa with a total ignorance of African realities. The university itself is led by the European lecturers who define the curricula and supported by African teachers.

In light of the previous examples, which both Thiong'o and Armah relate, the rationale of sustaining colonial exploitation governed the structuring of the African school administration built on the slave/master relationship. Administration in African schools literally means organizing a learning system aimed to sustain colonial dominance. It relied heavily on the adoption of a program which responded to the needs of the colonial empire which strived to ensure that docile bodies are trained to sustain the colonial system. As Thiong'o posits it, if colonial penetration was achieved by the gun, it was colonial education which completed the process. The colonizers knew that enhancing a colonial-type educational system was subtler than ensuring physical dominance. The school was the most appropriate tool to "manufacture the colonial mind". And a specific administration was required to govern its functionality.

In both their fiction essays, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah depicts painstakingly the power and influence such administrations wield on the Africans. As explained earlier, the administration of the learning institutions is mostly handled by the teaching personnel itself who not only define the relationship between the teacher and the learner but also select and adopt a program which is supposed to enhance European interests in the continent.

This educational system even though it later revealed its own weakness, it achieved its primary goal which consisted into training the Africans to perpetuate the colonial system through a strong effect of indoctrination. Today, more than sixty years after the continent got its independence, the effect of the colonial administration of African learning institutions is still visible, preventing largely the establishing of an African-centered educational system which enables the continent to address its challenges. While African universities claim a relative autonomy and freedom of proceeding, they are modeled on the European learning institutions. It is exactly what leads the students in *Petals of Blood* (Thiong'o, 1977) to rebel against the established system at Siriana and demand the Africanization of the school. The same battle is echoed in *Osiris Rising* (Armah, 1995) where the revolutionaries wage a fierce battle against the European guard. This fictionalized battles are the dramatization of real-life events that both writers experienced in their academic journey.

The battle against the Eurocentric educational system

The system which was designed to dominate colonial subject will be ironically challenged by those it was meant to train and subjugate. In the school described by Thiong'o and Armah in their essay, Europe was the center of the universe and the administration of the schooling system insisted on the maintenance of its patterns of education. The writings of the two authors stand as genuine critique of the colonial education in Africa. With the advent of independence and the coming of age of African students, the foundations of the system were challenged with Africans advocating for a greater, if not central implications of their realities. The African school could not rely on a European-oriented administration through a twisted curricula to sustain the development and progress the continent dreamt of. On a sweeping movement, as with the independence winds, African intellectuals started to confront the architects of the colonial and neo-colonial educations.

Moving the center

The first move thwarted against the eurocentric educational system erupted from what is commonly referred to as the Nairobi Literature Debate. On a famous paper, entitled, “On the Abolition of the English Department”, and released on October 24, 1968, Thiong’o and his colleagues Taban Lo Lyong and Henry Awuor Anyumba from the University of Nairobi, vehemently call for the reforming of the curricula inside the department. The position of the Nairobi reformists was grounded on a firm belief that the existing system only served the interests of European and Western powers who seek to exploit ruthlessly Africans. In the report of the preparatory committee to the reform, they wrote:

The present language and literature syllabuses are inadequate and irrelevant to the needs of the country. They are so organised that a Kenyan child knows himself through London and New York. Both should therefore be completely overhauled at all levels of our education system and particularly in schools (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 97).

They argued that the curricula outdated and delineated from the African realities. It appeared quite absurd to talk about the life of the colonizer in his home country to touch on aspects as wide as his geography, his way of life (housing, eating), his religion, in short, his culture in countries that claimed to rule themselves after their independence. At the same time, they deplored the lack of knowledge and inception of African culture and realities in the curricula as Thiong’o writes in the following passage:

Prior to independence, education in Kenya was an instrument of colonial policy designed to educate the people of Kenya into acceptance of their role as the colonized. The education system at independence was therefore an inheritance of colonialism so that literature syllabuses were centred on the study of an English literary tradition taught by English teachers. Such a situation meant that Kenyan children were alienated from their own experience [and] identity in an independent African country (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 96).

Thiong’o himself has lamented an ironic situation in which he found his son struggling to understand the word daffodil which for instance existed in England and not in the child’s natural environment.

The Nairobi group calls for the overhauling of the English Department as described below, which they intended to turn into a department of language as they write in their famous paper. The gist of their argument was to delineate the teaching of literature from the teaching of an all-English literature. They also claimed that the study of literature in the continent should be that of an African literature. What Thiong’o and his colleague were calling for is a sort of decolonizing the English Department, and by extension, of the African university. They made their so bold they write:

We reject the primacy of English literature and cultures. The aim, in short, should be to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves ... In suggesting this we are not rejecting other streams, especially the western stream. We are only clearly mapping out the directions and perspectives the study of culture and literature will inevitably take in an African university (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 94).

The rejection of the primacy of English literature and culture is only the first step in the struggle. As the European presence fades away, it should give room to a vibrant inception of African materials moving from the immediate environment to radiate throughout the continent and then to the world. The study of literature and culture should be locally anchored before opening up to other perspectives. On their call, the reformists make the following precisions:

We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the department. This, we have argued, is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre -of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 94).

Although the reformists insist on the centrality of the African experience in teaching literature and culture, they do not reject the incorporation of external perspectives which would only enrich and broaden the knowledge of the students and lecturers. It had also to incorporate the African added-value in literature, its oral tradition. Even though the value, importance and contribution of this material were still denied in then existing academic circles, the reformists made it clear that it constituted a cornerstone of African literature as they write:

The oral tradition is rich and many-sided ... the art did not end yesterday; it is a living tradition ... familiarity with oral literature could suggest new structures and techniques; and could foster attitudes of mind characterized by the willingness to experiment with new forms ... The study of the Oral Tradition would therefore supplement (not replace) courses in Modern African Literature. By discovering and proclaiming loyalty to indigenous values, the new literature would on the one hand be set in the stream of history to which it belongs and so be better appreciated; and on the other be better able to embrace and assimilate other thoughts without losing its roots (Thiong'o, 1986, pp. 94-95).

By opening up the space and inserting new material, the Nairobi reformists did not call for a blind rejection of the European literature, language and culture. Instead, they prioritized the African experience in order to give a solid grounding to Africans with their own cultural milieu. It is striking to note a similar resonance in *KMT* where the heroes of Armah, namely Lindela, Jengo, Djieli Hor and Astw remind the Europeanist academics (Professor Jean Pierre Badin, Christine Arendt) about the centrality of oral tradition in the teaching of African historiography. As such, the call voiced by Thiong'o and his colleagues was not an isolated issue peculiar to Kenya alone. It was part of a sweeping trend rattling against English departments across the continent as he highlights:

What was only tentative in the Leeds of our time, the possibility of opening out the mainstream to take in other streams, was later to become central to the debate about the relevance of literature in an African environment that raged in all the three East African universities at Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Makerere, after most of the students who had been at Leeds at the time later returned and questioned the practices of the existing English departments. There was Grant Kamenju in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania); Pio and Van Zirimu in Makerere, (Uganda); and I in Nairobi, (Kenya). I was horrified, when I returned to Kenya in 1967, to find that the Department of English was still organised on the basis that Europe was the centre of the universe. Europe, the centre of our imagination? Ezekiel Mphahlele from South Africa, who was there before me, had fought hard to have some African texts introduced into the syllabus. Otherwise the department was still largely oblivious to the rise of the new literatures in European languages in Africa let alone the fact of the long existing tradition of African-American literature and that of Caribbean peoples. The basic question was: from what base did African peoples look at the world? Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism? (Thiong'o, 1993, p. 26).

To African intellectuals, independence required also a change in the curricula which had to be Africa-centered or Africanized to offer the appropriate orientation and guidance to Africans in their dealing with the world. The curricula had to be decolonized, decentered from the West. The debate Thiong'o has related in *Homecoming* (1972) and *Decolonizing the Mind*, is dramatized in *Petals of Blood* where the students rebel against the established system in Siriana to call for the Africanization of the program. Siriana, a school run in iron fists with Fraudsham, experiences a strike in which students protested against the English bend of the curricula. The strike opposed the headmaster and his administration to African students and their aspirations.

The first strike that occurs in Siriana is during the passage of Chui and Munira at the institution. They rejected the racist views of Fraudsham and call for his departure. However, they did not succeed and Fraudsham calls the riot police to quell the protest and sack the ringleaders, including Munira and Chui. The use of the police force is a testimony that highlights how public law enforcement is put at the disposal of the administrative management of the school (1). The second protest occurs with the generation of Karega. Although the strike mostly concerns school conditions and a change in the syllabus, it originates from a trivial incident with the death of Fraudsham's dog, Lizzy.

He requests the students to mourn with him, which they refuse. He then summoned the school and issues a preach on the love of pets and humanism. When Fraudsham blames an African who was shot by a white man because he threw a stone to his dog, the students boast out. They demand a changing of the guard. They demanded the contents and objectives of their learning be aligned to their social environment. Karega recalls that they “wanted to be taught African Literature, African history, for we wanted to know ourselves better... we wanted an African headmaster and African teachers”. The young energetic African goes even further to ask why “should ourselves be reflected in white snows, spring flowers fluttering by on icy lakes?” and ask the prefect system administering the boarding school be ended as it “perpetrated the knightly order of master and menials”. That prefect system was a perfect replica of colonial public order in administering the school. It draws clear hierarchical lines between students, and allows the elders to prey on the younger. It also feeds divisions and hatred as some of the students are tasked to report to the administration which often brings encroachments between them.

The strike takes a serious tone and a few days after. Fraudsham resigns and decides to move back to England. He is replaced by Chui, who in his youthful revolutionary fervor, participated in the first strike which caused his expulsion. Contrary to all expectations, Chui proves to be a worse replica of Fraudsham. Having traded with the elite and the nascent bourgeoisie, Chui experienced some transformation after his revolutionary youth. Joining the elite, and siding with European businessmen, he turns himself into a zombie preying on his own people. From the moment he is appointed, he orders all demonstrations to end through a famous intervention as Karega recounts:

It was his desire, nay, his fervent prayer, that all the teachers should stay, knowing that he had not come to wreck but to build on what was already there: there would be no hasty programme of Africanisation, reckless speed invariably being the undoing of so many a fine school... obedience was the royal road to order and stability, the only basis of sound education. A school was like a body; there had to be the head, arms, feet, all performing their ordained functions without complaints for the benefit of the whole body (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 203).

Chui's arrival, his involvement in the bourgeoisie's exploitation of the masses, and his determination to block all the reforms shows the failure of the protest. The strike proves unsuccessful and the leaders of the students such as Karega, are sacked. He clearly stated “He did not therefore want to hear any more nonsense about African teachers, African history, African literature, African this and that: whoever heard of African, Chinese, or Greek mathematics and science?” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 206).

The failure is understandable in the extent that the students are quite young and not fully equipped to confront the powerful administration of Siriana. However, it has succeeded to rouse the attention of the students on the necessary changes to be carried out. Although most critics have associated this episode to the Nairobi Literature debate, *Petals of Blood* does not offer ample details on the struggle and its outcomes. The major difference between the fictionalized experience in *Petals* and the Nairobi debates lies in the success of the latter in its ability to trigger genuine conversations leading to significant reforms in East African universities and across the continent as Thiong'o shows in several instances of his essays. The same debate is echoed by Armah as we shall see in the next session.

The ousting of the old guard

The sweeping move of the decolonization of the African academy made its way almost to the entire continent. With a striking similarity to the Nairobi Literature Debate, Armah recounts, in *The Eloquence of the Scribe*, his struggle at the University of Lesotho where he stayed from 1976 to 1978, and which was directed on reforming the department of English. If Thiong'o is praised to have addressed the issue earlier than his peers and dealt with it throughout most of his essays, especially from *Homecoming* to *Moving the Center* (1993), Armah is hailed for his in-depth analysis in *The Eloquence* and his explicit dramatization of the need to “africanize” the African academy in *Osiris*

Rising, and his appraisal of the African schooling system *KMT*, through the famous “houses of life”. These two novels address far more explicitly the issue of the Eurocentric orientation of the curricula than Thiong’o’s even when we consider *Petals of Blood*.

Armah has conducted extensive research on the need to reform the African schooling system. As he details in *The Eloquence*, such a system is molded to keep Africans within the reach and under the hold of their European masters. Armah considers education as a crucial engine in social change. Under his perspective, it is a pillar into the remembering of the continent. As a “failed revolutionary”, Armah has dedicated much energy into bringing his contribution to free the African academy from its European grip. As he recounts in his memoir, Armah spent much of his life looking for an ideal place to put his theory into practice. As Tanzania was a haven of intellectual transformation through the leadership of Nyerere, Armah went to teach in Dar es Salam, hoping to benefit from the conducive Tanzanian atmosphere. However, it was not until he stayed in Lesotho from 1976 to 1979 that he seemed to find the ideal conditions to participate into the attempt of reforming the curricula. The English Department at the University of Lesotho offered the perfect opportunity as Armah enthusiastically points out:

Among several pleasant surprises offered by Lesotho, quite apart from the natural beauty of that healthy mountain country, one was the opportunity to work with a group of English department students ready for challenging the curricular content, and willing to work to bring the institutional challenges required to establish such improvements (Armah, 2006, p. 122).

Armah and his colleagues were all interested into opening up the English departments. They were also hopeful to incorporate the oral traditions from the rich background of the country and its neighbouring countries which he highlights during a visit of poets at the university. As Leif Lorentzon (1998, p. 16) points out, they were engaged into “restructuring of the literary courses but also a complete reorganization of the whole department and its syllabi”.

If relevant conditions existed at the University of Lesotho, it was however an incident related to salary payroll which caused Armah leave the country and impede the attempt to reforming the department. As he was the ringleader of leading a battle demanding equal pay between African lecturers and European expats, his departure would mark the end of the efforts mobilized to conduct the educational reforms he dreamed of. However, Armah conducted extensive research, which probably was meant to be shared and enhanced in Lesotho. It will later appear in *Osiris*. Besides, the need to free the African academy from its European masters is also addressed in *KMT*. The seriousness and rigor of the fictive representation originate surely from Armah’s painstaking research which he did not have the chance to implement in a practical way.

In the first novel, *Osiris Rising*, the focus is directed against the curricula of a teaching institution, Manda College. This school is not chosen randomly as it trains the next generation of lecturers, the main pillars of the educational system, tasked to teach in schools around the country. Any reforms that could be experienced in Manda will be therefore easily implemented. He also casts a group of revolutionary characters, organized around the hero, Asar, to wage a fierce battle against the European guard of the college in its unwavering determination to perpetuate the same educational pattern it has always sustained. As such, Asar and his fellows (Ast, Bai Kamara, Bantu Rolong, Imo Moko, Iva Mensah, Kodjo Boanye, Duma and the Mystic Comrad are confronting the all mighty-established force of the old guard (Wooley, Padmasana, Nguruwe), who maintain the *status quo* in both the administration and schooling system.

In their confrontation with the old guard, the Manda revolutionaries targeted three disciplines they choose as a starting point to experiment the reforms they intend to carry out. These disciplines consisted into History, African Studies and Literature. The work of Armah’s group of reformists differs, in terms of magnitude from the approach taken by Thiong’o and his colleagues, which revolved only around the English Department at the University of Nairobi. Although the old guard feels very uncomfortable upon the announcement of the reformists, the Europeanists hasten to precise they were eager to receive the different blueprints expecting the young guard will not deliver their proposals in a short time. They were struck by the commitment and determination

when the revolutionaries presented their work at the department level which was the first stage before moving it to the faculty. The Manda reformists were determined at all costs to challenge the *status quo* as echoed in this passage when Bai Kamara states:

So far it is not been our work. From the time I began teaching, all we Africans have done is to find stuff ready-made – syllabuses, curricula, the whole educational system. We have not created our own system. We have operated within this old system. Sometimes we grumble. We suggest modifications here and there. Low energy dabbling. What we are facing now is different. High energy work. Not just attacking something conveniently available. But creating a superior system. Working to replace the old with it (Armah, 1995, p. 189).

While they commit to overhauling the system, the reformists are also aware of the magnitude of the work lying ahead. Not only they know they will face the strong resistance from the old guard about any change, but also their work required strong intellectual grounding that necessitates incisive research and a sound methodology for its implementation. The primary bent of the reform is foregrounded on an Afrocentric perspective which is supposed to free the academy from European bondage, and which in many ways, echoes the call of the Nairobi circle, as Ogede writes:

At the meeting of the revolutionaries at Asar's home, for instance, attention is consistently focused on the existing curriculum and its deficiencies and how the task of redesigning a new one should be approached. It is also made abundantly clear that the perspective recommended is the Afrocentric one. Echoes of the famous educational revolution proposed jointly by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong in September and October 1968 in the Department of English at the Makerere University in Nairobi (sic) can be found the novel's proposed curriculum. But on the whole, the perspective offers a highly original and attractive interdisciplinary approach, involving African history, literature, sociology, philosophy and anthropology. Clearly the proposal presented by Armah covers areas that go beyond the scope proposed by the older document (2000, p. 147).

While the attempt appears to be bold and ambitious as Ogede undecodes, the reformists have to argue and deconstruct the assumptions and ready-made ideas of the old guard. Despite its resistance, the reformists, aided with the new representativeness system with students sitting in the board, managed to have the reforms passed at the department and faculty level. This feat is another major difference from the representation offered from Armah while such a success is missing in Thiong'o's fictional renderings. In *Osiris*, the reform is successful while in *Petals*, the students at Siriana fail against the adversity. In that light, *Osiris* gives a more optimistic tone and highlights the possibility of enhancing the required changes in African learning institutions. However, if the reforms have been passed, the leader of the revolutionary groups is assassinated by the repressive regime of Hapa through his lifelong rival, Seth Spencer. The price of the success of the reform in Manda is the assassination of the leader of the group, Asar, who is considered a danger to the Hapa regime in the novel. In Armah's fiction, the reader is used to a revolutionary aesthetics in which heroes are doomed to a tragic ending (Modin, Asar, Biko, Hor). However, the heroes' tragic fall is substituted to the perpetuation of their legacy through the collective ownership of fellows or coming generations (Ast is carrying Asar's baby in a pregnancy). The reformist mission will surely outlive the repressive character of the authorities as Asar fellows and the coming generations will carry out the battle.

In *KMT*, the debate is furthered to touch on aspects related to historiography. The conducting on the seminary about historiography in Africa in Yarw raises acute questions about the foundations of learning in African schools (Whitecastle and the University in which Jengo, Lindela – who studied at the Whitecastle with Biko – Professor Jean Pierre Badin and Professor Arendt are working. The reformists, Lindela and Jengo, backed by the Yarw traditionalists, Djeli Hor and Astw, challenge the established tradition about Africa from Europeanists our Africanists lecturers.

The urgency to reform approaches in the teaching system of African historiography is mostly an echo of the Manda revolution. Here, Djeli Hor, fed from the African stream of knowledge, confronts and debunks the false myths and prejudices on African history conveyed by the Hegelian like-minded of Jean Pierre Badin and Christine Arendt. The two European professors constitute the archetype of the typical European intellectual in the African academy who claims to have utmost knowledge and

exclusive legitimacy to lecture about Africa and its past. Hor's speech at the Yarw seminar proves to be a masterclass on African history sourced from ancient knowledge that the sharers have been able to preserve from alteration. After his speech, the audience easily grasps that the long so-called established knowledge on Africa, as defended by Badin and Arendt, are blatant falsifications of the continent. The two professors even submit to the clarity and accuracy which streams from Hor's presentation.

As if Armah is not satisfied with the deconstructive effect of Hor's speech at the Yarw seminar, he organizes the remaining parts of the novel around the unearthing and deciphering of ancient African knowledge through a tracking of the establishment and evolution of the houses of life. These embodied the true spirit of the African learning system and stood every way on the opposite of the European tradition. Although the novel delves in-depth on the abundance and richness of ancient knowledge in areas as large as astronomy, physics, biology, writing, philosophy, agriculture, mathematics, geography, and medicine (Armah, 2002, pp. 235-256), it is actually the organizational and administrative management of the houses of life in which we are interested in this analysis. These learning institutions are organized around central principles underpinned by the essence of life within the community. The system on which they are foregrounded underscores not the relevance of the individual and his personal success but rather the life of the community as a collective endeavor in which every single being and all social groupings are given utmost importance.

Closely examined, the organizing principles of the houses of life differ significantly from the European practices as epitomized in the different novels and highlighted in the authors' essays where they recount their passage in Alliance school for Thiong'o and Achimota College for Armah. In the houses of life, the principle of reciprocity is a pillar. Everyone gives and receives in return. In the European tradition of school administration and learning principles, there is one unidirectional system of learning devised through a very hierarchized system (Armah, 2002, p. 54) which is very different from the one existing between Lindela and Jengo, that of partners inspired from ancient knowledge in the houses of life. This is questioned by Biko at the Whitecastle school as he challenges the learning system. Lindela laments the attitude and conduct of the school administration which feel threatened by his friend's attitude.

Reading the decolonizing of the African Academy superstructure through the lens of decoloniality

The sound rationale sustaining the aspirations of the reformists finds enough credibility and underpinning as the previous sections have illustrated. It remains a basic right for Africans to demand for a schooling system and a learning curriculum which address the needs and aspirations of the African people. The call for reforms, raised as early as the time of the Nairobi debate which Thiong'o summarily represents in *Petals of Blood*, and during Armah's stay in Lesotho which he dramatizes in both *Osiris* and *KMT*, finds their legitimacy in the nature of the bequeathed learning tradition from imperial Europe which still impedes African transformation. However, such reforms have also to be scrutinized in order to assess their practicality and readiness to be effectively used by its beneficiaries. It is also relevant to address these reforms considering the criticisms directed against a purely African-oriented perspective in response to the ailing Eurocentric tradition.

It should be underscored that the calls for the reforms have found ample echo throughout the continents. In Nairobi, Thiong'o and his colleagues were able to shake the structuring of the English Department. Their Afrocentric call, as Thiong'o himself details in *Decolonizing the Mind* and *Moving the Center*, is espoused in African intellectual circles. The Kenyan writer even furthers the debate to initiate writing in local language in addition to his strong advocacy of using the African oral tradition. In that perspective, with his colleague, Ngugi wa Miri, Thiong'o writes the paly *I will Marry when I want* in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. However, with the ongoing dictatorship in Kenyan, first under Kenyatta, and later, with Daniel Arap Moi, afrocentrists such as Thiong'o are repressed, silenced, sent to jail and exiled. Under Moi, in Kenya, the passionate debate and the ambitious reforms are silenced and Thiong'o and other writers flew into exile. They are not able to fully implement their

reforms, as it happens in his fictitious work, *Petals of Blood*. However, the relevance of the voice of the Kenyan writer has made its way into African intellectual circles to prompt a serious questioning of the existing learning system in schools and universities.

Likewise, the accuracy and precision of the views Armah presents in his two novels, stand as a testimony to the seriousness with which he addresses the issue of reforming African school and universities. Both the works of Thiong'o and Armah, and their positions, along with other prominent African writers and intellectuals have enabled Africans to realize the misappropriation of their learning institutions and sparked the need to bring the necessary reforms. Thanks to their works, the continent was brought into a sweeping wind of change which rattled over Makerere and Dar es Salam. The reforms still continue to be applied in African universities. At Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, in the early 2010s, ambitious reforms were operated to establish a faculty of Civilizations, Religions, Arts and Cultures in which African languages are taught and researched in exactly the same way as hegemonic languages.

If the trailblazing work of writers such as Thiong'o and Armah has gained momentum and enabled bold reforms, the African academy is still caught with terrific contradictions. In most of the universities, where such reforms were carried out, the European language departments are still resisting. At the University of Saint Louis, while there is a department for all languages and African cultures, the English and the French departments still prevail, which raises several questions as to the place of English or other European literature departments on the continent. We are still at the level where African languages, while dominating overwhelmingly are still given small entry portions in African universities. The reforms should be more ambitious and give to local languages the biggest representativeness in African universities to reflect African realities. Debates and endeavors of similar magnitude aiming at decolonizing the African academy are raised by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza who describes the efforts he is involved in at the University of Free State in South Africa.

Some critics have also pointed out that the reforms echoed in the works of Thiong'o and Armah are too Afrocentered, espousing a racial perspective in responding to Eurocentrism. It is difficult to dissociate the racist contents of the reforms as they were formulated in some way to address European domination. However, the reforms proposed in the work of the authors have not been purely grounded on a racial response. They stand against Eurocentrism to call for the incorporation and valorization of the African experience and realism. They are not based on a blind call to substitute Africa to Europe. The revolutionaries in Manda understand this dimension and, while they insist that Africa should be cornerstone of the curricula, they precise that the continent should be opened to external knowledge.

If the remarkable work of Thiong'o and Armah has drawn so much interest, it has to do with its focus on the underpinnings of the system itself. Thiong'o who mostly questions the contents of the system, the learning curricula while Armah bring it extensively the dimension of the administration itself and how it should incorporate more societal elements to give it a more original imprint to lead the aspirations of the African people. Armah's work offers a more profound incrustation in the structuring of the system itself as he brings in the organization of the houses of life to the spotlight in *KMT*, in addition to dealing with curricula issues and faculty and departments management.

Considering the evolving situation since then, it can be grasped that incorporating more African societal aspects and practices would give a more solid momentum to the scope of the reforms and make the governance of African schools and universities more amenable to bear an African imprint. This is actually where decoloniality brings an added value as it enables to better understand the forces of power that confront behind the apparent scenery of the academic space.

Decoloniality can be defined as a critical thought that seeks to deconstruct the lasting effects of colonialism, focusing mainly on knowledge, culture, politics and society (Quijano). It emphasizes on the coloniality of knowledge, power, politics and culture. As such, applied to the work of Thiong'o and Armah, it reveals the relevance accorded to knowledge formulation and transmission. The works of Thiong'o and Armah emphasize political elements and the dynamics of power and society (coloniality), to explain the various mechanisms that have sustained the prevalence of European domination and influence in the education system.

The slave/master relationship and coloniality trope is a pervasive trope in the writing of the two others. Thiong'o has mentioned it in various essays up to *Globalectics* (2012b), with a two outstanding chapters on "The English Master and the Colonial bondsman" and "The Education of the Colonial Bondsman" where he illustrates the power dynamics that underpin the life and death struggle which opposes the colonizer and the colonized and which is present in all life sectors. These power dynamics are dealt with Armah in several instances in *Remembering A Dismembered Continent*, (2010) with chapters such as "Marx and Masks", "The Caliban Complex". Likewise, the opening chapters of *The Eloquence of the Scribes*, especially "Going to Meet Shakespeare", explain in details the powers lying behind the tensed relationships. They underscore the fighting for the securing of the public space through education indoctrination and colonial bondage, the influence of culture, politics and society and divergent traditions and how they influence the larger confrontation between imperial Europe and resistant Africa.

Although the fictional works point out to the existence of an African tradition, they do not reveal aptly the relevance of enticing in sophisticated epistemologies to serve as perfect responses to the European influence. It lacks the philosophical direction and agency which clearly outlines the dynamics of power, knowledge and being. Although these works focus on knowledge systems, they appear to be more of an experimental practice. This posits the issue of the epistemic challenge which Zeleza highlights in the following passage:

Eurocentrism frames African humanity and history as less than, mimetic and perpetually infantile and becoming Europe. The epistemological, ontological and historiographical tropes of Eurocentrism permeates intellectual and popular discourses on Africa, which distort, disparage and demean African realities, lives and experiences. Predictably, Eurocentrism has elicited countervailing affirmations of Africa and Africanness, of African purity, parity and personhood; defiant assertions of African difference from Europe, sameness with Europe and authenticity without Europe (Zeleza, 2021, p. 222).

How to use decoloniality as a theory of reading to better shed light on how Thiong'o and Armah address the issue of school and university administration in Africa? Reading their fiction through the lens of decoloniality gives a better glimpse of the rolling of the decolonizing process. It espouses a larger dimension to include elements of African authenticity such as indigenous knowledge and practices, rituals, performances and even religion which are identified in Armah's *KMT*.

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