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Introduction: perspectives on the African novel

Although Africa has had a long and enduring tradition of poetry and drama, the novel is today, as almost everywhere else in the world, the dominant literary genre on the continent. Its privileged status as a written genre may be attributed to European influence and its association with an imaginative consciousness grounded in literate modernity. However, there can be no doubt that the appeal of the novel has to do with the integrative function that narratives have always played in African societies, a role that is well illustrated not only by the didactic and reflexive purpose of the folk tales and fables that inform the sensibility and define a primary level of the imaginative faculty in traditional African societies,[1] but also by the centrality of the mythical tale, extending to the great oral epics – as exemplified by the Sundiata epic of Mali and the Ozidi saga of the Ijaws – with the ideological and symbolic significance these varieties of the narrative form assumed in pre-colonial times and their continued relevance in the contemporary period. In short, the novel has acquired today a cultural significance that was once the exclusive province of the oral narrative.

The continuity with the oral tradition is evident in the novels written in the African languages, in which the derivation of content and mode is direct and immediate. But the oral–literate interface, in its various manifestations, can also be felt as a quality of the fictional works of many an African writer, reflecting either a conscious design or, as is often the case, the effect of a cultural retention determined by the African background. Thus, the genres of oral narrative and the aesthetics they illustrate – insofar as this involves the recital of texts in the living contexts of performance – can be said to provide the imaginative background and, often, the structural model for the appropriation of the novel genre by African writers, in both the indigenous languages and the imported European tongues. The concept of orality (or "orature"), which serves as the theoretical and ethnographic foundation for the discussion of the intrinsic properties (character types, narrative functions and rhetorical devices, as well as the role of metaphor and symbolism) by

which the traditional narratives are structured can also be applied to the African novel, insofar as these properties have had a marked effect on the way African novelists have often conceived and executed their works, to the extent that we are sometimes obliged to identify in their works the signs of a textualized orality.

It is now customary to place the origins of the African novel firmly within the colonial experience – to consider its emergence as a direct consequence of the encounter with Europe, with the historical implications and the social and cultural factors that have conditioned the emergence and evolution of the novel as a literary genre on the continent. In this explanation of the rise of the novel in Africa, literacy and writing are represented as having developed largely as a function of Western education introduced by the various Christian missions in their evangelical effort. The centrality of the Bible to this effort has thus been advanced as the constitutive factor in the creation of a new literature by the elite that, over time, emerged from the African encounter with Europe, with its corollary of colonial domination and its cultural impositions. This view of the genesis of the novel and of modern literature generally, while valid, requires today to be qualified, insofar as literacy was first introduced into Africa by Arabs prior to the arrival of Europeans. The Arab presence in North Africa led to the early introduction of Islam to populations in Africa south of the Sahara, and has ensured sustained interactions between the two areas for a good part of the past millennium. The Koran has thus served for a much longer period than the Bible as a reference text for the protocols of writing and the formation of the literary sensibility in Africa.

However, the role of these sacred texts has obscured a point that needs to be remarked upon: the fact that the earliest works of fiction by writers either native to or associated with Africa predate the introduction of literacy in Arabic in the early period of the millennium, and, as the defining cultural mark of a Western inheritance, also predate the introduction of literacy in the European languages. The beginnings of the novel in Africa go back in fact to the formative period of Western literature itself, with works related to Africa constituting part of its early corpus of canonical texts. Of the works that have survived from this period, two in particular have an immediate bearing on the practice of fiction in Africa: the Greek masterpiece, *Aethiopica* by the Hellenic writer Heliodorus, and *The Golden Ass* by the Latin author, Apuleius. These works illustrate a phenomenon that was to assume significance many centuries later, namely, the appropriation by the African writer of a second language for expressive purposes, the deployment for literary ends of a foreign tongue serving as a dominant language of culture in its own time and place.

In its depiction of the interactions of peoples in the Hellenic world, *Aethiopica* offers a graphic reflection of the historical and cultural context of its composition. Its projection, in a constantly shifting perspective, of manners and beliefs among several populations in contact in the Eastern Mediterranean and along the Nile valley – Greeks, Persians, Egyptians and Ethiopians – integrates within a comprehensive fictional framework the themes of romance and the quest for spirituality, set against a realism dominated by a relentless procession of scenes of violence and carnage, intended presumably to give dramatic effect to its expansive narrative development. This is underlined by its structure as a sequence of set scenes, culminating in the long account of a military campaign that pits Ethiopians against Persians. The fact that the final scenes of the novel highlight the military brilliance of the Ethiopian general has generated speculation as to the identity and biography of the author and his personal circumstances in the human universe that is reproduced in his work. But while the personal details of the author have remained obscure, the atmosphere of the narrative points to an African with possibly a racial and ideological axe to grind.[2]

In contrast, *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is characterized by its linear structure, each chapter representing an episode in a series of transformations or metamorphoses undergone by its hero, involving a constant interplay between fantasy and realism. The element of realism and its satirical tone have earned the work the title of the "first modern novel," but the evocative power of its transformations and the visionary import of its final scene suggest a conception of fiction carried over from the traditional aesthetic of storytelling, with its slight adherence to an observable universe of facts, and its emphasis on an other-worldly dimension of experience. We might remark that the return to this mythic mode of apprehension, the departure from a strict order of realism, constitutes the basis of what has been called "magic realism" in the contemporary novel. It is thus possible to see *The Golden Ass* as the earliest example of this mode in prose fiction. In this sense, it can also be regarded as a remarkable antecedent to some of the most significant works in modern African fiction, such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Kojo Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*.

The point needs some clarification. The conscious recuperation in modern African literature forms the background to what is now recognized as an African variety of "magic realism," which can be seen as inherent in the inspiration and cultural "embeddedness" of the African novels now grouped in this category. Here, the recourse to fantasy and myth translates not merely the need felt by the writers for a culturally grounded mode of the African imagination – a mode of perception that accounts for the atmosphere of

experience that traditional esthetic forms seek to convey – but also for a governing metaphor which functions to give weight and comprehensiveness to the vision of life each writer seeks to project.[3]

Both *Aethiopica* and *The Golden Ass* appear to have been well known during the European Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Their long record of dissemination throws an interesting light on what may well have been a parallel development in Africa of written works and orally transmitted forms of fiction. For when their dates of composition are considered, it is possible to speculate that the written works antedate the longer narratives that we now associate with the oral tradition.

It was to take nearly a thousand years, however, before we were to witness the full emergence of the African novel as a literate genre. It is important to note in this respect the primary role played in this development by the African languages, which came to offer the writer the natural means of literate expression once these languages began to be reduced to writing throughout the continent in the course of the nineteenth century, mainly through Christian evangelical effort. As already remarked, this effort was focused largely on the translation of the Bible into the indigenous languages, often leading to the creation of a literary idiom for many of the languages.[4] In the circumstances, the first African novelists were products of missionary schools, so that a didactic and evangelical purpose came to predominate in this early literature, intent as the writers were on producing works of moral edification, as part of Christian teaching. Beyond this limited purpose of the writers, these mission-inspired works came to contain a larger cultural effect, for they bore witness to the profound transformation of values that the impact of Christianity had set in motion in Africa, a process in which the traditional religions and systems of belief came to exist in a state of tension with the new religion and with structures of mind associated with Western civilization. These texts were thus instrumental in the construction of a new mental universe indispensable for the emergence in Africa of a Western-inspired modernity.

Notwithstanding the formative role of the Christian religious text in the making of the African novel in the indigenous languages, the esthetic principle came to override the didactic impulse that motivated the early writers. For the expressive potential of the Old Testament and its recall of African orality proved influential in determining the narrative rhetoric and forms of fictional address in many of the indigenous novels. This creative process is well illustrated by Thomas Mofolo's Sotho novel, *Chaka*, composed in the Sotho language, a work which, despite its conflicted portrayal of the Zulu hero, derives its narrative impulse from its integration of the praise poem tradition into a prose narrative form, a re-creation compelled by its historical theme and cultural reference.[5]

The association of Christian sentiment with expressive form in the Bible also explains the influence of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has served as what Isabel Hofmeyr calls a "template" for the construction of the written novel in Africa.[6] It is important to observe, however, that Bunyan's work was able to exert such an influence not so much through the Christian orthodoxy of its content as by virtue of its quest motif and its allegorical burden, which bore a recognizable affinity to the didactic and symbolic function of the African folk tale tradition.

The influence of these Christian religious texts has been paralleled by that of the Koran for Muslim writers, which remains a normative reference for modern African fiction in Arabic, represented by works such as Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, and in particular, the novels of Naguib Mafouz. The influence of the Koran extends, however, beyond the literature in Arabic. The so-called Afro-Arab literature in Swahili and Hausa which was enabled by the transcription of African languages into the Arabic script (*ajami*), was predominantly devotional in tone; narratives in this tradition turned on the articulation of an Islamic outlook on the world based on the teachings of the Koran. The novels in the European languages attest equally to the influence of the holy book of Islam; they take their bearings from a specifically Muslim tradition of literacy and the rhetoric of narrative it conditions. Muslim writers in North Africa and in Africa south of the Sahara are equally indebted to the Koran for their motifs and modes of narration, as demonstrated by the pervasive presence of Islam in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, in which the meditation on religious experience – going hand in hand with the exploration of the hero's sense of cultural and spiritual exile – is informed largely by a sensibility that owes its force to Sufi mysticism. Equally striking is Mariama Bâ's deliberate borrowing from the Koran of the *mirasse* as a formal device for the recollections of her heroine in her novel *So Long a Letter*. In Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984), the Koran is invoked as central to the novel's celebration of an enduring heritage of Islamic culture by which whole communities in Northern Nigeria have sought to define their place in the world. In all these works, the Islamic experience is presented as a distinctive current of a modern awareness and sensibility, and Islamic religion and tradition as essential components of a universal humanism.[7]

While the mythic sources in the traditional cultures and the influence of Christian and Islamic religious texts have played an important part in the emergence and evolution of the African novel in the indigenous languages, the dominant trend has been towards an appropriation of the genre as a means for exploring themes and issues of contemporary experience. As pioneered by Daniel O. Fagunwa, the Yoruba novel emerged as an amalgam of heroic

adventure based on indigenous cosmology and cultural traditions on the one hand, and Christian moralism and symbolism on the other. But his successors have moved the Yoruba novel decidedly into a secular realm of understanding, in a transition that has also involved a profound transformation of the language as a medium of literate expression.[8] This movement of transition in the creation of a new literary tradition in the indigenous languages is well exemplified by the trajectory of the Swahili novel. As charted by Xavier Garnier in his study of the corpus, the evolution of prose fiction in Swahili has been marked by a pronounced shift from the reformulation of traditional fables that provided the substance of early efforts at prose fiction, towards clearly articulated narratives of modern life, focused especially on social and political issues. The Swahili novel has thus come to function both as a representation of contemporary realities and as a medium of public discourse.[9]

The transition to modernity registered by the thematic and formal evolution of the African novel in the indigenous languages brings the corpus into convergence with the works that have defined the trajectory of the African novel written in European languages, principally Portuguese, French and English.[10] The formal relation of these works to the Western tradition of written fiction is evident, dictated not only by the recourse to the language of the colonizer and the range of formal resources it offered in each case, but also by the colonial experience itself, constituting in all its comprehensive scope – political, socio-economic and cultural – the new context of life within which African existence came to be enclosed. The pressures inherent in this situation have been central to the genesis of modern African literature, most especially the "europhone" African novel which was called into existence by the colonial experience.

Given this background, it is perhaps in the nature of things that the oldest colonial empire in Africa should have provided the first indication of a new tradition of written fiction on the continent. In lusophone Africa, the beginnings of the novel are to be traced to "white writing" (to borrow J. M. Coetzee's term),[11] Evaristo d'Almeida's *O Escravo* (*The Slave*) published in 1856, being recorded as the first novel in Portuguese with an African setting. In the 1920s, *Camaxilo*, set in Angola, and written by Castro Soromenho, another Portuguese, confirmed the trend, to be followed by Baltazar Lopes's novel, *Chinquinho*, published in 1936. These works have been said to bear a close relationship to the novelistic tradition in Northeast Brazil, exemplified by the work of Jorge Amado,[12] although this does not preclude a genuine feeling for the African environment in the work of Soromenho, as Roger Bastide has pointed out.[13] The heavy burden of Portuguese colonialism provides the background and indeed the existential framework of the experience to

which these novels testify, so that the novel came to serve as a major vehicle of anti-colonial protest and of a nationalist sentiment that also found intense lyrical expression in poetry.[14] This anti-colonial theme is developed in varied narrative perspectives, marked by great originality in each case, in such works as Luandino Vierya's *The Secret Life of Xavier Domingos*, Pepetela's *Mayombe* and Luis Bernardo Honwana's *We Killed Mangy Dog*. The lusophone African novel has not lost its power of evocation in the post-independence period, enriched as it has been by the virtuosity of writers such as Mia Couto (*Under the Frangipani*) in Mozambique and José Eduardo Agualusa (*The Book of Chameleons*) in Angola.

The roots of the francophone African novel in the metropolitan traditions are just as deep as is the case with the lusophone. The French colonial novel, of which *Histoire de Louis Anniaba* and *Ourika* are the earliest manifestations, provide the first signs of an African presence in prose fiction in the French language, later to be expanded upon by the practitioners of the French colonial novel or *roman colonial*.[15] However, the consistently negative image of Africa purveyed by the French colonial novel rendered it superficial as a representation of the peoples and cultures of the continent. Moreover, the entrenched racism and ideological motivation that shaped its conception, as in Pierre Loti's *Le roman d'un Spahi*, could not but provoke the reaction marked by René Maran's *Batouala*, published in 1921. Despite the derivation of *Batouala* from the French colonial novel, of which it retains many of the formal features, Maran's effort to render an African point of view, to create living African characters in a genuine context of life served as a model that was soon adopted by other writers. *Batouala* thus marks the beginning of the francophone African novel. Its inspirational role is evident in the works published in the 1930s, beginning with Ahmadou Diagne's *Les trois volontés de Malic* and Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté*, followed by the novels of Ousmane Socé, Abdoulaye Sadji, Paul Hazoumé and Félix Couchoro.[16] In retrospect, these novels cannot be said to count as more than works of apprenticeship, but they prepared the ground for the remarkable blossoming of fictional writing that took place after World War II, illustrated notably by the works of Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Ousmane Sembène and Cheikh Hamidou Kane. As in lusophone Africa, the novels produced by francophone African writers during the colonial period are in varying degrees polemical, intended to give persuasive form and force to their depiction of affective states and attitudes, and indeed to ideological positions related to the colonial situation. The interest of these novels is not, however, limited to their nationalist orientation but derives as well from their achievement in artistic terms, for they display a resourceful handling of a language and tradition of fictional writing taken over from the metropolitan masters.

In this way, they were able to establish within the expressive framework of the French language a vision of Africa no longer determined by the *roman colonial*.

The parallels with anglophone Africa suggest themselves, even if the differences are just as striking. In this case, Aphrah Behn's *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* published in 1688, appears as the ancestor to the colonial novel in English, though its liberal spirit contrasts markedly with the animating principle of the novels that were later to constitute the tradition, devoted as these were, as in the French *roman colonial*, to an unrelenting denigration of Africa and the black race generally. The novels of Henry Rider Haggard and Joyce Cary, and in particular Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, come readily to mind here. It is in this regard that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* came to assume an innovative significance, as regards both theme and reference as well as narrative idiom, almost immediately upon its publication in 1958.

Much has been made of the character of Achebe's novel as a response to the fictions of empire. But the exemplary value of the work resides less in its polemical thrust than in the assured mode of its narrative projection of African life, carried through by a craftsmanship that introduced a new level of competence in the making of African fiction. It expanded the human perspective of the early novels in English, which had begun to take a measure of the drastic reordering of African lives by Western cultural impositions. The domestic and social themes of works such as *Marita or the Folly of Love* (written by an unnamed author and first published 1886), Joseph Jeffrey Walters's *Guanya Pau* (1891), and R. E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence* (first published 1941) turn on this conundrum and anticipate in many respects the concerns of the popular novel of the 1960s and 1970s.[17] More significantly, in terms of their ideological significance, Joseph Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) and William Conton's *The African* (1960) register the broader political implications of European presence and propose the vision of a new integration of the African self.

We cannot fail to consider here, as part of the exploration of the African experience in the novel, the singular perspective defined by the work of writers of European extraction in Southern Africa, who inaugurated a distinctive current of African fiction by substituting for the interest in landscape attested in the travel writing of the early literature in the region, an urgent moral preoccupation with the human drama that was being enacted in their world.[18] The acute dimension assumed by the race question and policy of apartheid, instituted practically as an enveloping system of the world, imparted to these novels a tone that issued directly from a humane consciousness. It is thus the passion for justice that animates their work, a passion that

unites writers as different in their approach to fiction as Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, and André Brink. The same passion connects them in a common cause with writers on the other side of the color line: Peter Abraham, Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, Es'kia Mphahlele, Mongane Serote, and Lewis Nkosi.[19] The depth of commitment and level of achievement of the South African novelists have ensured for their work a status broader in range than that of a regional school; their novels have, therefore, an immediate relevance to the narrative of struggle and survival on the African continent.

But it is in Achebe's work that the African experience is brought into definite focus, and assumes its full human and narrative scope in the modern novel. His redefinition of the terms of the fictional representation of Africa established the novel as a modern narrative genre on the African continent, indeed, as an autonomous mode of imaginative life in Africa. The native grasp of an Igbo ethos of communal living and individual awareness that underlies and legitimizes Achebe's imaginative expression has given powerful impulse to the effort by other writers to convey the sense of a specific location in the world that his work evinces. His influence in this regard has been evident in the work of the cluster of Igbo novelists who may be said to constitute a school spawned by his example. The names that come to mind include Flora Nwapa, Onuora Nzekwu, John Munonye, and most memorably, Elechi Amadi, whose compelling novel, *The Great Ponds*, represents the most convincing effort deployed by this group in the ethnographic grounding of the African novel.[20] But the example of Achebe has been extended in other directions by non-Igbo writers such as T. M. Aluko and especially by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for whom an affective bond with Kikuyu culture and traditions provides the foundation for his imaginative reliving of the Kenya Emergency in his first three novels.

What these observations point to is the progressive emergence and *africanization* of the novel as a modern form of narrative, its relocation, so to speak, as expressive medium in an African environment. Here, we must draw attention to an aspect of African fictional writing that has been often overlooked: The fact that African writers have also proved accomplished practitioners of short fiction. Birago Diop and Bernard Dadié have drawn inspiration from the oral tradition and excelled in the *conte*, through their transpositions of the African folk tale into French, while other writers have employed the conventional Western form of the short story or *nouvelle*, constructed around a single incident or emotional moment of great significance. The principal figures in the development of the short story as a subgenre of the African novel are Ousmane Sembène (*Voltaïques*) and Henri Lopès (*Sans Tam-Tam*) on the francophone side, and on the anglophone,

Grace Ogot, Charles Mungoshi (*The Setting Sun and Rolling Hills*), and especially the South Africans, who have excelled in the genre: Nadine Gordimer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Richard Rive, Alex La Guma, Njambulo Ndebele, Mzamane Mbulelu. Outstanding recent work includes Funso Aiyejina's *The Legend of the Rockhills* and Anthonia Kalu's *Broken Lives*, a collection that connects directly with Achebe's *Girls at War*.

If in the beginning, this process of naturalization of African fiction was centred on the charged dialectic that marked the relation of Africa to Europe, so that the African novel could be read, as Jameson has suggested, largely as "national allegory,"[21] the formal end of colonialism has imprinted a striking new character on the thematic concerns of the African writer, commanded as these are at the present time by the dilemmas of the post-independence situation. The overarching context of political culture has provoked a new discourse of dissidence in the African novel, aimed at uncovering the pathologies of governance that have contributed so massively to the tragic unfolding of the postcolonial condition in Africa. The critical consciousness this has generated is reflected in what I've called elsewhere "the new realism" in the African novel, often given form as modern parables.[22] Thus, the postcolonial condition has determined a strong dystopian current that has found its most powerful expression in the novels of Sony Labou Tansi. Moreover, the war novel, with its focus on ethnic conflicts and the catastrophes that have ensued from them, proceeds from the profound anxieties induced by contemporary events and thus constitutes a distinctive current of the new realism alluded to above. Thus, in their different ways, Ken Sarowiwa's *Sozaboy*, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, and the work that has emerged as the masterpiece of the genre, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, all deal with the phenomenon of violence in postcolonial Africa and the unsettling dimension it has assumed in contemporary African life.

A notable factor in the broadening of the horizons of the African novel entailed by these developments has been the remarkable entry of the women. The thematic orientation of women's literature in Africa is provided by the changing perceptions by African women of their social condition in relation to such issues as polygamy and male domination, and their quest for fulfillment and for a meaningful place in modern society through access to education and full participation in the economic life and national politics in the new African states. These themes are encompassed in Mariama Bâ's *So Long A Letter* which also set the tone for a writing that consciously aimed to reflect a feminine sensibility, but it is the novels of Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and more recently Amma Darko that illustrate the full narrative possibilities of these themes and the concerns to which they give voice.