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The African Novel in a Course on the Twentieth-Century Novel in English

The sub-Saharan African novel is one of the most important—and instructive—literary innovations of the twentieth century. Largely, but not exclusively, written in English and French, this genre represents a startlingly diverse and original response to the challenges of writing in a literary context multiply fractured in readership, publishing venues, influences, and critical reception. Throughout the twentieth century, but especially from the 1950s onward, African novelists have struggled to adapt the dominant conventions of the novel genre as inherited from European sources to their particular writing situation. Surely the most widely discussed example of such innovation is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. But a similar struggle is to be observed in a variety of other extraordinary works, such as Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*.

That these struggles of African novelists are instructive not only to students of African literature but also to students of the novel in general is demonstrated by an upper-division course I teach entitled *The Twentieth-Century Novel in English*. The course is restricted to anglophone writing, but the lessons to be drawn from it are not. I place African

novelists such as those mentioned above alongside William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad, Robert Graves, Anita Desai, R. K. Narayan, E. M. Forster, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, and others. The main purpose of the course is to introduce students to the way literature in English grows to a global phenomenon during the twentieth century. Yet in teaching the course, I also emphasize the variety of ways in which novelists not only contribute to this globalizing tendency but also resist it by a deliberate accommodation and articulation of opposing vernacular impulses in their works.¹

At its best, the sub-Saharan African novel is an especially effective response to the globalizing-antiglobalizing tension, which requires it to bend and extend the conventions of the novel genre. In a course on the anglophone twentieth-century novel in general, one contribution it makes is how, in so doing, it throws into critical relief the possibilities as well as limitations of the novel. Thus it can play a crucial pedagogical role in posing otherwise underarticulated questions to the genre—regarding the politics of language, the ideological content of point of view, the opposition of the aesthetic to the ethnographic in discussions of the novel.

English and the African Novel in English

In the introductory chapter of his influential work *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster takes up briefly the question of English, for, despite his title, he means really to confine his study to the novel in English. He observes:

“English” we shall of course interpret as written in English, not as published south of the Tweed or east of the Atlantic, or north of the Equator: we need not attend to geographical accidents, they can be left to the politicians. (3)

In the course of his work, Forster does discuss Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* but otherwise confines himself to British literature. Thus, despite the apparent catholicity of his initial understanding of *English*, he is able quickly to pass on to “more important” matters, such as that of periodization, and thence return to an understanding of the novel in English as part of a more or less conventionally regarded “English literature” (5). It is true that he did not have the many well-known examples of “post-colonial” fiction in English to work with that we have now, though given

his association with India, it might not have been too much to expect that he be aware of the novels written in English in Bengal toward the end of the nineteenth century (see Iyengar 314–15; Mukherjee, *Twice-Born Fiction* and *Perishable Empire*). His expansive understanding of English, then, is undermined by the narrowness of the tradition to which he ultimately lays such easy claim.

Only a few decades later the matter of language is altogether more complicated, altogether more political, for an anglophone writer from Africa like Achebe. Achebe’s conflicted relation to the language in which he writes—and therefore also to the tradition that is carried by the language—is evident in his essay “The African Writer and the English Language,” where he suggests that the African writer in English should “aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (100). The objective is to use the English language because of its versatility and its status as a global language, while accommodating it to the particularities of African experience. The African writer in English, Achebe suggests, should not hesitate to make a sacrificial offering of English in the pursuit of his own ends (100–01). The balance Achebe wishes to maintain—between the utility of English as a received language for cross-cultural communication and its transformation into an Africanized medium—may be regarded as an attempt to weigh the claims of the transnational against those of the vernacular. Earlier in the essay, he notes the role of English as national language in Africa: “If you take Nigeria as an example, the national literature, as I see it, is the literature written in English; and the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, Ijaw, etc., etc.” (93). The African writer writing in English, then, has the obligation to extend the resources of English in multiple directions, even if this extension requires the sacrifice, to return to Achebe’s telling simile, of the language itself.

Achebe’s approach to the English language is not dissimilar to that of R. K. Narayan, an Indian writer in English who once noted on behalf of his kind of writer:

English has proved that if a language has flexibility any experience can be communicated through it, even if it has to be paraphrased rather than conveyed, and even if the factual detail . . . is only partially understood. . . . We are still experimentalists. I may straightway explain what we do not attempt to do. We are not attempting to write Anglo-Saxon English. . . . (23)

The anxieties of this passage are similar to those of Achebe: they are those of an author writing in a multilingual context where the role of English is itself contested. Like Achebe, Narayan identifies what he considers the great suppleness of English as a literary language, even as he acknowledges its limitations—sometimes paraphrase is necessary and sometimes there can be only partial understanding of factual details. Despite these limitations, he finds the language adequate to his purpose, because he says, “We are still experimentalists.” His manner of expression is less extravagant than Achebe’s, but the implications are the same: we will use English, but it will be an English transformed; if necessary, sacrificed.

In the African literary context, even Achebe’s qualified advocacy of English as a literary language has been challenged by writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Framing the question of language in a sociohistorical context, Ngũgĩ noted in *Decolonising the Mind*:

The literature it [the petite bourgeoisie] produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African languages. Yet by avoiding a real confrontation with the language issue, it was clearly wearing false robes of identity: it was a pretender to the throne of the mainstream of African literature. (22)

He went on to assert, “African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class” (27).

Internationalism, nationalism, ethnicity, class: even this brief review of the interventions made by Achebe and Ngũgĩ in the debate over the status of English as a medium for African fiction (for the list of literary figures making such interventions is much longer) is refracted through all these categories.² Thus, in the classroom, it becomes one of the sites around which pedagogical questions can be raised regarding these very categories as they relate to the twentieth-century novel in English. Clearly, Forster’s relation to English is not the same as that of Achebe’s or, certainly, Ngũgĩ’s. Forster’s *Passage to India* and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* may both be about the colonial encounter (albeit in different locations) but, whatever the merits of Forster’s depiction of this encounter, in the classroom the contrasts between the two texts can become an occasion to explore the linguistic medium in which the anglophone novel is written. An African example can draw attention to the question of the language in which the twentieth-century novel in English is written.

The particular ways in which such attention is drawn are diverse. In *A Man of the People*, for example, Achebe repeatedly makes various characters speak in pidgin, leaving the passage “untranslated” for the uninitiated reader. The worldly Chief Nanga, discussing women, says at one point, “Any person wey tell you say woman no get sense just de talk pure jargon. When woman no want do something e go left am, but make you no fool yourself say e left the thing because e no get sense for do am” (61). “How true,” the young narrator, Odili, thinks to himself in response. It is an important moment for Odili as he is initiated into the ways of the world by Chief Nanga. In the United States classroom, most students are unable to gloss this passage to their satisfaction. But these moments of incomprehension and frustration become occasions to consider why Achebe might have chosen to insert such passages into a novel in English. What is he conveying about himself as an anglophone novelist through such passages? What relationship to his transnational readers is he signaling here?

Achebe’s famous Africanization of English through the importation of African proverbs and idioms in *Things Fall Apart* (examples of which might be shared with the students through photocopied passages) can reveal to students the ways in which African writers denaturalize the English language. At its most successful, such denaturalization makes it possible to go back to novels like *A Passage to India* and ask fresh questions of it. It becomes pertinent to ask in what ways passages such as the dialogue among Aziz, Hamidullah, and Mahmoud Ali in chapter 2 of *A Passage to India* or the presentation of the thoughts of the devoutly Hindu Narayan Godbole in the final section of the novel strive to capture a cultural location foreign to the English language as Forster uses it. And if there is not in Forster the kind of sacrifice of language that Achebe writes of, how does that lack affect his representation of the consciousness of Aziz and his fellow Indians?

Ideology and Point of View

In the classroom, Gordimer’s South African novel *July’s People* (written in 1981, that is, before the actual fall of apartheid) makes possible other kinds of denaturalization. The novel examines apartheid through the mechanism of a reversal. It depicts the relationship between a white “madam” and her black “boy” in a fictional future South Africa in the midst of a revolutionary situation. The flight of Bam Smales and Maureen

Smales with their children from their urban home to the village of their servant July places them, for the first time, in a role subservient to their black servant. Suddenly their liberal ideas are put to the test. In the isolation of July's village, July as well as Bam and especially Maureen, whose story this really is, confronts the implications of a reversal of roles.

July's People challenges through this mechanism of reversal the natural association of power or ability to rule with the white race. As the days pass in July's village, it becomes increasingly clear that Bam and Maureen's assumed superiority in prerevolutionary South Africa was grounded largely on their greater knowledge of the cultural codes they lived by. Confronted with the alien cultural codes of July's world, their helplessness becomes apparent. Most tellingly, they are unable to recognize the true sources of power in the village, mistaking the headman for the chief (111–12).

The reversal of roles in the novel is the plausible result of the Smales' displacement into a society of which they know virtually nothing, in a time when their own center of authority has been undercut by the revolutionary situation. July himself is hardly a revolutionary. Maureen finds herself challenged not so much by him as by her realization that he has an independent existence that she knew nothing about. The novel traces her journey from that moment at the beginning of the novel when "July broke into snickering embarrassment at her ignorance of a kind of authority not understood—his" (3) to the moment at the end of the novel when July disclaims responsibility for Daniel's taking the gun and speaks to her in his own language—the question of language again!—and we are told, "She understood although she knew no word" (152). What she has understood now and did not understand before is precisely that authority of his, an authority grounded in his own culture, society, and language.

In bringing Maureen—and the reader—to this realization, Gordimer exploits one of the most versatile resources available to the novelist: point of view. Although the protagonist is Maureen and it is her transformation that is mostly told, the point of view in the novel is not confined to her. In various sections, the narrative is presented from the point of view of other characters—Bam, July, July's wife. When the novel adopts the perspective of July or his wife, alternatives to Maureen's white liberalism are uncovered. A different world, with its own cultural and social codes, stands revealed through this shift, and consequently Maureen's own world and values are placed under interrogation.

While any novel can make use of shifts in point of view to explore versions of reality (as Faulkner did so famously in *The Sound and the Fury*), the exploitation of this particular resource in African novels like *July's People* is often much more easily legible as determined by history and politics—that is, it is closely linked to questions of power, race, and social control. Thus an opportunity is opened up in the classroom to push discussions of novelistic structure beyond questions of technique and into the realm of ideology. What sets of values does the concatenation of points of view convey in a novel? Through novels like *July's People*, the question becomes easier to pose in a class on the twentieth-century novel in English. In the process, the novel as a literary form is denaturalized again.

Art and Ethnography

In her critical work *The Black Interpreters*, Nadine Gordimer asserted:

African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. One must look at the world *from* Africa, to be an African writer, not look *upon* Africa from the world. (5)

As a statement of critical intent, the passage is impeccable. In practice, however, African novels cannot always be said to fulfill the "requirement" articulated here. African novels in English are often written by writers not resident in Africa and published by European and American presses for readers the majority of whom are outside Africa. This transnational publishing situation can make it difficult for authors to maintain the stance of writing *from* Africa. A good illustration of what is at issue here is offered by Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*.

The Joys of Motherhood is the account of Nnu Ego, an Igbo woman who sets out to make a place for herself in the world as a mother. She is convinced that it is only as a mother of male children that she will have the traditional respect and goodwill she craves. She spends a lifetime in the pursuit of this goal, in the process enduring enormous hardships piled on her both by her husband and by her children, only to wonder at the end whether it was all worth it. Emecheta's novel is historical in its narrative sweep if not in its narrative mode, starting early in the twentieth century,

from before Nnu Ego's birth, and ending decades later with her death. Through the life of her unlikely protagonist, Emecheta presents the changes that Nigeria as well as Igbo society underwent through the decades. As Igboland and Nigeria change, Nnu Ego too is forced to change, though she remains, to her ultimate detriment, unable to give up her desire to find fulfillment as a wife and mother. In this fashion, Emecheta not only presents a novel of character but also explores through this specific mode of presentation both Nigeria's history during the twentieth century and marriage as an institution.

But knowledge of neither this history nor the institution of marriage as it exists in Igbo society is something that Emecheta can assume on the part of all her readers. In various passages, then, she is forced to adopt what can only be called an autoethnographic narrative mode: explaining one's cultural mores and customs to outsiders. Speaking of Nnu Ego's imposing father, Nwokocha Agbadi, for example, Emecheta writes:

In his young days, a woman who gave in to a man without first fighting for her honour was never respected. To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after his time, with Christianity and other changes. (10)

In another passage on Agbadi, Emecheta writes:

Nwokocha Agbadi was not only a chief but an important one, therefore the disclosure of his death would have to comply with certain cultural laws—there must be gun shots, and two or three goats must be slaughtered before the announcement. Anyone who started grieving before the official proclamation would be made to pay fines equivalent to three goats. (13–14)

And even more directly, during a key scene when Nnu Ego attempts suicide, the reader is told:

However a thing like that is not permitted in Nigeria; you are simply not allowed to commit suicide in peace, because everyone is responsible for the other person. Foreigners may call us a nation of busybodies, but to us an individual's life belongs to the community and not just to him or her. So a person has no right to take it while another member of the community looks on. He must interfere, he must stop it happening. (60)

In each of these passages the narrative voice may position itself in Nigeria or in the Igbo community, but the audience being addressed is

clearly outside. Why would an Igbo readership need the kind of elucidation of customs and history provided by the first two passages? In the third passage, the identification of an external audience is even clearer. The narrator identifies herself as Nigerian, but the mode of address indicates that readers who are not Nigerian are intended here. There is in the passage a sharing of cultural knowledge (about the nature of an "individual's life") and also a criticism of "foreigners" and their opinions, which might itself be a symptom of anxiety about the adequacy of the African-ness of the text.

It cannot always be assumed that the African novel in English is primarily speaking to Africa. Even as it sets out to speak *from* Africa, it may not find itself speaking *to* Africa. This is one of the chief complaints Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o lodges against African literatures written in European languages. Like a great deal of contemporary African cinema, an African novel may find itself more widely distributed outside Africa than inside. So no matter what vantage point novelists choose to adopt in presenting the story, they must also negotiate the question of where the readers are mainly located. On the one hand, this necessity often requires an ethnographic or autoethnographic approach to narration, where certain kinds of cultural knowledge, routine to those raised in that culture, have to be described in some detail. On the other hand, a readership constructed as foreign may push the narrative voice to claim a specific ethnic or national identity as a way of insisting on the Africanness of the novel. The three passages from *The Joys of Motherhood* cited above illustrate this tension in the African novel in English—which is not to say that African novels in English in general are replete with such passages, for authors have a variety of different strategies to respond to the problem.

In the classroom, such passages from African novels in English open up questions of authorial vantage point and readerly location. How does the "from" in the Gordimer passage above relate to the "to"? If the "to" is outside Africa for all practical purposes, to what extent can the "from" remain unaffected? What kinds of editorial changes are imposed by the disjuncture between "from" and "to"? What kinds of transformations must the narrative voice undergo in an attempt to suture this disjuncture? Can it rigorously maintain the distinction between "from" and "upon" that Gordimer desires in attempting this suturing? Out of such questions flow others: How does the ethnographic content of such passages comport with notions of the novel as a work of art? Are such novels compromised as works of art because of such passages? Or must we revise our

understanding of what a work of art is and how a novel becomes a work of art?

Once again, the special position of the African novel in English, where it is at once heir to a certain literary tradition and language and perforce a traitor to them, catalyzes a series of questions about the genre of the novel. The pedagogical utility of such a catalytic effect in an introductory class on the twentieth-century novel in English cannot be overstated.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel in English was mainly a British and American phenomenon. At the end, arguably, some of the most exciting writing was coming from elsewhere—Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean. In this context, the African novel in English represents a vital literary development of the twentieth century. It is part of the cultural history of decolonization; it represents one of the ways in which the colonized wrested control over their own lives from their erstwhile masters. While the popularity the novel in English enjoyed during the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States was steadily eclipsed through the twentieth by the rise of mass media, the novel remained a cultural form of considerable prestige. Part of the reason for this continuing prestige was the extension of the novel's reach into other parts of the world. Thus it could be said that the cultural prestige of the novel in English was perpetuated by the contributions of writers like those discussed here, even as its influence was circumscribed by other developments.

In his essay "Why the Novel Matters," a defense of the novel early in the twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence called the novel "the book of life," suggesting through that phrase that the novel had a unique capacity to depict the changeable flow of the experiences of men and women alive, as opposed to men and women dead inside—that is, fixed and in thrall to received ideas (105). In a class on the twentieth-century novel in English, I have used this essay in conjunction with a novel like Lawrence's *Women in Love*, first, to ask the question if and in what ways the novel is a "book of life"; second, later in the semester, to ask the class to return to Lawrence's assertions about the novel during a discussion of Achebe's *A Man of the People*. This journey to Africa and back is facilitated by close readings of a passage each from the two novels.

In the first passage, early in *Women in Love*, Birkin, Gerald, and their companions are discussing an African sculpture Gerald finds ugly and Birkin defends as high art for the purity with which it abstracts what he

regards as mindless sensuousness and physicality (81–82). The racialism of this passage is not hard to recognize for most students. However, when juxtaposed with Achebe's recourse to the example of African sculpture in *A Man of the People*, the discussion is pushed into even more complex and rewarding territory. In his passage, Achebe's intention is to challenge the notion that non-African readers can have easy access to African artistic realities; the false interpretations of the statue offered by a non-African viewer are satirized (50–51). By comparing the two metafictional passages in the two novels—passages in which the two novelists offer highly condensed and not at all facile ideas about art and, by extension, novels—we are able to open up the novel in English for discussion in radically new ways.

Lawrence believes that the novel matters, because through it, as a "book of life," "the whole of me shall tremble in its wholeness" ("Why" 105). The racialism and sanctioned ignorance of Africa through which the notions behind this theory of the novel are purchased are made clear by juxtaposition of the two passages. Further questions can be posed to students: In this light, what are we to make of Lawrence's assertion that the novel as "the book of life" is meant to set "the whole of me" trembling? What is "life" or "whole" or "me" here? And what do they have to do with race?

The processes that took the English language to the African colonies also brought the novel there. Neither the language nor the novel could remain untransformed in the process. The accommodation to African realities and lives necessitated the rethinking of many received ideas about the novel. This rethinking was neither systematic nor unanimous. Where Achebe demonstrated a desire to fashion certain kinds of remedies in his work, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o declared the very notion of writing novels in English a dead end. The rethinking of the novel in African contexts proceeded not only through the generation of numerous examples by the kinds of authors discussed above but also in lively critical debate surrounding the production of actual novels. In a class on the twentieth-century novel in English, the examples of African fiction can serve both to denaturalize the novel in general and to render visible the implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, ideological choices made by novelists everywhere.

I conclude by insisting that in a class such as the one described here an African novel be appreciated both on its own merits and in terms of its

conversation with other African and postcolonial novels. I never teach an African novel by itself in such a class. If there is a Ngũgĩ, there will also be an Emecheta, in addition to a Narayan or a Kincaid. The African novel in English is pedagogically useful, because it turns canonical metropolitan novels like Forster's *A Passage to India* and Lawrence's *Women in Love* inside out, but this utility is not its only one, and the African novel should not be taught as if it were.

Notes

1. I explore these distinctions in greater detail in "Midnight's Orphans."
2. For other writers weighing in on this debate, see Wali; Chinweizu and Madubuike, especially 8–16; Bishop, especially chapter 2; and Onwuemene.

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