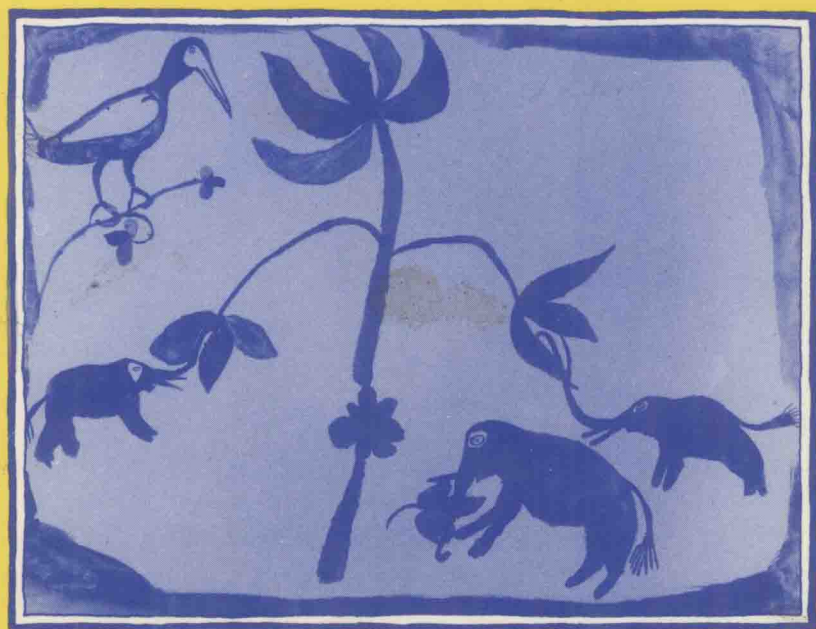


AFRICA AND THE NOVEL



NEIL McEWAN

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Neil McEwan



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For My Parents

Preface

This book is a study of how Africa has contributed to the novel during the last thirty years; it is not a complete survey of African fiction. Although I hope to assist the student or general reader who is relatively new to African literature in English, I mean to put a case of interest to everyone who reads new novels.

African writers express a view of the world from within a culture which has been more or less politely disregarded by our own, as though it were removed from the present day, ever since Conrad found it 'prehistoric' eighty years ago. Other terms have changed, but his kind of distancing remains. 'Barbaric' is now 'traditional'; 'civilised' is 'modern' or 'developed'. A recent complacency is to speak of 'hybrid' culture and of people who live 'in two worlds'. The art of a novelist who looks at what is real in his own knowledge of life finds it more complex, vital and unpredictable than that.

African novelists address readers at home in the setting of their present experience. Since they are still beset by outside assumptions about Africa's future, this is an urgent commitment. Addressing other readers in English, or French, the novels can be disconcerting to what Roland Barthes called the *Doxa*, the sum of our commonly received opinions – and to views publicised by Barthes. African styles of fiction are likely to discomfort readers who have been persuaded by the new prescriptive criticism. A frequent response is to say that Africa is at an earlier stage of the novel. But African novels are not underdeveloped. The most creative writers compete with those in older literary traditions in extending the possibilities and uses of fiction even in times and places which are gravely unpropitious. In this respect I hope their work can be seen in relation to Western literature in the 1960s and 1970s, and to European novels about Africa, without the imposition of our preconceptions on their culture, all over again.

I am indebted to many colleagues and friends in Fez for the loan of books, for advice, and for hospitality; especially to Michael Scott; to Abdulla and Griselda El Tayeb; to Tony and Jeannine

Newbury; and to Jean-Jacques and Christine Le Port. I am grateful to my parents, R. K. and J. L. McEwan, for many kinds of help with the book.

J. N. McE.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Modern Africa	1
2 Colonial Africa: Achebe, Oyono, Camara Laye	20
3 Independence: Soyinka, Achebe, Armah	61
4 Stories, Themes and Impressions in Recent African Fiction	102
5 Outsiders? Nadine Gordimer and Laurens van der Post	128
6 Afterword	161
<i>Notes</i>	167
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	172
<i>Index</i>	177

1 Modern Africa

Modern is a complex word which means different things to a geologist, an historian and an aircraft-designer. The senses of 'now existing' and 'of recent origin' have grown further apart in every century since the word appeared in English in 1500. Much that now exists is held to be obsolete, in life and literature. Competing voices claim their own modernity and *modern* becomes increasingly highly charged when it means what is now desirable and elastic in its sense of now existing. Podsnap's 'not English!' has been replaced by 'not modern!' Africans have suffered most from other people's misguided attempts to modernise them, and much of their literature has been inspired by a reappraisal of their own present place. But African fiction is worth the attention of everybody interested in the state of the novel. It poses various challenges, not least to developments in criticism which are losing touch with what novelists actually write.

My purpose is to offer an account of the best work of African novelists since 1950, and of some novels by outsiders inspired by experience of Africa, in the context of a discussion of the competing claims made on literature, and on all of us, by the idea of 'the modern'. When novels by Africans began to be published in London in the 1950s they were often discussed in terms of earlier periods of English literature. Amos Tutuola was said to be 'Elizabethan'; Cyprian Ekwensi was called an African Defoe — a comparison which became almost routine. It was even argued that an 'emergent bourgeoisie' in Africa was repeating the experience of England in the eighteenth century. There have been good critical accounts of the new African fiction in English, but studies of the contemporary novel have ignored them. Critics of African fiction have often seemed to justify that by assuming that new content has been put into old forms, African materials appearing in the traditional European form of the novel.¹ I hope to show that Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka and others have been writing fiction which is fully contemporary.

According to one pervasive misconception Africans are not 'ready' for modern writing. Even Chinua Achebe has lent it currency in the course of disparaging certain trends in European literature. Ghana, he observed caustically on one occasion, 'is not a modern existentialist country'. No country is existentialist, and there are English novelists who share Achebe's poor opinion of 'existentialism', while an African writer can reasonably take Kafka or Camus into account. The view still to be found among London reviewers that African fiction is 'at the stage of Dickens' is akin to the notion once common in British Council circles that earlier English literature should be most interesting to African readers because they are at the same stage of development as Chaucer or Fielding or Dickens; no one was ever sure which. In fact certain features of the Dickens world may have a special immediacy for a Nigerian or Sudanese reader, and other features for readers in England. No society has entirely outgrown the conditions Dickens knew, nor has any retained or acquired them. A British, Irish, or American novelist has at his disposal a range of fictional possibilities extending from the earliest European prose narratives to the most ingenious techniques of post-modernism: the continuum includes Fielding and Dickens, Lawrence and Joyce, Nabokov and John Barth. To deny that one can still learn from Dickens's art or from his portrayal of life is shortsighted, since the complex, uneven passage of history has finished with neither.

An African novelist who writes in English has access to the same possibilities. It is not a matter of borrowing techniques (as for agricultural irrigation) but of working out in new circumstances possibilities suggested by older books. Modern criticism of Victorian fiction has shown the almost unlimited scope for types of narrative which were once supposed to have been superseded by new experiments — a misunderstanding which is still current in France. Solzhenitsyn, Roland Barthes claimed, 'is not a good writer *for us*' because 'someone writing, let's say like Maupassant or Zola, can't be judged the same way as one of our modern writers'.² Russia is very different from France, but equidistant in history from Maupassant. A Nigerian or Kenyan novelist is not writing in an older manner for an older society; he is writing as the contemporary of Roland Barthes and John Barth, in a type of society that has never existed before. Influences from his own culture in forms of narrative, in oral culture, in his own language will assist in his creation of an African reality, but 'influences' in

good literature are only one kind of inspiration, and a novelist needs all he can find. No new novel with life in it can be like Defoe or like the tale of a bardic griot, although it may owe something hard to define to both.

Roland Barthes's condescension to Solzhenitsyn was characteristic of the attack on realism which began seriously in France in the early 1950s and has since spread to America, England, and Africa — as one sees in Marc Gontard's *La violence du texte* (1981), a study of Moroccan fiction in the fashionable French manner which has now added algebra to Barthes's ancient Greek in its attempt to mystify the young. Several recent books have helped to clarify the descriptive powers and responsibilities of the novelist and have shown that 'fictive' experiment is an old tradition compatible with realism.³ Critics, overimpressed by Barthes, who say that British realism is not 'for us' subject themselves to a narrow view of what contemporary readers expect. African novels are refreshing in their claim to teach, to inform, to entertain, and — especially in recent years — to persuade, by reference to the real world. Critical acknowledgement of their competence to do so within the realm of modern literature is worth defending because there is a deeply established tendency to treat them as 'backward'.

Some African critics disregard the issue because their literature belongs to an entirely separate culture, whose independence it has been necessary to defend. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Homecoming* has an appendix 'On the Abolition of The English Department'. As a Professor of Literature he contributed to the replacement of Nairobi University's English Department by Departments of African Literature and Language. Ngugi has rightly insisted that African students must approach other cultures through their own, and through their own languages. Wole Soyinka has objected to outsiders' imposition of 'their European world and their history, their social neuroses and their value systems'.⁴ The 'universal' is a dangerous idea since it easily leads to cultural aggression. Chinua Achebe has explained the need for African autonomy in objecting to a claim that characters in one African novel might be Americans because the work is 'universal':

Does it occur to American critics to try out their game of changing names of characters and places in an American novel, say, a Philip Roth or an Updike, and slotting in African names just to see how it works? But of course it would not occur to them. It

would never occur to them to doubt the universality of their own literature. In the nature of things the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it.⁵

It does occur to many of them to doubt the universality and realism of their literature, and writers with Achebe's objectives should concede nothing to these doubts. Overemphasis on separate realities yields to the substitution of 'structures' for the real. African and English writers and readers want to resist the creed that, in a phrase Achebe quotes, 'we are all Americans under the skin'. But such fiction as Achebe's historical books reminds us that humanism, as George Watson has recently re-affirmed in *The Story of the Novel* 'is a necessary ingredient in the claims of realism'.⁶

Discussing the question of verification, George Watson gives the case of an African schoolboy who knew a Lady Catherine de Burgh in his own village. Achebe might be irritated by that. But Lady Catherine was real to Jane Austen as the quintessence of a certain blend of the ladylike and the vulgar in Regency England, occupying an exact place in the sociolinguistic history of social arrogance – and as a proud, domineering, unfeeling woman with power over others. George Watson's African child recognised the woman in the lady, and rejoiced if he read *Pride and Prejudice* to the end where Elizabeth puts her in her place. The stubborn humanity of every culture is most obvious when we read works of the past. Marx's admiration for the ancient Greeks troubled him because he thought they belonged to a less developed stage of history than his own: 'the childhood of mankind'. Homer is still a best seller. Our capacity to enjoy literature seems to be the least explicable of all kinds of development. Literature breaks the rules by which we separate epochs and cultures. Even those who think that foreigners of their own time are retarded can feel at home with their stories. A Victorian reader who thought the Russians backward would have been impressed by their novels. African writers in the last thirty years have shown again that cultural barriers do not withstand good writing. Whatever a foreign reader's attitude to the Africa of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it will not interfere with his absorption in the novel.

Defending what is *African* in African literature ought not to forbid its discussion as a contribution to writing in the modern

world. A story can be a means of mitigating cultural prejudice. It might be illuminating to an African that a good man in Jane Austen can marry his brother's wife's sister,⁷ or to a European that a good man in Elechi Amadi can take several wives at once. Varieties of custom and outlook can be learned in the course of reading the best novels. There are opponents of realism who deny that one book can be better than another except as a matter of personal taste; a useful refutation, if one is needed, exists in the fact that for all our cultural differences African and European critics have largely agreed about which are the best books – although foreigners have much to learn from Africans about how to read them. 'Literature', says Eldred Jones, 'is part of Africa's gift to the world'.⁸ Novel readers are less numerous than novelists would like but they are now to be found everywhere; for the first time a writer in English can be in touch with a readership the great Victorians wrongly claimed to address: intelligent representatives of all mankind. The attack on realism, the denial that we can verify the truthfulness of our reading, is directed at all parts of this community. To ignore the claims of the 'universal' (an inadequate word for common experience) abets a cause which denies what African writers most vigorously claim, in the manner and purpose of their work: full participation in the modern world.

Wanting that above all for their novels and their societies, African intellectuals have engaged in prolonged debate about the relation of their fiction to European traditions. Whereas drama and poetry are African, the novel is said to be a European import. However well adapted to Africa, fiction is seen as a latecomer there; this is occasionally made a justification for polemical novels, as though all the art had been already accomplished far away. Western writers have also suffered an unnerving sense of a great institution behind them. Exaggerated respect for the history of the novel has been disabling in European and African literary theory.

In Nigeria it caused needless hostility when Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was published in 1952, although this is one of the finest minor works of its period. Its opening can hardly be quoted too often:

I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life. In those days we did not know other money, except COWRIES, so

that everything was very cheap, and my father was the richest man in our town.

My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all of the rest were hard workers, but I myself was an expert palm-wine drinkard. I was drinking palm-wine from morning till night and from night till morning. By that time I could not drink ordinary water at all except palm-wine.

But when my father noticed that I could not do any work more than to drink, he engaged an expert palm-wine tapster for me; he had no other work more than to tap palm-wine every day.

The tapster dies and the bereft drinkard seeks him in 'The Dead's town'; he has many marvellous adventures. The sentences are shaped by the imperfectly educated Tutuola's remarkable sense of what will read well in modern English; the story's incidents are drawn partly from Yoruba folklore. Foreign reviewers, including Dylan Thomas, were delighted,⁹ but at home it was felt that Tutuola was not dignified enough to be an African successor to Dickens and Lawrence (who would both have admired him). Other novelists were more orthodox.

Another reaction to the status of the Novel has been a refusal to 'compete' with a foreign genre, and critics have been attacked for pointing out Western influences in novels even when their authors admit to having profited from reading Hardy or Conrad or Joyce. Here is a different version of the European fear (or hope) that the prestigious novel is an exhausted genre. The Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin offers a valuable corrective: 'the higher a genre develops, and the more complex it becomes, the better and more fully it remembers its past'.¹⁰ That is clear in the way fiction has been revitalised by the discovery of fresh starting-points in old novels, throughout the last half-century. Other critics have shown what the novel shares with other kinds of narrative and argued that its origins need not be located in Richardson and Defoe.¹¹ The differences between English and French accounts of fiction's development make the existence of a genre conditioned by one, European world view seem unlikely. There is another background to fiction, of which novelists are usually more aware than critics, in everyday story-telling, anecdote, gossip, argument by example, mimicry, confession, fantasy, dreams, elaborated jokes, and the impulse to reminisce about childhood or travels, or to grumble about one's husband or wife. The novel has always thrived on every kind of

talk. An ear for people talking is perhaps a novelist's first qualification. Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia, the Cameroonian playwright and author of prose 'chronicles' of life in his village Mvoutessi began his first play *Three Suitors: One Husband* after listening to a palaver in the village. The stories in his *Chroniques de Mvoutessi* have the same source; Oyônô-Mbia's village is endlessly in palaver.¹² He is, as so many novelists have been, an extraordinary story-teller, mimic, wit and literary joker, in French and English. This aspect of the novel is neglected most of all in teaching and in guide books for students which stress themes and messages at the risk of representing a story as a tract. It may be that readers expect Lawrence's 'full play' of ideas and resent a writer's obvious designs on them because they recognise an affinity to conversation in which one anecdote is contradicted by another.¹³ In talk nobody doubts his sense of the real, although we enjoy tall stories. Novelists must be more than good talkers, but at their most advanced they are true to their most modest origins, in our ways of discussing the world. Happily no one can decide whether talk has 'developed', or propose that the 'genre' is exhausted.

It is frustrating for the African novelist in English that the best talk around him is in another language. The language barrier frustrates the foreigner too, and excludes most outsiders from competing as African novelists. It helps to explain the worst of all misrepresentations of Africa, which continues to be a menace, and which African novelists of most intellectual persuasions have combated: the European charge of backwardness.

At the close of his *Chinua Achebe* David Carroll observes that Achebe 'is creating a new kind of fictional reality which makes the reader examine afresh both his own reality and his assumptions about the modern novel'.¹⁴ Professor Carroll means the English reader, for whom this is certainly true. For the African reader Achebe's fictional reality is that of the modern novel and it conveys the Ibo life (in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*) known in Conrad's and Cary's lifetimes as a reality of the modern African world. The foreigner is made to re-examine his own reality and his own novels, but above all he is made to absorb the fact that another kind of reality has coexisted with his.

Colonialism interrupted the course of many relatively homogeneous societies at various stages of their own historical developments and found all of them hopelessly 'retarded'. The newcomers'

cultural advancement had been less consistent. Modernisers working in conformity with European models introduced Calvinist theology, Victorian literature, and Marxist–Leninism; Napoleonic bureaucracy, Edwardian education, and the World Bank. European incongruities have become more startling in Africa where older institutions found new ground and less competition. The regime of South Africa draws authority from ideas which were at their strongest in the seventeenth century. So beset, African creative writers since Independence have asserted the modernity of their own worlds, not without opposition. Overlooking the presence of anachronisms throughout our own societies, we have found them everywhere in Africa. Few Europeans can visit Africa without feeling that they are looking into the past: life is ‘nineteenth century’, or ‘medieval’, or ‘prehistoric’. Understandable as metaphors among non-historians these designations are inaccurate and unfriendly. An historian in Africa would certainly find points of comparison between modern societies and his period of study, and that would be possible in Europe too. Such comparisons need very careful definition and can be only speculative. When an Islamic city is called ‘medieval’, as V. S. Naipaul recently described Qum in Iran,¹⁵ and as visitors almost invariably label traditional cities in North Africa, the effect is to claim the modern world for the West, and to disclaim the obligations of coexistence with peoples who live differently. Discussing Senghor’s idea of Africa’s mission to ‘leaven’ the world Achebe writes:

In talking about the world here we really mean Europe and the West. But we have all got into the bad habit of regarding that slice of the globe as the whole thing. That an African writer can so easily slip into this error is a tribute to its hold upon the contemporary imagination. For those of Europe and the West such a habit if not entirely excusable is at least understandable. It can even be amusing in a harmless way – as when, for example, a game between Cincinnati and Minnesota is called the World Series. But it ceases to be funny when it consigns other continents and peoples into a kind of limbo; and it begins to border on the grotesque when these continents and peoples come to accept this view of the world and of themselves.¹⁶

The limbo into which Africa is cast is that of the past, not as Western historians understand it, but as it is commonly imagined.

Alberto Moravia's very readable travel book *Which Tribe do You Belong To?* records journeys in East and West Africa. Throughout the book Moravia presents himself as a modern man and locates Africans somewhere in 'the past'. In one sketch, 'The Abyss of the Centuries', he describes a young couple he saw in a shop in rural Kenya in 1963; the girl was 'adorned' with copper rings and the man with painted body-markings. They were, he says 'indecipherable' because 'between them and me there was a gap of ten or fifteen thousand years'. But he recalls the girl's 'glance of bashful, shy humanity; like a modest appeal to a remote, archaic brotherhood'. The chapter ends with an account of a Samburu hut where the author imagines himself, painted red, with a wife in copper rings: 'and I have gone back twenty thousand years; and this is my home'.¹⁷ Elsewhere in the book Moravia finds other past periods reflected in contemporary Africa. A Gikuyu schoolmaster who speaks enthusiastically of European literature, but with little apparent understanding, reminds him of how Virgil and Latin culture were regarded in the Middle Ages;¹⁸ a group of Englishmen observed in a hotel are 'perfect samples' of 'homo Victorianus'.¹⁹ Among the Dogoni of Bandiagara in Mali Moravia is surprised by the normal appearance of boys who seem 'just like boys anywhere in the world', yet believe, he thinks, that 'the cosmos is merely crockery', and that the sun and moon are basins, of red and white copper. He finds 'points of resemblance with the myths of Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean', and he wonders why the Dogoni 'came to a standstill at the myths themselves, whereas elsewhere there was a progression from myth to science'.²⁰ History has followed another course in Rome.

The girl in copper rings has probably seen tourists before; whatever she thinks of the shop with its tins of food, umbrellas, and workmen's clothes, her thoughts belong to the present age. The schoolmaster's fellow-countryman Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o has explained the irrelevance of much colonial English-teaching to the realities of modern Kenya; Ngugi might perhaps wish that the Englishmen would go back to the nineteenth century.²¹ Moravia emphasises that he does not feel superior to the Dogoni. He was impressed by the courteous behaviour and conversation of the Dogoni boys who acted as his guides. He is aware that African hospitality to strangers and good manners in the young contrast just as disturbingly with Western social barbarity as Western astronomy with African myth. These differences nowadays embarrass the

educated European who feels that Europe has no claim to be better than Africa but that traditional African world views are wrong, and traditional life 'limiting'. It is too easy an escape to find in the Dogoni or Samburu reflections of prehistory, twenty thousand years ago. We know little about life then, although we know that people were better fed, larger, and healthier, than most are today; and that they were undisturbed by Italian novelists. Moravia's assumption that he is epochs away from the girl in the rings, from whom he is in fact divided chiefly by language, is disappointing in a novelist. He could have wondered about how an African freethinker, contemplating the Pope, might mistakenly say: 'between him and me there is a gap of centuries', or how an urbane African might find 'living-history' in Calabria, or in Oxford 'which people call medieval, though it's not'. An African novelist visiting the United States and hearing of the movement to remove Darwin from school curricula might suffer the illusion of a past come back to life, so strong is the American insistence abroad that social and technological changes have made a wholly new world there, safely encapsulated.

In deriding the efforts of 'foreign triers' among Victorian and early-twentieth-century novelists for their inability to show the African world from inside and for distorting or ignoring their African characters, African critics have given various explanations: racialism, imperialism, Romanticism, laziness about language learning. Carl Gustav Jung, who identified modern Africans with Early Man, believed that Europeans are unbalanced by meeting in Africans the 'primitive' in themselves. However that may be, the first half-century of English fiction about Africa is a disappointment. Olive Schreiner's *The Story of An African Farm* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are good novels flawed. We should understand why.

The presence of ignorance, stupidity, greed, and racialism, among Europeans in colonial Africa has been amply demonstrated. 'The conquest of the earth', Marlow observes at the outset of his tale in *Heart of Darkness* 'is not a pretty thing'. Whatever view would be taken today of Marlow's 'idea', had he explained it, there is no doubt that many Europeans had baser motives. But Africans were misrepresented by the most intelligent and imaginative outsiders, good novelists. At its best the European idea led to a view of Africans which diminished and blurred their humanity.

In the case of Olive Schreiner, a progressive-minded writer,