

NOTES AND REVIEWS

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European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth-Century Fiction
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The various ways in which writers belonging to one race have attempted to present other races in creative literature have always been a compelling source of interest for literary critics. Eldred Jones's *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), which examined Elizabethan conceptions of the black man, culminating in Shakespeare's subtle study of his Moor, has had followers in the field of fiction, not the least of which is Douglas Killam's *Africa in English Fiction 1874 - 1939* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968). The basic assumption behind such works is that most of the English writers in question presented distorted pictures of black men based on stereotypes and misconceptions derived at second hand from travel tales and spurious anthropological works. One of the consequences of the colonial contact is that Africans, too, have been writing about Europeans, and it was inevitable that studies would emerge which attempt to demonstrate the accuracy of the African's presentation of the white man.

Sarah Milbury-Steen's *European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth-Century Fiction* is one such study. In fact, as the title implies, the author's aim is to examine the image that both Europeans and Africans present of each other in their fiction. The title of the book might lead the reader to suppose that Dr. Milbury-Steen would devote some attention to a comparative evaluation of the fairness and accuracy with which the races present each other. Such hopes remain unfulfilled. The organization of the book precludes this interesting exercise. Part one is strictly devoted to Europeans looking at Africans, and Part two to Africans looking at Europeans. Each part consists of chapters on the origins of stereotypes, stereotypes preserved, stereotypes contradicted, and stereotypes transcended.

The chapters on the origins of African stereotypes in British and French colonial novels are the most illuminating and insightful in the whole book. Here Dr. Milbury-Steen shows herself to be a competent and meticulous researcher, tracing the European stereotypes of Africans to various pseudoscientific theories designed to bolster European consciousness of racial superiority. As a consequence of these theories, the African in the popular European imagination came to be regarded as ugly, filthy, mentally deficient, incapable of deductive reasoning, savage, deceitful, oversexed, impulsive, superstitious, and lazy; and these views profoundly influenced several European writers in their presentation of Africans in their novels.

One of the dangers of Dr. Milbury-Steen's approach is the temptation to see stereotypes where they do not exist, and, unfortunately, she has not always been able to avoid this pitfall. This particularly applies to her analysis of *Batouala*, a novel by René Maran who was not even a European, but a Francophone West Indian working with the French Colonial Service in Central Africa. Maran's novel

was deliberately written to shock the French into a realization of the evils of their colonial administration and a recognition of the dignity and humanity of the African peoples they ruled. But Dr. Milbury-Steen, like some other commentators on the novel, sees Maran as merely reproducing the usual African stereotypes, presenting the African as savage, cruel, oversexed, and an adulterer indulging in sexual orgies. A careful reading of *Batouala*, however, fails to substantiate this claim. Dr. Milbury-Steen's impression of chief Batouala's cruelty is based on the latter's supposed ill-treatment (beating) of his dog. Nowhere in the novel, however, do we see Batouala ill-treating his dog, and even if he does, this would be no different from the way in which millions of Africans, ancient and modern, treat their dogs, which are regarded, not so much as pets as in Europe, but as hunters and watchmen. What the novel presents in this case is not so much a stereotype as the representation of an ethnographical fact. Similarly, Dr. Milbury-Steen claims that Yassigui'Ndja, the chief's wife, upholds the stock notion of black sexuality so completely that she builds her whole life around the pursuit of sexual pleasure. The evidence for this is not in the text. Certainly Yassigui'Ndja falls in love with the handsome young man Bissibi'Nguai, as do most of the other women, and in a dangerous situation where her life is threatened sees hope only in the prospect of elopement with him. But this is a far cry from building her life around the pursuit of sexual pleasure, or being the embodiment of black sexuality. Dr. Milbury-Steen in her anxious search for stereotypes quite often fails to realize the real human dilemmas confronting the characters in a realistically-evoked and convincing situation which has nothing to do with stereotypes.

Dr. Milbury-Steen is much more to the point on Graham Greene's overrated novel *Heart of the Matter* which is set in Sierra Leone, and which has no convincing authentic African character. Indeed, it seems that during his West African tours Graham Greene blinded himself to the reality of Africans and could thus only create stereotypes when he wanted to represent them in his fiction.

Milbury-Steen's chapter on Joyce Cary's much misunderstood novel *Mr. Johnson*, which she sees as representing "stereotypes transcended," is possibly her best. A number of African intellectuals, including Chinua Achebe and Abioseh Nicol, have reacted very strongly against Cary's portrayal of Mr. Johnson which they see as a caricature of the African. They thus fail to realize that Joyce Cary intended Mr. Johnson not as a typical representative of any race, African or whatever, but as nothing more nor less than Mr. Johnson, a peculiar individual, a creative artist with a powerful imagination and a tremendous zest for life. Milbury-Steen's chapter brings this out very lucidly and persuasively.

Generally Dr. Milbury-Steen is much sounder in her discussion of Europeans looking at Africans than Africans looking at Europeans. In the latter case she is rather at sea. Firstly, her method dictates that she should attempt to locate the literary sources of African stereotypes of Europeans, just as she had traced the sources of European stereotypes of Africans in pseudoscientific racist works. And she locates these rather unconvincingly in the African oral tradition. Do we really need any sources of African stereotypes of Europeans? The early European writers who wished to represent Africans in fiction lacked, in most cases, first-hand information of Africans; and even when they lived in Africa, they were so distant from Africans that they never got to know them at all. Hence the need to resort to stereotypes in the representation of Africans in fiction. The Africans who wrote about Europeans, on the other hand, had ample opportunity to get to know the European at first hand. It would have been a much more fruitful exercise to attempt to locate the sources of African "stereotypes" (if stereotypes they could be called) of Europeans in personal experience than in the oral tradition.

This brings one to a very significant flaw in Dr. Milbury-Steen's presentation—the failure to give a precise definition of the term “stereotype.” The use of the term today is quite often in a pejorative sense suggesting a fixed conception which is often inaccurate or distorted. To suggest therefore that Achebe's white characters are stereotypes is to imply that they are inaccurate representations of Europeans at the time, based on popular distortions or misconceptions. But Achebe's white characters—Winterbottom, Wright, and Clarke—are not necessarily stereotypes in the pejorative sense of the term, simply because they conform to popular African ideas of the white administrator. It merely means that Achebe's conception of these characters, which may be quite authentic and genuine, coincides with the popular conception, which may also in its turn be quite authentic and genuine. A “stereotype” is not necessarily inaccurate or a distortion. If this is how Achebe, from his own personal experience, feels that British administrators were like, he has every right to represent them as such in his novels. We must never lose sight of the fact that writers like Achebe, Oyono, Ousmane, and Beti were writing for the most part from personal experience, not from some literary source, and they were trying to re-create Europeans as they knew them.

It is all too easy to make the facile assumption, as Dr. Milbury-Steen often does, that a “stereotype” or a character which seems to conform to the popular conception, will be unconvincing or unrealistic or insufficiently realized. The fact that Aluko's or Achebe's British administrative officers look like stereotypes does not imply a lack of understanding of their psychological makeup. A stereotype is not necessarily a “type” character. Conversely, the fact that a character fails to come to life does not necessarily mean that he is a stereotype. All too often Dr. Milbury-Steen seems to assume that because certain white characters are flat or one-dimensional, or are said to be so by some critic or other, they must be stereotypes.

Inevitably, Dr. Milbury-Steen's comments on the African novels are irritatingly jaundiced. But it is with Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* that she is most off course. She sees Clarence's quest as an attempt to fuse the physical with the spiritual, to learn to abandon the Western guilt complex about sex. She seems to forget that the Master of Ceremonies (an exemplary character according to Dr. Milbury-Steen) who as Clarence's conscience finally exposes all the things that Clarence has tried to hide from himself, actually rebukes him in the novel for his sexual indulgence in an attempt to force him to feel ashamed of himself. Clarence's wallowing in sexuality is hardly something he is expected to accept and be proud of. Finally, having rejected the assimilation interpretation of the novel, she proceeds in effect to demonstrate the assimilation of Clarence into African society.

European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth-Century Fiction is thus an uneven performance. It contains brilliant insights into the sources of European stereotypes of Africans and the treatment of these images in European works on Africa, coexisting with rather simple critical judgements on African novelists' portrayal of white men.

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