

## BOOK REVIEWS

Neil McEwan

### *AFRICA AND THE NOVEL*

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Reviewed by Gerald Moore

Neil McEwan has made a forceful and distinctive entry to the discussion of African fiction with this book. He benefits throughout from the depth and extent of his reading in the general literature of criticism. Few earlier critics of the African novel, indigenous or foreign, have had this grounding in the theory of the subject which, despite the protests of the more chauvinistic commentators, does illuminate the reading of any literature, however different or autonomous it may claim to be. The point is that theory can accommodate difference, but can also make sense of it and relate it where necessary to what we already know.

One example of such illumination is his application of Bakhtin's definition of the "menippean" to Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*. This is effective both in the appreciation of that complex work itself and in linking it creatively with other menippean works in other ages and literatures. For Bakhtin argues that the menippean tradition in narrative freely mingles "fantasy and symbolism with low-life realism." It does so within the overall, unifying and renewing spirit of carnival. Hence the dramatic, poetic, satiric, mythic, and realistic elements which continually intermingle in *The Interpreters* and elsewhere in Soyinka's work, notably in *The Road*, can be seen as celebrative and mutually illuminating in the carnivalistic manner, rather than as discordant. Some of Bakhtin's other examples of menippean writers, such as Swift, Rabelais, and Aristophanes, are ones whom earlier commentators have linked with Soyinka, but without being able to do so in a coherent way.

*The Interpreters* has caused particular problems for critics who have approached it with a preconceived and extraneously derived notion of what a novel should be. Thus Charles Larson, in *The Emergence of African Fiction*, labors throughout under the weight of the assumptions expressed in his title; that African fiction is slowly "coming of age" and thus qualifying to join in some sort of universalist jamboree which is the ultimate destination of all emergent fictions. Since *The Interpreters* is unquestionably experimental, it can be slotted with a sigh of relief into that category within the universalist scene; a scene which, on closer examination, turns out to consist mainly of American writers. Hence he reserves his highest accolade for Lenrie Peters's novel *The Second Round* noting approvingly (if wrongly) that one could read it without realizing that it was an African novel at all. Faced with this kind of blandness, one wonders whether Larson would accept the immitigably Russian character of *Anna Karenina*, the quite equal Frenchness of *Madame Bovary* or, forsooth, the Americanness of *The Great Gatsby*. If these works have universal appeal, it is surely through the intensity with which they realize their particular worlds, not despite it.

Eustace Palmer, on the other hand, found *The Interpreters* so offensive to his notion of what a novel should be (which he freely admitted to be based on the classic European novel) that he banished it altogether from his first book, *Introduction to the African Novel*, only to smuggle it back without explanation into his second, curiously titled *The Development of the African Novel*. Here we find the same pernicious evolutionism as in Charles Larson. Yes, individual writers develop and even improve. But the same notion of development cannot be extended to literatures, since literature as an activity is as old as human society itself. If we buy the notion of development, how are we to explain that literatures often throw up their greatest writers at an early stage? One has only to think of Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare. African fiction will continue to change and exhibit new features, but is unlikely to produce a novel which is in some absolute sense better or more "developed" than *Things Fall Apart*.

More important than occasional critical insights offered by McEwan from his reading, is his continual insistence that the African novel is part of the modern scene, just as the world it describes is part of the modern world. To participate in that world, one does not need to

be technologically "hip", but simply to be alive, if the word modern is used in its proper sense of contemporary. This reinforces the argument that evolutionary ideas are as inappropriate to fiction as they are to the discussion of any other social phenomenon. Let them be confined to paleontology, where they originated and where they properly belong. McEwan strengthens his case by reminding us that the white characters in African fiction, who see themselves as the bearers of the modern, in administration, religion, or education, into the prehistoric world, often strike the reader as being curiously archaic and out of touch, entirely lacking the dynamic adaptability displayed by many of the Africans around them. This observation might also be made of *A Passage to India*, where Aziz is certainly the most alive of the characters offered and the most responsive to his actual environment. The same archaism can be detected in the brutal colonialists of Oyono's *Une Vie du Boy* as in the relatively well-meaning Winterbottom of *Arrow of God*, or the Reverend Father Superior Drumont of *le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, whose reaction upon discovering that he has learned nothing in twenty years is not to apply that knowledge, but to abandon Africa forever.

In his selection of texts, McEwan has aimed at the representative rather than the comprehensive. This is surely wise, at a point in time when one begins to look for studies of individual writers or national literatures, rather than continent-wide surveys of a genre. He devotes most discussion to Laye's *le Regard du Roi*, Oyono's *Une Vie du Boy*, Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* (the first appearance of this talented Somali writer in a book-length study) and to three of Achebe's novels. There is also some briefer discussion of Elechi Amadi, Alex la Guma, and Meja Mwangi. This is all right so far as it goes, but it does suggest a serious underestimation of Sembene Ousmane, who is mentioned only because one of Ngugi's characters is reading him, and of Mongo Beti, whose important novels of the seventies are not even referred to. Also, since McEwan has generally been content to concentrate on only one book by each author, one looks in vain for those one-shot novelists who have nevertheless made profound marks with their single shots. Obvious here are Kane's *l'Aventure Ambigue*, Yambo's *le Devoir de Violence*, Fall's *le Plaie*, Kourouma's *les Soleils des Independences* and Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*. A study of the African novel which considers none of these is somewhat impaired. To be prolific is not everything in art (one thinks of Goncharov or Constant) and these are undoubtedly amongst the most distinguished and challenging of African novels. A book published in 1983 might also have found room for some of the younger novelists who have begun to publish in the past dozen years or so, such as Isidore Okpewho, Festus Iyayi, Kole Omotoso, and Dambudze Marechera.

Still, objections can be raised to any selection and presumably Neil McEwan writes of what he likes. This must also explain his choice of two white South-African writers for discussion in his last chapter, under the title "Outsiders?". McEwan does not engage directly with the question posed in his title. But he does quote Nadine Gordimer, one of those selected, to the effect that the one thing a white writer cannot experience is blackness. This seems largely to answer the question in the positive, for in a book mostly concerned with the black experience, inability to share that experience does define one as an outsider. But in sheer terms of quality as an artist depicting contemporary Africa, Nadine Gordimer certainly merits discussion here, and it is certainly a fully contemporary Africa that she sees. This is much less certain when we turn to the novels of his other choice, Laurens van der Post. As McEwan himself admits, van der Post is in the forefront of those who insist on relegating African life to the prehistoric, or at best the romantically barbaric. One might say that he always sees the African as equal but opposite, the necessary through cruelly despised complement to his own guilty modernity. He is like a white negritudinist in his insistence that Africa must play this instinctive role in opposition to the drama of white rationality and technological wizardry. One wonders what is either prehistoric or romantic about existence today in Soweto or Crossroads. But van der Post does not address himself to questions such as these, and despite his evident decency as a human being, or his epic sense of South-African history and landscape, his inability to see his African characters as fully contemporary does appear to invalidate his work as a novelist (not as a chronicler of Bushman life in the wild), by the very criterion set up by McEwan himself in his opening chapter. If McEwan wanted to set his black African novels against comparable work appearing in the south of the continent, then he has overlooked some obvious candidates for the slot occupied by van der Post. To mention only three, what about André Brink, J. M. Coetzee, or Doris Lessing? All these seem to fit more clearly into his conception of what the novelist is about.

These carpings, however, do not seriously damage the thrust of Neil McEwan's book as a whole. It displays throughout an ability to say fresh things and a certain intellectual toughness most welcome in the discussion of his subject.