

## MODERN AFRICAN WRITING

By NADINE GORDIMER

THESE are two kinds of writers in Africa: the testifiers and those who are actually creating a modern African literature. But perhaps I ought first to explain a little more fully on what criteria I base the distinction between the testifiers and the creative writers. The testifiers supply some fascinating folklore and a lot of useful information about the organization of traditional African life, and the facts of social change in Africa. Like their counterparts, lesser writers all over the world, they take stock-in-trade abstractions of human behavior and look about for a dummy to dress in them, a dummy put together out of prototypes in other people's books rather than from observation of living people. They set these dummies in action, and you watch till they run down; there is no attempt to uncover human motivation, whether of temperament, from within, or social situation, from without. Such writers do not understand the forces which lie behind the human phenomena they observe and are moved to write about.

In passing, there is one difference between these writers in Africa and their European counterparts which is interesting because it

relates so closely to Africa in its present state of transition. Elsewhere, people who are ill-equipped creatively write out of vanity or because there is a profitable reading public for the third-rate. In Africa, a literature is still seen largely as a function of the benefits of education, automatically conferred upon a society which has a quota of Western-educated people. The West African pidgin-English concept "to know book" goes further than it may appear; many school teachers, clerks, and other white-collar workers seem to write a novel almost as a matter of duty. The principle is strongly reinforced, of course, by the fact that the shortage of Western-educated people means that Africa's real writers all, I think, without exception, have to perform some other function in addition to their vocation—from Africa's greatest poet, Leopold Sedar Senghor, who is also the President of Senegal, to T. M. Aluko, a fine Nigerian novelist, who is director of public works.

But this is by the way. Let me give some examples of the work of writers whose factual material is interesting but whose ability falls short of that material. The would-be writer says to himself: all over Africa village boys have become Prime Ministers and Presidents: Kenyatta, Obote, Touré, Banda, Kaunda; I will write a book about a village boy who, like them, leaves home, struggles for an education, forms a political party, resists the colonial authorities, wins over the people, and moves into Government House. Another would-be writer, aware of the move to re-establish the validity of the African way of life, says to herself, it is one of the customs of my country for the husband of a childless woman to take another wife: I will write about a childless woman whose husband takes another wife. The result is, at best, something like the Sierra Leonian, Wil-

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MISS GORDIMER has always lived in South Africa, where she was born. She has published four collections of short stories and four novels, all widely translated. A new novel, *A Guest of Honour*, will appear this month, and a fifth book of stories is underway. In 1961, she won a British award for the most distinguished contribution to Commonwealth literature. She was a Ford Foundation Visiting Professor to the United States, also in 1961. In 1969, she lectured at Harvard, Princeton, and Northwestern; in 1970, at Western Michigan and The University of Michigan. Two of her novels—*A World of Strangers* and *The Late Bourgeois World* are banned in South Africa, as is *South African Writing Today*, co-edited with Lionel Abrahams.

liam Conton's *The African*, and the Nigerian, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. While Conton's hero, Kisimi Kamara, progresses from village bright boy through the care of gin-tipping missionary ladies to Cambridge certificate, England, lodgings, urban poverty and midnight oil, enlivened by boyish plans for African liberation, he has a certain autobiographical veracity behind him. When he returns to his country and becomes a public, less subjective figure, his author, lacking the creative insight into the complex motivation—psychological, political, and historical—needed to give his hero substance in this situation, resorts to sudden bald statements to be taken on trust by the reader—"Six months later I was Prime Minister"—and finally turns in desperation (and wild defiance of the political facts of life) to having Kamara resign office, buy an airline ticket, and land in South Africa to organise a boycott to bring down Apartheid.

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is a childless woman whose bewilderment and frustration are stated and left unexplored. Again, not *knowing enough* about her own creation, the author has to resort to something to fill the vacuum. She uses rambling details of daily life, mildly interesting but largely irrelevant. Among them the key to the objective reality of *Efuru* lies half buried and less than half understood. *Efuru* is presented as beautiful, clever, a successful trader, and she performs all the rites and neighbourly duties without which these attributes would not be valid in a tribal society, but she has had two unsuccessful marriages and seen her only child die. In a somewhat off-stage incident, a sage diagnoses that a river goddess has chosen *Efuru* as her honoured worshipper; it seems that other women chosen by the river goddess have been childless, too. Are we then being shown, through the life of an individual, how sublimation of frustrated natural instincts takes place in a woman of a particular type, and how an African society invents or employs religious or mystical conventions to reconcile her to her lot and give her a place within the society despite the fact that she cannot fulfil the conventional one? Is this novel really about an interesting form of compensation, not merely personal, but also

social? The answer is yes, but Flora Nwapa, the author, only dimly senses the theme of her novel; all she has seen is the somewhat disparate series of events in the life of *Efuru*. Perhaps you remember E. M. Forster's famous definition of the difference between story and plot. "The king died and then the queen died": that is a story, a series of events arranged in their time-sequence. "The king died and then the queen died of grief": that is a plot; the time-sequence is preserved but the emphasis is on causality. If I carry the definition one step further and suppose the author sets out to explore the questions, "What sort of woman is it who dies of grief and what sort of social and historical context shaped her?"—we reach a definition of theme, the third dimension of the novel, and the one where it fulfils art's function of eternally pushing back the barriers of understanding in order to apprehend and make sense of life.

Flora Nwapa is one among the many African writers who are not able to do this for African life because she is not capable of dealing with theme. But she is a country-woman of one of the few African writers whose name already belongs to world literature—Chinua Achebe. He handles the dominant themes of African writing, commanding all the resources of a brilliant creative imagination from a classical sense of tragedy to ironic wit. In his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, he shows at once a comprehensive insight into his characters. Their psychological make-up is never seen in isolation, as a neurotic phenomenon; his historical sense sets them at the axis of their time and place. He knows who they are, and why they are as they are; he shows them as stemming from the past, engaged with the forces of the present, and relevant to a future. He chooses as his hero what Hegel calls a world-historical figure, a man who, though not obscure is not a king, not a history-maker in the obvious sense, but someone through whose individual life the forces of his time can be seen to interact. Okonkwo is a person of authority and achievement in his Eastern Nigerian village. He was born the son of a failure and is self-made; by his own efforts he has a reputation as a fine wrestler, has distinguished

himself in tribal wars, has an excellent yam crop, two tribal titles, and can afford three wives. A hostage of a tribal skirmish, a young boy, Ikemefuna, is given into his care until the council of tribal elders decides the boy's fate. Ikemefuna becomes so much a member of Okonkwo's family that he often has the honor of carrying Okonkwo's stool; yet when the elders decide Ikemefuna must die, Okonkwo is expected to be present when the deed is done, and, indeed to despatch him in his final agony. Okonkwo tries to put the dead boy out of his mind. Then later, at the funeral rites for an old man, the gun with which Okonkwo is to fire a salute explodes and fatally wounds another young boy. It is a crime to kill a clansman, and so Okonkwo is exiled from the village for seven years.

These are the disparate facts of the narrative; in Achebe's hands they grow out of one another with the surging inevitability of a Greek tragedy. Okonkwo's own son, Nwoye, was a disappointment; Ikemefuna had come to stand in his place. Yet when Ikemefuna received his death-blow and turned to Okonkwo, calling out "My father, they have killed me!" Okonkwo, afraid of being thought weak, drew his matchet and cut him down. . . . The curse of Okonkwo's guilt over Ikemefuna hangs over subsequent events; the man at whose funeral Okonkwo inadvertently killed a young clansman was Ezeudu, the same old man who had said to Okonkwo at the time of Ikemefuna's killing, "That boy calls you father. Bear no hand in his death." So ends the first part of the novel. In it we have seen the personal psychological make-up of Okonkwo stemming from his private situation and background: the forces of the past which have combined to make him the man he is.

The second half brings the man into engagement with the specific politico-historical situation of his time. The seven years of Okonkwo's exile coincide with the infiltration of white missionaries and the colonial administration that follows, the flag close behind the cross. When Okonkwo returns to his village, his crime against the clan expiated, he finds that the white man's religion has come and "led many of the people astray"; the white man's government has built a court where he

judges cases "in ignorance" of African law; and a store has been opened where for the first time palm-oil and kernel have become "things of great price." Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, has become a Christian convert, and disowns his father. Okonkwo, whose exile has cost him his position of authority in the clan—"The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another"—regains authority when, on his advice, the church is burned down because an *egwugwu* (an ancestral spirit impersonated by a clansman) has been unmasked and desecrated by a Christian convert. As a result, Okonkwo and five other leaders are summoned by the District Commissioner for a discussion and are then arrested and held hostage for a fine to be paid by the villagers. Lashed and humiliated by underlings of his own race while he was in prison, Okonkwo decides that if the clan will not fight to drive the white man away, he will avenge himself alone. At a meeting of the clan, he kills a government messenger who comes to declare the meeting illegal. Before the D.C. arrives with soldiers to arrest him, he hangs himself.

Again, the train of events falls into a more profoundly meaningful arrangement than that of causality when Achebe's deep understanding of the nature of the white man's impact on Africa is brought to bear on them. Okonkwo kills himself because the authority he takes up again is already a broken thing; there can be no real return to the clan, for him, because the African ethos that held it together has faltered before the attraction-repulsion of the white man's ethos. When Okonkwo kills the government messenger:

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action.

The white man's gods more than the white man's guns—Achebe shows how, above all, these were what no one was armed against, at this stage in Africa's history.

Tumult instead of action: *No Longer At Ease*, the title of Achebe's second novel, at

once takes up the theme of the era for which the scene was set at the close of *Things Fall Apart*. *No Longer At Ease* begins in a courtroom in Lagos where Obi Okonkwo (I don't know whether the suggestion is that he is a later generation of the dead Okonkwo's family) is on trial for taking bribes. The time is still pre-Nigerian independence. Obi is a been-to, a civil servant educated in England, personable, with a taste for poetry and scotch, and a car. Friends, white administrators—all discuss his downfall: "Everyone wondered why." The book explores the irony of the statement, working back to it through the conflict of social pressures that have made this courtroom almost a pre-destination for young Obi. When he returned from England, full of enthusiasm for the new Africa his generation is going to build, and determined to set an example of dedication, honesty, and disinterest in the Africanized Civil Service, he was at once burdened with two incompatible sets of obligations: on the one hand, to pay back to his village the money advanced for his overseas education and the necessity to assist his family; on the other, to live in a European style befitting his position as a civil servant. With a terse ironic touch, Achebe places him not between some sweeping abstraction of "natural" forces of past and future, but between social stresses, as he extends himself docilely on the rack of the bourgeois values his society has taken over from the white man, values totally unreal in the economic and social conditions of that society. It is not that Obi cannot do his work efficiently, but that he accepts the necessity for the trappings of a European bourgeois life that, during a European administration, went along with it. Even the obligation to support his family is not measured in accordance with their actual needs, but with what is thought to befit the family of a man who lives according to European white-collar values.

In his third novel, *Arrow of God*, Achebe turns back to the early colonial era, pre-dating that of *Things Fall Apart*. There are similarities between the first and the third; but, in the first, the conflict between the white man and Africa is overt, whereas in the third, African confidence is still unshaken

and the African ethos intact, a positive value not yet brought into question by others. It is significant that whereas Okonkwo loses his son as a convert to Christianity, Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* sends his son to the mission school in cold calculation that it is useful and necessary to acquire the white man's magic—his skills. Although the threat of the white man's presence hangs over these people, they have not yet realized that they could ever be anything but masters of their own destiny. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's purpose was to show traditional life disintegrating; in *Arrow of God* his purpose is above all to reinstate the validity of life without the white man. He examines, through the ordinary devices of the psychological novel, the stresses and emotion problems of that life and the social order created to contain them. They are presented in themselves, in the tension of their own order, rather than in conflict with another. Although the actions of colonial administrators precipitate events in the novel, it is the events themselves and the Africans who deal with them who take up the foreground—the white men, prominent in Achebe's other books, this time remain curiously unimportant and remote.

The scene is a complex of villages in Eastern Nigeria and the people are Ibo. Ezeulu, Chief Priest of Ulu, local deity of the Umuaro people, is the protagonist. The central narrative is his double struggle: against rivalry among his own tribesmen, and the incomprehensible demands (scarcely recognised as authority, yet) of the district officers and missionaries. This story-line is so richly overlaid with the intrigues, counter-intrigues, ceremonies, customs, feasts and legends of the Umuaro, not to mention character studies of Ezeulu's wives, children, in-laws, and friends, and the brilliantly observed relations between them all, that it comes as something of a shock, in the last chapter or two, to realize that while this abundance of life has been occupying one's mind, Ezeulu has been moving toward one of those Lear-like destinies of defeat before social change that Achebe understands so well. This novel attempts the complete evocation of African life—not an exoticist exploitation of local colour and strange customs, but the total logic of a par-

ticular way of life. Only *The Dark Child*, an autobiographical novel by the French African writer, Camara Laye, can compare with it, and then only as an exquisite detail can be compared with the superbly realized complete canvas. For Achebe has succeeded superbly, even though he has perhaps not solved all the technical problems of fitting this particular theme into the form of the conventional modern novel.

In his latest novel, *A Man of The People*, he turns to comic irony as the best approach to the theme of political corruption in an independent African State—and he is almost the only English-writing African able to use it. Again, so far, one has to look to French African writers for comparison—the rather clumsy satire of Mongo Beti's attack on the Catholic Church in *King Lazarus*, and the immensely stylish, sophisticated bite of Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*, written in the form of a diary which records the servant's-eye view of the private life and loves of the white master-race.

James Ngugi of Kenya is another novelist who attempts important African themes on a scale of complexity and depth, although he does not always manage to bring them off with the skill of an Achebe. He attempts to relate the African past—not just historical but also mythological—to the present-day life of the Gikuyu people. The period of his novel, *The River Between*, is immediately pre-Mau-Mau—or pre-Kiama, to give the movement its proper name. The approach is that of an exploration of the background of social and historical forces that led to the formation of a liberation movement. The novel begins with a scene-setting in which the mythological origin of the Gikuyu—their Adam-and-Eve story—is invoked, and the prophesy of an ancient Gikuyu seer is recalled: "There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies." Now they have come; the familiar struggle is on between the clanspeople who remain within tribal disciplines and the white missionaries and their black converts. The young boy Waiyuki, like Ezeulu's son in *Arrow of God*, goes to the mission school to learn the secrets of the white man; but for Waiyuki this is seen as part of the fulfilment of a political

destiny. His father is a descendent of the seer and believes that his son is the chosen one whom it was also predicted would come from the hills to save the Gikuyu. The feud between the mission and the clan finds its martyr in Muthoni, daughter of the convert pastor, Joshua. The issue is, not surprisingly, her circumcision—white condemnation of female circumcision coming second only to the settler appropriation of the White Highlands, in the canon of Gikuyu resentment of colonial rule. Muthoni is a devout Christian, but she cannot accept the Christian edict against a rite without which she will not belong, in the true sense, to her people. She says "I want to be a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe." Waiyuki realises that Muthoni "had the courage to attempt a reconciliation of the many forces that wanted to control her" from the tribal past and the westernised future. She dies of the operation: to the tribe, a saint; to the mission, a pagan punished for her sins. Waiyuki, while he follows his father's admonition to remain true to his people and the ancient rites, becomes a teacher and believes that the salvation of the people before the threat of annihilation by the white man's ethos lies in western education, the organization of the Gikuyu independent schools movement. He joins the Kiama at its inception, when it is chiefly a society to keep Gikuyu cultural traditions alive, but resigns when it takes on a more militant character, putting off the political mission that he sees is necessary: to unite the people, both Christian and tribal, in a common purpose of liberation from white rule. Later he rejoins the Kiama but fails to commit himself fully to leadership. Finally, he is expelled when he goes to warn the mission of an impending attack by the Kiama. The conflict is now between Waiyuki and the tribe; like other saviours before him he is threatened with crucifixion at the hands of those he has come to save. He understands at last that no evasion is possible—"the new awareness of the people wanted expression at a political level"—and no other would do.

This over-long and clumsy novel does analyze with considerable insight the spiritual conflict between the values of tribal life and those imposed by white conquest. Ngugi cre-

ates a world-historical figure. The man who seeks to go beyond the either-or and believes that a new synthesis is necessary if Africa is to take her place in the modern world becomes a victim of the force of nationalism. Waiyuki is seen as a failure because he cannot fulfil the demands of his time; Ngugi understands the forces of that time and places him squarely in it.

*A Grain of Wheat*, James Ngugi's latest novel, is an extremely interesting piece of work because it brings a new theme to African literature—the effects on a people of the changes brought about in themselves by the demands of a bloody and bitter struggle for independence. How fit is one for peace, when one has made revolution one's life? Set in the immediate post-Mau-Mau period the novel looks back to the personal tragedies of a number of people who were active in Mau-Mau, and examines how the experience now shapes their lives. In the uneasy peace, they have to come to terms with one another, but their relationships are determined by the experience that has put all human relationships through the test of fire—the guerilla revolution itself. Here are the wild-looking bearded men who lived in the Aberdares for years, emerging after the revolution with almost all their instincts for normal life lost; brave men half-broken by the experience; and men accepted as brave men who must live the rest of their lives with the secret knowledge that they were traitors. Mugo, a local small farmer, is such a man. He has betrayed a fellow Gikuyu to the British; as a result of various events which enmesh him in the sense of his own guilt, he brings his own world crashing down around his head by confession, and the words of one of the Mau-Mau veterans who are his judges at a private trial sum up the light in which Ngugi presents him: "Your deeds alone will condemn you. No one will ever escape from his own actions." It is the measure of James Ngugi's development as a writer that none of the protagonists in this novel is marred by the pseudo-nobility of some of the characters in his earlier work, and yet he succeeds in placing the so-called Mau-Mau movement in the historical, political, and sociological context of the African continental revolution. What the white world

perhaps still thinks of as a reversion to primitive savagery (as opposed, no doubt, to civilized savagery in Nazi Germany) is shown to be a guerilla war in which freedom was won, and which brought with its accomplishment a high price for the people who waged it.

Wole Soyinka, another Nigerian, made his name as a poet and Africa's finest playwright. He deals with a post-independence Africa in an extraordinary first novel, *The Interpreters*. Sagoe the journalist, Sekoni the engineer, Lasunwon the lawyer, Egbo the aristocrat working in the Foreign Office, Bandele the academic—these are the friends that the painter Kola is using as models for the pantheon of Nigerian gods in an ambitious canvas. These contemporary Africans are interpreting through their lives, modern Africa, and the painter is interpreting the old godhead anew, through them. These men are Western-educated, but they are certainly not Been-tos—far from being precariously extended between two worlds (African life and the cities of Europe), they have reached the synthesis of both which many Africans writing before Soyinka have seen as the ideal solution to the problem of modern African identity. But it is a critical synthesis: it turns out that the spiritual inadequacies of both worlds become clear to those who, at long last, have come into the heritage of the two as one. The journalist Sagoe's scatological philosophy of Voidancy—"the most individual function of man"—a lavatory philosophy with the smallest room in the house as its temple of meditation—is a send-up of Negritude along with the hair-splitting of orthodoxy and revisionism in the fad philosophies of East and West. Sekoni, the engineer, has a nervous breakdown (the first one I've come across in African writing) when a power station he has built is never used because of some piece of political finagery. Dr. Faseyi has problems with his English wife, not because she is not acceptable to his family, but because she forgets her white gloves and asks for palm wine instead of a cocktail at an embassy reception, behaving, he says, "like a bush-Cockney." Egbo, taking his friends on a visit to his ancestral home, where his family is still a great one, casts a cold eye on both his grandfather's feudal

dignity and his own sycophantic life at the Foreign Office: "What is my grandfather but a glorified bandit? Only that doesn't help either. Sooner a glorified bandit than a loud-mouthed slave." And Sagoe, watching a Lagos crowd in pursuit of a wretched young pickpocket, says to himself, "Run, you little thief, or the bigger thieves will pass a law against your existence as a menace to society . . . run from the same crowd which will reform tomorrow and cheer the larger thief returning from his twentieth Economic Mission, and pluck his train from the mud, dog-wise, in its teeth."

Nothing is what is seemed—what it seemed it would be before African emancipation; even the prophet of a new Christian sect in Lagos, a Lazarus claiming to have risen from the dead, turns out to have as his disciples a gang of thieves. Does Soyinka see him as the symbol of the new African society? Perhaps. But this magnificent novel, with its poet's command of the torrents of language, its wit both fiery and laconic, is not defeatist. One cannot do justice to its complexity in a brief summary and discussion; but it is significant that episodes most meaningful—whether as fulfilment or disillusion—to the protagonists are often those rooted in Africanness, in the subsoil of the new society.

It is interesting to compare for a moment the total involvement—in both Europe and Africa—of Wole Soyinka's people with the almost total disengagement of Doumbe in a novel called *A Few Nights & Days* by the Cameroonian, Mbella Sonne Dipoko. Doumbe is just another one of the deracinated young everywhere, moving through the cafés, dance-halls, and beds of Paris. To him, the moment, privately tangible, is all that matters; so that one might take him as an example of the African depersonalised by the West. In traditional African societies, the welfare of the tribe is the concept of ultimate concern, and the constant presence of the spirits of the ancestors, influencing daily life, makes the Western division of life into secular and spiritual a meaningless concept. Soyinka's sophisticated protagonists are fully engaged in attempting to interpret this concept in modern terms.

Ezekiel Mphahlele, the South African writer, maintains that the cultured élite of black Africa is becoming middle class because the diplomas of its members give them access to positions of responsibility, whereas in South Africa the Negro intellectual is still a member of the proletariat because racial segregation prevents his obtaining white-collar jobs and privileges reserved for whites. This applies to African literature and writers, too, of course; he implies that there is no proletarian literature in black Africa, only in South Africa. If he has in mind an urban proletariat, what he says is true; apart from Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, the story of a Nigerian prostitute, and perhaps one or two others, the literature of black Africa, where it deals with urban life, deals with the African middle class. But novels dealing with rural life, such as John Munonye's *The Only Son*, Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*, Ghanaian S. A. Konadu's *A Woman In Her Prime*, and James Ngugi's novels as well as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*—if subject and theme, and not the manner of life of the author, are the criteria, then surely this is the literature of an agrarian proletariat?

Apart from a very few notable exceptions (Mofolo's *Chaka*, Abraham's historical novel, *Wild Conquest*) imaginative African writing in South Africa is overwhelmingly a proletarian literature in a society where colour and class are identified. It ranges from Peter Abrahams's countryman-comes-to-town story, *Mine Boy* with its view of the violent baptism of a mineworker into city life seen through the saving grace of individuals and individual racial attitudes, to Alex La Guma's *A Walk In The Night* in which the debasement of life on the wrong side of the color bar hangs a pall of degradation over every human activity, so that every relationship is demeaned in the generalization of an overwhelming inhumanity: the color bar itself. Alex La Guma's protagonists in District Six do not talk about inequality; they bear its weals. In this novel, Michael Adonis is a colored boy who has just lost his job in a society where his ambitions are limited by job reservations and his security as a worker is not ensured by a trade union. He wanders

the streets around his Cape Town tenement room, and in an atmosphere of cheap wine, sex, and the meaningless aggression of frustrated human beings, unintentionally kills a decrepit old white man who has sunk too low for acceptance among whites. Adonis's moral dissolution culminates when he lets his friend, Willieboy, be blamed for the crime, while Adonis himself joins a gang of thugs. In his short stories, Alex La Guma shows the same ability to convey the sight, sound, and smell of poverty and misery, so that the flesh-and-blood meaning of the color bar becomes a shocking, sensuous impact. His stories are set in prisons, cheap cafés, backyards, yet eschew the cliché situations of apartheid—the confrontations of black and white in the context of the immorality act or liquor raids, which are done to death by lesser writers. He is able to make a subtle piece of social comment, in his slight story "Nocturne," out of a colored delinquent attracted upstairs into a white house by the sound of music he has never heard before. James Matthews, in the same story collection, *Quartet*, shows the other face of deprivation in a brilliantly observed story "The Portable Radio," in which the black man's desire for material possessions, cynically fostered across the color bar by the white man, becomes yet another fake foisted upon the black man in place of the self-respect discrimination denies him. Both these stories convey more about the particular social situation in which they occur than the too obvious allegory of a story like Richard Rive's version of the nativity in color-bar-dress, with a white village hotel owner, and Mary and Joseph as black laborers. When James Matthews deals with political action, as in his bus-boycott story "Azikwela" ("We Will Not Ride"), he shows not generalized heroic or saintly figures, but ordinary, frightened men, driven to find themselves through experiences they half-shrink from, tempted to prefer deprived life to the danger of risking what little they have in the hope of attaining something better; coming slowly to the discovery that it is the intangibles, a sense of one's innate dignity and an identification with the hopes of one's fellows, which become both means and end, and give one the

courage to act. Throughout South African black literature—in the autobiographical writings of Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, and others, as well as in fiction—it is these protagonists and these qualities that are taken to represent the only true values for a dispossessed proletariat.

What are the most striking features of the way Africa sees itself and its relation to the rest of the world, emerging from African literature in English? Well, to begin with, some attitudes that are likely to be surprising to the white world. The way Africa sees the role of Christianity in Africa's history, for example. The general view of Christianity is as intrinsically alien and destructive. Whether Christian values did or did not offer any spiritual advance on those of African religions is not seen as the issue; the church is evil because it lures the people away from their own gods. When the missionaries brought the gospel to Africa, so far as traditional African society was concerned they were the devil's disciples: to be a convert was to be damned, not saved—an attitude that sets on its head the traditional white view of Christianity, leading the dark continent into the light. Well, one's own god is always the true one; the other man's is the pagan idol. Of course, one also sees how the African view of Christianity was conditioned first by the slave trade, when certain bishops were zealous in baptising slaves before they were shipped off, and then later—when missionaries like Livingstone had influenced the white world to outlaw slavery, and had brought white administrators in their train instead—by resentment against the interlopers for whom the white man's religion had opened the way. On the other hand, where Islam enters African literature it is not presented as a foreign religion at all, so easily, it seems, it was assimilated. And the fact that Arabs bought and sold Africans both before the whites began and after the whites had ceased to do so, brings no trace of resentment into acceptance of the Arab's Mohammedanism. What is striking is the religious fatalism that pervades the protagonists in novels about arabised Africans—Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*, for example—and the submissiveness of the woman portrayed,

in contrast with the vigour and initiative of those remarkable women who often dominate fiction about societies which still worship their ancestors.

The African view of white colonial administrators—apart from the missionaries, Africa's entire experience of the white world for several decades—is seen to change, from the monstrous bad-man figures of some African writers, through the figures of fun drawn by others, to the picture being presented in post-Independence literature of the white administrator as a man who, although he may have had a genuine wish to be useful in Africa, an integrity of purpose fully granted, is completely unable to make real contact with African life. It is as if the man who for so long claimed to "know the African" can now never hope to get to know him in any meaningful way. As for the white liberal, in the main he or she appears in African fiction in the role summed up by the South African political thinker, Majeke, as "conciliator between the oppressor and the oppressed."<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Lois, the Englishwoman in Peter Abrahams's "Wreath for Udomo"; he makes a heroine of her.

But then writing from black South Africa is different from that of any other part of the continent. As Wole Soyinka said recently, "The experience of the South African writer is approached by that of other Africans only remotely by the experience of colonial repression." The difference in experience is reflected in the picture of the African that emerges from South African black literature, compared with that of the rest of the English-writing continent. It is as a dispossessed proletariat that the Africans emerge in black South African literature, a people struggling under the triple burden of industrialization, color, and class discrimination, in a capitalist economy which orders their lives as if they were still living in a feudal age. It is as a people dealing with the problems of power that the rest are shown, exercising the right even to misgovern themselves and struggling not to live an anachronism,

but to re-establish the African past as something contiguous with the drastic, profound, and necessary change of the present.

What main trend does African English literature show in its development? George Lukacs, the Hungarian philosopher and one of the two or three important literary critics of our time, discerns three main trends in modern world literature in his *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*: first, the literature of the *avant garde*—experimental Modernism from Kafka and Joyce to Beckett and Faulkner, which he condemns for its subjectivism, its static view of the human condition, its dissolution of character, its obsession with pathological states and its lack of a sense of history; and second, Socialist Realism, which he criticizes for its oversimplification, its failure to see the contradictions in the everyday life of society, and its view of history—"Utopia is already with us" under communism—a view he finds no less static than that of the Western *avant garde*. He contrasts with these two systems of artistic dogmatism the trend of critical realism—work in which the social changes that characterize our era are most truly reflected, character is not sacrificed to artistic pattern, the human condition is understood dynamically, in an historical context, and the pathological aspects of modern life are placed in a critical perspective. George Lukacs sees the critical realists as the true heirs, through writers such as Thomas Mann and Conrad, of the great realists of the 19th century, Balzac, Stendhal, and Tolstoy, and critical realism as not only the link with the great literature of the past, but also the literature that points to the future. There seems to me no doubt that African English literature's best writers are critical realists, and that this is the direction in which African literature is developing.

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Bloke Modisane.

Reprinted from MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW

Vol. IX, No. 4, Fall, 1970