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### **African Authors and the Postcolonial Present**

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## African Authors and the Postcolonial Present

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### Abstract

This essay addresses a number of prevalent expectations and notions concerning the nature of postcolonial African writing, arguing, that, in addressing the postcolonial *present*, the trend in African fiction is to depict indigenous rulership and the effects power abuses as well as internecine conflicts, violence or social breakdown have on the lives of the contemporary populations of these territories. While effects of colonialism do linger and neo-colonialism is an issue, concentration is on the agency of Africans to contest as well as complicate the reductive portrayals of African victimisation. The essay argues in addition for readers and theorists to pay attention also to newer texts – among which those by younger female writers are often of particular interest – and not to accord the status of authenticity primarily to older, established texts and works with tribal and rural settings. The postcolonial present in Africa comprises the continent’s own forms of modernity and technological sophistication, along with the still widespread conditions of war, civil war, social anarchy, and widespread violence on the lives of individuals and families.

Against the background of the infamous and culturally divisive parcelling out of African territories to and by European powers at the 1884-5 Berlin conference, the African writers contribute to the reinvention of nationhood for their African societies. Subthemes analysing workings and abuses of power, the causes and the consequences of violent enmity, suppressed histories, the horrific exploitation of children and the acute issue of gender abuse are in most cases related to the nature of nationhood within the particular society. The essay argues that the social and political topics are addressed by African authors in powerfully affective language; the moving portrayals of individuals within their complex, entangled relationships give voice to African experience, hence the body of postcolonial African writing contributes to social, intellectual and aesthetic capital deserving greater recognition.

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**Keywords:** The African image; the postcolonial present; affiliative critique; implicit analysis; agency; nationhood

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“*Kuria uru kwa mu-Afrika gutigiria mundu arie wega!*” [“Untranslatable” saying in Gikuyu meaning (approximately) ‘The fact that the African does not eat well cannot stop him from speaking well ...’ – Meja Mwangi, *Striving for the Wind* (n.pag.)]

In an essay trenchantly titled “What Has Literature Got to Do with It?” Chinua Achebe wrote: “*stories create people create stories*” (*Hopes* 163, original italicized). I want to bring this statement by a Nigerian author – with its emphasis on the ways human beings are shaped

by the narrative environment into which they are born, from within which they in turn have to create new narratives to explain their contexts, make bearable the circumstances within which they live, provide themselves with an ethical code and shape their aspirations— to bear on the title and argument of this article. The image of Africa in the world evoking a benighted and devastated continent, a portion of the earth that was bypassed by modernity, is unfortunately not very different from dismissive comments such as those the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel made in his 1830 publication titled (in translation) “Reason in History”: “Among negroes it is the case that consciousness has not attained even the intuition of any sort of objectivity”; “Africa in general is a closed land” and “Africa [...] does not have history as such. Consequently we abandon Africa, never to mention it again” (quoted in Dussel, “Eurocentrism” 70). “Stories” of Africa in the media concern, mostly, sickness and starvation, war and bloodshed or droughts and floods. One of the main tasks African authors face is to address, rectify, complicate and query such simplistic images – without denying the oppressions and sufferings which many Africans continue to endure. For the great danger of the homogenising and depressing ideas of Africa dominating the global media is that they have accumulated over time to the point of being nearly indelible, and that these shallow ‘ideas’ in turn typecast actual Africans so that their own stories about themselves and their societies are blocked or struggle to get a hearing.

It is not only or even primarily for others, but also for themselves that Africans (with local writers in the vanguard) need to tell themselves their own stories in order that narratives embedding local perspectives and African agency – both castigating the often awful misdeeds and dire errors and enshrining and commemorating the heroic and the socially sustainable acts of both leaders and people in their own history – can contribute to the shaping of the next generations and the tales and histories and ideals they, in turn, will create for themselves and those who come after. The complex stories of African individuals, families and societies are not mere records, but involve the subtle skill of implicit analysis by means of which evoked situations are portrayed to uncover the forces at play and indicate the interaction of social and moral responsibilities; it is an art of assessment. In an earlier essay I have termed this task of ‘book-keeping in Africa,’ using the portmanteau term to refer to authors as record keepers or archivists who can hold leaders to account as well as challenging their people for failures of courage or inspiring them to acts of dedication that can stand as historical markers. ‘Book-keeping’ refers also to all those readers, teachers and scholars engaging with the heritage and treasury (or simply, the library) of African writing. In addition, each significant text – noteworthy in terms of what insights it reveals and by its vividness of evocation – is a strongbox keeping or conserving what needs to be known or remembered for the people to whom it matters, and contributing to the knowledge and cultural capital of the wider world (Gagiano, “Book-keeping”). In a provocative comment, the literary scholar Neil Lazarus has suggested “that the ‘world’ has to date typically been more adequately registered, and rendered, in ‘postcolonial’ *literature* than in postcolonial *criticism*” (*The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 36). As far as African literature is concerned, I am inclined to agree with this.

In the broad postcolonial sphere, in which a majority of people remain within the lower ranks through the after-effects of colonial racism and its damaging, hierarchizing effects, authors are important contributors to the struggle for recognition which Maria Pia Lara, a Mexican political philosopher, has aptly articulated (with particular reference to the function of prose texts as interventions in the public sphere):

Recognition is a struggle, a struggle that must be fought in relation to others and in

the permanent tension of changing prejudice and transforming the social order. This battle plays a major role in how one uses institutionalized channels of communicating with others, and how one redefines the limits on traditional views, enlarging one's own understanding of values and 'changing the rules'. Dialogue is not only a means of showing what makes one different, but also of showing that those differences are an important part of what should be regarded as worthy. Solidarity enters here because it is only through others that one can define one's own identities, and no solidarity is possible if the discourse does not form a bridge to the other's understanding of what are considered to be worthy features and needs of human beings. *Recognition, in this sense, is a performative process of acquiring identity.* (*Moral Textures* 157, emphasis added)

Lara's concentration (in the cited work) is on "feminist narratives in the public sphere", but she usefully theorizes the function of fiction and autobiography as textual forms within which "new historical accounts can be drawn" so that "the polluted representations of marginalized, excluded and oppressed groups can be challenged and set right" in the public sphere; acting as correctives to "the bias and distortion of earlier narrations" (*Moral Textures* 171).

Postcolonial writers from many regions have addressed the situation on which Kamau Brathwaite (a Caribbean poet) reported by recalling the way he noticed, as a youngster, that "we were not in the books" ("Caliban's" 6). While this is no longer the case, and a number of postcolonial authors (some Africans among them) have gained international recognition and fame, in the case of expectations concerning the image of Africa in literary representation, a problem that remains is that readers and theorists (Africans among them) tend even now to identify as texts that they consider 'authentically African' those that depict a tribal setting or engage primarily with colonialism, colonialists or the consequences of colonialism. After-effects of a colonial past do still permeate most African societies (as they do elsewhere in the former imperially dominated parts of the world), and writers reflect and reflect on this reality, but the authors like other members of these societies have moved on as to whom they hold mainly responsible for the failures of governance and abuses of power in their countries. What Homi Bhabha wrote in a 1992 essay – that "postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" induces us to "engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning [...] produced in the act of social survival" ("Freedom's" 46-47) – remains valid, but focuses on the status of postcolonial cultures in relation to the West and other dominant cultures and shows less awareness of the cultural, social and political imbalances and injustices of distribution within post-colonial societies indigenously governed though neo-colonially manipulated. I cite the balanced way in which Trinh T. Minh-ha, the Vietnamese-American filmmaker and cultural theorist, gives recognition to the language of writing (perhaps this is especially true of the art-speech of postcolonial novelists) as paradoxically both "the site of return" and "a site of change, an ever-shifting ground" She indicates the yearning for commemoration along with the imperative of adaptation and exploration that are necessarily simultaneously present in our linguistic acts, including novels (*elsewhere* 28). More bluntly, Felix Mnthali has articulated a challenge to those critics who view certain sophisticated novels as 'betraying' "ordinary Africans" by stating that "we Africans should be excused the exasperation we often feel at not being considered 'ordinary' unless we are poor and live in rural areas, a classification which has its roots in colonial anthropology" (Mnthali 191).

What is at stake is the danger of homogenisation of Africans even in the broad context of postcolonial scholarship; a homogenisation that treats African subjects (in the double sense of topics and persons/characters) as necessarily (in) an inactive state of victimisation, rather than as bearing responsibility for their lives within the area – smaller or larger as it may be – in which they do have room to manoeuvre and make choices. Simply: people who are merely the playthings of history, nature or external powers (or who are seen as such) are being trivialized, even by the consciously compassionate. The unexamined roots of pity sometimes lie in condescension, and denial or ignorance of African agency is a manifestation of such suspect ‘sympathies’. Linked with this issue is the danger of a persistent expectation that the African text is properly (‘authentically’) African only if it shows Africans living in tribal communities and if the narrative structure is simple. Nuruddin Farah, a Somali writer, gives some inkling of this double jeopardy when he writes as follows (using a quotation):

[...] the hegemonic grain of African caricatures that still rely, in an age of mass global communication, on the sort of generic, distorting discourses considered by Vaughan: “here is a starving child, there is a mad dog; feed her, bomb him [...] information about Africa reaches us, most of the time, through a series of filters which, by reducing the vast continent to a cluster of emotive slogans, succeed in denying us any sense of complexity, context, truth.” (Farah, *Imaginary* 201)

Farah touches on the point where “information” works through the creation of impressions or images that become ‘the image’ of Africa; the verbal art of the novelist is indeed not merely a matter of conveying knowledge in the form of information, since novels do have the power of giving readers memorable impressions of places, societies and events through what Maria Pia Lara terms “illocutionary force” (*Moral Textures* 2-5). By this Lara means the affective force of writing that is created by the art-work of vivid representation. However, the outstanding success of some few African texts that made a first breakthrough for modern African fiction in globally accessible languages, have perhaps (entirely inadvertently!) contributed to what has now become an expectation of what ‘an African novel’ should be about and in what style it should be constructed. The words of Felix Mnthali (a Malawian writer and scholar), quoted above, give some indication of such an unfortunate outcome. Another example would be the way in which Dambudzo Marechera’s brilliant and anarchic writing style and thematic focus were sneeringly characterized as pandering to ‘Euro-modernism’ when, in her commentary on the Zimbabwean author’s writing, the critic Juliet Okonkwo wrote that Marechera had “grafted a decadent avant-garde European attitude [‘nihilism’] and style to experiences that emanate from Africa” (*Okike Review*, 91). Marechera himself reflected this type of criticism of his work by referring to a “Nigerian” whose “taunts” of the writer-figure in the Marechera text include the mocking question why he does not write in his “own” language and “within” his own people’s “great tradition of oral literature” (*House* 142-143).

Marechera wrote, concerning the effect of “the African image” (*Insider* 80), that its effects include (as I summarised his point) “a blinding of the self-critical consciousness of Africans, falsifying and constricting thought and life” (Gagiano, *Achebe, Head, Marechera* 203). This has a stultifying effect, producing stasis instead of change or progress; Marechera foresaw a process whereby Africans would “drive through to the independent countries where [...] original thoughts veer and crash into ancient lamp-posts” and would construct “new towns crowded with thousands of homeless unemployed whose dreams [...] would merely] rot in the gutters” (*Insider* 74, 79-80). Marechera underlines the probable effect on Africans themselves of a rigid, fixed notion of what it is to be African as a choking off of innovative ideas and actions, confining most Africans to enduring poverty and victimhood (strangely

reiterating or seemingly confirming Hegel's earlier reference to Africans as lacking history). Bessie Head, famous as a Botswana writer but born in apartheid-era South Africa, resented the inability of reviewers to grasp the value and importance of her profoundly complex text, *A Question of Power* (1974), surmising that the lack of understanding and actual misreading of this (admittedly very difficult) text resulted from reviewers' assumption that all Africans are invariably the innocent victims of oppression and incapable of cruelty towards one another; a sentimental notion which (as she clearly saw) is *as* damaging in its inability to recognise Africans as being capable of the full gamut of moral conduct, from good to evil, as any other people, as are the more blatant forms of racism expressed in denigration. Head wrote indignantly (in a letter):

In the mind of any white, whether racist or liberal, a black man is not a whole man, with whole, horrific, satanic passions. A black man is a wee, sleekit, timorous, cowering beastie they mowed down with maxim guns a hundred years ago. A black man could not possibly be the characters in my book, so hugely vile, so hugely demonish. (cited Eilersen, *Thunder* 259)

Head's insistence that Africans be accorded capacities for good *and* for evil and recognised as the initiators of their own destiny is one important aspect of the multi-dimensional problem with regard to the reception of contemporary African writing that I am addressing in this article. Another aspect that has been alluded to but not fully described is the tendency to expect African novels to depict rural rather than urban settings and traditional rather than modern communities. An illustrative example here is the reception of the five novels written by the most influential African author of our era, Chinua Achebe. Without yielding to any reader or critic in my appreciation of both *Things Fall Apart* (1958 – Achebe's first) and *Arrow of God* (1964), perhaps his most sophisticated novels, as works of high verbal art, I cannot but note that Achebe's second, fourth and final novels – *No Longer at Ease* (1961); *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987); equally accomplished texts, but with urban settings depicting mainly modern lifestyles reliant on advanced technologies – have attracted much less attention. Achebe as the often proclaimed 'father' of contemporary internationally accessible African writing, was not the primordialist he is too often taken to be; he may be the African author whose texts are best suited to demonstrate the falseness of the dichotomy (traditional *or* modern) that is too frequently assumed to be the preoccupation of African writing in our time. An early illustration taken from Francophone African writing occurs in Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (the 1970 English translation of this 1960 work bearing the title *God's Bits of Wood*). The novel's main participants are the Senegalese and Malian rail workers who go on strike against their French colonial employers. They are poor and live mostly in hovels in urban squatter camps, yet are strongly conscious of their human rights and of being African citizens in a new era (that of "the machine") in which the trains their labour allows to run have been brought to a stop by the workers' daring (first) strike: "an age had ended ... Now the machine ruled over their lands and when they forced every machine [i.e. train] within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their weakness. ... the machine was making of them a whole new breed of men" (32).

A further aspect to be considered here is the prevalence of realism in African fiction. The struggle for improved wages and work conditions by the workers on the Dakar-Niger line that led to the prolonged strike which Sembène depicted in *God's Bits of Wood* was an actual historical event. Even a brief snippet like the extract cited here (above) makes evident, however, how truly accomplished fiction gives resonance to and allows the reader to grasp

imaginatively the momentous effect of the action taken on the lives of the, at this stage, still colonised African persons affected – not only the workmen mentioned above, but their whole families; indeed, their entire society. Senegal was an independent country when the novel was written by one of the most influential and far-sighted of postcolonial artists, and Sembène's narrative – even in the translated (English) version used here – is a good example of the complex texture of writing and of the way 'event', 'data', 'information', 'history' or 'fact' become transformed by means of the author's interpretative vision, thus enabling attentive readers to move from a sense of the 'real' to the more inclusive point of 'realisation' or imaginative absorption. This is something that makes the finest African fiction (like literatures elsewhere) the repository of intellectual, cultural and historical 'capital.' What Sembène achieves – in the face of a then and even now far too prevalent lack of interest in if not actual denigration of Africans (and others) of low status – is to foreground their experience and their struggle for recognition and justice as being worthy of consideration. In the words of Robert Young, "the task of the postcolonial is to make the invisible, in this sense, visible" – and this is a task that "begins with the politics of knowledge," and with "articulating" the "unauthorized knowledges, and histories" of (previously) colonized people (Young, "Postcolonial" 23).

The topic of realism in African fiction is a complex one. I argue that, even though post-modernist texts and types of non-realist alternative styles such as surrealism occur much less often in African writing than in (say) European or Asian fiction, readers need to think carefully about this phenomenon, rather than simply assuming that African writers are less sophisticated than their counterparts elsewhere. It is necessary to recall in the first place that every realist text engages in the very difficult art of verbal representation; the African authors in many cases carry the burden of having to recount in a humanly comprehensible way to a world readership largely ignorant of the spheres from within and about which they write, how particular atrocities (for example) became possible in that region at that time. For the rest of the world is all too quick to forget its own cruelties and aberrations from the supposedly humanly normal, as a consequence all too often reverting to the stereotype of the 'African savage' – although in contemporary times the 'savages' are equipped with AK47s rather than with spears. Chinua Achebe complained with considerable reason that Joseph Conrad's famous novella *The Heart of Darkness* (1946), while overtly anti-colonial, still gave apparent support to seriously racist conceptualisations of Africans ("An Image" 1988). Realism in the full sense of the term can be thought of as a probably unfulfillable ideal; writing an account of a situation, an event or a series of events, in a way that is adequate to the actual immensity of its complexity, penetrating secret plans and revealing hidden intentions and unravelling the tangled networks of interactions in their human and non-human dimensions is forever merely an approximation of 'the reality'. Never can the narrative act be mechanically facilitated in the way the photograph, recording, video or film is. Its necessarily impressionistic, affective and implicitly evaluative dimensions will – while making it a less than 'correct' or 'faithful' version of 'reality' – paradoxically allow it the 'truth-feel', the dimension of seeming adequacy that the recorded versions of 'the same' phenomenon cannot achieve. In this sense, the realism of the most fully realised African novels is not to be seen as a failure of the imagination, but as the acceptance of perhaps its most difficult challenge. Here one must also bear in mind the care with which the continent's finest writers avoid the temptations of both sensationalism and sentimentality.

Realism in African (and other postcolonial) writing needs to be seen as serving a political purpose – not in the sense of a merely partisan or ideological undertaking, but in the

larger cultural and human battle for recognition; a more immediate and often daily task for many of the world's formerly colonized people. Taking their part in this struggle enhances the gravitas of the work by the most serious and noteworthy artists in words. Edward Said's enlightening comments can be cited here, from a passage in which he speaks of literature as "hybrid", as "entangled with a lot of what used to be regarded as extraneous elements" – this, Said states, strikes him as "*the* essential idea adequate for the revolutionary realities [...] in which the contests of the secular world so provocatively inform the texts we both read and write" ("Figures", 15). To this he adds:

If configurations like Commonwealth or world literature are to have any meaning at all it is therefore because [...] they first testify to the contests and continuing struggles by virtue of which they have emerged not only as texts but as experiences, and second, because they interact ferociously not only with the whole nationalist basis for the composition and study of literature but also with the lofty independence and indifference with which it has become customary Eurocentrically to regard the Western metropolitan literatures. (Said, "Figures" 15)

In the first part of this essay I have attempted as far as possible to allow African writers' articulations speaking room in my argument, while linking disparate authors together through its sequent stages. In the main, I have made use of older and established authors whose achievements we must not lose sight of, but I want to conclude this part of my essay with the point that even scholars compiling academic courses for the teaching of African literature (in the minority of universities world-wide where the subject features) tend to concentrate on the older authors, and in their classes as well as in their books and articles pay insufficient attention to the great and creative new contributions to this corpus by Africa's younger writers. One fascinating aspect of the more recent writing from the continent is the number of female authors from many regions who have the confidence and authority to hold their nations to account, writing from what I have termed positions of "affiliative critique" (Gagiano, "Women" 1) in order to assess their societies in ethical-political terms while implicitly reaffirming their own sense of belonging to and being dedicated to their people and the welfare of their portion of Africa. In this article I wish to stress that not all three terms of the main phrase of my title matter equally: while in recent and contemporary African writing the colonial past *and* its several lingering effects continue to matter and to be noted by most authors, the primary meanings of "post" as signifying 'after' and even to an extent 'beyond' are shown to be given greater consideration as the authors turn to the "present" of their depicted societies and circumstances. In their focus on the contemporary, the writers are placing responsibility for the present 'state of the nation' on the indigenous rulers and on many gross flaws of leadership, and they draw attention to the plight as well as the failures of citizenship and to personal and familial relationships. Markedly less attention is given to the colonial period and colonial rulers as bearing responsibility for the present plight of the nation. Violence, war and regimes of terror being as prevalent as they are in very many parts of Africa, authors face and face up to such horrors, making creative contributions in probing the malign roots of social collapse and internecine conflict. They depict the deep human cost – the destruction wrought in the lives of women, children and men – as well as the ways in which individuals and groups resist, make do, cope and sometimes manage to transform their societies. In doing so, such African writers contribute to what one might term experiential knowledge: awareness of the nature and effects of some of the most dire situations people in Africa but also elsewhere can acquire as emotional, moral and political education. Literature here as elsewhere can provide imaginative training and act as an ethical warning system. It is

in this regard that Achebe in an early essay declared that “art is and always has been in the service of man” (“Africa” 19), and in this sense that African prose art contributes to the larger world – even as it attempts to guide the continent’s peoples.

While a majority of the texts addressed here engage in forms of social analysis, they do not of course employ overtly theoretical terms or discourse; the authors use what I term a technique of implicit analysis which combines political and ethical evaluation that functions (subtly and indirectly) by means of the affective charge that is built into the evocation of both event, setting and character. Aspects of this issue have been addressed in Zoe Norridge’s fine text (*Perceiving*, 2013). Neither media sound-bites and reports nor even written histories are able to achieve the fullness of evaluation of such texts and the complexity and vividness of their rendition. What I am moving towards in this section of my essay is to draw readers’ attention to what might be termed the ‘star texts’ of African authorship. Inevitably the essay writer’s own preferences and interests affect the texts chosen for mention here, though a degree of critical consensus does exist concerning the canon of African writing.

Chinua Achebe is the most widely known of African authors. The status accorded to his quite small corpus of five novels results from the unparalleled subtlety and complexity of his writing. His compatriot Wole Soyinka won the first Nobel Prize for Literature by an African. Soyinka is a playwright, poet, and a public intellectual as well as a novelist; his *Season of Anomy* (1973) is one of the most impressive novels addressing the Nigerian Civil [or ‘Biafran’] War of mid-1967 until January 1970 – a war in which more than a million Nigerians, mainly Igbos, lost their lives. Soyinka alludes obliquely but unmistakably to the war and the ethnic divisions of the time. Naguib Mahfouz (who wrote in Arabic) also earned the Nobel Prize; this author’s so-called ‘Cairo Trilogy’ is both a magisterial family saga and a political history of Egypt; his set of novels links the familial cruelty, oppression and neglect (both spousal and generational) of the patriarch al-Sayid with the state’s failures to nurture its citizens. [The novels of the trilogy comprise *Palace Walk* – 1956; *Palace of Desire* and *Sugar Street* – both 1957.] Assia Djebar (a *nom de plume*) wrote in French; this Algerian author of Berber extraction was also a filmmaker and a professor of history. In what is perhaps her greatest work, *Fantasia – An Algerian Cavalcade* (1993), she writes of gender oppression of girls and women (practices validated by her own culture and by rigid interpretations of Islam) and her text vividly evokes the colonial savagery of the French against her people in their wars of colonial conquest and in the Algerian War of Liberation. Mongo Beti (another pseudonym) is the *grand seigneur* of Francophone writing; a Cameroonian who wrote in French, his incisive writing combines satire, humour, compassion and political fierceness in a literary exposure of foolishness and fraud in a range of social contexts. A writer known throughout the world for championing of the cause of African literature to be written in the continent’s indigenous languages and for his proto-Marxist convictions, the Kenyan Ngũgi wa Thiong’o nevertheless wrote what is still regarded as his greatest novel – *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) – in English, and his text portrays failure, betrayal and weakness rather than idealising the heroes of the liberation struggle against the British. Bessie Head, who was born in South Africa on the ‘wrong’ side of the apartheid ‘colour line’ – of a white mother and an unknown black father – spent most of her writing life in Botswana, accepting the country as her own long before it allowed her citizenship. She made her breakthrough with the novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), followed by *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974). Head is one of Africa’s great philosophical thinkers, especially about issues of racist victimisation and its long-term effects; she used the notion of ordinariness in order to counter power greed and cruelty. Zimbabwe has excellent writers, but the two names that stand out are

those of Dambudzo Marechera (previously mentioned) and Yvonne Vera; both died young, of AIDS, but each left a major literary legacy. Vera's two greatest novels are (arguably) *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). The earlier of these novels is set in late colonial Rhodesia (as Zimbabwe was named while colonized) and the latter in the aftermath of the Zimbabwean Liberation War (known locally as The Second Chimurenga) when a confined civil war with genocidal dimensions broke out in the Matabeleland region of the newly independent country. Vera's densely poetic style is that of an accomplished verbal artist. Nuruddin Farah had to flee his country, Somalia, during the early years of the regime of Siad Barre, but the tyranny he witnessed inspired his widely acclaimed trilogy 'Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship' (as he himself named it): *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1982) and *Close, Sesame* (1983). The three texts portray respectively a young man who is initially not politically interested, a young woman who is an activist and an intellectual, and a respected, gentle and pious old man (an anti-colonial activist in his youth) as each of them is drawn into the struggle to remain upright within the entanglements of abusive power in their country. Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, the two South African winners of the Nobel, are too widely known to require description at this point in my essay.

I now list of a sampling of further noteworthy texts not as often 'noticed', or by less widely known African authors – both in confirmation of my title promising a focus on the postcolonial *present*, and because some of the texts named below can be considered 'hidden gems' of the African corpus. Considerations of space allow no more than a cursory listing of the titles, authors, publication dates and settings of these works, but the catalogue is in my view worth including to give readers of this essay a sense of the spread of enlightening work emanating from the supposedly 'dark continent'. I begin my selection with the novel *The Thirteenth Sun* (1973) by the Ethiopian Dianachew Worku, a text that evokes a pilgrimage, a rape, and a death; then the Sudanese Tayeb Salih's remarkable and challenging novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1967), a translation from Arabic; also *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981) by Mongane Wally Serote, which movingly evokes black lives under apartheid in South Africa; *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (1985) by the Congolese Sony Labou Tansi is a surreal tragicomedy; Mia Couto's *Voices Made Night* was written in Portuguese and is a fine collection of stories set in Mozambique; Zimbabwean Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) concerns a youth's participation in the Zimbabwean Liberation War and is a complex bildungsroman; *The Forbidden Woman* (1993) by Malika Mokeddem is an Algerian text originally written in French, denouncing female oppression; Boris Boubacar Diop's originally French text *Murambi: The Book of Bones* (2000) is a Senegalese writer's response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide; Binwell Sinyangwa's *A Cowrie of Hope* (2000) is set in northern Zambia and contrasts the nobility of a poor rural peasant woman with the vulgar urban criminal who steals from her, but whom she finally defeats; *The Screaming of the Innocent* (2002) is by the internationally known Botswana jurist Unity Dow – in it, a covered up crime of a girl's ritual murder is exposed; Safi Abdi's novel *Offspring of Paradise* (2003) depicts Somalia's collapse into mayhem and the quandaries of refugees; *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) by Sefi Atta evokes life in Lagos, Nigeria from the perspective of a young female lawyer; the British and Sierra Leonean Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005) is set in the aftermath of the civil war in Sierra Leone, it courageously takes up the traumatising of a child soldier and the attempt to heal him; José Eduardo Agualusa's *My Father's Wives* (2007) takes its characters from Portugal to Angola, through Namibia and Cape Town to Mozambique Island; Cristina Ali Farah's *Little Mother* (2007) – originally written in Italian by the Somali-Italian author – portrays three expatriate Somalis and their struggles to reconnect and reintegrate; *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010) by Maaza Mengiste is

a novel evoking the fall of Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Sellassie and the rise of the Derg followed by the period of 'The Red Terror'; and finally *Dust* (2014) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor evokes a range of Kenyan settings and events, uncovering pain that was hidden and political secrets.

Authors as social interpreters do the work of 'digesting' social crises; the shock of wars and social mayhem or cultural devastation and familial breakdown require interpretative and recuperative responses of the kind profoundly thoughtful literary texts can offer. Mikhail Bakhtin has remarked: "the prose art requires [...] a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle" and stated that creative fiction "deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility". He suggests that the artwork in prose responds to "discourse" that is "still warm from that struggle and hostility" and "subjects [the diverging discourses] to the dynamic unity of its own style" (*Dialogic* 331). Bakhtin's observations are closely applicable to the creative processes by means of which African authors respond to the terrible prevalence of violence and bloody enmity— or the aftermath of such conditions, often equally destructive – in their midst. What the Russian theorist points out is not simply that writers 'record' what he terms "social struggle" (particularly not in a partisan manner or from an ideological stance) but that they depict and examine the social forces that interact at such times within a larger framework of insight, assessment and moral discernment. Novel writing that fails to evoke the interactions and complexities, the accumulation of acts and attitudes that eventually manifest in crises is not "prose art". It is because the texts listed above do achieve this difficult, subtle balancing that they are mentioned here. I need to add that *many* more African texts merit mention in the two listings, above, but that my essay can only provide a sampling and attempt to make it as representative as possible. Elsewhere I have written brief outlines of most of these texts, or commented on them in more detail in articles.

The insights of Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1991) were embraced by literary scholars, particularly because Anderson gave recognition to the role of literary texts such as novels in 'inventing' nations and nationhood – a necessarily imaginative act. In reflecting on the major themes of African writing of and about the postcolonial present, one cannot but see that nationhood is the major albeit often underlying and inexplicit theme of a majority of the dense and shapely works of prose art that have been mentioned here. A useful quote from Anderson's work is the statement that "nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations" (149) – a remark indicating that when colonial or 'Western' authors (such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Carey, to whom Achebe responded in *Things Fall Apart*) evoke African peoples, traces of condescension, contempt or horror frequently tinge their descriptions. To rephrase, one could say that African authors of the postcolonial present need to re-imagine their nations, or even to begin the work of imagining the nation, since all that the colonial powers were interested in, in their construal of the African areas which they had invaded, was administering the subject peoples; certainly not with imagining these territories as nations. The crucial point is frequently made that many of the huge continent's bloodiest conflicts result from the fact that at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, 'national' borders were recklessly drawn through cultural and speech communities, thus irreparably fracturing them, *or* forcibly 'uniting' social and political groups at enmity or highly diverse cultural communities ill-suited to one another, thus setting them up for future friction. In contrast, the 'insider' position of the African writer causes her or him to be concerned with and for the nation of which they are a member. Even if African authors write of a particular community,

they are obliged to consider how such a community fits into the larger national frame, particularly when there are tensions or open conflict around this issue. Authors often mourn the loss of community or the ugly enmities that damage lives and compromise futures. It is right that they do so, for as Frantz Fanon wrote, “the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities” (*Wretched* 181). If a nation is torn by internecine conflict, or has been seemingly destroyed by social breakdown and mass evacuation, it may still be imagined ‘beyond’ such damage – as has been done, for example, by Nigerian, Somali and Rwandan writers. It is as if nationhood remains a standard by which communal values (or their betrayal) are judged. This is, as was stated earlier, increasingly true of Africa’s younger women writers. In this respect, Anderson’s almost oracular remark, that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6), is apposite here. I would apply it to the pervasive sense of commitment to an ideal of nationhood that is discernible in most of these works – even those concerning countries from which the writers have fled, or whose leaders and people they implicitly castigate for the moral and political failures, flaws and cruelties; flagrantly displayed and penetratingly though implicitly analysed in their texts. As Fanon has memorably stated: “Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come” (*Wretched* 183). His words ‘anticipate’ the title of this essay.

The principal sub-themes of African writing in the postcolonial present can in almost all instances be related or shown to be crucially affected by issues concerning and events around the achievement or loss of nationhood; these linked themes are (I suggest) those of power and its [mis]uses; war and especially civil war or social breakdown or mayhem; the nation’s hidden histories; issues of change and social adaptation; gender matters – especially the place and role of women; violence, cruelty, trauma, suffering and (the possibility) of recovery – particularly of African children; lastly: migration, incursions and exodus. The historical, cultural and geographical range of the nation; the major religious or ethical affiliations within it and how they interact and the daily life of people both in public roles and domestic settings can all be linked to the kind of national existence ascribed to citizens and others who dwell among them. African writing tends to be closely and vividly ‘grounded’, as we say, in local realities, even while manifesting strong awareness of international linkages or Africans’ transference to other sites, in the ‘West’ and elsewhere. While texts of the prize-winning and aesthetically shaped kind tend to garner most notice in scholarly writing, Africa has a strong tradition of what one might term ‘serious popular’ (in contrast with trivial or ‘pulp’) fiction. Some of the texts that could be so categorized do get noted, while others have ‘only’ the local fame (and function) they perhaps set out to achieve. It needs to be noted that African poverty and dreadfully low rates of literacy, in combination with the difficulty of finding local publishers willing to risk on texts not suited for the school market, create enormous difficulties for the continent’s creative writers. Those writers who do find ‘international’ publishers and readership are, on the other hand, increasingly accused of writing to ‘recipes’ that will earn them prizes and admiration from an ‘international’ public – supposedly betraying their African nations or tailoring their texts to satisfy the taste for the exotic or for the pornography of violence in rape or bloodshed. I find these charges generally unfair, unkind and uncalled for. Postcolonial writers from different regions have indeed also had to face such innuendoes.

In the preceding parts of this essay I have tended to outline the broad social trends and significant historical shifts and shocks depicted by Africa’s narrative artists and the writers’ role in their own societies as in the international sphere. The crucial point that needs to be

added concerns these authors' ability (in their texts) to evoke individuals and relationships so vividly and compellingly; so empathetically and affectively that readers are not only led to fuller and more complex understanding of situations that are elsewhere made to seem merely 'more of the same', 'typical of Africa', and so forth, but are induced to care about the persons and societies portrayed. Impossible to quantify as the powers of empathetic understanding and imaginative understanding are, let alone their effectiveness in ameliorating or addressing real crises, work in the medium of verbal art undeniably contributes to giving the people of Africa a speaking turn in the world's debates, though it is indeed still in need of considerable amplification. African writing creates a 'presencing' opportunity. In contemporary contexts where the continent not only continues to bear the burden of racist denigration, but those of neglect, ignorance and dismissal, we need every available mechanism to bring both African plights and the dignity of Africans to international notice. This is where figures like Achebe's Okwonko, Ikemefuna and Ezeulu (in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*) as much as Obi, Odili, BB, Christopher and Ikem in his other three novels, in their authority and poignancy, embody the case for African lives mattering; being "grievable" in Judith Butler's memorable term (2010). Bessie Head's profound thoughts about the powers of gender oppression and of racial contempt – or any form of malign arrogance and contempt – are conveyed to readers by means of Elizabeth's passionate, suffering and searching nature and her courage in squarely facing fearful ideas and truths, as depicted in *A Question of Power*. The touchingly trusting nature of the elderly villager Napolo that is exhibited as he tells the belligerent paramilitary youths confronting him at a roadblock: "I have no enemies and I do not need to carry a weapon" is the yardstick by which we measure the viciousness and corruption unleashed on Malawi by the Banda regime. Phephelaphi in the Vera novel *Butterfly Burning* by her grace and her aspirational nature is contrasted with her much older life-partner Fumbatha – a man so deeply damaged by colonial humiliation that he ends up thwarting and destroying the delicate life of the woman he had loved above all. Ram in Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*, whose sardonic nature never quite hides his capacity for humane compassion, delineates for us the complexities of wealth, power and postcolonial politics in Egypt. Amantle in Dow's *The Screaming of the Innocent*, during a year of national service in a remote village, uncovers and 'solves' (without resolving) a terrible, hushed up crime – a girl's ritual murder – because of her engaging and courageous nature. The former Zimbabwean liberation soldier Munashe, in Alexander Kanengoni's *Echoing Silences* (1997), a brief but harrowing novel, exemplifies Africa's many war traumatised men, as Agu in Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) allows us to sense the agonies suffered by a mere boy who is also a conscripted child soldier.

The complexities of relationships and the entanglements of private and familial lives with political forces, social change or social breakdown are brilliantly rendered in many of the African novels mentioned in this essay. To give just a sampling, in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the forging of a new community comprising long settled villagers and incomers from elsewhere, fosters creative advances and increased prosperity and allows them to defeat the grasping, viciously repressive local chief. In this beautiful text, the relationship with the land is a central force. A particularly fascinating and ultimately tragic relationship – between a young man and his camel – forms the centre and determines the narrative flow of a novel set among the Libyan Touareg people in *Gold Dust* (first published in Arabic, in 1980) by Ibrahim Al-Koni, who himself grew up immersed in this desert culture. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a younger Nigerian author – in her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) – depicts the painful paradoxes of love, hurt and suffering in the family of a fanatic Christian tyrant who is their severely abusive husband and father; a hugely wealthy businessman and philanthropist internationally acclaimed for his stand against political tyranny in their

country. In the historical novel *Heart of Redness* (2000), Zakes Mda juxtaposes the tremendous cultural and survival stresses of the famine brought on by the great Xhosa Cattle-Killing (which itself had been a desperate resistance against British colonization) with the enmities in post-apartheid South Africa, in a village context, between the twin brothers descended from those who were at enmity in colonial times. The contemporary competitive tensions pitch modernizers against traditionalists, but with several complicating factors – among them, the ruthless greed of the new rulers. Two relationships are central to Binwell Sinyangwe’s small gem of a novel, *A Cowrie of Hope*; the central one is that between a literally dirt poor village woman and her only child – a quiet, intellectually gifted girl selected for (expensive) high school study. The mother’s determination to enable the girl to get an education involves her in feats of courage and challenges to her hopes that would have destroyed anyone less loving than she. The other important relationship in the narrative is with the mother’s oldest woman friend, who herself is nearly as poor, but who has a generous heart and a joyous soul. In *Beasts of No Nation*, the situation of a child soldier, Agu, a brutalized little boy, is powerfully addressed in the child’s idiosyncratic English. The horrible acts of violence into which he is forced as well as the sexual abuse of the bewildered boy result from the forced relationship between him and his Commander. In *Offspring of Paradise* (2003), Safi Abdi vividly portrays the deep love between two refugees from the violent mayhem that overwhelmed Somalia at the collapse of the Barre regime in 1995. An old woman and her granddaughter, they seem to be the only remnants of their family. With her father dead in a bomb explosion that happened before her eyes and her pregnant mother gang-raped and lost, the teenage girl is filled with bitter fury against Somali manhood and very nearly drawn into the clutches of a suspect, ideologically fundamentalist Christian woman. Wonderfully portrayed in Maaza Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* are the deep loyalties that bind and the passionate angers that fissure a family’s relationships amidst the shocking events of the Ethiopian Revolution and the shifting political alliances that result from it. Yvonne Adhiambo Awuor’s *Dust*, a very recent text, exposes the suppressed secrets of a Kenyan Turkana family at a rural homestead; secrets which embroil them in the tragic, bloody conflicts of their society. Although the central relationship of this complex narrative (between the daughter and her elder and only brother) is destroyed by the young man’s assassination as the novel opens, the remaining family members’ love for him painfully links the passionate mother, the dignified father and the expatriate daughter in un-healing grief.

The Afrocentric gaze of an essay on “African Authors and the Postcolonial Present” is predictable. Nevertheless I wish to try in the final section of this piece to bring in the broader perspectives offered by Enrique Dussel, Achille Mbembe and Maria Pia Lara. In an article in *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, the theologian, political philosopher and historian Dussel wrote: “Intercultural dialogue brings about a transversal and mutual cross-fertilization among the critical thinkers of the periphery and those from ‘border’ spaces”, and added that “the organization of networks to discuss their own specific problems transforms this process of self-affirmation into a weapon of liberation” (“Transmodernity”, 25). What Dussel touches on here suggests the possibly immense value for formerly colonized and otherwise sidelined peoples of the world co-operating culturally, intellectually and politically. In this regard, a journal such as *Glocal Colloquies* can provide useful opportunities to form the networks to which Dussel refers. In an earlier piece, Dussel has given an explanation of the term “transmodernity” (his coinage), as follows:

The “realization” of modernity no longer lies in the passage from its abstract potential to its “real,” European, embodiment. It lies today, rather, in a process that will

transcend modernity as such, a trans-modernity, in which both modernity and its negated alterity (the victims) co-realize themselves in a process of mutual creative fertilization. (“Eurocentrism”, 76)

In this earlier piece, Dussel’s reference to “the victims” may now come across as dated, but was historically contextualized in his essay. I bring in the second Dussel citation here in order to point to its more inclusive bent, in that the South American scholar here appears not only to have a ‘club’ of formerly colonized nations in mind, but suggests the need to heal fissures by means of inter-communicative strategies that will engage with the so-called metropolitan centres, making clear that the supposedly peripheral sections of the world are their own centres and have their own forms of modernity. They are not lagging behind in some earlier time-frame, but are indeed *present* to and in the contemporary world. One can link to this the point that texts from different parts of the postcolonial world are eminently suited for analysis from comparative perspectives; postcolonial literature might be thought of as potentially ‘already’ comparative (see e.g. Gagiano, “Witnessing Child”). Additionally, comparative reading practices can do important linking work to breach fissures between ‘metropolitan’ literatures, criticism and theory and the equivalent work produced in the postcolonial regions by both creative and scholarly writers.

In some thoughtful statements from an interview with Achille Mbembe in which he was asked the question “What is postcolonial thinking?” Mbembe said: “Postcolonial thought is not an anti-European thought. [...] it invites us to undertake an alternative reading of our common modernity. [...] But postcolonial thought is also a dream: the dream of a new form of humanism, [...] the dream of a *polis* that is universal because ethnically diverse” (“What is”, 11). While acknowledging, in his reference to “a dream”, the idealistic and aspirational nature of contemporary postcolonial thinking, as he sees it, Mbembe does point to the need for beginning the reconstructive work that is incumbent upon all of us, but especially on those who are engaged in literary, cultural and intellectual enterprises at this time. Mbembe’s stress on (what he believes to be) the absence of anti-European attitudes in postcolonial work can be linked with Maria Pia Lara’s remark (in a longer passage cited earlier) that “no solidarity is possible if the discourse does not form a bridge to the other’s understanding of what are considered to be worthy features and needs of human beings” (*Moral Textures* 157). Central here is the implied point that the world’s powerful needs to be addressed in ways that will reach their ears and allow them to recognize the humanity and worth of the subalterns of our time. Working from and beyond “notions elaborated by [Hannah] Arendt about the public sphere as a source of storytelling,” Lara explains that “stories about new beginnings” require “a legitimation process that depends on critical acceptance by other groups in the public sphere” (*Moral Textures*, 6). In the “variegated strategies of deconstructing, retelling and reconfiguring the symbolic order and its historical sources” (*Moral Textures*, 7), Lara gives a leading role to narrative prose, in the form of novels and autobiographies. We can adapt Hamlet’s well-known declaration that the play (or the novel, short story, or poem?) is “the thing/ wherein [to] catch the conscience of the King” (II.ii.600-601) – whether “King” refers to the local, postcolonial ruler, or to the ‘Western’ leader. Achebe often uses an Igbo proverb that cautions us to negotiate with the powerful, he who holds both the yam and the knife – in other words, who both possesses the desired or necessary substance or entity and controls the means of accessing it. The pen of the postcolonial writer is not a knife and the text not a yam, but this African saying can be adapted to suggest that the author serves up nutrition to or provides medicine for the health of society (through her or his text) to the critical scholarly reader as well as the world-wide reading public. It is incumbent upon those of us who work in

literature to take up the texts that light up some of the world's darker corners of suffering and neglect, as much as it is our task to help make space for the talents, the dignity and enterprise of those who live or originate from such regions.

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