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Keith Booker. *The African Novel in English: An Introduction.* New York: Heinemann, 1998. xi + 227 pp. $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-325-00030-5.

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Keith Booker's *The African Novel in English* provides an excellent introduction to the discussion of selected African novels as well as to the critical and theoretical debates that have accompanied African literature's rise to prominence.

The African Novel consists of three basic parts: The first section introduces the reader to three main issues (history, language, genre) necessary to understanding African cultural practices in their own historical and aesthetic contexts. The second part provides a literary history of the African novel written in English. It also, however, includes a brief overview of lusophone and francophone African fiction whose discussion Booker otherwise deliberately excludes "as part of a general emphasis on accessibility to American and British undergraduate readers" (p. ix). The third and longest part of this textbook includes extended discussions of eight novels written in English,[1] their historical background, and their author's biography. The eight books discussed are: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* (Nigeria), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (Ghana), Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Season's End* (South Africa), Nguigi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (Kenya) and Tsitsi Dangerembga's *Nervous Conditions* (Zimbabwe). Booker explains his omission of difficult writers like Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and South Africa's Bessie Head in terms of the emphasis on accessibility mentioned above.

No understanding of African fiction would be complete without a knowledge of the theoretical paradigms and critical dilemmas, which Booker discusses in the first section of his book and invokes again throughout his analyses of individual texts. Following Jameson's influential and controversial essay[2], Booker warns, for instance, against the temptation to judge African culture by European aesthetic and formalist standards which claim to be "universal" but fail to respect the role of African oral traditions in the development of modern African literature. Inversely, he is also conscious of the difficulty of accounting for the otherness of African aesthetics without reverting to an orientalist tendency that sees African culture as an "alien and exotic curiosity" (p. 8). This double bind (universalism versus orientalism) is further complicated, Booker explains, by the fact that critics who seek to acknowledge the dialogue between African and European literatures still risk perpetuating Europe's colonial and cultural domination of Africa if they "lean too far in one direction or another in appreciating this hybridity" (p. 7). After discussing the difficulties critics face in approaching African culture, Booker highlights the dilemmas with which African writers themselves have to contend when producing their fictional works. In succint but cogent sub-sections, the author investigates the three basic issues of history, language and literary genre–fraught notions for postcolonial writers invested in developing their own national cultures. The concepts were all originated and/or have developed in a Eurocentric discursive and capitalist framework and make, for instance, the choice of English (the language of the colonizer) or of the novel (the quintessential European bourgeois genre) a highly political and debated act for African writers.

Even as Booker emphasizes the need to appreciate the hybridity of the African novel (p. 7), his position remains firmly grounded in a Jamesonian paradigm. His textual analyses which are significantly followed by historical, political and economic details about each author's country of origin confirm Jameson's much-debated claim that Third World literatures function as "national allegories."[3] Like Jameson, Booker argues that in "Third World" fiction, the protagonist's development parallels that of the nation and that separating the character's private and public lives would only further the fragmentation of social life triggered by capitalism. This "reifica-

tion" ultimately "draws any energies away from the public world of politics and thus weakens any attempt to oppose the current structure of power" (p. 136). The influence of Marxist thinkers like Jameson and Lukacs on Booker's approach is also evident when he tackles the issue of the "relevance" of African literature to a Western audience. Drawing on Jameson's discussion of the global dominance of late capitalism and of its resulting "homogenization" of cultural life across the world, Booker emphasizes the importance of African literature for Western readers on two counts: first, he argues that in today's interconnected global cultural system, "African and Western culture no longer exist as separate, pure phenomena" (p. 3), and that Western students need to know about African culture; secondly, African cultural productions provide new and important perspectives on Western literature insofar as they resist the "homogenizing" tendencies of third stage capitalism and represent instead an empowering "collective experience." In other words, African novels are both like and unlike Western cultural productions. We can not only relate to them and understand them but also use them to better understand ourselves.

It is evidence of the difficult task awaiting critics of "Third World" culture that even a commentator as keenly aware of ideological double binds as Keith Booker could not avoid the trap of Eurocentric tendencies when he examines the relevance of African literature to Western readers. Booker begins his introduction with a discussion of "The Question of Relevance: The African Novel and the Western Reader" and ends with a reminder that "if the African novel raises a number of formal and ideological issues that are different from those we typically encounter in the European novel, this very difference can help us understand Western literature better" (p. 28). This reviewer was made uncomfortable by the author's repeated efforts at justifying the value of African literature to a Western audience and by the resulting instrumentality ascribed (albeit implicitly) to African cultural practices. Booker does a great job emphasizing the need to challenge Western aesthetic and moral values in order to adequately appreciate African culture, but the justification for doing so needs to exceed that of learning "to see 'our' culture in new and different ways" (p. 28, emphasis added). Reminding Western readers that African culture is "a crucial part of the national cultural heritages of both Britain and America" (p. 2) is one thing; framing the discussion of African literature in terms of its relevance to the West is another. No introductory textbook to French or German literatures, for instance, would begin with such justification. Its relevance to students and teachers from other linguistic and cultural affiliations is taken for granted. Booker is otherwise so mindful of the double binds critics of postcolonial literatures have to face that the omission of a self-reflexive discussion when it comes to this issue is particularly striking.

In the third and longest section of *The African Novel*, Booker highlights the hybrid nature of African literature through the analysis of selected novels. Depending on the work under scrutiny, however, his study of the ways in which African fiction incorporates both African and European literary traditions is more or less persuasive. It is convincing when he accounts for the syncretic combination of written and oral cultural impulses in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* but less cogent when he describes the workings of gender in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* or the operations of style in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*. After arguing, for instance, that Nnu Ego, the protagonist of Emecheta's novel, provides a "trenchant description of the role played by the glorification of motherhood ... in traditional Igbo society" (p. 92), Booker questions the very interpretation he has just endorsed as a Eurocentric projection of Western feminist concerns: "In short, Nnu Ego's tragedy may not be that she is forced into a traditional role as the mother of Oshio and Adim but that the impact of colonialism makes it impossible for her to assume that role fully" (p. 94). The same kind of contradictory reading characterizes Booker's examination of literary technique in Aidoo's novel. On the one hand, he suggests that the "indirect free style" and complex narrative voice used in *Sister Killjoy* testifies to the rich and dialogic relationship between the African novel and modernist works like Conrad's. On the other hand, he warns his readers against placing Aidoo's text within the conventions of Western modernist aesthetics, a gesture whose universalizing tendencies overlook the influence of African oral narratives.

At moments like these, it is unclear how Booker's discussion of these aspects of African culture as alternately related to Western or African cultural values succeeds in describing the "hybrid" nature of African traditions. Neither is it clear how he avoids the pitfall of seeing the hybridity of the African novel as "a simple additive combination of cultural perspectives" (p. 21). At other times, Booker is so invested in challenging Western standards of reading that he ends up casting the moral objections of critics to the precolonial patriarchal structures depicted in *Joys of Motherhood* or to the practice of human sacrifice in *Things Fall Apart* as yet another form of universal-

ism: "It is important to recognize, though, that the killing of Ikemefuna, however startling by Western standards, does not necessarily demonstrate a weakness in Igbo society" (p. 70). While Booker's point about the importance of recognizing the differences between Igbo social values and Western individualistic norms is well taken, readers may wonder whether such recognition and the recovery of repressed cultural forms need necessarily result, as Maryse Conde put it, in glossing over "blemishes such as domestic slavery, tribal warfare, and the subjugation of women" (p. 124).[4]

These questions aside, however, *The African Novel* provides an informed and lucid introduction to the African novel written in English. It offers detailed and careful analyses of important individual texts as well as an overview of the influential theoretical and critical debates that have been waged in postcolonial studies of the novel. The historical context provided with each textual analysis will be valuable to teachers and students of African literature, especially where Booker explicitly engages this background's relation to the text under scrutiny.

Notes:

[1]. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* is an exception, since it was written in Gikuyu and only subsequently translated into English by the author himself.

[2]. Jameson, Fredric "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15:65-88.

[3]. Booker mentions but does not engage Aijaz Ahmad's important critique of Jameson's argument in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures.* London: Verso, 1992.

[4]. Conde, Maryse. "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer." *Yale French Studies* 83 (1993): 121-136.

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