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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brenda Cooper. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. London & New York: Routledge, 1998. 250 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-18239-3.

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Published on H-AfrLitCine (May, 2000)



Brenda Cooper's latest book is very informative and thought-provoking. I have no doubt that the book will effectively introduce readers not only to the complex fictional worlds of three of the most rapidly self-asserting African writers, but also to the art of magical realism in general. Written in a lucid, accessible, and appropriately personal style, the book is also well-structured and brings a lot of useful insights into a number of controversial issues in contemporary critical theory, such as Marxism and postmodernism, difference and the politics of identity, positioning and representation, and gender.

The first two chapters set a firm and useful theoretical framework on which Cooper builds her discussions of the fiction of Ben Okri, Syl Cheney-Coker and Kojo Laing in subsequent chapters. Negating any simplified, polarized opposition between Marxism and postmodernism, for example, she rightly encourages a sense of negotiation and states that "there is also a third space of another kind, a theoretical position that might be called a "reconstituted Marxism." This theoretical position, to use her own words, "recognises individuals as gendered, racially constituted, unevenly privileged subjects, playing out many-layered lives that are both structurally determined and also idiosyncratically forged." >From this perspective, Cooper has been able to examine in considerable detail and a convincing manner the hybrid fictional worlds of these three writers, which cannot be simply described in terms of polarised opposites such as "history versus magic, the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death."

Cooper defines magical realism as syncretist art form "born precisely out of that perilous and fragile embrace between the superstitious beliefs and the ironic distance."

This definition enables her to make an important distinction between the culturally monolithic writings of authors like Amos Tutuola and D.O Fagunwa, who are unambiguously attached to the superstitious beliefs they depict, with the culturally ambivalent works of "cosmopolitan," magical realist writers such as Ben Okri, Syl Cheney-Coker and Kojo Laing. As she convincingly argues in the third chapter, although Tutuola's work has had an influence on the writings of the magical realist authors mentioned above, it belongs to the project of cultural nationalists and decolonizers such as Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka and Armah. Here Cooper makes a useful contribution towards our understanding of the uses of the supernatural in African literature.

In the following three chapters Cooper discusses how the three magical realist writers mentioned above try in their respective works to negotiate the middle space created by a cosmopolitan drive deriving from their marginal positioning, on one hand, and a desire to inscribe their writings in the African socio-political context, on the other. She persuasively shows that through their use of devices like irony, parody, pastiche, paradox, the grotesque, riddles and mythical allusion these writers have produced complex, ambivalent works of art which depict "life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious," interrogate traditional practices, denounce imperialism and promote change. In spite of these writers' promotion of change, however, Cooper points out convincingly that "gender has been the Achille's heel tripping up progressive writers who fall into the trap of gender stereotypes."

Comparing Appiah's and Mudimbe's seminal writings with the fictional works of these writers in the final

chapter, Cooper rightly concludes that all of them “occupy ambiguous spaces suspended between cosmopolitan and decoloniser positionings.” This is indeed the situation of many an African or third world intellectual.

On the whole, Cooper has produced an important book in an area of African literature which has not received adequate attention so far. This book is a must for

students of African literature, critical theory and cultural studies.

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**Citation:** Lokangaka Losambe. Review of Cooper, Brenda, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4123>

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