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## **The Novel and Decolonization in Africa**

**Mpalive-Hangson Msiska**

The African novel in English emerged in earnest in the period after World War II. It was a product of the broader social, political and economic changes engendered by the encounter with Europe, which by the mid-1940s had crystalized into a forceful lived experience, at the heart of which was the challenge of Western modernity to an African way of life and its history. True, there had been isolated novelistic narratives produced in Africa earlier, most notably Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, written in 1919 and published in 1930, and R.R. R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* published 1928, but these did not lead to the emergence of a fully-fledged novelistic tradition. The widespread production, circulation and consumption of the novel in Africa did not take place until after 1945, more specifically after 1958, with the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Just as the novel's genesis in Europe in the early eighteenth century had been propelled by broader historical and cultural changes in society, so too in Africa: from 1945 to the early 1960s, the continent underwent rapid and momentous change as a result of World War II. The increased pace of modernization, access to education, and the development of nationalism all had an impact on individual and collective consciousness, on social institutions and practices, and on discourses of representation. These changes required new forms of representation; and above any other genre, the novel seemed to meet the challenges of the time best. Writing in 1960 in *The Times* (London), Abioseh Nicol observed that most of the writing emerging in Africa during the period of decolonization was marked by a concern with the 'impact of education, Christianity and

contact with Europeans on ancient beliefs and customs' (Nicol 1960, 20). Such contact transformed the social and physical reality of a growing number of Africans, as Christianity and colonial government institutions reached even the most remote parts of the continent by the 1940s. Ironically, the ubiquitous institutions of colonial modernity such as the village church, school and the warrant chief (a creation of the colonial administration) would engender seeds of resentment and a clamour for decolonization and independence.

In this context, the novel offered the most capacious and flexible form in which to register the new forms of subjectivity, social experience, and even ways of being and seeing that arose out of the colonial encounter. Significantly, the novel would become one of the important sites where new discourses of the private and public sphere would be articulated, contested and reconstituted. It would also be in novelistic discourse that questions about the state of family relations, kinship ties, ethnic and national identity as well as gender relations in a modern world would be examined and worked out. Additionally, the novel would provide the means by which new political ideologies would be enunciated and interrogated. In this regard, the writers of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s would serve as part of an organic intellectual leadership of the movement for self-determination and independence that sprung up across the continent in the Post-War period. The cultural formation of these intellectuals would itself be marked by their awareness of the unique access they had to the colonial means of educational and cultural capital that elevated their status above those of their compatriots. As part of an educated elite, African writers were at the centre of the cultural politics of decolonization and their works served as more than simply a mode of self-expression – creative works also

functioned as an outlet for the ‘cultured’ indigenous perspective on the contemporary situation, especially the nature of colonial power and its effects on Africans. Writers were also contributing to the fashioning of a post-colonial future. In this way, writing was doubly valorized as both a private and public discourse, one committed to the enunciation of public ideas. Thus, the novel would serve as the specific discourse of an emergent class, one with a more secular outlook and that would also be in the vanguard of narratives of decolonization.

As other contributors to this volume have noted, increased educational and publishing opportunities, urbanization and political consciousness in the post-war period created a cultural environment in which the novel found a fertile soil in which to grow and prosper as a form that both spoke to the impulses and needs of the African reader and appealed to an overseas readership. The genre served as the discursive terrain where the African could reflect on his or her new subjectivity and its surrounding ideological universe. This chapter will begin by exploring the forces that led to the proliferation of the novel as a genre during the period after World War II and will then focus on those writers whose careers can be firmly placed in the decade after the War, namely: Peter Abrahams, Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe.

### **The Historical and Cultural Background**

What were the particular conditions that had produced this historical and cultural formation? First and foremost, this formation was the culmination of the missionary effort to incorporate Africans into the religious and cultural values of Europe through

education, and efforts which had begun in earnest around the 1850s. It was also a result of African demands for better education, beginning around 1912 when there emerged in a number of colonial territories so-called 'native associations.' These associations include the South African Native National Congress (SANNC)—which later evolved into the African National Congress (ANC)—and the North Nyasa Native Association in Malawi, The Young Kikuyu Association, later known as the East African Association, led by Harry Thuku and Herbert Macaulay's Lagos-centred Nigerian National Democracy Party (NNDP). These associations mainly sought improvements in the living conditions of the colonised, better amenities, and some limited political reforms; in the Post-War period they would be superseded by national parties that increased pressure on the Colonial government to cede power to Africans. In Nigeria there was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) founded by Herbert Macaulay and led by Nnamdi Azikiwe who in 1963 became the first President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There was also the Action Group led by Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by Ahmadu Bello. In Ghana, J.B. Danquah founded the Gold-Coast United Convention (UGCC), after protests and riots over food prices, by, among others, ex-servicemen.

There was also the emergence of what might be described as youth culture which manifested itself as a radical political force. In 1938, the National Youth Movement which brought Azikiwe and other young leaders to prominence, defeating Macaulay's NNDP in the Lagos Town Council elections, was one of the many instances in this period when youth snatched leadership rather than patiently awaiting its turn as in traditional African society. It must have been Macaulay's recognition of the power of the educated

youth that made him align with them when in 1944 he used his financial and political clout to form the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). When Macaulay died, the Presidency passed to Azikiwe in a transfer of power from one generation to another that was symptomatic of the broader changes across the continent. In Ghana, for instance, Kwame Nkrumah, who had been back from Britain and America for less than two years, wrested power from J.B Danqua by forming the rival and more populist the Gold Coast United People's Convention Party (CCP) in 1948 which won the 1951 elections and subsequently made Nkrumah the first Black Prime Minister in Ghana and Africa as a whole. British political machinations in Ghana as well as Nkrumah's growing authoritarianism formed the subject of Peter Abrahams's 1956 novel, *The Wreath for Udomo*.

Abrahams's and Nkrumah's paths first crossed in England in the 1940s. They were both actively involved in the 1945 Pan-Africanist Congress held in Manchester and attended by, among others, W.E.B Dubois and future African leaders like Jomo Kenyatta, later to lead Kenya to independence after publishing *Facing Mount Kenya* (1953), an important cultural and historical account of the Kikuyu whose primary aim was, as Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to retrieve the repressed values and cultures of the indigenous peoples partly to show that Africans were more than capable of leading themselves in modern Africa. Pan-Africanism, which emphasised the unity of Black people, was transnational, but even so, it was not regarded by the Nationalists as in conflict with the aspiration to found postcolonial nations in Africa. Indeed, if anything, nationalism was seen as laying the foundation for a trans-territorial Pan-African formation that would embody the global Black nation. The first attempt was made in

1963 when the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was formed. Although the emphasis of the OAU (and the African Union that succeeded it) was on the geopolitical union of the continent rather than on black unity, Pan-Africanism would continue to be a major theme in the works of African novelists.

Newspapers were one of the major conduits of international currents of thought, including Pan-Africanism. Marcus Garvey's the *Negro World*, established in 1918, was one of the most influential. There were also local newspapers such as Macaulay's the *Lagos Times*, founded in the 1920s; Azikiwe's the *West African Pilot*, started in 1937; and magazines such as *Drum*, launched in 1951. In addition to promoting political ideas among their readers, these dailies and periodicals provided an outlet for creative writing. The success of such publications was also due to the growing numbers of literate readers in both local languages and in English. That was particularly a result of the continuing promotion of literacy by missionaries and later by Africans themselves, some of whom founded independent schools and churches. It is noteworthy that there was an increase in the provision of secondary and tertiary education after World War II and that the colonial government got more involved in education, which earlier had been mostly the preserve of missionaries. The beneficiaries of this wider and more secular provision of education would include individuals who would later become important writers.

Additionally, the formation of Government Literature Bureaus across Sub-Saharan Africa after the Second World War helped to foster the habit of writing and provided local facilities for publication. In some territories, Africans took matters in their own hands and engaged in publishing and printing books; this is evident in the emergence of Onitsha Market Literature in the late 1940s. Additionally, as Abioseh Nicol notes, 'the

advent of bodies like the British Council, the broadcasting corporations and the festivals of the arts after the war, encouraged the beginning of creative writing' (Nicol 1960, 20).

### **Peter Abrahams: Race, Class, and Modernity**

Peter Abrahams's writing career spans the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and beyond. His writing is dominated by a concern with the politics of race and class, determined largely by the situation in the country of his birth, South Africa. Born to an Ethiopian father and a mixed-race mother in Vrededorp near Johannesburg, Abrahams was perhaps one of the first major African writers, although he is not as well-known as Chinua Achebe.

Kolewole Ogungbesan explains this anomaly as follows:

Peter Abrahams's low standing among African writers reflects the difficulty in assessing not only his achievement but also the true nature of that achievement. Because he began writing a full decade before the current movement in African writing got under way, he has been acknowledged as an obvious influence on subsequent African writers. Yet, both the nature and extent of his influence have been difficult to determine. (Ogungbesan 1980, 187)

For all that, Abrahams and his work were at the centre of African Nationalism and Pan-Africanism from the 1940s onwards. He had a deep understanding of racial and social inequality and was fully committed to eradicating them to engender a better society. Abrahams's politics arose from his experience in South Africa where he was



officially classified as a 'coloured' and endured the humiliations associated with his station in life. While at school, he was attracted to Marxism, finding that its analysis of capitalist class relations illuminated his own situation. Later, while working in Johannesburg as a clerk at the Bantu Social Centre, he encountered the work of African-American thinkers and writers such as W.E.B Dubois and members of the Harlem Renaissance. This gave him a notion of Black literature and how to use literature as a critique of racism, which he did in his 1954 novel *Tell Freedom*. Having begun writing poetry and short stories in South Africa, with some limited success, Abrahams immigrated to the United Kingdom in 1939 where he quickly established himself as a distinctive intellectual and artistic voice, working for the Communist Party of Great Britain Book Distribution Agency until 1944 and contributing to its newspaper the *Daily Worker*. Abrahams settled in Jamaica in 1959 and has overall published ten novels and two autobiographical works.

In his first novel, *Song of the City* (1945), Abrahams signaled his passionate concern for the plight of Black people in South Africa, especially as it affected interracial social relationships. However, most of his early work was largely ignored by the press, and when it was reviewed, it was merely read as a source of information on African life. It might be that the unexpected style of his work challenged his readership's horizon of expectation. Abrahams worked within the aesthetics of Modernism and Socialist Realism in his early work – perhaps that was not a style that was expected of Africans at the time, especially by those interested in African affairs.

Be that as it may, *Song of the City* is one of the earliest novels to explore the theme of Black migration to Johannesburg, which had been going on since the 1880s

when gold was first discovered on the Rand. In the novel, Dick Nduli's hopes of a better life in the city are quickly frustrated by unfounded police harassment which leads to a spell in jail, showing that long before apartheid had formalized racial segregation, law enforcement agencies were prone to treat Black people with impunity. Nevertheless, the protagonist's prison experience introduces him to radical nationalism as he changes from a country boy to a politically conscious urban subject, revealing how spaces of colonial punishment could also serve as sites of subversion and also how the colonial city provided ample resources for cultivating radical politics. This may be why, despite the many forms of discrimination he endures there, Nduli decides to settle in the city, seeing the place as a symbol of modernity and enlightenment for the African. This preference for the city over the countryside became an important theme in the work of subsequent African writers, including Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948) and Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954). Thus, the novel records the emergence of a new subjectivity in Africa, the African man or woman of the city. The novel also portrays the effects of race and ethnicity in the management of public and private spheres of South African in the 1940s. It exposes the limits of liberalism, as the multicultural consensus of Professor Ashe's drawing room is fractured by serious political cleavages over whether South Africa should join the Second World War and marked by the emergence of a more radical form of politics represented by Nduli and his fellow activists, on the one hand, and Afrikaner Nationalism, on the other.

Abrahams would explore these themes with greater imaginative power in his novel *Mine Boy* published in 1946. Like *Song of the City*, *Mine Boy* charts the transition of a country man into an urban subject. Xuma, green to the ways of the city, is taken in

hand by the shebeen owner Leah and her small surrogate family. In Xuma's case, unlike Nduli's, his country manners of decency, loyalty and hard work endear him to all who cross his path, including his workmates at the mine, as he assumes the role of the natural leader. It is very clear that this novel, as would Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, presents the city as corroding the essential goodness of the countryside, leaving migrants unsure of who they are. This condition is exemplified by *Mine Boy*'s character Daddy, a one-time community leader who becomes infantilized as a bumbling drunkard.

However, *Mine Boy* also shows that the city can be revitalized by the traditional values of the rural areas. Xuma's fresh outlook is used to defamiliarize what is taken for granted by the city folk, including their poor treatment at the hands of the white establishment. This perspective leads Xuma to organize a mine strike that is joined by his liberal Irish boss. It is significant that Abrahams presents the possibility of inter-racial cooperation in fighting racial and class-based injustice, a view embodied by the ANC, which illustrates how novelistic practice during decolonization could be employed to propagate particular political positions. Abrahams was also drawing on Marxism to produce a critique of the labour relations in South Africa; Michael Wade is right when he describes *Mine Boy* as 'South African's first Proletarian novel' (Wade 1978, 95). Indeed, in the very year of the novel's publication, the ANC and the South African Communist Party sponsored the formation of the African Miners Union which participated in a general strike over mining conditions. Thus, in keeping with what has come to be known as socialist realism, the novel documents contemporary historical events, but in a way that shows their links to the historical workings of Capitalism in South Africa, since what is driving workers like Xuma into the mines is the severe shortage of productive land for

Africans since the 1913 Land Act alienated almost ninety percent of arable land to white ownership.

For Sally-Anne Jackson, *Mine Boy* is singularly important for its concern with colonial diseases, showing how mining was not only a source of money for the black workers, but also of increased vulnerability to terminal diseases such as tuberculosis. In Abraham's novel the diseased body functions as a metaphor of the general breakdown of African society engendered by colonial and racial oppression. Xuma's lover, the school teacher Elizabeth cannot marry him because, in her words, she is 'sick inside,' for she hankers after the white world and cannot settle in a black community. She embodies the psychic alienation examined by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and explored by later writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1989).

In *Song of the City*, Abrahams privileges the city; in *Mine Boy*, he is ambivalent about the city. But in *Path of Thunder* (1948), Abrahams explores the possibility of the metropolitan subject finding a home in the countryside. The protagonist, Lanny Swartz, who is a 'coloured,' returns to his rural area to educate and modernize his community; he finds himself alienated, especially because of his love affair with an Afrikaner woman which provokes hostility from the white community that leads to the couple's tragic death. J.P. Wade rightly concludes that 'If *The Path of Thunder* is an account of Lanny's exclusion from the "western" society for which he had been ideologically prepared, it is also therefore an account of his exclusion from his own (black and working-class) community, and his subsequent political neutralisation' (Wade 1989, 72). The protagonist's failure bespeaks a fundamental contradiction in the liberal ideal, especially as practiced in pre-apartheid South Africa, predicated on the idea that access to education

and modernity would in the end make black people assimilate into the dominant culture so that the problem of race would gradually disappear, forgetting that in a racialised society modernity itself is intersected and mediated by racial difference.

Abrahams would take up some of these problems in his classic novel, *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956). This novel focuses on young radicals from Africa and the Caribbean who are based in London as students and activists, among whom Michael Udomo emerges as the natural leader. Udomo returns to his country Panafrika, which is under colonial rule, and manages to lead his country to independence; in the process, Udomo betrays his friend David Mhendi because he is unacceptable to his European sponsors. Udomo's ruthless pragmatism alienates him from his allies and leads to his death. The novel was widely regarded as a criticism of Nkrumah whom Abrahams had known well since their days in London; he had visited Nkrumah in 1955 on a return from South Africa and Kenya where he had been working as a correspondent for the *Observer* newspaper. A contemporary reviewer claimed that *A Wreath for Udomo* adds 'to the ever-growing library of books on present-day Africa [...] one more well-painted picture of the hopes, fears, dreams and possibilities of that part of the world which more and more people are beginning to realize is the continent of the future' (St. John 1956, 14).

Evidently, *A Wreath for Udomo* was seen as trying to grasp the new postcolonial formations from inside. It was one of the first to examine attitudes toward power in an African-led postcolonial country, suggesting that the idealism of the struggle for independence may not always be sustained in the actual practice of governance, as the idealism of activist nationalism gives way to the practicalities of power. Additionally, the novel explores life in a white-dominated neighbouring country of Pluralia, largely

modelled on South Africa, where racial hatred reigns supreme although a section of the black population has been successfully incorporated into Western modernity. In the choice between Panafrica and Pluralia, Abrahams prefers the former as the pragmatic option.

Between 1942 and the mid-1950s, Abraham had achieved much as a writer and had led a life rich and varied enough to write his own autobiography, *Tell Freedom* (1954). His work had pondered the nature of African political, social, and cultural modernity. It was committed to a non-racial as well as non-tribal postcolonial future. Abrahams was critical of African leaders like Nkrumah and Kenyatta for aligning themselves with tradition. He aptly defined the problem facing the modern African in an essay, 'The conflict of Culture in Africa' (1954), in which he argued that Africans who aligned themselves with tradition were doing so because they had been rejected by the white establishment and not by choice. He writes:

For the detribalized man this is essentially a situation of isolation. His rejection of tribalism places him outside the moral and psychological props of his society. He does not only lose its restraining and inhibiting influences, but also its comforting influences. [...] On the other hand the white administrator who could help and make life easier has very little, if any, time for him. [...] In the case of Kenyatta, it was this sense of isolation that compelled him to write *Facing Mount Kenya*, [...] his apologia for tribalism. (Abrahams 1954, 305-306)

Undoubtedly, a number of Abrahams's contemporaries—like Chinua Achebe—would have disagreed with this call for absolute detribalisation, as they would have regarded Abrahams's position as a capitulation to the so-called European 'civilizing mission' which had done much harm to the self-perception of Africans.

### **Amos Tutuola: The Inscription of an African Cosmology**

Amos Tutuola has a unique place in African literary history, given his unusual family, cultural and educational background among African writers of the 1940s and 1950s. Like Abrahams, Tutuola came from an extremely poor background and relied on charity for his education and social advance. Like Abraham, he started school late, at the age of twelve, sent and paid for by his Nigerian employer, for whom he was working as a live-in servant. Tutuola completed 6 years of education, leaving school in 1939 after the death of his father in order to train as a blacksmith; from 1942 to 1945 Tutuola practiced his trade with the Royal Air Force in Nigeria. In the 1950s, he worked as a storekeeper for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. In the same year that Faber and Faber published Abrahams's *Mine Boy* in London, Tutuola was completing the manuscript of his most famous novel, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952). On its publication by Faber in 1952, Tutuola's novel would receive greater and less grudging acclaim in Europe and America than works by the obviously distinguished Abrahams had ever received.

Tutuola's novel was immediately canonised by the literary establishment, including the poet and playwright Dylan Thomas and the novelist, short story writer and literary critic V.S Prichett. Thomas, whose work sought to bring his Welsh heritage into

mainstream literature, must have divined a kindred spirit in Tutuola's style. It may also have been Tutuola's apolitical approach that made his work more acceptable than Abrahams's overtly political aesthetic. Tutuola may also have appealed to the Modernists' primitivism, suggested by Thomas's reference to Tutuola's book as 'a tall and devilish tale' (Moore 1962, 39). However, the enthusiasm with which the Western literary establishment received Tutuola alarmed some Africans, who regarded this enthusiasm as a ploy to indulge long-held racist attitudes towards Africans and a failure to take African modernity into account. Tutuola was nevertheless eventually accepted in African literary circles as an important writer, appointed to a Writers' Residency at the University of Ife in the 1970s, among several honours.

Despite the controversy surrounding the author, the publication of *The Palm Wine Drinkard* was a major international milestone in the formation of African literature because it initiated the art of inscribing indigenous African mythopoesis in modern literary practice, something later writers would undertake more self-consciously. *The Palm Wine Drinkard* is a first-person narrative about a young man who is so addicted to drinking that he does nothing *but* drink. This protagonist's concerned father engages a full-time tapster to ensure constant provision for the son. When the tapster dies, the young man embarks on a quest to find him, leading him through a series of encounters with various forms of the dead and ghosts in their myriad grotesque manifestations until he reaches the land of the dead where he finds the tapster, who is unable to change back into a human. However, the tapster gives the young man an egg with which to conjure anything he wishes, including palm wine. This egg's potency is ultimately undermined by human greed.



In *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola managed to bring into the mode of modern literary representation the style and motifs of oral literature and the world view that framed them. It is widely acknowledged that Tutuola used material from traditional Yoruba oral tradition, mining the same vein as the renowned Yoruba-language writer D.O. Fagunwa whose collected tales were introduced into the school curriculum in Nigeria in the 1930s. At one level, Tutuola was doing something similar to Fagunwa, but in English rather than in Yoruba. In this regard, Tutuola was engaged in an archival exercise of inscribing the traditional African creative imagination into the hegemonic mode of cultural production of his time. Like traditional African folktales, Tutuola's narrative is didactic; it highlights the dangers of excess, the fickleness of social relationships, the value of endurance and it demonstrates how even the most inveterate lazy palm wine drinker can be reformed into a socially responsible citizen by deferring his gratification until he has proven his worth. Nevertheless, Tutuola's rendering of the tales into English was mediated by the Western practice of authorship, a particular and historically specific set of conventions that required and permitted the artist a greater degree of intervention than had traditional oral performance.

Tutuola's significance as a writer is that his work provides a glimpse into that moment when the role of the traditional African story-teller evolves into that of the modern author, but with the marks of the transition intact to a degree not evident in the work of his university-educated contemporaries who came to writing having already been acculturated into the new concept of the *story-teller-as-author*. For the university educated writer, the conception of the African writer as a present day story teller, an *imbongi* or *griot*, would be more an index of cultural nationalism, ideological choice,

than part of a lived experience as in Tutuola's case. Thus, Tutuola adapted the function of the author to the needs and demands of the storyteller; in the process, his work achieved a deep formal hybridity and authorial subjectivity.

Additionally, Tutuola articulated and specified an African cultural modernity. In a foreword to Tutuola's second novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), Geoffrey Parrinder observes that 'at the same time as it relates old themes, the story reflects the situation of Africans under the impact of European ideas and government' (Parrinder 1954, 12). One of the fundamental ways in which those ideas are reflected is in Tutuola's choice to write in English rather than Yoruba – his mother tongue – as the language of literary representation. English was the language of colonial cultural hegemony in Anglophone Africa. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has argued, 'language was the means of spiritual subjugation' (Ngũgĩ 1981, 9). Above all, English was the language of modernity, part of the symbolic cultural capital in terms of which power and status were distributed in the colonial era. In this regard, Tutuola's novel was aspirational like the works of his colleagues; he longed to belong to the new cultural order, even though his linguistic and educational resources had been severely constrained by lack of opportunity.

As in his first novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* also employed mythopoesis, but with a twist. In this novel, Tutuola introduced some modifications to the traditional cosmology, which divides Being into the worlds of the living, the dead and the gods. In Tutuola's schema, there is a realm of permanent ghosts whose status, unlike in the traditional conception, is not achieved by passing from the living to the realm of the dead through death. Tutuola piles as much grotesquerie on the creatures as possible, for instance, describing the 'Smelling Ghost' thus: '[a]ll kinds of snakes, centipedes and flies

were living on every part of his body' (Tutuola 1954, 29). Tutuola used his imagination to transform the traditional representation of spiritual beings, in that process turning a traditional cosmology into a secular modern mythopoesis; this transformation is something that later writers would engage with, such as Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreters* (1965) and Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* (1990).

Tutuola's radical revision of traditional ontological frameworks would also extend to subjectivity. In *The Bush of Ghosts*, Tutuola represents what amount to lesbian relationships when he describes the city where women marry other women. The protagonist is told that 'those women with moustaches had been betrayed by their husbands after their marriage, but now none of them could marry any male again except to marry ladies as husbands' (Tutuola 1954, 123). Granted, this is being presented as the opposite of the norm; what is significant is that Tutuola's imaginative space allowed him to think of forms of subjectivity that were not available in his society. His foregrounding of women's subjectivity is further evident in his choice of female protagonists for subsequent works like *Simbi and the Satyr of the Black Jungle* (1955) and *The Brave African Huntress* (1958).

Tutuola continued to publish more such narratives until his death in 1997. Critics have noticed that in the 1960s he drew upon several non-African texts, such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and *One Thousand and One Nights*. The latter includes motifs from Sanskrit, suggesting that Tutuola's appropriation of the older tales was in keeping with the oral tradition's non-proprietary circulation of texts. Whatever Tutuola borrowed from others, he fashioned it into unique narratives, giving him a distinct authorial identity in African writing.

## **Cyprian Ekwensi: the Work of Popular Fiction**

Like Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi worked off the beaten track, and for this reason, his place in African literary history has needed to be defended from time to time, as his writing does not obviously articulate the main ideological concerns of African literature in the age of decolonization. Ekwensi was born in Minna, Northern Nigeria to Igbo parents. He learned Hausa and Yoruba in addition to English and his mother tongue, Igbo. Unlike Tutuola, Ekwensi came from a family that did not seem to have any difficulty in sending him to school, his father being an accomplished storyteller and elephant hunter. After his early education in Northern Nigeria, Ekwensi studied forestry and pharmacy in Ibadan, completing his studies at the Chelsea School of Pharmacy, University of London.

Ekwensi began writing while working as a forester; in 1947, his novella *When Love Whispers* was released by an Onitsha Market publisher. It is significant that Ekwensi began his career at Onitsha, the birthplace of one of the most vibrant indigenous writing and publishing industries in colonial Africa in the 1940s and reminiscent of Grub Street publishing in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London. In the fashion of other novels in the Onitsha tradition, *When Love Whispers* exhibits traits that would define Ekwensi's style for most of his life, such as his fascination with the modern notion of love and romance, with modernity, with education as a transformative force and, above

all, with fast-moving plots associated with crime fiction and romances. Ekwensi's style would influence many popular African writers, such as Kalu Okpi in Nigeria, David Maillu in Kenya, and Aubrey Kalitera in Malawi.

In the same year, Ekwensi published his collection *Okolo the Wrestler and Other Igbo Tales* (1947), suggesting that he aimed to locate himself on the same cultural terrain as Tutuola. Given that the demand for school readers with indigenous content provided the surest way of getting noticed as an aspiring writer, especially after the 1940s, this was not surprising. Ekwensi was so prolific that between 1947 and 1948 alone he published 5 books with British publishers – a mark of his serious commitment to writing and a sign that he was being taken seriously internationally. By the time of his death in November 2007, Ekwensi had published over 40 books and hundreds of short stories, proving to be the most prolific African writer.

Upon returning from his studies in Britain in the mid-1950s, Ekwensi joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. He was promoted to Features Editor before being appointed Director of Information, one of the most senior positions in the Nigerian colonial civil service, a position in which he remained through independence until the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1966. Like Chinua Achebe, Ekwensi escaped to Eastern Nigeria into what would later become the Republic of Biafra; here, he again served as a senior civil servant. After the war, Ekwensi returned to writing and publishing.

There is a wide range of subjects in Ekwensi's oeuvre, but two books in particular have been responsible for his popularity and, some would say, for his notoriety: *People of the City* (1954) and *Jagua Nana* (1961). *People of the City* was published four years

before Chinua Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*. In fact, apart from Abrahams's and Tutuola's work discussed above, *People of the City* was one of the earliest African novels to receive international attention. On the publication of the novel, Abrahams welcomed Ekwensi as 'a literary pioneer' (Abrahams 1954, 975). There were many reasons why the novel would become an important work in the African canon. It was certainly the first to celebrate the modern African city and capture its dizzying flow of day-to-day life. Ekwensi dramatized metropolitan life and identity in all its rich and sometimes bewildering variety.

*People of the City* filters the experience of the city through a young journalist who is also a part-time jazz bandleader. Sango, a suave urbane crime reporter, is a man-about-town and a representative of the educated and urbanised young elite. In Ekwensi's novel, what defines the emergent metropolitan subject is the unabashed consumption of European culture side-by-side with vibrant traditional cultural forms adapting modernity to the cultural specificity of Nigeria. We are told, for instance, that: 'Of women Sango could have his pick, from the silk-clad ones who wore lipstick in the European manner and smelled of scent in the warm air to the more ample, less sophisticated ones in the big-sleeved velvet blouses that feminized a woman' (ch 1).

The city is not only for the sophisticated and the aspiring, but is also a den of criminality. There is Aila, the attractive compulsive shoplifter, who wants to use Sango's respectability as a cloak for her lifestyle; there are Nigerian as well as Lebanese businessmen who are so thoroughly corrupt that at times they outwit themselves. The novel exemplifies Ekwensi's artistic motto: 'I don't see myself as a literary stylist, [...] but I am more interested in getting at the heart of the truth which the man in the street can

recognize than in just spinning words' (Ekwensi in Duerden and Pieterse 1972, 79). The novel would establish Ekwensi's reputation as purveyor of sensational and action-packed writing, exuding a gritty realism that would compel critics such as Dennis Duerden to compare him to Charles Dickens. *People of the City* is breathlessly recounted in an episodic narrative structure, something that can also be accounted for by the fact that Ekwensi had presented the drafts of the novel as radio short stories. In this respect, he was one of the first writers to use the new broadcast media as a source of narrative technique. Ekwensi's openness to new audio-visual forms adds greatly to his distinctiveness as a writer.

Ekwensi may have been keen on popular fiction, but his concern with popular forms did not imply a disengagement from nationalist politics. Like most of the educated elite of his time, he saw independence not only as a political objective, but also as a logical culmination of modernity. The novel offered him a new mode of discourse in which lived experience could be examined without privileging one sector; for Ekwensi, the private and the public were equally important and most often intrinsically linked. Indeed, a careful study of Ekwensi's work shows that he was consistently engaged with politics, but as part of the fabric of the quotidian rather than something separate and exalted. The example of Sango's band losing its slot at the All Language Club because of having been hired by a political group that the new owner of the club does not support shows just how political even the business of earning a living could be in a city like Lagos.

Another important example of Ekwensi's engagement with the politics of decolonization is represented in another famous scene in *People of the City*. In this

scene, the funeral of De Pereira, the founding father of Nigerian nationalism, brings together all the different peoples of the city, cutting across divisions of class, ethnicity, gender and race. Ekwensi's description of De Pereira's funeral is reminiscent of the funeral of Herbert Macaulay, the pioneer Nigerian nationalist, which took place in Lagos in 1946. In this case, Ekwensi's novel serves as more than a thriller; it provides readers with a documentation of both the contemporary and the recent past, including the history of nationalism and decolonization. Another example of Ekwensi's concern with the politics of decolonization initially appears to be incidental in the novel: 'Sango had heard of the coal crisis which broke out in the Eastern Greens, of the twenty-one miners who had been shot down by policemen under orders from "the imperialists"' (ch 6). This was a reference to the 1949 Enugu miner's strike in which a number of workers had been killed, an event that fueled nationalist animosity towards British colonial rule in Nigeria.

Ekwensi returns to the city in *Jagua Nana* (1961), but this time from the perspective of a city woman who has learned the modern ways of self-embellishment so well that she exemplifies the city as a place of self-fashioning, in which one can assume a multiplicity of identities. There are two Jaguas in the novel: there is the ordinary Jagua who leads an ordinary street life, and there is the decorated and attired and purposefully designed Jagua who is meant to be sexually irresistible to men of all ages, including those much younger than her, like her lover Freddie, the aspiring lawyer. Jagua's name, a local translation of the posh car, Jaguar, also signifies the ways in which bodies in the city become sites of commodification as they bear the inscriptions of modernity.

By the official moral standards of the 1950s and 1960s, Jagua Nana's explicit enjoyment of sex and her flaunting of her sexuality would have been regarded as



outrageous. Reportedly, the novel was banned in Ireland. Yet *Jagua Nana* is also rich in social commentary. It is radical in adopting a female protagonist, bringing into greater relief the place of women in the city and in modernity. Jagua is brutalised by her husband and family because she can't bear children. In frustration she leaves for the city where it is impossible for a woman of limited education to make ends meet. She manages to become a trader, but the business fails and so she relies on her role as a prostitute; this work has the advantage of giving her access to the heart of the city's social life, as she is able to mingle with the modern men, both black and white, and to ensure a modest living and a highly fulfilling life. Jagua invests in her young lover Freddie who wants to be a lawyer as security for old age, but they grow apart as she cannot give up prostitution. The use of a prostitute as a window into society would subsequently be adopted by other writers, such as Ngũgĩ in *Petals of Blood* (1978), but Ekwensi was the first to realize the advantage of looking at the social formation through the lives of the marginalised, especially women. From this view, the public sphere looks radically different.

Ekwensi evolved as a great populist social commentator whose novelistic practice included politics as one of the many things that intervened in the lives of his characters, although he does not depict politics as more significant than other factors. Ekwensi covered his politics so deeply in city lights that he should not, nor would he wish to, be put in the same category as Abrahams or Achebe whose writing was seriously and profoundly political. Like Tutuola, Ekwensi was a consummate storyteller. Unlike Tutuola, who recounted traditional tales in a grammatically eccentric English idiom, Ekwensi told contemporary stories from the urban street in impeccable English, using a

hybrid discourse fashioned from popular literature and Hollywood films. To compare Ekwensi with Dickens is no exaggeration. Like his nineteenth-century predecessor, Ekwensi sought to turn the novel in Africa into a mirror of a society undergoing radical transformation. He wanted the novel to function as an active social text that was both mimetic and transgressive as well as accessible to as wide a readership as possible.

### **Chinua Achebe: the Writer in Decolonization**

For Chinua Achebe, however, the novel would be the discursive mode in which traditional oral culture and the received European novelistic tradition would evolve into a cultural practice that would probe the conditions of African modernity under colonialism. Although Abrahams was already an established novelist in the 1950s, the publication of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 was a huge event, both for the African novel and for African literature as a whole. As Simon Gikandi argues, Achebe inaugurated African literature as a cultural practice by recognising that 'the novel provided a new way of reorganising African cultures, especially in the crucial juncture of transition from colonialism to national independence' (Gikandi 1991, 3).

Albert Chinuamulogo Achebe's early life was spent in a vicarage at Ogidi where he was born on 16 November 1930, his father being a catechist in the Anglican Church. Achebe recalls that as Christians, they 'tended to look down on others ... The others we called, with the conceit appropriate to followers of a true religion, the heathen or "the people of nothing"' (Achebe 1988, 20). Achebe's identification with Western culture was reinforced by his education at Government College Umuahia, Nigeria, from 1944 to

1948 and at University College Ibadan from 1949 to 1953. The university introduced Achebe to mainstream English literature and the colonial novel about Africa, including Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939). Achebe would later drop his European name to distance himself from what he considered to be the excessive of Westernisation of his early life. As Achebe puts it: 'Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son' (Achebe 1988, 25).

Achebe entered post-war cultural politics at an angle diametrically opposed to Abrahams's, but closer to Tutuola's. As Gikandi notes, he was one of 'the sons and daughters of the Igbo Christians who had renounced African tradition [and who] would become writers and nationalists bent on recovering and re-valourising the traditions their fathers had denounced and desecrated' (Gikandi 1990, 15). Nevertheless, Achebe's ideological transformation was not a simple matter of individual volition; there were broader processes at work that contributed to it. For Achebe, the nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War 'brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves' (Achebe 1988, 25). The time Achebe was at school and university was a most intense period of nationalist agitation in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole, culminating in the more liberal 1951 constitution that saw the colonial government put greater powers in the hands of Nigerians. In addition, the achievement of self-governance in Ghana in 1957 was an event of continental and global importance, since it demonstrated that a postcolonial African government was not only conceivable,

but possible. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* was a product of a specific historical formation as much as that moment's discursive articulation.

It is remarkable that Achebe set his first novel in the nineteenth century rather than in the contemporary period, hence signaling the importance of the history of decolonization to the emergence of an African novel. History was considered important because the colonial denigration of African culture had largely been based on the view that Africans did not have a documentable past. As Hegel had argued, Africa was not part of 'universal history,' a view that seemed evident in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and other novels by European writers at the beginning of the twentieth century and later. After the Second World War, a number of historians, notably Basil Davidson, John Fage and Rowland Oliver, began to challenge this view. Fage and Oliver contended that '[T]he first popular idea about Africa is also the first major misconception. The notion of Africa as the Dark Continent is a parochial European idea, which gained currency because Africa was the last of the continents to be opened to the gaze of the outside world' (Fage and Oliver 1961, 1).

Concerned with the task of affirming the presence of African history, Achebe insisted that one of his goals in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to show his people 'where the rain began to beat them' (**'Role of the Writer in a New Nation, 8)** Through the life and death of its protagonist Okonkwo, the novel recovers and recathects African subjectivity, the African past, traditional African values and institutions to demonstrate that Africans, as individuals, have a complex human psychology and that their societies are complex formations shaped by a long history. The complex narrative of history is evident at the the end of the novel when

Okonkwo commits suicide because of his disappointment that his people have so irretrievably changed and cannot stand up against the encroaching colonial order. The unexpected end to Okonkwo's life reflects Achebe's desire to imagine the African past in all its dimensions. Neither Okonkwo nor his society are idealised, as they are shown to have flaws. In contrast to depictions in colonial novels like Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, such weaknesses are accounted for by particular social circumstances and systems of belief to illustrate that what from outside might appear incomprehensible is in fact perfectly understandable from inside. In his focus on the particularity of the institutions of society, Achebe's goal was to provide a counterpoint to what Abdul JanMohamed has defined as the colonial 'Racial Romance' (JanMohamed 1983).

Achebe followed *Things Fall Apart* by publishing *No Longer at Ease* (1960), a novel in which, as had Ekwensi's two novels about the city, Achebe explores what it means to inhabit colonial modernity. The hero of the novel, Obi Okonkwo, is sent to the United Kingdom to study law by his community in the city, a community that hopes Obi will return to help them navigate the new world. However, instead of studying law, Obi changes to English. On his return to Nigeria, Obi further disappoints his community by expressing his wish to marry Clara, an *Osu* or social outcast. The story then revolves around Obi's difficulties as he tries to negotiate the demands of modernity and the claims of tradition. Returning to Nigeria full of idealism, he ends up corrupt; Achebe uses the story of Obi's fall to represent the challenges of developing effective post-colonial private and public spheres. As Obi discovers, the traditional notion of kinship supports communities trying to help one of their members advance, but it can also burden one with

responsibilities and values that are incompatible with the desire for modernity. Achebe also uses the novel to probe the ways in which Africans are appropriating Western modernity, concluding that they are 'no longer at ease' with themselves and the world. They suffer from a deep alienation from themselves, their traditional cultures, and from Western modernity; this is a continuation of the loss of direction that Obi's grandfather, Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, had divined in his clansmen before taking his own life.

After *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe's deep concern with the African past would take him back to the beginning of colonial rule in West Africa, the period in which the colonial government was being established in particular through the process of indirect rule that was famously propounded by Lord Lugard's *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922). *Arrow of God* (1964) is set in the period between 1914 and the early 1920s when Lugard, who unified Northern and Southern Nigeria, extended the colonial system of governance through the indigenous political structures practised in the North to the South. However, the creation of warrant chiefs among groups (like the Igbo) that did not have state-like structures would prove difficult, as the government had to invent chiefs where none had existed before. In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, the priest of Ulu, is invited to become such a chief because he has impressed the British resident administrator with his principled stand against his clan's attack on a neighbouring one over a land dispute. But Ezeulu's disagreement with his people on this and other occasions is not entirely motivated by honourable intentions or principles in accordance with the social expectations of his office.

Even before the intervention of the colonial authorities, Ezeulu is shown to be at odds with the needs and desires of his community. For example, he sends one of his sons

to join the Christians hoping that if there is anything of value in the new way of life, he will not miss it; since this comes after Ezeulu has witnessed against his clan in a land dispute, it is seen as further evidence of his accommodation of the new forces and abandonment of ancestral traditions. It is, however, Ezeulu's decision not to name the day of the New Yam Festival in fulfilment of his traditional religious role. This decision arises principally from Ezeulu's pride and bitterness against his political and religious rivals in the clan whom he suspects of unfairly trying to undermine his office, and it also comes from a breakdown in communication with his deity, which leads to his insanity. Ezeulu's descent into madness is accelerated by the tragic loss of his eldest son and of the authority of his priesthood and its associated deity. The consequence of all this is the strengthening of the Christian missions and the colonial government, which makes Ezeulu and his deity irrelevant and redundant.

Achebe employed the novel form as a means of dramatizing the encounter between traditional African society and colonial modernity. He wanted to understand the weaknesses of African society on the eve of decolonization and to account for the apparent attractiveness of colonial modernity to young Africans. Achebe's use of the novel as a vehicle for exploring the process of colonization and its consequences was in marked contrast to the narrative of triumphalism embodied in a colonial text such as the imaginary document by George Allen titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, which is featured in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In his first three novels, Achebe's goal was to present the view of colonization and decolonization from inside as it were and to represent Igbo society and identity as complex as that of any other society undergoing the process of change. In these works,

Igbo society and beliefs are presented as the source of stability for the community, but also as part of a changing history and culture. In the circumstances, Achebe's novels, like those of other African writers who followed him, most notably Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo [*Weep Not Child* (1964) and *River Between* (1965)], would present a counter-epistemology that proffered an African mode of knowing and interpretation, albeit within discourses of Western modernity. In this regard, the genre of the novel served as a suitable form in which narrative functioned as a space of argumentation and debate, of presenting a view from below and within an emergent class and its culture.

### **Conclusion**

The African novel emerged as a space of formal and ideological dialectical translation, of European culture into Africa and African culture into a European discursive mode and formation, with the objective of defining a specifically modern African cultural practice and way of life. Emerging at the moment of decolonization, the novel in Africa was the culmination of the process of acculturation into a western modernity that began with the advent of Christianity and colonial rule in the nineteenth century and was entrenched in the interwar period, reaching its apogee in the postwar period of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s. The novels that emerged during this period were part of the cultural process of problematizing modernity as well as sites for imagining and articulating new forms of subjectivity and modes of representation. In decolonization, the novel would serve as a site of intellectual, cultural and political discussion, a place where modernity would be presented as both a challenge to



indigenous African identity and culture and an opportunity for rethinking the past and forging an African cultural renaissance.

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