Postgraduate English
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

Issue 02 September 2000

Editor: Brian Burton

Literary Traditions in Contemporary Anglo-African Fiction

Petra Bittner*

* (Department of English and American Literature, Technical University of Berlin)

Literary Traditions in Contemporary Anglo-African Fiction

Petra Bittner
(Department of English and American Literature, Technical University of Berlin)

Postgraduate English, Issue 02, September 2000

My project focuses on novels and short stories of contemporary women writers who migrated between Great Britain and African countries. The analysis concentrates on British and African literary influences in their texts and the problem of categorization that comes with it. This paper selects two of the many writers I am focusing on in the greater project: Doris Lessing and Marjorie Macgoye. Their works are especially challenging since they cut across all conventional modes of representation, showing women between two very different cultures. Critics time and again are at a loss categorizing their work. In this paper I focus on one story by Doris Lessing and one novel by Marjorie Macgoye extracting the different literary traditions that are part of their fiction, paying special attention to the construction of female identity.

Doris Lessing: A Pioneer in Post-Colonial Writing in the 1950's

Doris Lessing was born in 1919 in Persia; her family moved to a farm in Rhodesia, where she lived from 1924 until she settled in England in 1949. Lessing's two short story collections This Was the Old Chief's Country and The Sun between their Feet (both published in 1951) take the Rhodesia of her youth as a setting. As I will argue, these collections are important as a binding element between colonial texts by British writers in Africa and the more recent post-colonial fiction by British-born writers like Marjorie Macgoye.

The stories in This Was the Old Chief's Country are populated with five different types of female protagonist. They are a) the maturing white girl (see e.g. "The Old Chief Mshlanga", 13), b) the English woman who has just arrived in Rhodesia

(see e.g. "A Home for the Highland Cattle", 241), c) the white settler woman (see e.g. "The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange", 75), e) the Afrikaner woman (as in "The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange", 75) and f) the African woman (as in "Little Tembi", 104). These characters fall into three categories with regard to the agency they are granted. Characters a) through c) (the white girl, the English arrival, the white settler) are potential protagonists whereas the role of Afrikaner women is restricted to that of a supporting character at most. The African woman is even more marginalized; she has an object-like status, if she is considered at all. Because of these types of characters and the problems addressed in the African stories, critics do not agree which tradition these stories belong to. Some place at least a couple of the stories in the British colonial tradition, others declare Lessing's African work "irrelevant to a discussion of the British literary tradition about Africa" (Hammond, 120), and still others detect patterns in her work "which share a great deal with some distinguished narratives by black writers like Bessie Head" (Ward, 86).

In order to reassess the African stories' literary affinities, I will quickly characterize what I see as the limits within which they stand. (Please note: it is purely for demonstrative reasons that I talk of easily identifiable categories here). At one end there is British colonial writing, often in the form of travel accounts. As Christine Loflin observes: "Africa in the works of British travelers and explorers is not an actual place being seen …; desires and fears of the observers are projected onto the landscape" (48). Mary Louise Pratt additionally characterizes the British travel writer as the "viewer and the verbal painter" (205), since the scene is deictically ordered with reference to the writer's vantage point, and is static. At the other end of the scale, there is African writing – itself a disputed category. Some critics, like Chinua Achebe, require 'African writing' merely to be about Africa, no matter what the nationality of the author might be. Other critics, like Kofi Awoonor, favor a stricter approach: he requires that African literature see "the world from the African view" (172) with characters interpreted from within an African mythology and ontology. A critic that assesses

the problem from a temporal, or rather, political angle is Michael Harris. He characterizes British writers' fiction from Africa to be self-absorbed in contrast to post-colonial writers' texts which try to reconstruct the country's colonial history. Harris identifies a third group of writers especially for South Africa: "The group of liberal white South African writers, …, seems to belong racially-speaking to the British colonial tradition, and yet they frequently write in protest against the white South African regime and in favor of the cause of the indigenous, black South African people" (11). Even though South Africa is a special case in terms of race relations, writers in other African countries commit to similar issues.

Doris Lessing is an example of a writer who tackles these issues in Rhodesia in the 1950's. In her African stories she occupies an ambivalent position even in Harris's third group because of the particular historical period she wrote about and her special literary personality. "Racially-speaking" Lessing belongs to the British colonial tradition and her stories, more often than not, focus on British characters. Nevertheless her writing can be described as post-colonial as defined by Harris, even though she favors an indirect method by exploiting colonial themes and styles of writing about Africa to meet her own ends. She will for example explore colonial themes (like the old settler myth) and ridicule them by showing their pitfalls and shortcomings; she will mimic a certain picturesque style of writing and with delicately mocking adjectives ridicule the whole scene or tell a story from the view point of a British child or adolescent and through their openness to their surroundings show the dawning realization of strangeness.

"The Old Chief Mshlanga": The White Girl in an African Setting

In this story the protagonist is a "white child" (13) living in Rhodesia. The girl is introduced by a selectively omniscient narrator, which represents the whites' view in Africa. From a distance she is described as out of place in the African landscape. More at home in the world of "Northern forests" (13), she recites parts of Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott". A quotation at the end of the first paragraph foreshadows future events: "Out flew the web and floated wide, the mirror cracked from side to side …" (13). The girl is closely associated with the

Lady of Shalott in her fate of being in the African setting but not of it. Her state of mind, however, is characterized by images in the African landscape: creating oxymora by blending two cultures as in e.g. "the green aisles of the mealie stalks, the leaves arching like cathedrals"(13). These constructs illustrate the turmoil inside the young protagonist's mind as she tries to come to terms with her conflicting inner and outer worlds. She is closely associated with the "white farm" (13) of her father that "was largely unused, broken only occasionally by small patches of cultivation" (13). Like the farm, the girl is not contributing anything to society and her secluded life prevents her from ever becoming involved in it. In this way she can be seen as the Lady of Shalott, the ever observing but never participating protagonist of Tennyson's poem. But – in her own way – the girl is at the same time the Lady's opposite, the knight Lancelot, as she roams the countryside with a gun and two dogs: as "armour against fear" (14, italics mine). Since the white girl is alien to the African environment, it frightens her. Lessing indicates that this state is the common fate of a white girl in Africa, since all these initial observations are made about an anonymous protagonist. It is not until the third page that the author focuses on an individual and the perspective changes from the third to the first person – the girl however still does not get a name. Individualized in this way, she recalls an encounter with a group of Africans. At the time of the encounter she is fourteen years old. On the verge of adulthood, the girl questions the world around her. In contrast to the grown-ups, she is still receptive and willing to learn about the world she lives in.

> There were neat patches of mealies and pumpkins and millet, and cattle grazed under some trees at a distance. Fowls scratched among the huts, dogs lay sleeping on the grass, and goats friezed a kopje that jutted up beyond a tributary of the river lying like an enclosed arm around the village. (21) (italics mine)

In this section two – of what Pratt calls – "standard elements of the imperial trope" (209) can be found: "estheticizing adjectives" (209) and "the broad panorama anchored in the seer" (209). The site is seen as a painting and the description is

ordered in terms of background and foreground (Pratt). The patches of mealies in the background are "neat" (21), which is all a white girl can be expected to say about them, since she neither knows anything about farming nor does she know anything about the importance of mealies in the natives' diet; so she accounts for them in purely aesthetic terms. In the foreground the young female observer sees a kopje "friezed" (21) by goats. She even uses architectural vocabulary to convey her impression – the result of her reading "explorer books" (16) as a first reference to native life in Africa. Having had no practice talking about the natives' part of the country she unreflectively copies imperialist diction, even though it stands in contrast with her attitude which is adventurous (as can be expected of a child) but not imperialist. Everything is described at face value with no reference to historical or social facts, since they are unknown to the beholder. So, it comes of no surprise that the protagonist feels isolated from a landscape that must appear vast and mysterious with no reference points whatsoever. And this vastness takes its toll on the girl. She becomes confused, no longer sure of herself: "I did not know what to do next. … I did not understand myself" (21). Nevertheless she caries on, willing to find out where the Africans, she met, live. Once she finds their village, she pushes her way past the women right into the hut of the chief. Here, at last, she realizes the foolishness of her endeavor. After a short visit to the chief's tent, she returns home, having been unable to communicate with the native people. This is the basic dilemma of Lessing's characters: even if they are able to break out for a while, they are still trapped by the restrictions in and around them. In a very indirect way the protagonist has been initiated into white colonial society without realizing it. The story leaves no winners; everyone is defeated in their own way: the girl is disillusioned and the natives are moved to another part of the country, where they do not belong.

In what way are these stories African or British?

The above story is just one example of the profound influence of British literature on Lessing's African stories. Nevertheless they can be considered post-colonial despite their creation in colonial times and their almost exclusive focus on white

characters. The reason for that is the author's original take on white settlers' problems in Rhodesia. In contrast to colonial texts, Lessing is presenting new kinds of white protagonists. She usually depicts them as feeling out of place in a world whose cultural signs they are unable to read. Her honest and true-life presentations of people and setting were new to British literature about Africa. Even though she never explicitly referred to historical events, these events are the background to her stories: In "The Old Chief Mshlanga" it is the Land Apportionment Act that forced native Rhodesians from their land in order to secure the best farm land for British farmers. The importance of this event to the story can be seen in the story's title which mentions the chief even though the story seems to be all about the white girl.

The African stories are, however, also African in Achebe's sense in that they are "about Africa" (2). And Africa here does not serve as "an exotic background" (3) as Harris observed it for colonial fiction, rather it is an adaptable setting which Lessing uses to underscore the alienation which all experience but few can voice.

Marjorie Macgoye: A Post-Colonial Writer of our Time

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye was born in England in 1928 and was raised and educated there. In 1954 she went to Kenya as a missionary bookseller. She has been an integral part of the Kenyan literary scene from its beginning in the 1960's as an organizer of poetry and fiction readings as well as a fiction and non-fiction writer. In 1960 she married the Luo doctor D.G.W. Oludhe-Macgoye. She has been a Kenyan citizen since 1964.

What are her credentials?

So far Macgoye has published six novels, one of which earned her a Sinclair Prize for fiction, another was runner up for the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for literature. The fact that one is a British, the other a Kenyan literary award illustrates Macgoye's in-betweeness. For all one can tell from the non-fiction writing she has produced (The Story of Kenya and Moral Issues in Kenya) and based on the correspondence I have had with the author, Macgoye does not consider herself an outsider in

Kenya, but of course, her work is not entirely "African" either. Her novels are a new blend of African and non-African elements with regard to style and subject matter. Her female characters are very independent but at the same time conscious of their responsibility for themselves and the country they live in, Kenya. In contrast to Lessing Macgoye chooses British and Kenyan female protagonists to populate her novels: the reader meets international casts in four of her works and entirely Kenyan ones in two of them. Maybe it is because of that unsettling mixture that Macgoye is met with such diverse criticism.

Macgoye's fiction is neither genuinely Kenyan, nor genuinely British but a distinguished new brand of literature that takes elements from both literary traditions and turns them into something new and unfamiliar. Consider the following

Coming to Birth

This novel which was published in 1986 and won her the Sinclair Prize for fiction examines the relationship between public and private life in a post-colonial Kenyan city. It parallels the emergence of a new type of Kenyan woman with the emergence of a new nation as it traces the female protagonist's development between 1956 and 1978 (from the beginning of the Kenyan Emergency, which eventually led to Kenya's independence, to the death of the first native prime minister). Arlene Elder in her chapter on English-language fiction from East Africa describes this work as "a sensitive examination of marriage in a political pressure cooker" (78) but it is more than that. As in all her other novels Macgoye is more concerned with the development of the nation as a whole than with individual life stories. She occasionally chooses the female perspective to explore the problems involved in the emancipation of a nation from its former oppressors and parallels it with Kenyan women's struggle for equal rights with the male population.

This is what happens in Coming to Birth. Paulina, a Luo girl from a village, comes to Nairobi to join Martin to whom her parents have married her. She is

young (sixteen years old), bewildered and pregnant. As she miscarries again and again, Martin gets involved with other women and the marriage disintegrates. Being on her own now, Paulina is lucky to find good jobs and even manages to get some education. Her personal life comes second. She is not at all eager to find a new husband. When she gets pregnant by a long-time companion she does not take this pregnancy as a reason to spend the rest of her life with him. Eventually, Martin returns, moves in with her, and they start a new life together with Paulina in a much more powerful position as a bread winner. She is even expecting the child she so desperately longed for at the beginning of their marriage; this adds to Paulina's newly-gained self-confidence. Judging from this character study Macgoye would fit nicely into the category of African women writers as defined by Carol Boyce Davies who describes African women's fiction as portraying

> … women in various struggles for self-definition. A character's ability to define herself is shaped both by her understanding of the boundaries by which society circumscribes her and by her ability to transcend those boundaries and attain self-actualization while remaining nonetheless within her society. (336)

Paulina stands a good example of such a woman, who creates new space for herself in her community without threatening the basis of Kenyan society. The time is right for changing her own position, the protagonist feels, as so much changes in public life during the years of the Kenyan Emergency. However, unlike most contemporary African-born women writers, Macgoye does not treat her character's development from a feminist or womanist standpoint. And this, among other things, is what distinguishes Macgoye's writing from most contemporary African-born women writers. Although she does not fully share the views of many African women writers on the primary importance of women's liberation, Macgoye nevertheless qualifies as a post-colonial writer as defined by Harris as "writing in a realist tradition blending fiction and history to recreate the past, a collective past that is" (10).

How does she achieve this? And how does it work? For one thing, she enriches the text with historical facts from the Emergency era elaborating on party politics of the time, explicitly mentioning different events finally leading to the declaration of the Kenyan Constitution in 1964. In this way she demonstrates the resourcefulness of the country in achieving independence without hiding the problems that developed in the process. To bring this particular decade of Kenyan history to life, she uses the protagonist as a metaphor: Paulina's city life that begins so perilously is shown to grow with the challenges, finally creating a self-conscious young individual who stands up for her rights.

How much does the African setting matter?

Throughout Macgoye's work, the setting is essential because no other country produced exactly the same circumstances for people to live in. It is made clear by emphasizing historical detail. In this particular novel, details from around the Kenyan Emergency era are woven in. This is in line with Macgoye's overall goal to chronicle Kenyan life from the colonial period up to the present day. With every new novel she covered another era in recent Kenyan history with an evermore deepening understanding of the country's fate in colonial and post-colonial times. Even though she was born and raised in England, she developed a remarkable sensitivity for Kenyan aspects of life, leaving critics to argue about a foreigner's qualification to comment on indigenous cultural issues. In a very general sense she carries on Lessing's legacy of humanizing the fictional view on African countries in this century.

Conclusion

Lessing was one of the first women writers to faithfully portray settler women in Rhodesia, carefully exploring their living conditions and the effect it had on them. She paid special attention to the different cultural contexts they had to negotiate. Even though Macgoye in Coming to Birth, 35 years later, chooses a Kenyan protagonist, the clash between British and Kenyan culture is still at the center of her novel. Paulina (the main character)'s purpose is not only to illustrate the situation of women in (post-) colonial Kenya, but to stand as a metaphor for the

entire political situation in Kenya in newly independent times. To make that quite clear Macgoye weaves in historical detail, emphasizing at the same time her goal of chronicling recent Kenyan history. In contrast to that Lessing's aim was to identify problems between the colonizers and the colonized on a more personal level and in doing so to expose colonial writers' arrogance in detaching the plots of their stories from their African environment. To accomplish that, she utilized English literary symbols and tropes remaining well inside the Western literary tradition (see e.g. her use of the Tennyson poem); whereas Macgoye integrates Kenyan terms and tropes from an African literary tradition. In that sense the latter writer can be seen as a true post-colonial novelist as defined by Harris despite her British origin. But taking into consideration the times in which they wrote (Lessing in the 1950's and Macgoye from the 1960's to the 1990's), both writers must be credited for breaking new ground in Anglo-African writing.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "Thoughts on the African Novel". In: Smith, Rowland. Exile and Tradition. Bristol: Longman, 1976. 1-8.

Awoonor, Kofi. "Tradition and Continuity in African Literature". In: Smith, Rowland. Exile and Tradition. Bristol: Longman, 1976. 166-173.

Davies, Carole Boyce; Fido, Elaine Savory. "African Women Writers: Toward a Literary History". In: Owomoyela, Oyekan (ed.). A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. 311-347.

Elder, Arlene. "English-Language Fiction from East Africa". In: Owomoyela, Oyekan (ed.). A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. 49-85.

Hammond, Dorothy; Jablow, Alta. The Africa that Never was. Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa. New York: Twayne Publishers, INC., 1970.

Harris, Michael. Outsiders & Insiders. Perspectives of Third World Culture in British and Post-Colonial Fiction. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992.

Lessing, Doris. This Was the Old Chief's Country. London: Harper Collins, 1994.

----. The Sun Between their Feet. London: Harper Collins, 1994.

Loflin, Christine. African Horizons. The Landscapes of African Fiction. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Macgoye, Marjorie Oludhe. Coming to Birth. London: Heinemann Ltd., 1986.

----. Moral Issues in Kenya: A Personal View. Nairobi: Uzima Press,1996

Pratt, Mary Louise. Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Ward, David. Chronicles of Darkness. London: Routledge, 1989.

First Response

This article addresses the difficulty of categorising literary texts in national terms when they arise from an experience of migrancy. In doing so, it brings together the works of Lessing and Macgoye in ways that cut across literary mappings according to race. This is thought-provoking in that whereas Lessing would usually be classified in terms of 'settler literature', the case of Macgoye is put forward to disrupt this in favour of a wider category of Anglo-African writing. One question that seems to be suspended here is that of the temporality of nationalisms. What would be useful with respect to this is a consideration of Jameson's reading of 'third world literature' in terms of national allegory and Ahmad's response to this.