

*Complicity and Responsibility in Contemporary African Writing: The Postcolony Revisited*

Minna Johanna Niemi

204 pages, 2021, £x.xx (hardcover)

Routledge

Reviewed by Christine Emmett, University of Warwick

Reflecting on the field of African literary criticism, Ato Quayson bemoans the loss of the individual. He notes that due to “the transparently chaotic political and social conditions in postcolonial Africa, the ‘individual’ is constantly being abrogated in favour of the collective, whether this be thought of as nation, ethnic group, or even kin” (cited in Niemi 7). In *Complicity and Responsibility in Contemporary African Writing*, Minna Johanna Niemi responds to this abrogation, studying the moral dilemmas of African literature in terms of “the individual as a decision maker” (6). She thus elevates the notion of individual moral agency above questions, say, of class, race or consciousness. The ethical decisions which characters make are informed by two key concepts: complicity, the state of being implicated in the diffuse violence of nondemocratic contexts, and responsibility, construed as those moral decisions made on the basis of a social duty towards the other. Thus the book extends the field of complicity studies to African literature, focusing specifically on the question of how one lives ethically or responsibly in a corrupt, totalitarian or violent society, and how literature either manages or fails to represent the complexities surrounding decision-making in these difficult moral contexts.

From this set up, the first two chapters serve to introduce the main concepts and terminology used throughout the book, drawn primarily from Hannah Arendt’s writings on totalitarianism: that of the morally upright but isolated “good man” versus that of the socially minded “good citizen.” The first chapter thus uses Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to emphasize the importance of independent thinking as that which leads good citizens to act responsibly when customary moral standards have been suspended or reversed. The following chapter then considers the difficulties of this form of thinking, by shifting to the context of political terror envisioned in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Here the effects of this thinking produce psychic difficulties for the good citizen as they confront their own complicity and an inability to extricate themselves from structures of oppression. However, not acknowledging this complicity presents one potential pitfall of literary representation. In this respect Chapter Three turns to Coetzee’s critique

of some anti-apartheid literature with its tendency to contrast “a morally astute character against a corrupted [apartheid] state” (71) while failing to recognize “the little perpetrator” present even in those who oppose the political regime (72).

This perspective is expanded in the book’s chapter on what Niemi calls the “Uprooted intellectuals” of Armah’s *Fragments* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, who overcome this binary model in their moral standpoints. For Armah’s Baako and Dangarembga’s Nyasha, spending a few years in the colonial centre has endowed them with what Niemi terms “multidirectional identifications” which allow them to bypass the seductive promises of both colonial mimicry and postcolonial nationalism, so that they perceive the ongoing damage of colonialism as well as the normalized violence of the postcolony. Yet, departing from Frantz Fanon’s conception of the intellectual, Niemi shows how these characters are overcome by shame and an experience of powerlessness despite their sense of social responsibility.

The readings then turn towards novels whose characters embody the various mechanisms and ways by which individuals deny and avoid responsibility. Chapter Five deals with Tambudzai, the main character in Dangarembga’s Zimbabwean trilogy. Niemi shows how *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body* chart the moral development of their protagonist through the novelistic spaces of colonial-era poverty, patriarchal oppression and war to post-independence desperation and neoliberal resentment. Tambudzai survives through a sheer commitment to her own self-advancement, remaining unfettered to her community and burying herself in a neoliberal redefinition of responsibility as material self-sufficiency. The final two chapters then focus specifically on childhood complicity in Michiel Heyns’s *The Children’s Day* and Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps* respectively. Here, again, the mechanisms of moral abnegation are considered: in Farah’s novel, the maternal comfort provided by the violent binaries of nationalist ideologies is shown to resemble Kleinian psychological splitting. And in Heyns’s novel, Niemi highlights a tendency to hide behind the law, with the voice of social authority and dominance substituting that of individual moral responsibility. In this way, children exemplify one of the thornier aspects of complicity: that individuals can be the victims of violence and simultaneously perpetrators too. Niemi concludes with a discussion of the ways by which former imperial centers have abnegated responsibility for colonialism and its afterlives in Africa. She highlights the ways in which geographical distance, racism and the policing of national borders allow the citizens of center countries to maintain a moralizing distance. Against this tendency, the corpus of novels she discusses highlights the ongoing impact of colonialism without reducing characters to passive receptacles of violence. These texts thus offer the

possibility of removing the moral distance that allows those in the center to disavow their complicity.

As Niemi notes, what is particularly significant in each of the novels discussed is their emphasis on individual agency. In this way, she produces a criticism that answers Quayson's call "to restore the individual to history" (cited in Niemi 7). However, this focus also presents a number of problems. At times these are formal, so that reading the individual into texts like *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* or *Waiting For The Barbarians* means ignoring the allegories which structure these novels. But the larger problem is actually sociological and concerns the extent to which individual ethical agents are related to their social and material environments. Despite her explicit refusal of Marxist literary paradigms, Marxist theory still emerges in the materialist inclinations of the book, with the circumstances of individuals still influenced by the environment – whether of neocolonial extraction or neoliberalism. But how much agency does this determination really leave to individual moral subjects? Niemi's uncertainty is reflected in the book's use of the term ideology. At times it is defined so weakly that only the vulnerable, those with "an inability to think [independently]" are "susceptible to ideology" (120). Likewise, at points the analysis collapses into sociologically flat moralistic categories, as when background characters' choices are explained in terms of a "herd mentality" (105). As Perry Anderson once noted, there is a tendency towards rhetorical falsity in the inflation of agency and its ethical terms, since moral judgments are easily offered "in lieu of causal understanding" (1980:86).

This problem aside, the peculiarly humanist register of the book has distinct benefits – as Niemi notes, the immediacy of identifying with individual characters has the capacity to break down the assumptions and cultivated moral distance that stymies engagement with the history and reality of many African countries. In this way, her emphasis on individual agency means that non-specialists and recent initiates to literary studies will find these readings particularly approachable. There is also a commitment to readability that indicates the author's investment in opening the study of African literature to new entrants. A wide range of theory is lucidly described and exemplified and a rich set of footnotes explicate historical and political contexts, highlighting crucial arguments in the field. All this makes it a useful starting point for students approaching the field afresh as well as those wishing to interrogate the web of complicities binding the metropolitan core back to Africa's peripheries.

### Works Cited

Anderson, Perry. *Arguments within English Marxism*. Verso, 1980.