

After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism

Gerald Gaylard

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Gerald Gaylard's *After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism* is a voluminous and consequential new publication in the field of African letters. Due to its considerable length, it is able to treat the oft-neglected but increasingly evident traditions of African postmodernist and magical realist writing with the levels of range and detail that they merit. Gaylard's founding premises are both lucid and revelatory. Firstly, he asserts that because the postcolonial has by definition not yet been fully realised, it requires of us an imaginative act—an act that must place us beyond our usual categories of consciousness or understanding. In terms of this premise, African postmodernist and magical realist texts most fully undertake this act via instances of “incremental recombination” (2) or divergence, whose ultimate impetus is respectively elaborative or interpellative. Secondly, Gaylard asserts that political dissidence must at some level work in defamiliarizing ways. Thirdly, Gaylard's methodology works by “comparative induction” (8), reading for family resemblances without distorting the interruptive and singular qualities of the texts he surveys.

Having carefully set out the terms of his contribution to the field, Gaylard proceeds to discuss the ways in which African magical realist and postmodernist texts depart from earlier social realist orthodoxies. For Gaylard, African social realism is largely a colonial inheritance, whose emphasis upon mimesis and consequent failures of self-reflexivity are cognate with those moments when nationalisms forget that the nation too is a collective fiction which may be reshaped according to circumstance and need. The logical conclusions follow inevitably—the rational imperative to be politically committed often fails because it is unable to imagine social alternatives. In short, Gaylard argues for the crucial role played by the imagination, and the literary fiction that enlivens it, to progressive political projects. He locates the sources of African magical realist texts less in the influence of South American literary traditions than in African cosmologies and animist philosophies. Because these texts arise out of myth unhinged from tradition, they work to enchant our partly real world, creating the possibility for change.

Gaylard moves on to map out the aesthetics of African magical realism, by listing and then extrapolating the formal features and thematic concerns of such writing. His chosen foci are the reflexivity of narrative, imagery and

genre, but these topics are interwoven with wide-ranging and considered discussions of magic, technology and defamiliarization. Gaylard concludes that defamiliarization “is the key aesthetic strategy of African magical realism, an aesthetic strategy that works via the ambiguation and oscillation of sympathies” (176). Once it is acknowledged, this complication of sympathies leads one into difficult intellectual terrain. How is one to identify the politics of oblique literary texts that work to obscure referentiality? Gaylard’s answer is characteristically cautious and adept: postcolonial African texts are not reducible to a single politics, but they adopt a similar ensemble of strategies (gender critique, subversive representations of Western technologies, critical imageries originating in the unconscious, the excavation of memory, the African subject as cosmopolitan flaneur, among others). Crucially, Gaylard identifies these texts as “parapolitical,” arguing that they aim not to oppose but to highlight and balance the tensions emerging from within political opposition and hybrid subjectivities. Since power operates in a dispersed manner, African magic realist texts operate not with an oppositional logic, but are something closer to a matrix with intersecting nodes of pressure. Gaylard argues that this fictional mode approximates the multiple layers of experience and disorder at work within African postcolonial societies, and suggests that African postcolonialism is “politically-charged postmodernism” (262). He concludes that the power of African postcolonial texts lies not only in producing newness by revealing what has been occluded in anti-revelatory cultural conditions, but by retaining an ethical irreducibility within themselves. The result is a new “virtual” relationship between African politics and aesthetics.

If I have a criticism of *After Colonialism*, it is that it is occasionally incautious in filling out its very broad canvas. Gaylard is sometimes too hasty to collapse the postcolonial straightforwardly onto the postmodern or magical realism, and he occasionally forgets that African social realism and African modernism may be postcolonial too, even though he acknowledges postcolonialism’s realist roots. As a consequence, *After Colonialism* all but elides the crucial category of African modernisms, in which the necessity for national identity is played out as a quest for literary form. In fact, modernism is oversimplified here, being described as “interiorised [. . .] psychological realism” (16) in which the majority of canonical texts adopt a “typically realist third person perspective” (16). In this aspect, *After Colonialism* avoids the complexity of engagement that it sustains elsewhere in its exposition of argument. Likewise, although Gaylard emphasises that he wishes to read for stylistic and formal similarities between texts, more close reading of individual texts would have been welcome.

Having said this, Gaylard’s taxonomic approach offers readers new ways of positioning and relating to elusive writers such as Marechera, Okri, Laing, Bandele, Landsman and others, while never forgetting the larger political and world historical contexts from which they issue. His argument moves nimbly and lucidly across difficult theoretical terrain. The result is an astute, wise and remarkably unpretentious book, which exhibits an unabashed but serious delight in its subject matter. *After Colonialism* will no

doubt become an important point of reference for scholars of postcolonial African literatures.