Representations of Africa in Ben Okri's and Alexander McCall Smith's Works

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Abstract: *This presentation explores the representation of Africa in different novels by two different writers. The novels belong to late 20th and early 21st-century British fiction set in Africa. The two writers have different backgrounds in many ways except for their engagement, love and complicated relationship with the African continent. I argue that the representation by these writers reveals the meaning and significance of Africa in a postcolonial context as a space of nostalgia, loss, and eventually, hope in contemporary British fiction.*

Keywords: *representations of Africa, postcolonialism, nostalgia, hope, British fiction*

English fiction has undergone an immense change in the 20th and 21st centuries during the period of decolonisation and afterwards. A spectrum of new voices, new cultural and ethnic backgrounds brought about new modes of narrative techniques, styles, and contextual and thematic innovations have been witnessed in an unprecendented manner, following social, political and of course economic and ecological changes and developments. We see more and more voices from the ex-colonies such as the Indian sub-continent, Africa, the Middle East and China and the far East. We witness roughly two dominant modes of writing following the decolonisation of these countries. One is dominantly produced by the writers who come from the former colonies and who strive to explore the effects of colonisation and its aftermath. These voices have acutely made themselves heard, echoing in almost all literary genres, and especially in the novel, since the novel genre allows more space for what these writers want to carry over. Secondly, there is a mode of writing experimented with by British writers who want to voice their own experience and interpretation of colonisation and its aftermath, which means to them, metaphorically and realistically, the end of the empire. The African continent plays an immense role in the expression of both these concerns in literature due to its long history under the colonial rule. Therefore, writers coming from the African continent and their British counterparts who write about their perspective on colonisation and decolonisation have contributed greatly to British literature in terms of form and content. The reason why I have chosen Africa in this presentation as the space to discuss modern British fiction is that Africa hosts both native writers and white British (Scottish in my case, more specifically) writers, and provides writers of both categories with the space

necessary to write about their versions of colonisation/ decolonisation in a literary genre. Hence Africa becomes the space and landscape for the production of fictional narratives on the experience of colonisation and decolonisation. My aim in this paper is to discuss the presentation of the African continent in the works of two contemporary British writers, one of whom is the black British writer Ben Okri, and the other one Alexander McCall Smith, the white Scottish writer who was born in Africa and spent many years there. They come from very different social backgrounds as well. Okri looks at Africa from an African perspective, whereas Smith looks at Africa from a Western perspective, albeit not "the West and the Rest" attitude, which I will elaborate on subsequently.

Before delving into my specific topic, I would like to start with an overview of the present state of British fiction in a generalised manner. Today we are no longer able to say that there exists a British literature which is British in the sense of belonging to the white British population of the British Isles in kind and nature since the cultural environment we live in is increasingly globalised, and a multiplicity of languages, cultures and narrative and oral traditions are becoming part of British literature.

This richness and plurality has added a new flavor to British fiction, and has resulted in a more intense focus on the presentation of particular landscapes and a deliberate emphasis on the spatial qualities of the narratives. Now new writers are choosing to recontextualise their texts in order to focus on Britain's relation to its own history as well as to the history of their native land, and to create a sense of cultural identity (Séllei).

This search for and materialisation of a new voice in British fiction became evident in the postmodernist mode of writing, which believes that its self-reflexive quality could provide a form of aesthetic and ethical leverage allowing fiction to explore a changing and complex sense of personal and collective identity. Séllei, by making references to Richard Bradford and Steven Connor, sums up the situation of British fiction and argues that now it seems that British fiction has focused on the increasing plurality of voices and narratives within a British cultural context. The postcolonial predicament which has made "Britishness" plural and at the same time self-reflexive postmodern appropriations have made space and spatial issues a focus, in the shape of dwelling on landscape and its connotations.

Multiculturalism taking place following the postcolonial period questions established cultural norms where history and nostalgia have been regarded as embedded in the cultural memory of the West. Ben Okri and new writers of postcolonial origin interpret and question these embedded issues as well as their own collective memory dating back to colonial and earlier times in their native lands. Now British fiction is engaged with a plurality of voices and landscape from various places in the former colonies, Africa in the scope

of my article, seeking to give a meaning and an understanding of present, past and history from different perspectives and backgrounds. Postmodern writing enables Okri to try and experiment with new ways of narrating his side of the story. The reason why postmodern writing is a venue for such a climate is spelled out by Julian Murphet in "Fiction and Postmodernity" (in *20th Century English Fiction*): "That the epic process of Third World emigration should have 'come home' to the old seat of empire itself, and inscribed itself there in a force-field of distinct and intermingled ethno-religious communities, is a profoundly postmodern fact." (717)

As I said earlier, in this essay I would like to study two distinct writers of British literature, both having written in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and still producing works, of two different backgrounds and ethnic identities. The answer to why I want to deal with these writers is that they are representative of the varied voices in modern British fiction. Both writers use the same space, Africa, in order to interpret their understanding of present and past, through a postmodernist prism of the fiction genre. These writers play an important part in presenting a wider-angled view on Euro-African perception of space and postcolonialism. They have diverse forms of expression, intricate topographies and complexly formed cultural identities as they perceive Africa and represent it in their novels as a spatial entity that narrates itself through history and culture (qtd. in Krishran). The first writer is Nigerian born black British writer Ben Okri (1959). Ben Okri has spent his life time mostly in Britain, although in between he spent some of his pre-adult years in Nigeria.

Presently Okri is based in London and continues to produce works of fiction. Hence, he is writing and actually belonging to a distictly British cultural space. Within this space which he belongs to, he writes about Nigerian, or, more broadly, African postcolonial experience focusing on history and culture, using African orality, myths and symbols in order to reveal "history, culture, society, the depths, the surfaces, and the mystery of being human," in his own words (Okri ix-x). The Africa he writes about is a space of conflicts, of political and cultural and personal and self-reflexive ground for reevaluating the ties between the person and the land's history, tradition and the past from a postcolonial and postmodernist perspective.

As Gayatri Spivak says in an interview "one is never at home" since ideas of home are linked to "simple notions of identity" (Shands 36-38). For Okri's character Omovo, in his novel *Dangerous Love*, who I am going to discuss in relation to my subject, the notion of identity and its relation to home – which is Africa – can only become meaningful in an attempt to interpret and explore the notions of history, time and present in a nostagic and evaluative moment.

Africa offers this space to Omovo, it is the element of time, "the form or image that gives us an intuition of something that is not directly perceivable

but which permeates all that we apprehend. Time is the soul of space, the invisible entity which animates the field of our experience" (Mitchell 545). This is true for Omovo, the hero in *Dangerous Love* who is invoked by the spatial matter, Africa, experiences moments of nostalgic and evaluative moments about Africa's past and present. It is an experience of disconnection with the past and uncertainty for the future. In the novel, Africa is not an imagined space but a material entity which simultaneously constructs and deconstructs itself in a hybridised form of English. It is both set in a landscape of myths, rituals, orality, carnivalistic elements and in the postcolonial Nigeria of poverty, oppression, injustice and relentless ignorance:

> Then suddenly, as if something had burst in his brain, he was assaulted by gusts of emptiness and fear. He was plunged into a negative moment of being, the opposite of sufflation, ambushed by images, halls that never ended, walls that rose up to the skies, Ifeyiwa's nightmares, empty mazes, abysms, a monumental terror of the future. He experienced the feeling of space without end, without trees, without human beings, without the sky. And it was only when he let out a short, animal scream that he began to return to a familiar reality. (Okri 267)

Ben Okri uses magical realism as a tool to reestablish African culture and identity, as a mode that is pitted against more dominant modes of western writing.

In *Dangerous Love*, as in other Okri novels, magical realism is dominant in order to establish this Africannness, as well as to reflect the tragic love story of two frustrated African youth amid the poverty, oppression and ignorance in postcolonial war-torn Nigeria (Biafra War). Exploitation and atrocities and political turmoils are normal events in Omovo's life:

> In a moment experienced reminiscent of stream of consciousness, Omovo thought:
> Omovo watched him go. He remembered what the men of his compound had said about the entanglement of bureaucracy and corruption that had spread throughout society. He thought about the older generation, how they had squandered and stolen much of the country's resources, eaten up its future, weakened its potential, enriched themselves, got fat, created chaos everywhere, poisoned the next generation, and spread rashes of hunger through the land. (Okri 249)

Jackie Kay writes that the notion of a "fantasy Africa" "that is present in every black person's mind renders itself as something of a space of longing,

in postcolonial writing" (qtd. in Krishran 620). In Okri, Africa is felt and realised simultaneously as a space of devastation, postcolonial chaos and lost hopes:

> He got up, dusted the back of his trousers, and made his way into the darkened parkland. He felt he was leaving a part of himself behind forever. Deep in the darkness, amongst the trees, he felt there were ghosts everywhere. The ghosts of tigers and eagles, the ghosts of bewildered young girls. (Okri 428)

Ben Okri, as I have mentioned earlier, is an African Briton, born in Nigeria, who has spent most of his adult life in England. His Africa is the Africa from the eye of an African with a British nationality, writing from England. The lived experience of Britons of African heritage is recreated as both felt and realised within this context.

On the other hand, the other writer I am going to discuss looks at Africa from a totally different angle. At this point it is important to mention what Madhu Krishran writes about two versions of writing about postcolonial Africa:

> Africa has remained a free field for the play of European fantasy, since the classical times, and there are two sets of projections through which Africa has been represented in British writing, on the one hand, Africa is the pejorative negation of all the good traits of the British…lewd, savage, instictual, thoughtless, while on the other Africa represents the former, now lost, values of the British, thru [*sic*] the concept of the noble savage. (621)

This excerpt may be appropriated to my second writer, Alexander McCall Smith, as I will discuss soon. As regards Okri, however, this excerpt cannot be applied, since, although Okri criticises the past and present of Africa, he does not condemn it with negative adjectives. On the contrary, spatially, Africa offers vast opportunities once it succeeds in overcoming the postcolonial devastation.

In his own words, "Africa enables to portray a living moment and through that to reveal history, culture, society, the depths, the surfaces, and the mystery of being human" (Okri x). This living moment, metaphorically, reveals the history of Africa through its past, its colonial past, its life and now.

My second writer is Alexander McCall Smith. His Africa in his *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series makes it possible for the leading character Mma Ramotswe in the living moments in the mix of space and time, to recreate history, Africa's past and present and her own life and family from

the perspective of love, warm feelings of nostalgia and a compassionate embracing of Africa with everything that materialises it. Alexander McCall Smith is a Scotsman born in Zimbabwe in 1948, who was raised there and spent a good many years in Africa, mainly in Botswana where the series takes place. In his interviews he has quite often mentioned his love and admiration for that land and its people, and has often gone there for official or personal reasons. In his series *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, he makes a "fictional return" (Maetzke 64) to this beloved land.

The series takes place in Africa, Botswana and centres on the formidable woman detective Mma Ramotswe, her husband Mr J.L. Matekoni, her secretary Mma Makutsi and two young employees in the garage and the agency. The character Mma Ramotswe has gained worldwide popularity in the UK, the USA and Africa because the series and the characters, the landscape and life portrayed in the series are very different from what postcolonial writers or the likes of UK-based Okri often depict.

Mma Ramotswe is actually the mouthpiece of McCall Smith to articulate his nostalgia and admiration for the history, present and future of Africa. This articulation manifestly hosts a different vision and quality from that of Okri.

In *The Girl Who Married a Lion*, Mma Ramotswe writes a foreword to the stories, where she voices a nostalgic spirit overcoming spaces and nations:

> …But then you hear these old stories – the stories that you heard so many times – and suddenly everything comes back. You are there again, sitting with your aunt outside her house, and it is quiet, and the sky is empty and the sun is on the land. And you think: I am a lucky person to be here, to be listening to these things that happened in another place, just round the corner, in the days when animals could speak. And the sadness goes away and your heart is full again. (xiii-ix)

The above description is very unlike Omovo's experience, and unlike what Okri tries to explore and explain.

Hence, in common with many postcolonial writers, Okri is 'writing back' in order to challenge Western mainstream and dominant modes of writing, presenting a rich narrative of many-faceted resistance, challenge and distortion which postcolonial techniques allow him. His point is to emphasise the culture and identity of the African people and to voice their trauma and frustration. Since postcolonial literature is about the problems and chaos experienced by the marginalised people of the former colonies, Okri is exploring these themes by way of the experimental techniques which postmodern writing makes accessible.

McCall Smith presents no anticipated pattern of postcolonial subversion or volatility. Instead, in his series, there is political and personal stability. His main characters are self-confident, happy, and wise people, living in a vast, dry but rich land under the very friendly African sun and sky. In *Morality for Beautiful Girls*, we see how fondly and blissfully Africa is represented:

> They were camped in the Okovango, outside Maun, under a covering of towering mopane trees. To the North, barely half a mile away, the lake streched out, a ribbon of blue in the Brown and green of bush. The savannah grass here was thick and rich, and there was good cover fort he animals. If you wanted to see elephant, you had to be watchful, as the lushness of the vegetation made it difficult to make out even their bulky grey shapes as they moved slowly through their forage.

Christine Maetzke seems to approve of this representation of African landscape by McCall Smith when she writes:

> What we encounter in McCall Smith's No. 1 Detective Agency series is not the disruption of 'typical' postcolonial dichotomies-tradition/modernity, empire/colony or 'the West and the Rest' – but a return to an almost pristine, essentially righteous, African environment with a strong, though empathetic sense of 'good' and 'evil'… Whereas national and other seemingly stable categories are increasingly eroded in this transcultural, transnational day and age, Mma Ramotswe promises readerly respite from postmodern fragmentation and insecurities by offering wholeness for body, spirit and nation. (66)

In both novels, Okri's and McCall Smith's nostalgia is shared in common, but it is not of the same kind. In the case of Okri, as summarised by Maetzke, Hutcheon claims that: "Nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. It operates through what Bakhtin called an 'historical inversion': the ideal that is NOT being lived now is projected into the past" (qtd. in Maetzke 66). In the case of McCall Smith, nostalgia concerns the stable, traditional social order of Africa that still exists as an antidote to today's less desirable aspects of home, such as colonisation, capitalism etc.

To conclude, I would argue that British fiction today hosts many forms of dealing with or exploring postcolonialism by way of postmodernist or other experimentalist narratives. Among these, Okri gives a fragmented, chaotic and traumatic picture of the present and past of Africa from the perspective of postcolonialism. McCall Smith's Africa and its people, and altogether his

narrative, is stable, optimistic, dealing with modern-day realities, as opposed to Okri's nostalgic 'Other' present.

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