

THE AFRICAN NOVEL

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The role of orality

- Although Africa has had a long and enduring tradition of poetry and drama, the novel is today, as almost everywhere else in the world, the dominant literary genre on the continent. Its privileged status as a written genre may be attributed to European influence and its association with an imaginative consciousness grounded in literate modernity. However, there can be no doubt that the appeal of the novel has to do with the integrative function that narratives have always played in African societies, a role that is well illustrated not only by the didactic and reflexive purpose of the folk tales and fables that inform the sensibility and define a primary level of the imaginative faculty in traditional African societies,¹ but also by the centrality of the mythical tale, extending to the great oral epics—as exemplified by the Sundiata epic of Mali and the Ozidi saga of the Ijaws

- ▣ The continuity with the oral tradition is evident in the novels written in the African languages, in which the derivation of content and mode is direct and immediate.
- ▣ the genres of oral narrative and the aesthetics they illustrate—insofar as this involves the recital of texts in the living contexts of performance—can be said to provide the imaginative background and, often, the structural model for the appropriation of the novel genre by African writers, in both the indigenous languages and the imported European tongues.

The historical development of the novel writing

- ▣ In this explanation of the rise of the novel in Africa, literacy and writing are represented as having developed largely as a function of Western education introduced by the various Christian missions in their evangelical effort. The centrality of the Bible to this effort has thus been advanced as the constitutive factor in the creation of a new literature by the elite that, over time, emerged from the African encounter with Europe, with its corollary of colonial domination and its cultural impositions.

- ▣ literacy was first introduced into Africa by Arabs prior to the arrival of Europeans.
- ▣ The Koran has thus served for a much longer period than the Bible as a reference text for the protocols of writing and the formation of the literary sensibility in Africa.

The beginning of the African novel

- ▣ The beginnings of the novel in Africa go back in fact to the formative period of Western literature itself, with works related to Africa constituting part of its early corpus of canonical texts. Of the works that have survived from this period, two in particular have an immediate bearing on the practice of fiction in Africa: the Greek master-piece, *Aethiopica* by the Hellenic writer Heliodorus, and *The Golden Ass* by the Latin author, Apuleius.

- ▣ the Greek master-piece, *Aethiopica* by the Hellenic writer Heliodorus, and *The Golden Ass* by the Latin author, Apuleius. illustrate a phenomenon that was to assume significance many centuries later, namely, the appropriation by the African writer of a second language for expressive purposes, the deployment for literary ends of a foreign tongue serving as a dominant language of culture in its own time and place

The African origin of these works

- ▣ In this sense, it can also be regarded as a remarkable antecedent to some of the most significant works in modern African fiction, such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Kojo Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*.

The full emergence of the novel genre

- ▣ It was to take nearly a thousand years, however, before we were to witness the full emergence of the African novel as a literate genre. It is important to note in this respect the primary role played in this development by the African languages, which came to offer the writer the natural means of literate expression once these languages began to be reduced to writing throughout the continent in the course of the nineteenth century, mainly through Christian evangelical effort.

Characteristics of the first African novels

- ▣ In the circumstances, the first African novelists were products of missionary schools, so that a didactic and evangelical purpose came to predominate in this early literature, intent as the writers were on producing works of moral edification, as part of Christian teaching. Beyond this limited purpose of the writers, these mission-inspired works came to contain a larger cultural effect, for they bore witness to the profound transformation of values that the impact of Christianity had set in motion in Africa, a process in which the traditional religions and systems of belief came to exist in a state of tension with the new religion and with structures of mind associated with Western civilization.