

## The Strange Truths of African Realism: Community, Identity and Resistance in the Literature of Independence

Post-Independence African writing is particularly rich in content and diversity. Through analysis of the transitional role of realism in this period, I intend to explore how literary developments interact with socioeconomic, political, and philosophical climates. As liberation moves to liberalism, there is a corresponding trend away from social realism towards more self-consciously hybrid genres, in which the relationship between the historical, the magical, and the fictional is problematised. It is however unclear whether this generic instability is emancipatory or treacherous, or indeed if it is as unstable as it may at first appear; drawing on non-western traditions troubles canonical genre conventions, but also produces site-specific modes of resistance.

Genre, according to John Frow, is 'a form of symbolic action', shaping our understanding of the world. Genres are formed through the texts which constitute them. An analysis of generic trends in the African novel reveals a number of discourses alternative to those of western historicity. In 2000, Okey Ndibe stated that contemporary corruption in Africa '[was] becoming impossible to understand through [...] conventional forms of storytelling', suggesting a need for writing to adapt to new complexities. Ben Okri, whose magical realism is one example of how genre can be used to rewrite a nation's history, says: '[t]o poison a nation, poison its stories.' Implicit here is a claim that stories may also provide an antidote. I shall argue that realism and its radical revision have been crucial in shaping the discursive matrices of contemporary African literature, and that the performative reshaping of genres constitutes a form of political activism.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's claim that '[t]hought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions [...] it cannot help but liberate or enslave', I will map theoretical shifts between stability and instability, rationality and irrationality, deconstruction and reconstruction, against their literary counterparts. The idealism of revolutionary periods, the following disenchantment, and the search for new forms of resistance and community explored by Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Arjun Appadurai provide theoretical models which both develop out of and inform literary production. This process is particularly evident in the work of writers such as as Ayi Kwei Armah, Christopher Abani, Tayeb Salih, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, who create fresh ways of conceiving reality through mimicking and subverting genre conventions. The major axes of my interpretation of genre and realism come from György Lukács' *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* and John Frow's *Genre*, both describing a tight interrelation between genre and political engagement.

Christopher Warnes, whose *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel* has significantly informed my research, would be invaluable in taking this project further. Cambridge University's Centre for African Studies holds a large collection of books unavailable in

most British libraries, and access to the CAMP project will be key in locating contemporary reviews of texts, and conducting research based on primary sources. In addition, the weekly Research Seminar Series in the Centre will serve as a vital stimulus for new avenues of research.