

The Family in Modern African Literature

ALASTAIR NIVEN

AFRICAN NOVELS concerned with family life need to be precisely dated because the development of English-language writing over the last forty years (the first Anglophone novel, R. E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence*, came out in 1941) has been so various.¹ At the very least one needs to speak of phases of writing and for that reason a brief resumé of the period may be helpful. Ali Mazrui, in the first of his 1979 Reith Lectures, described Africa as "a Garden of Eden in decay." He may have meant his pre-lapsarian designation to be half ironic, but a generation of writers grouped around Chinua Achebe in the early 1960's would have accepted it as accurate, only modifying it a little to avoid accusations of *négritude* sentimentality. Senghor and his contemporaries in the 1940's had painted a portrait of "pre-civilized" Africa in which the black heart of the great mother was throbbing quietly in a slumbering body, waiting only for the kiss of cultural nationalism to awaken it. Achebe qualified that view, claiming that the white man was as much a catalyst as an instigator in the decay of Africa's greatness. The seeds of decay, as Ezeulu recognizes in *Arrow of God* (1964), lay within the African himself:

The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit. . . . We have shown the white men the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on. If we now want him to go away we must either wait until he is tired of his visit or we must drive him away. (p. 163)

Though the novel takes place around 1920 Achebe intends his readers to apply its moral perspective to the 1960's, for he sees twentieth-century colonial and post-colonial African society as a

continuous degeneration from a society that was "not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that . . . had poetry, and above all . . . dignity."²

In the late 1960's a new group of writers, including Yambo Ouologuem of Mali and Ayi Kwei Armah in Ghana, referred less explicitly than Achebe to European influence. They said that by making colonialism the scapegoat for everything wrong in contemporary society and thus continuing to make it central to every kind of self-analysis the African writer perpetuates a form of colonial dominance. They began to write novels in which the white man has no prominence. If he is there then it is as a kind of fountain in the background, pouring out the material commodities which have dethroned the old gods. Recent writers, however, have not cast their net even that far, suggesting that if Africans like the blandishments of a materialistic society they do so on their own terms and not because an avuncular white society seduces them into corrupt ways. We ought not patronizingly to assume that there needs to be a Sugar Daddy in the background. The African, according to this school of fiction (the main example of which is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* [1977]) freely chooses his own course: it is an aspect of his maturity, albeit a negative one, that he can choose wrongly.

Skepticism about how the white man runs his affairs and in particular about the nature of his class-based society runs through all modern African writing. In his semi-fictional *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911)³ J. E. Casely Hayford shows how the young African protagonist Kwamankra reacts to London:

As he watched the mighty procession of men, women, and children jostling one another, he was overwhelmed with a sense of the weariness which European civilisation has evolved for itself. But it was of the teaching of the Christian philosophy and its paradoxes that his mind was full. Was it not the Nazarene who said "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest"? Had he given this people who professed to be his followers, rest in their constant attempt to overreach one another, in the way they trampled upon one another unto fame and fortune? . . . And in his innermost heart he found himself thanking the gods that he was a poor benighted pagan. . . . (pp. 20-21)

African writing since Casely Hayford has gone through phases of disconnection from Europe and degrees of detachment from Christian teaching. It follows that as family life in a nuclear form is at the core of western society and monogamous fidelity one of the staples of Christian instruction the writers may question their value. Certainly in *Le Regard du Roi* (1954)⁴ Camara Laye illustrates, through the picaresque adventures of Clarence, his white protagonist, how deep-rooted and perhaps even instinctive is the European guilt about infidelity or polyandry. Clarence has to be "de-blanché" before he can understand the different assumptions of the society into which he has been expelled by his own people. Only when the process is complete is he ready to be received into the arms of the radiant king who he has been following. Whether the novel is the ultimate statement of *négritude* or more of a Kafka-influenced surrealist fantasy still sets critics arguing, but neither view can dispute Laye's total refusal to adopt, or to make less than absurd, the family values of European society.

More conventional *négritude* writers than Laye tended to divide the world into black and white but they then sought reconciliation between the two, a harmony which they expressed in imagery uniting Baudelaire with the sound of the tom-tom. Senghor honours Mother Africa and ancient goddesses in his poems in the same verses that celebrate the purity of the Virgin Mary and the venerable relationships that ought to exist between a son and his mother. Achebe was more interested in righting the injustice which he believed historians had caused to Africa's past (summed up, five years *after* the publication of *Things Fall Apart* [1958], by Hugh Trevor-Roper claiming that "There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. . . . The rest is darkness, and darkness is not a subject of history").⁵ But Achebe has something of Senghor's veneration for the son-mother link: Okonkwo is banished to his mother's village. In other words, a novel mainly about traditional village life on the eve of the arrival of the white man — but substantially taking place before the characters learn of his existence — has the same family attitudes, respect for parents, love of children, that almost any society inculcates.

Armah, affected by some of the aggressiveness of black aspirations in America in the 1960's and early 1970's, reduces the white

man to virtual irrelevance in his criticism of modern African society. Yet, as we shall see, family honour is an important theme in his work. Ngugi, in *Petals of Blood*, if not in its predecessors, similarly extols the family values which any European would respect, but he writes a novel which cuts the white man out of its orbit of concern. Each African novelist of the past twenty-five years intensifies the sense of self-sufficiency. Yet this is paradoxical, for the African writer's society has become more materially advanced in that time and hence more orientated to consumer living, the consequence of which, or possibly the condition for which, is the nuclear family unit. The nuclear family unit does not exist in the oral literature of Africa, but it has been a part of the novel (and of some poetry) since English-language African writing began. Even Casely Hayford's *Kwamankra* does not rebel against it, wishing that he could keep his son "from knowing the seamy side of life":

But since knowledge must come some day, it were well I guided thee to the sources thereof, if so be it might not be all gall to thy thirsty soul . . . But it is high time you were in bed . . ."

"Good-night, dad!"

"Good-night, my boy," and, in a minute, he had disappeared behind the curtains, leaving *Kwamankra* to his thoughts and to his pipe. (pp. 112-13)

It is a picture of bourgeois family bliss at the heart of one of the great emancipatory tracts.

Of all the literary genres fiction is probably most dependent upon what society wants of it. It exists because leisure has been devised during which it may be read. In Europe the apparent failure of the working-class novel to take root (almost none before D. H. Lawrence, very few since him to threaten the monopoly of middle-class concerns) underlines the relationship between the book and its public. A novel presumes literacy (a play does not), privacy (a praise poem is usually a public event, but a novel almost never is), and time for reading it. Some interesting evidence is beginning to emerge, but based more on anecdote than on documentation so far, that vernacular language African novels may not presume the first two of these requirements — Ngugi has

said that his Kikuyu novel, *Devil on the Cross*,⁶ is read aloud, à la Dickens in the nineteenth century, in public hostelries, in extended family groups, and even on buses. This never happened to *Petals of Blood*, to *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) or to any of his other novels. The writer in a language used primarily by non-formally educated people may be able to create a shared event which ceases to make him exclusive or élite. An African novel in English (or French or Portuguese) is bound to cut out a large section of the potential national audience, unless it is translated into the vernacular which very rarely happens. This is all important when considering the role of the family in African fiction because it means that the English-language novel best accompanies a western-style, or nuclear, family life where privacy to read is physically possible (good light, quiet), and where the one-to-one relationship of page-to-person is thought to be as important as a shared community experience. The introduction of fiction to Africa, with a few isolated exceptions, did not happen until the 1940's, that is, at the same time that educational opportunities were being sufficiently extended to allow for a new class — civil servants, clerks, teachers — to set up a style of living akin to, though far from a carbon copy of, the nuclear unit in Europe, with the space and the time, as well as the learning (and the finance — books have to be bought) to read fiction.

The fiction would therefore be likely, at this stage, from the early 1940's onwards, to reflect the concerns of the families reading it. Almost any chapbook published in Onitsha in the 1940's and 1950's incorporated the morality and aspirations of middle-class life — one wife is preferable to several mistresses, a home should be private, money should be earned by hard work, cities at night are dangerous for young girls, Christian principles are a secure basis for a good life. Rosemary in *Rosemary and the Taxi-Driver* or Mabel in *Mabel, the Sweet Honey that Poured Away* learn the horrors of deviating from these norms, as virtually all the heroines of Onitsha novelettes do. Cyprian Ekwensi, whose *People of the City* (1954)⁷ was the first Nigerian novel of urban life, grew out of Onitsha, writing pseudonymously some of the sixpenny pamphlets on sale in the Market. Ekwensi's novels occupy a strange borderland between popular romance and respec-

table literature taken seriously not only by social historians interested in its appeal to so many categories of people but by critics too. They display the anonymity of city life (though he has essayed pastoral fiction too) and the difficulties of surviving in it. Several Onitsha titles would be adequate sub-titles for Ekwensi's stories — *Money and Girls Turn Man Up and Down*, for example. Typical of the characters in his novels is the clerk in *People of the City* who commits suicide: "To him the city has been an enemy that raised the prices of its commodities without increasing his pay" (p. 70). All Ekwensi's characters search for the security of belonging to a family, sometimes literally — Jagua Nana, the eponymous heroine of his most famous novel, wants nothing more than a husband and a child — and sometimes metaphorically — as the *People of the City* "were all each and every one of them — members of one family, and what concerned one concerned all the others" (p. 152). Ekwensi still writes (his novel *Survive the Peace* (1976)⁸ is one of the best novels of the Biafran war, partly looking at its effects upon ordinary family life), but his influence in less than it was fifteen years ago. In a similar vein, and by any standard a best-seller, is David Maillu, the Nairobi-based writer whose tales like *Kadosa* (1979)⁹ have many of the same attitudes to family values or envy of them among the dispossessed characters, which Ekwensi expresses.

Many of the early African novels such as John Munonye's *The Only Son* (1966), Mongo Beti's *Mission Terminée* (1957)¹⁰ or Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) are about growing-up in a community which is still deeply traditional in most of its customs but aware too of the benefits of education. Inevitably the majority of these novels have a strongly autobiographical strain, with the author recalling village life, his mother, his schoolmates and almost everything except the colonial flag and the white school-teachers, with affection. As records of a society in transition these novels will retain their interest, though the most famous of them, *L'Enfant Noir* by Camara Laye, now begins to look rather sentimental. The portrait of family life is idyllic, even when, as is the case here, the parents are strict. Laye describes the rituals of Guinean family life with dignity but with a certain detachment,

as though he is evoking a past that no longer has the power to disturb him. It is a highly formal family life.

Those who had reached manhood had their own hut. The youngest, those who, like me, were still uncircumcised, slept in my mother's hut. My father certainly thought they could have no better lodging. My mother was very kind, very correct. She also had great authority, and kept an eye on everything we did; so that her kindness was not altogether untempered by severity. (p. 55)

This is perceptive writing but slightly lofty. It conveys, however, an impression of integrated family life. Far more dramatic, and hence in style more immediate, are novels of return such as Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) or Armah's *Fragments* (1969), where the author sees the disrupting effects upon family life that "been-to" attitudes can invoke.

In *No Longer at Ease* Achebe conveys the anxiety of many young Nigerians who have studied abroad, at the expense of their village elders, but who on returning home find problems of re-settlement which cut into their most important relationships. Obi Okonkwo's family is traditional in its attitudes. He finds great difficulty in living up to its expectations. He no longer shares many of its beliefs, especially its Christianity. The crisis of the novel comes when Obi declares his determination to marry an *osu* girl, someone set apart as unmarriageable according to custom. As Obi's father says:

Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself that I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that, my son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters. (pp. 133-34)

Obi has thrown down the most fundamental challenge to his family, exposing its inconsistency in belief. "Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man *osu* . . . But have we not seen the light of the Gospel?" (p. 133), he asks his father, hypocritically using language which may appeal to him.

This kind of conflict between tradition and modernity is not straight-forward. Obi feels great pressure on himself. He is not arrogantly flouting his family's values but he feels caught — uneasily — between two worlds. He falls victim to the strain and ends up in a court of law on a corruption charge. "The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth" (p. 170).

Fragments illustrates the dilemma even more intensely. The main character Baako is brought to the edge of madness by the pressures upon him as a "been-to." His family expect him to be the same person as before, but rich, to be unchanged in his deference to them, but to be the provider of luxuries: "Everyone who goes returns. He will come. He will be changed, but we shall welcome him as the same. That is the circle . . ." (p. 14). It is an impossible paradox for Baako to sustain and he cracks as dramatically as Obi.

Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), is usually read as an attack on Nkrumah's rule, a scatalogical statement of post-independence disillusionment which significantly re-directed African fiction away from the balanced ironies of Achebe to something more abrasive and cynical. All this is valid, but it tends to overlook the domestic aspect of the novel. The Man, the main character, refuses to be part of the greedy acquisitive society, though Armah surely suggests that his inertness is just as rotten as everyone else's self-interest. The Man's wife cannot understand why he is not like other people. He is not sure he understands it himself.

For the little children.

In the end, was there anything done for the children's sake which could really be seen as a crime? Anything that could justify their condemnation to pain when all that was required was the sacrifice of something which would turn out in the end to be merely a fraction of life? (p. 171)

The Beautiful Ones focusses on a single family living in a city, not well off, not influential. It catches accurately the pressures upon the head of such a household to compromise his principles in order to give his wife and children the advantages which all his

neighbours appear to enjoy. Is high-minded idealism compatible with living in a society created out of self-interest, checks and balances? Lawrence in *The Rainbow* suggested, through Ursula's decision to opt out, that it was not so. Armah is less sure, for the end of the novel seems partly to vindicate the Man and allows his wife to see him in a more favourable light.

The clash of values between traditional life and modern society has been the subject of many key works in contemporary African literature, almost always portrayed through family conflict. Okot p'Bitek's poems, originally written in Acoli, *Song of Lawino* (1966)¹² and *Song of Ocol* (1970)¹³ are further examples, deeply influential in East Africa. A new kind of novel is beginning to emerge, however, which assumes that the nuclear family living in an urban apartment block is here to stay and which therefore does not counterpoint it with a rural setting. Ben Okri, a young Nigerian novelist, has recently been praised for his first novel *Flowers and Shadows* (1980).¹⁴ The same conflict between material values and idealism appears here but it is not argued out against the possibility of retreat from the city back to the village. Armah began this kind of writing. Okri continues it. Other young writers — Kenya's Ngure Mwaniki and Mwangi Ruheni, for example — are part of the new urban school of writing which takes the small family unit for granted. Buchi Emecheta, in *In the Ditch* (1972),¹⁵ a semi-autobiographical account of her own struggle to bring up five children as a single parent in a London slum, goes beyond this. Implicit feminism, contempt for male patronage, a deep-seated conviction that it is possible to define the family in a totally untraditional way — these are the hallmarks of her early books, though it is worth noting that Emecheta is increasingly moving on to historical writings which re-assert traditional family attitudes. In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1980),¹⁶ for example, there is a guarded attitude to husbands but an unequivocal one of duty and love towards children.

The move towards novels about the modern nuclear family obviously brings African fiction more into line with western fiction. There is one crucial difference, however. The issues upon which the novelists focus have so far been "public" ones. A novel like *Flowers and Shadows* expresses a young man's adolescent skepti-

cism about the kind of society he inhabits (Okri was seventeen when he wrote it). Africa has not yet produced an Iris Murdoch or a Susan Hill, concentrating more on the private neuroses which modern society produces in the individual. African fiction tends to make statements about the kind of society which the continent ought to be evolving. The best novels — none better than *Petals of Blood* has been published in recent years — create psychologically interesting characters, but they do so in order to illustrate larger points about the claims of capitalism and socialism, tradition and development, or power and corruption. I respect it for this, believing that the European novel has shunned public issues for too long and retreated behind the closed doors of the bedroom and the study.

A survey like this has left much out. African literature can no longer be considered monolithically as a whole. The concentration on urban families in many Nigerian and Kenyan novels is not matched by what the young Zimbabweans are writing — Dambudzo Marechera in *The House of Hunger* (1979) or S. Nyamfukudzo in *The Journey Within* (1980), for example, where the hero is caught between rural traditions and educated interests as much as Obi Okonkwo was twenty-one years ago. Nor have I taken into account the growth of vernacular fiction, where the themes are often very different — mythic, epic or historical. The family as seen in contemporary African novels cannot be categorized in one way, but there is plenty of evidence that the best novelists see it under great strain as it tries to hang on to its inheritance from tradition and yet to come to terms with the same pressures in modern life which affect our own society. For this reason one of the most interesting recent novels is *Chirundu*,¹⁷ by Es'kia Mphahlele of South Africa. Published in 1979 just before Mphahlele returned to his own country after twenty years in exile it has some familiar themes — corruption among rulers, the injustice of denying workers their rights — but it is also about the claim of colonially instituted law to be superior to African customary law. Mphahlele examines this issue through the story of a man sued by his “traditional” wife for bigamy. It dramatizes as effectively as any recent novel the difficulty of adopting western family standards in a society where the majority of the people are

denied the economic means to have such a choice. There are obviously particular reasons for this in South Africa, but the basic issue is relevant to every African country where a European-language literature is flourishing.

NOTES

- 1 R. E. Obeng, *Eighteenpence* (Ilfracombe: Stockwell, 1943; re-issued Accra: Ghana Publishing House, 1970). Unless otherwise specified, all novels mentioned in the text are published by Heinemann, London.
- 2 Chinua Achebe, "The role of the writer in a new nation," *Nigeria Magazine*, 81 (1964).
- 3 J. E. Casely-Hayford, *Ethiopia Unbound* (London: C. M. Phillips, 1911; re-issued London, Frank Cass, 1969).
- 4 Camara Laye, *Le Regard du Roi* (Paris: Plon, 1954). Translated by James Kirkup as *The Radiance of the King* (London: Heinemann, 1956).
- 5 H. Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe," *The Listener*, 28 Nov. 1963, p. 871.
- 6 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann, 1981). Translation.
- 7 Cyriac Ekwensi, *People of the City* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1954; revised ed. London: Heinemann, 1963).
- 8 Cyprian Ekwensi, *Survive the Peace* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).
- 9 David Maillu, *Kadosa* (Nairobi: Maillu, 1979).
- 10 Mongo Beti, *Mission Terminée* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1957). Translated by Peter Green as *Mission to Kala* (London: Heinemann, 1964).
- 11 Camara Laye, *L'Enfant Noir* (Paris: Plon, 1953). Translated by James Kirkup as *The African Child* (London: Collins, 1955); first published as *The Dark Child*.
- 12 Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966).
- 13 Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Ocol* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1970).
- 14 Ben Okri, *Flowers and Shadows* (London: Longman, 1980).
- 15 Buchi Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972).
- 16 Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Allison and Busby, 1979).
- 17 Es'kia Mphahlele, *Chirundu* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979).