



The politics of the popular: Definitions and uses of African popular fiction



Review article



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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the discourse around the politics and the polemics of ‘the popular’. It focuses on the definitions and uses of African popular fiction. The problematic in the definition of ‘African popular fiction’ starts from the difficulty in the definition of African popular culture itself which the fiction in question is supposed to reflect or influence (Barber, 1997). This paper does not take the term ‘popular’ as a received notion but as a contested notion because there is politics behind it. ‘Popular fiction’ is a term originating from outside Africa in the West while in Africa there is a problem of distinction between what is popular and what is not popular. The transpositions from Western to African popular fiction require adjustments beyond substituting black for white or beyond bringing the proletariat-bourgeois dichotomy because contexts are totally different. Popular fiction acquires new characteristics and uses when transposed to the African local and when transposed to a different local within Africa. African writers re-interpret or extend the boundaries of this genre in order to make it do new intellectual work and address questions of social and political power. This form is conscripted for new ends and is made to address emergent issues of social contradiction in Africa. It is itself an institution of social critical analysis.

Keywords: African popular culture, African popular fiction, politics of the popular, popular



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Public Interest Statement

Is there a boundary between the popular and the canonical in the African context? This paper is a contribution to the discourse around the politics and the polemics of ‘the popular.’ By engaging with the politics of ‘the popular’ this paper locates itself in the debate. It will enlighten readers or critics to engage with representation in African popular fiction in a critical way and more interrogate these imaginaries in a new way.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the definitions and uses of African popular fiction. The problematic in the definition of ‘African popular fiction’ starts from the difficulty in the definition of African popular culture itself which the fiction in question is supposed to reflect or influence. In this paper it is noted with attention that ‘popular fiction’ is a term originating from outside Africa in the West while in Africa there is a problem of distinction of what is popular and what is not popular. When the term ‘popular culture’ is transferred into the African context, it brings with its ambiguity, conflicts, assumptions and problems as it is demonstrated in this article. There is a kind of politics behind ‘popular’. Thus, this paper is a contribution to the discourse around the politics and the polemics of ‘the popular.’ By engaging with the politics of ‘the popular’ this paper locates itself in the debate. It will enlighten readers or critics to engage with representation in African popular fiction in a critical way and more interrogate these imaginaries in a new way.

2. Popular Culture

The concept ‘popular’ is ambiguous when used in the African context. As Barber (1997) says, “[p]opular culture in many discourses occupies a self-evidently positive position, and the task then becomes of distinguishing between what is ‘truly’ popular and what is contaminated by hegemonic ideological infiltration from above” (p.3). According to some of the Latin American Theatre activists there is a distinction between ‘popular culture’ – that which truly serves the interests of the people by opening their eyes to the historical conditions of their existence – and ‘people’s’ culture, – that which emanates from the people but which is a form of false consciousness, working against their true interests by fostering acceptance of status quo (*ibid.*).

The concept ‘popular’, as Bourdieu observes, is always ambiguous because it comes to Africa inscribed with the history of political and cultural struggles. It is a site of contested evaluations. ‘Popular’ is often associated with low-class and to be low class is not good (Barber, 1997, p.2). In the history of Europe usage, ‘people’ can mean the whole people, the nation but mostly it is used to mean a part of the nation, a class

– those who are not the dominant classes, the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie. So, the people's culture can therefore be seen as engaged in contests over those boundaries. The people's culture in Europe then is low or common culture as opposed to the high culture of the ruling class. It is not the case with African context. The boundaries between the people and the 'elite' or the ruling class are not usually clearly specified.

Therefore, in the paper's argument, 'popular' is not taken as a received notion but as a contested notion. A persistent thorn in definitions of 'popular culture' is the ambiguity of the word 'popular'. And in the African context, to that ambiguity is added the multiplicity of native languages and the legacy of colonisation, having in mind that language and literature are the carrier of cultural knowledge and wisdom. When reading Barber (1997), it can be noticed that for some, 'popular' means what is produced locally and constructed on familiar strategies or formulas. For others 'popular' is considered as being that which functions in the interests of the masses (the farmers, workers, unemployed) by opening their eyes to their own objective historical situation, the actual conditions of their existence, and thus enabling them to empower themselves. Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* obviously becomes the popular literature because it identifies the interest of the mass. However, this Marxist sense is nowadays less used to interrogate what is a popular writing. Still for others, that term 'popular' is used as an aesthetic category where the distinction between elite literature and popular writing is not only in terms of accessibility to the majority (distribution, cost) but also in terms of formal stylistic features. Popular writing otherwise addresses the same serious moral and political issues as elite literature, according to this third category of thinkers.

Popular 'cultural productivity'/'creativity' emerged in the Africanist scholarship only as a residual category: a vague, shapeless, undefined space, demarcated only by what it is not. It is not wholly 'traditional' – in the sense given to this term by much Africanist scholarship, that is, purely oral, expressed in exclusively indigenous African languages or images, and coming from or alluding to the pre-colonial past. On the other hand, it is not 'elite' or 'modern', 'westernized' culture – in the sense of inhabiting a world formed by higher education, fully mastery of European languages and representational conventions, defined by its cultural proximity to the metropolitan centres, and addressed to a minority but 'international' audience. It is rather defined by its occupation of the zone between these two poles (Barber, 1997, p.1).

Mpolokeng Bogatsu (2002) gives the example of the formation of *loxion kulcha* which is about the fashioning of black youth culture in post-apartheid South Africa. As Bogatsu argues, the *loxion kulcha* is an example of the emerging "highly imaginative

and innovative cultural forms in which existing genres are reworked and ‘remixed’ with a range of global resources” (p.1). Like much urban youth culture of which it forms a part, the *loxion kulcha* range resituates older discourses, both freeing them of older and more rigid meanings and investing them with new ones that recognise the persistent social contradictions to which these discourses have reference. Bogatsu’s is an example of how the urban youth create a kind of culture to cope with the hardships of the urban life. They use humour to alleviate the absurdity they face in daily life.

The two categories, ‘traditional’ and ‘elite’ (or ‘modern’/ ‘westernised’) as presented by Barber have dominated the study of African cultures. However, there is a vast domain of cultural production which cannot be classified as either ‘traditional’ or ‘elite’, as ‘oral’ or ‘literate’, as indigenous’ or ‘Western’ in inspiration, because it straddles and dissolves these distinctions. That kind of production which is neither ‘traditional’ nor ‘elite’ makes use of all the available contemporary materials to speak to contemporary struggles. But they are not mere products of ‘culture contact’ either, speaking about, – and to – the West that has ‘corrupted’ them. They are the work of local cultural producers speaking to local audiences about pressing concerns, experiences and struggles that they share (Barber, 1997, p.2).

The pejorative thrust has been renewed by the conflation of the idea of ‘popular’ with the idea of ‘mass culture’: seen by many as mechanically produced pap controlled by a manipulative state to brainwash its passive citizens. But ‘popular’ has also long been a focus for approbation and championship, to the point where anything produced by ‘the people’ is automatically valued. Popular sovereignty and popular democracy, highly value-charged terms, assume that what is popular is by definition good and approved.

If ‘popular culture’ is in some way grounded on a notion of ‘the people’ as a really-existing demographic category, then it is easy to slip into the assumption that each stratum of society has its own distinctive culture, a way of life and a range of expressive forms and genres which are peculiar to it and which affirm its identity vis-à-vis the other strata. This assumption has however been challenged by historians. One historian Chartier maintains that it is not possible to establish exclusive relationships between specific cultural forms and particular social groups, especially in the context of Africa. Indeed, there are no clear-cut boundaries between the popular and the canonical in Africa.

According to Barber (1997, p.4), when the distinction between ‘folk’/ ‘traditional’, ‘elite’ and ‘mass’, ‘bourgeois and ‘proletariat’, or that between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture is transplanted to Africa, then the already-porous and ambiguous classifications seem to turn around on their axes and reconfigure themselves into

unstable, almost unusable paradigm. What then could be said to be the sociological referent of 'popular' culture in Africa? 'The people', 'the masses', 'the grassroots', are phrases lavishly used by the press and by politicians in many parts of Africa. But the categories represented in this rhetoric remain out of focus. What endures is a pervasive sense of 'us' and 'them', even though the boundaries between these categories may be highly porous and shifting particularly in Africa. There is intermingling of the ruled and the ruling classes, and those who were in the revolutionary category yesterday may be in the ruling group today.

The term proposed by Breckenridge and Appardurai, as an alternative is 'public culture', as a term intended to bypass the dichotomies of elite and mass, high and low (Hofmeyr 2004, p.128). Equally as Barber's work on popular culture in Africa signalled some time ago, any attempt to grapple with the 'popular' in Africa requires moving away from settled conceptions of these high and low, 'traditional' and 'elite'. 'Popular culture' becomes a terrain of contradiction and ambiguity rather than a site simply of resistance' (Hofmeyr, p.130.). Barber recognises the evasiveness and difficulty of the definition of the term 'popular' and allows the term to accrue a number of competing, cross-cutting meanings deriving from sociological, historical, aesthetic, anthropological and economic debates (Newell, 2002, p.4).

Through popular culture, we understand how society changes and not how messages for change are put. In the popular productions, there is a manifestation of high degree in their invention to face the new reality. In the popular, 'the subaltern can speak' (Spivak, 1995) and there is something which is communicated. Thus, the contrast between 'popular fiction' and literature occurs against the backdrop of continuing debates by scholars about the categories 'low' and 'high' culture.

3. Definitions of African Popular Fiction

It is said that any effort to define popular fiction in Africa must account for the manner in which local practitioners constantly absorb new cultural currents, poach upon so-called 'traditional' and 'elite' discourses, adapt and operate outside of 'official art forms' to fit their needs. That is why many African art forms are evasive and difficult to classify. Therefore, we talk of definitions in plural because it depends on the context and the local, and various scholars give different definitions for the term 'African popular fiction'.

To begin with, we might ask what the difference between the western popular fiction and African popular fiction is. Dismissively from the academic point of view, western popular fiction is the bestseller, and more positively, forms of prose writing that address proletarian oppositions to bourgeois values. The style may be classified

popular when it returns to the syntax of literariness to the expressiveness of oral speech; when the vocabulary rejects the art allusion for detail of the street (Michael Chapman in Newell, 2002, p.141). There is a register for the western popular.

Furthermore, in the western context, as a genre dealing primarily with the feelings and situations of women, by women, for women readers, romantic fiction has always been marginalised and enormously successful in terms of sales. In Africa, romantic fiction is both less gender specific – it may also be by or about or read by men – and less formulaic, so that within certain recognizable parameters, significant deviations occur in texts “to suggest the contours of a form answering, not to western or westernised expectations, but to the aspirations/pleasure/desire of a specifically local readership” (Jane Bryce in Barber, 1997, p.122). Scholars of African popular fiction have proved with some evidence that this readership is less exclusively female than in the West.

Where western romance is largely written to and confined by a formula, so that both writers’ names and publishers act as signifiers of absolutely specific and predictable products, in the African context, romantic fiction is part of a self-conscious process of self-definition. While African romances conform to some of the requirements of the romantic formula – most obviously, obstacles in the way of love being surmounted against all the odds, they deviate in certain very significant respects (Jane Bryce in Barber, 1997, pp.121-2). Bryce gives the example of Nigerian romances which deviate from the formula by even occasionally proffering a male protagonist, contrary to the western romances where the protagonist is a female most of the time. The romantic formula requires obstacles to be placed in the way of ‘true’ love: in the African context, such obstacles are frequently provided by religion and ethnicity, and not social class as in western.

For Newell (2002, pp.3-6), African popular fiction is a field of African creativity which is non-elite, unofficial and urban. ‘Popular fiction’ is an urban phenomenon, conveying urban aspirations and fantasies, and assisting readers in their efforts to come to terms with crime and poverty and urban living conditions. Most of the time, it comes in hot and gets out cold because of its temporality. Furthermore, Newell states that book production and consumption patterns in Africa differ greatly from those of late-capitalist economies: the term ‘popular’ therefore requires, according to her, re-settling if it is to retain validity in modern African contexts. In the West, popular genres are intimately connected with the development of large publishing conglomerates, which have an ‘entrepreneurial vision of the book as an endlessly replicable commodity (Radway quoted in Newell, 2002, p.4). In fact, people who engage in popular fiction have a commercial mind. The popular is about

commoditisation. That brings to the question of pornoaesthetics, the question of sexualised text instead of textualised text. It is also about presenting the absurdity of human conditions in modern society. How do people survive the new environment? While in the West the definition of ‘popular’ depends on mass-production, mass-marketing and mass-consumption of the artefact where the audiences see the popular artefact as commodity to be purchased on a regular basis, the economic situation in Africa does not allow the majority of African potential readers to buy regularly. Not only the price of books is not within reach for everybody who would like to read but also the level of literacy is still low.

Thus, specific readerships are not necessarily implied by particular genres, as they are in the West: for example, men read *Harlequin* and *Mills and Boon* romances in West Africa in order to learn about women’s behaviour, and Ghana boasts a long tradition of male romance writers dating back to the mid-1940s (Newell, 2002, p.4). Therefore, it is necessary to focus upon African readership just as much as upon texts if we wish to describe the ‘popular’ qualities of African fiction. Indeed, in the African context, looking at the aesthetic category of African popular fiction would be even more interesting than the readership because often the economic situations do not allow buying regularly. Questions such as ‘what are the practices of African popular fiction? What are its tropes?’ ‘Is there something that is communicated?’ should be the focus in the attempt to define it. It often uses the sugar daddy and good-time girl tropes but often with very significant modifications; it uses allusions, satire, metaphor, allegory, humour just to tell the truth to people laughingly. When dominant western genres such as the romance and thriller are put into operation by writers who are situated geographically and economically outside the centres of mass-production, then the ideologies commonly associated with the genres are detached. As Newell (2002) observes, it is not easy to catalogue the ‘popular’ qualities of fiction in Africa. Considering the lack of mass-marketing and the dynamic nature of literary genres on the continent, in what sense is the word ‘popular’ appropriate to describe locally published fiction in Africa? Popular is a widely used but ill-defined term in studies of African fiction, but it is also immensely useful in demarcating a field of African creativity which is non-elite, unofficial and urban. According to Barber quoted by Newell (2002) in her introduction (p.4), “the definitive feature of African popular art forms is their lack of formal and stylistic regulation from outside”.

Another scholar who has attempted to define ‘popular fiction’ is Schneider-Mayerson (2010). According to him, ‘popular fiction’ is defined by what it is not: “literature”. Most critics openly or implicitly adhere to the following claims: whereas “literature” is indifferent to (if not contemptuous of) the marketplace, original, and

complex, popular fiction is simple, sensuous, exaggerated, exciting and formulaic (p.21). According to these proponents, 'literature' has a timeless appeal and is global while 'popular fiction' is temporary and local. This can bring one to interrogate why canonical is timeless while it is about temporality if you are talking about mass appeal. In Africa, 'global' and 'local' texts are not divorced from one another, for local popular novelists include references to canonical African texts in their work, and one can find 'good-time girls' with painted lips and miniskirts causing havoc to young men within Ngugi's and Ben Okri's publications (Newell, 2002, p.8). As the same author continues to point out, local and urban popular discourses about marriage, women, the city, wealth and good fortune are in many cases precisely where the plots and character are fertilised and raised. Where would Ama Ata Aidoo be without the Ghanaian "good-time girl", a figure she appropriates from popular, male-authored narratives on numerous occasions and instils with new, politicised messages for readers? Where would Ngugi wa Thiong'o be without the east African manifestation of the same character type? Where would Ben Okri be without the sensational, popular *ogbaanje* stories which circulate around southern and eastern Nigeria? These persistent character types and templates generate new social commentaries with each appearance in pamphlets, stage shows, videos, magazines and novels. This can lead us to the question 'who decides the canon'? It is the critics who canonise texts. And this category is made of a class of elite group of people who decide the canonical. It is political. However, mindsets are beginning to change. Some texts started as popular and ended up by becoming canon.

Bernth Lindfors (1991) makes a proposal that 'Any work that seeks to communicate an African perspective to a large audience in a style that can be readily apprehended and appreciated could legitimately be called a piece of African popular literature' (Quoted in Newell, 2002, p.4). It may be true that popular fiction is produced by less educated and targeting ordinary people, that is, the masses and supposedly to be known by many. But in the African context, is this large audience willing to read? If they are willing to read, does the economic situation allow them to buy this material? What about languages issue? If our definition of popular fiction is readership, we should interrogate this attitude. In any case, it can be said that 'popular fiction' in Africa describes those types of narrative which never fail to generate debate amongst readers on moral and behavioural issues. In terms of their appeal, such narratives are popular in the sense of being in demand by African readers; in terms of their content, these texts are popular in the sense of containing ubiquitous character types and plots, reworked with each re-usage by authors. Love stories published in diverse African locations convey young people's fights for their chosen marriage partners, as youths

protest in the name of love against betrothals arranged by their parents. Many plots revolve around this formula and common character types emerge from. The common denominator linking these different regional literatures is that the romance formula serves to license attitudes and opinions which are challenging to established social practices such as bride price, arranged marriage and polygamy.

In Africa, 'popular' is another sense to indicate an area of exploration, rather than to attempt to classify a discrete category of cultural products. The point is not to demarcate but to find a standpoint from which we can actually see the great variety and intensity of cultural production that was and is going on in African cities, villages, plantations, townships and war-fronts (Barber, 1997, p.7) and try to understand what this cultural production communicates. According to Barber, "no one should assume that 'popular' texts are somehow easier, more available, and less demanding than the production of the 'educated elite' (p.8), which I do agree with her. As she goes on pointing out, the emergent quality of these texts, their performative dimension, their ambiguities and synthesis, make interpretation a challenge, especially of course to outsiders. Within African popular fiction lie narrative possibilities for textual subversion and thematic experimentation, and the reader can interpret the text in various ways depending on "the experiences that s/he brings into the text, his/her expectations, the intertextual allusions, his/her competence among many other things" (Odhiambo, 2004, pp. 203-4).

The difficulty in defining African popular fiction therefore derives from the difficulty of the category itself. Bryce questions the 'people's'/popular' distinction, arguing that genres emanating from the people without outside instigation can still embody visions of social and personal improvement. 'Rather than escapist fantasy', romantic love becomes a trope for the desire for change, both personal and social, and for the belief in the possibility of change' (Bryce in Barber, 1997, p.6). It becomes an institution of social critical analysis.

From all the various definitions, it can be retained that 'popular' in the phrase 'African popular fiction' is used as an aesthetic category or a genre type whether these imaginaries are produced by a lesser-known or well-known writer, and without considering the type of readership it addresses to. 'African popular fiction' becomes therefore any significant imaginary text or story – locally produced – with a strong plot modelled on stereotypes and clichés with possibility of manipulating them for utility – thus referring to the genre type rather than referring to the category of people from where it emanates or the category of people to which it addresses, because if well analysed there are no clear boundaries between those we can call people and the rest in the African contexts, between the popular and the canonical.

4. Uses of African Popular Fiction

African popular fiction is functional because it has various uses. Its uses can be explored either through the way we read them or the way they have been written. There is something that is communicated in these texts and people read these texts because they appeal to their experience. This can bring us to Freudian psychoanalysis. What a popular novel teaches is considered by many African readers to be of equal importance to its entertainment value (Newell, 2002, p.1).

“As a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated, the romance genre in Africa plays a series of important functions” as it is argued by various scholars in the field of African popular fiction (Muhomah, 2002, p.154). Odhiambo (2004) demonstrates in his article that fiction meant for light reading or writing that is ostensibly intended for entertainment can also be a vehicle for critical political, cultural and social commentary. Popular genres such as the thriller or romance indeed have the capacity to combine the elements of excitement and assessment of social life. The characters are ordinary people with whom the ‘man on the street’ or ‘the man in the bar’ can identify. For instance, a romance story that tells of a relationship between a man and a woman can also be read as an allegory of the relationship between citizens and their nations (p.190). African popular fiction offers a space to those who do not have space in the canon to voice their concerns in the cultural order. As Hofmeyr (2004) points out, in a situation of fragile democracy, failed or weak states, authoritarian rule and violent political transition, popular cultural texts and performances become like ‘pavement parliaments’ in which issues of power are debated and discussed. Popular texts provide a ‘laboratory’ for debating larger issues in the society (p.128). Through African popular fiction we can overhear many of the hopes and fears of social classes excluded from the narration in the canonical culture or what C Wright Mills call ‘cultural apparatus’ (in Barber, 1997, p.15). Popular fiction is thus used as a counter power, a subversive power.

At thematic level and in spite of the various languages chosen for narratives, popular novelists across the continent are pre-occupied with many similar issues concerning land, love, wealth, social class and the city; but often upon close analysis, apparently common tropes and character types are realised in vastly different ways due to the range of historical and political experiences across Africa. The use of the generic mix of the romance and the detective novel becomes a form that attempts to explain the African instability and state of confusion. Throughout the continent, popular novelists seem to be responding to Africa’s pervasive economic crises through their protagonists and plots. Through the romance’s intense, personalised commitment to individuals, as well as its promotion of young female characters and

their right to marry self-selected partners, authors can express criticisms and protests that might otherwise have been censored by their societies. As Nwoga and Larkin (in Newell, 2002, pp.5-6) reveal in relation to Nigerian popular literature, in fiction published since 1950s, African writers with diverse political interests and agendas employ the language of romantic love to voice ideals about the social rights and duties of individuals. These ideals may be egalitarian or conservative in their gender perspective: often relating to domesticity and to women's status within marriage. These ideals are of course personal to the authors, but they are also deeply collective, promoting the alternative social models for the community at large. Authors are engaged in the construction of symbolic economies, converting and transforming real economic relationships into symbolic ones and helping to generate explanations of (mis)fortune that will touch the experiences of their readers. Through such narratives, readers can start to rationalise their own poverty, for in large number of novels wealthy characters are morally punished for their misappropriation of wealth. Plots thus offer symbolic resolutions to the everyday problems of readers

One particular trajectory of this symbolic economy can be found in the stories of good-time girls and their sugar-daddies which proliferate in popular fiction across the continent. Gender seems to be an essential, primary lens through which popular novelists filter their interpretations of urban society at large. Popular novels are fascinating for their nuanced, detailed revelations of popular attitudes towards women. However, "the elite aesthetics and the conservative morality tend to relegate popular genres such as romance to the level of not only of non-literature but of dangerously immoral and intellectually dubious anti-literature. As an example from Kenya shows, Kenyan popular novels of sex-and-violence, which Chris Wanjala has characterised as 'pornoaesthetics', surprisingly often portray women – even prostitutes, predators and patsies – as the means of regeneration for aggressively 'bad' macho protagonists (Jane Bryce in Barber, 1997, p.119). It would rather be important to ask oneself the question: 'Why does popular fiction valorise the low values of human culture?'

In contemporary East African novels, as Nelson (in Newell, 2002, p.7) shows, the rural mother-figure epitomises an alternative morally pure order, containing many of the ideals that cannot be realised in fictional cities; by contrast, the urban good-time girl and prostitute symbolise the corruption of the postcolonial nation state. As Newell notes, the manner in which the city, the cash economy, land and marriage are thematised in early Kenyan fiction is unlikely to overlap with early Nigerian fiction, given the vastly different experience of colonisation in settler colonies and in commercial trading colonies (*ibid.*). That fact justifies the regional differences of that

genre within Africa. In particular, the village to which so many fictional good-time girls are returned can be read as symbolic space in which authors are attempting to resolve the socio-economic problems and contradictions encountered by young men in urban areas. However, the negative representations of emancipated women in much popular fiction cannot easily be linked with 'real' women's economic independence.

By invoking the character of the good-time girl or the ideal wife in their narratives, African popular novelists are employing an ideological device to reinforce their value judgements about appropriate female behaviour at particular historical moments. Novels often contain moral warnings against such women's deceitful behaviour and solutions are offered to young readerships to help them 'deal with the chronic societal ill [of] female waywardness and the love for transient values'. Local and urban popular discourse about marriage, women, the city, wealth and good fortune are, in many cases, precisely where the plots and characters of 'elite' African literature are fertilised and raised. Popular novelists innovate from within their chosen genres to suit the aesthetic 'tastes and expectations of situated reading publics'. Popular narratives are both fictional and cultural artefacts, produced within – and assisting our understanding – of complex socio-cultural formations. Through them we can overhear many of the hopes and fears of social classes excluded from the narration of nationalist histories as mentions Newell (2002). Like many sites of popular culture then, the romance and the thriller genre in Africa provide a suggestive mode for understanding perceptions of power.

The romance narrative, considered passé in the 'West' obtains a new lease of life in Africa. The first notable publication was Germaine Greer's 1970 polemic *The female Eunuch*, which argued that romance novels pacified, deceived, and manipulated their female readers and should be shunned by women. Often 'shunned in the 'West' as anti-feminist, and culturally exhausted, the romance in Africa has a vibrant life where it is employed, often by women writers, to enter feminist claims into the public arena' (Hofmeyr, 2004, p.133).

African popular fiction is important to the reader's life. It clearly demonstrates the function of fiction and the ways in which local readers seek to organise their lives through popular narratives. Africans read for utilitarian purposes, in virtual exclusion of all else. Reading for personal achievement rather than for fantasy or pleasure, Africans have what T. Gyendu terms a 'textbook mentality', selecting educational texts in the hope of acquiring knowledge for social or professional advancement (Newell, 2002, p.2).

As scholars in the field of African popular fiction reveal, locally published African novels and magazines are marketed very often in a way that emphasises their status

as ‘problem-solving’ texts, as quasi-fictions which are relevant and didactic and thoroughly located in socio-political contexts. As examples given in Newell (2002) to illustrate how functional the African popular fiction is, Swahili novels in Kenya often end with a proverb or maxim, and Tanzanian Swahili novels often ‘carry their culprits to Ujamaa villages or National Service Camps’. Sales figures can soar when the covers of texts promise that ‘this booklet... is very useful to husbands and wives because it contains almost every advice necessary to help them not to misunderstand themselves after marriage’; or ‘this story will excite any couple involved in the endless search for harmony in marriage’ [on their back cover]. Adverts know to hit the hunger or thirst of people. In this manner, writers and publishers alike appeal to readers’ personal interests and thirst, emphasising the moral knowledge to be gleaned from reading and, large numbers of African readers expect fiction to fulfil precisely this didactic function. As many novelists declare in their books and as many local readers agree, African popular fiction must be included among the range of ‘educational’ texts that a reader will purchase.

In general sense, as discourse markers and socio-economic indicators, the characters in African popular fiction are modelled on stereotypes and clichés. Barber remarks that stereotypes are a way of ‘making models that can be applied to readers’ own specific circumstances...’. She also notes that the function of ‘stereotype clichés and formulas in African popular culture generally could fruitfully be treated as the point at which individuals’ experiences and shared concerns intersect’ (in Ogola, 2002, pp 50-1). For example, Teacher Damiano, Father Cammisasius and Whispers in *Whispers*, an African popular fiction from Kenya are some of the characters deliberately loaded with stereotypical clichés to embody moral messages specifically for readers of the same gender or occupying the same social role. “Models of behaviour [of characters] (representation) become models for behaviour (warning, advice)” [of readers] (*ibid*). However, stereotypes and clichés are a sword with double edge that must be handled cautiously. They can reinforce negative stereotypes rather than unravel them.

The locally published ‘popular’ text in Africa can be defined as that which circulates outside the very structures that characterise popular literary production in late-capitalist economies (Newell, 2002, p.3). It can be a site of cultural productions, where the contradictions of African modernity are played out. Contributors of *Readings in African Popular Fiction* agree that African popular fiction expresses, mediates and symbolically resolves ‘common people’s experiences of post-colonial class society and urbanisation:

African romantic fiction, like most African popular writing, has an underlying didactic purpose. Where western romance is largely written and confined by a formula... in the African context, romantic fiction is part of self-conscious process of self-definition... While African romances conform to some of the requirements of the romantic formula, they deviate in certain very significant aspects (Jane Bryce in Barber, 1997, p.122).

The quotation above extracted from Jane Bryce (in Muhomah, 2002, p.77), introduces the differences between western and African use of tropes of romance. In the western romance, the path to the marriage altar is where heroine's adventure of love and romance is traditionally concluded. In the case of African romance in general, the meaning of love and romance only becomes clear as the couple enters into married life. The marriage does not end at the altar. Instead, the focus shifts to life after the wedding. Women writers thus promote marital ideals after the exchange of marriage vows of 'till death do us part', that privilege conjugality, romance and individual relationships as the bedrock of marriage, ideals such as faithful monogamy, responsible fatherhood and negotiation of how the money should be spent for the family well-being. Newell phrases the issue in the following terms:

Women writers seem to be using the romance to signify their dissatisfaction with existing popular narratives about marriage. Romantic fiction has become a tool enabling them to reconceptualise women's marital status. Through the ideology of love, a critique of 'masculinist' conceptions of marriage can be mounted, for the love-scenes portrayed by women writers convey utopian visions of relationships and marriage (in Muhomah, 2002, p.78)

Women's actions in these writings are therefore viewed as a recommendation for solid relationships grounded on shared interests and companionship rather than seething passion and that is another use of romance in the African context. While it is true that African popular fiction produced in colonial languages excludes readers who are literate only in African languages, it plays a positive role in cutting across class and ethnic differences, and suggests that one function of popular writing is to symbolically erase artificially constructed boundaries as it is exemplified in Pat Ngurukie's *Soldier's Wife* (1989) or Muthoni Likimani's *What Does a Man Want?* (1974).

Another use not less important is that African popular fiction is important to the writer's or the producer's and the distributor's life because it is a commercial

commodity that generates income. In short, African popular fiction whether produced in African languages or in colonial languages has various uses as it has been detailed in this section.

Conclusion

Whatever the language of particular narratives, African popular fiction reveals the inadequacy of centre-periphery models of cultural transmission: popular fiction on the continent illustrates the immense creative agency of ‘the local’, who can put the most hegemonic of international art forms to diverse new uses. In writing thrillers or detective stories, African popular novelists might buy into recognisable global art forms, but the content of their texts is reserved for the expression and resolution of local concerns. African popular fiction and particularly the romance is fluid and flexible both in its subject matter and structure and is used in varied ways by different writers to suit the local needs by commenting on diverse issues in society. African popular fiction is a flexible genre that can allow the writer to narrate diverse social, cultural, economic and political issues in contemporary Africa in novels that are ostensibly light in reading and mainly intended for entertainment. For instance, a writer can use the generic mix of the romance and the detective novel. The writer can exploit it to suit their literary needs and address the imagined social needs of a society at the same time.

While the popular fiction serves ABC in the western world with proletariat-bourgeois dichotomy, African various writers re-interpret or extend the boundaries of this genre in order to serve to local concerns totally different from those it serves in the West. But since human beings share certain characteristics, what serves an African can also inspire a non African in a way or another. African popular fiction expresses, mediates, and symbolically resolves ‘common’ people’s experiences of post-colonial class society and urbanisation characterised with uncertainty and instability. African popular fiction is more an aesthetic category built on a formula or a genre loaded with stereotypical clichés which are often manipulated to extend the boundaries in order to address the needs of the society, targeting mainly the mass audience but not exclusively, whether written by an elite or non-elite. Its flexibility allows writers to fit in their expressive needs for the targeted audience. Popular fiction acquires new characteristics and uses when transposed to the African local and even within Africa when transposed to a different local in order to fulfil functions different from those they fulfil in the West.

All in all, the study of popular fiction requires its own attention. Popular fiction has to be studied as a field and must cease to be viewed as meretricious cousin of ‘real’

literature because it is very functional in African society. Its flexibility offers a range of possibilities to capture the instability and the confusion of the contemporary society.

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