

The Specter of Authenticity: Discourses of (Post) Colonialism in the African Novels of Nancy Farmer

Abstract

Children's books have always courted controversy, from nineteenth-century debates on the dangers of fairy tales to publications of the last fifty years that have offered a challenge to the notion of what might be suitable literature for the young. Such a description will not surprise anyone familiar with the ideologically ambivalent or contradictory ideas about childhood that are articulated and negotiated in children's fiction, and aware of the degree to which children's writers in general have taken the conflicts and political realities of modern history as their manifest topics. This paper will address controversial subject matter and a source of interest of much contemporary children's literature, the fictional coverage of familial and postcolonial conflicts, and will question traditional assumptions about children's literature as an apolitical genre. It proposes that children's texts are now in a position to envision new modes of response or resistance, challenging the uneven power relations of colonialism. More specifically, it will demonstrate how Farmer's novels have questioned the dominant discourses that constitute cultural givens yet sometimes straddled the border between subversion and an uneasy complicity. The argument investigates what these texts have to say about colonial histories, relations of colonial power, and the projected futures of postcolonial societies. The African novels of Nancy Farmer, I will argue, raise postcolonial issues with a mix of compliance with and resistance to colonial ideologies.

Keywords: African novel, postcolonialism, fairy tale, children's tales, discourse in literature.

The extent to which the "ideological signals," to use Fredric Jameson's phrase (1991: 84), are embedded in the specific details of children's texts—which are already profoundly ideological in their commitment to accepted constructions of childhood—has been the subject of many critical readings. The most

important and influential of these articulations from the perspective of Marxism came from Jack Zipes and Ian Wojcik-Andrews who, as Rollin and West point out, have demonstrated that “a children’s ‘classic’ is more a product of a societal power structure than of an individual creative mind” ([1999] 2008: 13). Others (Bradford *et al.* 2008; Reynolds 2007) have tried, instead, to recognize children’s literature for its transformative power, or its radical political *potential*, while feminist (Clark and Higonnet 1999; Paul in Hunt [1996] 2004; Wilkie-Stibbs 2002 and others) and postcolonial (Bradford 2007; Maddy and MacCann 2008; Yenika-Agbaw 2008, among others) theorists of children’s literature have dealt with the textual complexities of the gender and racial politics involved in studying narrative strategies in specific children’s texts. However, critical consideration of children’s fiction has only recently begun to engage with postcolonial theory while the field of postcolonial studies has largely ignored literature for children. The discussion of the ideological terrain of children’s literature is further complicated by the view that it is a site of the colonization of childhood by imperialist adulthood, with important results for the field of children’s literature and for the texts that inscribe the field (see, for instance, Rose 1984; Nodelman 1992, 2008). In constructing a variety of implied reader positions tied to the values and mores of the culture that produced it, children’s fiction may be seen as an imperial project aimed at satisfying adult needs and desires with regard to children.

One might ask whether the idea of children’s literature as colonialist discourse is not just another way of saying that it is, in Perry Nodelman’s (2008: 163) words, “literature in which adults attempt to manipulate children.” And indeed, as Mavis Reimer notes, in the case of texts produced in the Western world for the children of colonizers, we can no longer adhere to the “simple analogy between the child and the racialized other.” While as literature for children, such texts “instantiate the difference between the child and the adult,” as neo-imperialist texts they often take the West as their frame of reference and “include the targeted child audience within the privileged racial group” (Reimer 2000: 111). But while it may seem far-fetched to associate Western ways of thinking about ‘other’ cultures with adult ideas of what it means to be childlike, the parallels are highly suggestive. As Roderick McGillis pointed out well over a decade ago, “Children are the subaltern” and for us to consider them in the light of postcolonial studies is to set up the poles of a paradox: postcolonialism and children (McGillis 1997: 7). Postcolonial writers, it could be said, make their readers aware of the constructedness of socio-cultural categories; children’s writers set out to “draw their readers into the world as adults see it and construct it” (McGillis 1997: 8). On the whole, however, what children’s writers and critics offer is not merely a discourse for remaking the child in the image that adults desire. It is also a discourse of an engaged plurality with a greater variety of subject positions to assume than was available to previous generations. Young readers now have the opportunity to choose between narratives which not only put them in a position to see things in a new way, but which also force questions upon them.

As modern examples of radical fictions, defined by Nick Bentley as “texts that engage with the constructions, reproductions and negotiations of particular formations of identity and ideology” that are widespread in a particular period (Bentley 2007: 21), Farmer’s *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* (1994) and *A Girl Named Disaster* (1996) belong to a group of recent novels for a younger audience marked by two broad characteristics. First of all, they attempt to confront the continuity of colonialism by foregrounding the totalizing impulse of Western—imperialistic—modes of explanation and juxtaposing it with Indigenous epistemologies and models of history. Secondly, they try to produce a distinct cultural identity which will in its turn be influenced by a critical awareness of colonialism’s ideological effects. Here, as elsewhere in

recent works, anxieties about the deconstruction of the self have been able to develop into what Bentley describes as an “interest in models of hybridity and inbetweenness, of identities that reside on the borders between, and *in* between, traditional categories of identity.” This, he adds, has led the 1990s novel to introduce questions of ontology, turning on an “uncertainty about the relationship between the real and the unreal,” between the authentic and the fake, as well as about “nostalgia for lost or displaced selves and organic communities” (Bentley 2005: 10). His examples are British fiction, but they might just as well be American; and Farmer also sets out to make a similar point about memory as present in the construction of identity but at the same time involved in distorting the past.

Farmer’s is less the mode of social and cultural critique than the essentially humanist view of cultural exchange as necessary for personal maturation, a re-visioning of unproblematic notions of national and cultural identity into a specifically cross-cultural humanity. The representation of larger-than-national spaces in her novels is bound to involve the journey: a motif which is arguably an important component of the postcolonial children’s text and which can be seen as an illustration of “transnational and unbordered engagement with space” (Upstone 2009: 57). In addition to answering the requirements of the Bildungsroman, the journey provides the conditions necessary for exploring the notion of cultural difference. In *A Girl Named Disaster*, Nhamo cuts her ties to the oppressive Shona culture and seeks out her long-lost father. As the novel moves away from its politically alive geography of familial conflicts to social conflagrations at the core of the former colony, the underlying cultural tensions become more localized and ever more intense: new divisions and discriminations accompany rapid economic change, but they can also destabilize both national and cultural identity and thereby influence the production of cultural meanings and their power relations.

In *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm*, Tendai, Rita and Kuda, the three children of the Chief of Security for the Land of Zimbabwe, enjoy the proxy pleasures of a luxury home along with futuristic elements which seem to be essential to the utopia dreamed in 1990s, such as robots, holophones and automatic Dobermans. But so it is that *en route* to an easily deluded satisfaction the young characters find themselves locked in by their father’s obsessive fear that they may be kidnapped by his enemies. The children’s journey begins, in fact, when they are attacked and then imprisoned in Dead Man’s Vlei, a rubbish dump sprawling across Harare and inhabited by the dispossessed and undeveloped, and takes them to a series of territories which evoke certain aspects of the nation’s past, recreating historical settings of one kind or another. The territories include the Valley of Resthaven, a utopian enclave within real social space, established by a group of dissidents as a closed tribal system within the country of Zimbabwe, as well as a “remnant of British imperialism, . . . the home of Beryl Horsepool-Worthingham, where the members of the Animal Fanciers’ Society maintain their quaint customs, including afternoon tea, the veneration of animals, and the consumption of large quantities of sherry for purportedly medicinal reasons” (Bradford *et al.* 2008: 70). Zimbabwean society in the novel is itself a space in which various groups compete with each other in waving their different thematic banners. The colonial past and more recent ecological disasters have left their mark on people’s experience and daily life: toxic chemicals have contaminated the land and the soil of Dead Man’s Vlei; deformed beggars haunt the bourgeois suburbs; and the Masks, a corrupt society that has gone too far in the direction of the collectivist and the conformist, engage in extortion and physical violence.

It could be argued that cultural and ideological assumptions are explored in Farmer’s novels with a suitably postmodern mix of the playful and the provocative. *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* achieves a

doubling effect through an element of playfulness, realized in the dispersion of the narrative with its shifts between narrator and character focalization, its level of intertextual reference, and its use of irony. Indeed, it is precisely this parodic clashing of discourses which, as Bradford *et al.* have argued, asks young readers to “construct subject positions of some complexity as they negotiate the novel’s varying perspectives and discursal modes” (Bradford *et al.* 2008: 72). Few passages would seem to reveal the plot structure’s parody and reflexivity quite so transparently as the description of Resthaven: far from an “uncritical celebration of originary ‘African’ culture.” The novel’s representation of that utopian space “plays with notions of appearance, reality and fantasy” (Bradford *et al.* 2008: 70). There is here, in the regressive images of village culture, an ideological return to the old way of life inspired by the pre-colonial or the primitive. Meanwhile, this alternative version of the return to simplicity—in the face of the appeal of the various forms of complexity available in so satisfying a world—becomes accessible only to a few of that culture’s members. At any rate it seems enough for the society outside Resthaven to know that this space exists: thus, General Matsika, the children’s father, insists that “Every culture has one place it will not allow to be touched. This is ours. As long as Resthaven exists, the Heart of Africa is safe” (Farmer 1994: 148). The fundamental idea behind Resthaven, then, is the conviction about the inevitability of utopia, which here combines a sealed-off human community with a “consolatory fantasy for Africans living in the modern world” (Bradford *et al.* 2008: 70). This is also how memory is discovered in Farmer’s novel to be a more authentic experience of the past than history, for memory “implies a more direct rapport with the past than historical narratives can provide” (Su 2005: 13).

Allowed entry into Resthaven, the children are surprised to discover that village life is organized exactly according to the descriptions of pre-colonial Africa with which they are familiar. The smell of wood fires, for instance, evokes “something deeply buried in Tendai, an ancestral memory of sitting by such a hearth and letting the smoke wash over him” (Farmer 1994: 102). However, it is important to note that the ancestral memories evoked by the palpable, sensory qualities of landscape come not from Tendai’s reconnection with the ancestral figures but from exciting stories produced by a character known as the Mellow, that is, the son of Beryl Horsepool-Worthingham. The unique value of the Mellow in the Matsika household lies in his function as a Praise Singer, who reassures the family members of their innumerable virtues as well as futures prospects, and who recounts tribal stories and myths of the old order:

Night after night, the Mellow had told them stories of faraway times. He had told them how the houses were made and the weapons were forged, how the pots were laid in hot coals for many days to season them. It was all part of the unending wandering story he wove about them. Sometimes it was Praise, sometimes history, and a lot of time it was pure fantasy, but told with such authority that they all believed it. (Farmer 1994: 103)

While the Mellow’s mixing of fiction, history and Praise Singing “reflects back to the members of the Matsika family enhanced versions of themselves which they internalize as true”, Resthaven similarly generates an illusion: part of its attraction lies in the construction of an optical image of the world inside stretching out endlessly in an enormous curving mirror (Bradford *et al.* 2008: 71). To reappropriate the original image seems a tall order for the peoples whose national images have been exploited in order to validate and sustain a myth of Western superiority.

Proposed as a solution to the specific social and cultural problems encountered by the characters in Farmer’s novel, the elitist isolationism of Resthaven behaves like a narrative fulfillment of Tendai’s

yearning for wholeness. However, if doubts fade away in this refuge from urban experience, we may still harbor some hesitations about its flat-out denial of modern reality. How could this small village intended as an idyllic place of rural felicity belong to anything other than a nostalgic and primitivistic fantasy? Does Farmer suggest that Resthaven was a seemingly realistic option for a nation weakened by dangerous memories of conflict, oppression, and exclusion? One way of interpreting this section might be to read for the same parodic strategies that characterize the detective plot of Farmer's novel. If the conclusion of the 'Resthaven' section adds to a nostalgic celebration of pre-colonial societies, it is not without a degree of self-consciousness about its often escapist rhetoric. The question is thereby raised, for readers of this section of the novel, as to how this ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, measures up in relation to other attitudes toward the rediscovery of the past, both personal and national. The unreliability of memory, the displacement of the legacies of colonialism, the disruption of national and individual constructions of identity—all of these complicate and challenge the possibility of authentic identity. The paradox of valorizing the myth without reinvesting in it makes for the kind of spurious resolution that succeeds only insofar as it undercuts the relevance of any such attempt.

The reflexivity that we have seen as characterizing *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* calls both literal and ironic meanings to its reader's attention and prevents any simple identification with focalizing characters. Thus, the utopian spaces of the novel suggest transformative directions without proposing alternative social and political orders; in fact, typically for utopian texts addressing postcolonial issues, the novel "leave[s] it open to [its] readers to construe their own image of utopia which is not and cannot be a fixed and realizable end in itself any longer" (Pordzik 2001: 18). Resthaven has been read in a number of ways: as an anti-utopia, were we to regard its patriarchal ideology and the oppression of women as ironic questioning of the very possibility of utopian communities; as a flawed utopia in Sargent's use of the term, that is, as a society which creates a good place at too great a cost (Resthaven 2003: 226); or as an example of "strategic essentialism where those seeking a better future for a postcolonial society invoke valued aspects of its precolonial past" (Bradford *et al.* 2008: 72–73). On the one hand, the different significations suggested by Resthaven are varied enough to work against any simple formulation of postcolonialism or decolonization. On the other, the novel's reduction of the complex history of cultural change to an inaccurate folkloric myth and bizarre "tribal" practices demonstrates the potency of residual colonial attitudes naturalized in habits of perception and representation and replayed in contemporary children's fiction.

If one of the aims of postcolonial literature has been to readdress the way in which ethnic minorities have been constructed in literary discourse, as Gareth Griffiths reminds us, "there are real dangers in recent representations of Indigenous peoples" in Western literature, which "stress[es] claims to an 'authentic' voice." These claims, he continues,

by overwriting the actual complexity of difference, may write out that voice as effectively as earlier oppressive discourses [... of colonial racism]. In fact, it may well be the same process at work, and the result may be just as crippling to the efforts of Indigenous peoples to evolve an effective strategy of recuperation and resistance. (Griffiths [1995] 2006: 165)

Farmer's novels may be taken as instructive examples of this peculiar effect. *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* includes ten pages of definitions and a point-by-point cultural commentary, but its fictional narrative, as Maddy and MacCann have demonstrated, might seem rather remote from the realities of the Shona ethnic group (Maddy, MacCann 2008: 114). When Tendai and his siblings are suspected of

witchcraft and therefore threatened with a prolonged stay in Resthaven—which, after all, tries to revive a traditionally organized Shona community—they learn about the sad fate that awaits them: “[Y]ou’ll wish you died. You’ll get food the goats wouldn’t touch and the nastiest chores. But worst of all, people will hate you. They’ll look at you with loathing for the rest of your days” (Farmer 1994: 159). These and similar remarks leave the reader in no doubt that, in Farmer’s novel, the Shona group’s social structures and institutions are recognized as dysfunctional, or even dangerous. The reader’s attention is focused on the bigotry of the village life, where envy reigns supreme and witchcraft is used as a political tool; the various xenophobic or patriarchal social practices problematize Resthaven’s value as a refuge and sanctuary and refocus the readerly gaze on the nervous distrust of anyone unfamiliar with Shona cultural habits, and on the indolence of the men who loiter away their days in idleness. But it is only in Rita’s comments that the implicit sexism of that male-dominated culture really begins to reveal itself:

“It’s all right for you,” said Rita tearfully. “You’re a *boy*. You get to lie around listening to stories. I have to scrub the floor, wash clothes, sweep the courtyard, and—and—air out the babies’ bedding. It’s so horrible...

He wanted to help her with the dirty mats, but that would certainly not be allowed. Tribal law was perfectly clear on that point: boys and girls had different duties, and unfortunately, the nastiest ones fell on the girls. (Farmer 1994: 126–127)

The running cultural commentary can serve to demonstrate the peculiarities of the novel’s representation of the collective experience of the Shona group, where the non-fictional material, though intended to offer the reader a more complete knowledge, runs counter to the novel’s misuse of the rhetoric of the noble primitive. While myths of identity and culture vary across former colonies and across time, white imaginings of Indigenous peoples bear the same ideological charge of essentially colonialist discourse: the primitive mind, the noble savage, the ethic of natural innocence. All of these themes revive the much-contested aim of discriminating between the authentic and the inauthentic—the “overworked and problematic term[s] in discussions of Indigenous peoples and texts,” according to Bradford (2007: 86)—even where they in fact reveal the deeper inauthenticity of the authentic as such. If Farmer challenges the notions of cultural authenticity and purity in her satirical narratives, in her representations of African communities she still remains compliant with a late imperial racism and a fetishization of “the primitive.” Perhaps postcolonial children’s literature has been inherently ambivalent since its cautious beginnings: it has always been both transgressive and authorizing, both undercutting and excluding. If this is so, then Farmer merely foregrounds this inherent paradox. The ideological content of her novels is manifest, but their political resonance seems ambiguous: Farmer’s use of authenticity as an empowering strategy can be seen as a destructive tampering with the values, customs and life rhythms of the indigenous peoples, and a reconfirmation of exoticist stereotypes.

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