UNIT 3 MODERN NOVEL IN AFRICA

Structure

3.0 Objectives
3.1 Africa—the First Storytellers
   3.1.1 Orature—the Tradition of Narrating Orally
3.2 Africa—First Written Narratives
   3.2.1 Literacy and the Bible—European Missionaries
3.3 Africa—First Publications in English: Ethiopia Unbound, Eighteen Pence
3.4 African Writings as part of National Struggles
   3.4.1 Professionals’ and Writers’ Meets in Paris, Rome—International links
   3.4.2 Goals of African Literatures—Social, Cultural and Political
   3.4.3 The Language Question—Mediums of Creative Writings
3.5 The Rise of Modern Novel in Africa
   3.5.1 Assimilating Native Traditions of Narration
3.6 Some Early Novels
   3.6.1 Things Fall Apart—Encounter with Europe as a Theme
   3.6.2 Early writings of Ngugi wa Thiong’o
   3.6.3 South Africa—Racial Clash as Fiction: Paton, La Guma, Gordime
   3.6.4 Corruption as a Major Theme of Post-Independence African Fiction
   3.6.5 The Emergence of the Political Novel—Ngugi’s Devil on the Cross
   3.6.6 Fiction by African Women
3.7 Let Us Sum Up
3.8 Questions
3.9 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The principal objective of this Unit is to focus on the tradition of narration in Africa. The tradition that was primarily oral, became written after the arrival of first the Arabs who introduced the Arabic language and also its script and later by the Europeans who introduced literacy in order to enable them to read the Bible. Still later, they introduced their respective system of education, as a part of which the Africans were exposed to their literatures. The British for instance introduced as a part of the educational requirements, texts like the Bible and Pilgrim’s Progress. These in turn became the role models when the first samples of fiction by Africans written in English appeared.

The Unit also discusses briefly the various stages through which the African novel in English passed and the major themes it embraced at various points of time. It also takes note of fiction writing by African women.

3.1 AFRICA—THE FIRST STORYTELLERS

If what the anthropologists tell us is true that man first appeared on the African continent, then the credit for being the first fiction-artist must also go to an African, since the art of story-telling is as old as man. Thus, it may not be difficult to visualize a group of people—not just children—gathered around a person—most probably a man but could as well be a woman—in the fading light of the evening after the day’s work—of hunting but could also be of fruit-gathering—had been done and requesting him to tell of his hunting experience. Exaggerating a little here to enhance his valour and understating a little there to minimize his sense of fear and cowardice, the man narrates the factual experience of a hunt. On another occasion, the person not only
exaggerated a little here and understated a little there but he also supplied a few
details that never occurred, slipping them into his narrative in such a manner that it
was difficult to separate one from the other—those that actually happened from those
that never happened. Thus was born the first fiction-artist of Africa—and of the
world.

3.1.1 Orature—the Tradition of Narrating Orally

We have used the expression ‘story-teller’ or ‘fiction-artist’ and not the expression
‘fiction-writer’, for this was in the oral tradition of narration. The oral tradition as the
only mode of narration was to last millennia in the case of Africa and in many cases
still continues to be the only mode of creating stories or songs. In course of time there
grew not only a sizeable body of significant oral narratives—orature—but also
groups of professional narrators—the griot, the babalawo and Giccandi players—who
moved from place to place in various African societies and narrated these tales.

3.2 AFRICA—FIRST WRITTEN NARRATIVES

However, it was with the coming of outsiders—primarily invaders, although some
came for trade alone as well, the Chinese or the Indians for instance—that written
forms of narration were introduced into the cultural soil of Africa. Contrary to
popular impression, those who introduced scripts for African languages for the first
time were not Europeans but Arabs who came down from the North to invade,
convert and set up kingdoms for continued economic exploitation. Thus Hausa, a
language of the people living in northern parts of Nigeria, acquired a script—the
Arabic script. Thus Swahili—a trade patois spoken on the coast from Mombassa to
Zanzibar—also became a written language with the help of the Arabic script.

However, literary activity in these and other similar languages was only scanty, at
best. With the coming of Europeans towards the end of the 15th century—the
Portuguese under Vasco-da-Gama were perhaps among the very first—European
languages were introduced on the continent of Africa. Within a couple of hundred
years the continent was abuzz with Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, German,
Flemish and Italian.

3.2.1 Literacy and the Bible—European Missionaries

It was the missionaries from different parts of Europe who entered various regions of
Africa on the apparent pretext of bringing enlightenment to its people who brought
literacy to Africa. The Bible had to be read. The weekly sermon by the priest was a
written discourse read aloud to the congregation. This in turn led to a number of
significant developments: first, the Bible had to be translated into various African
languages, most of which did not have a script. So scripts were either invented or
adapted for these languages before such translations could be undertaken. Thus, the
‘credit’ of transforming a large number of African societies from oral to written, from
pre-literate to literate goes to these missionaries. In the meantime, the Africans were
encouraged by the missionaries to learn to read the word in European languages as
well. Thus the reading—and writing too—of English, French, Portuguese, etc., was
introduced by the missionaries. By this time, most parts of the continent had been
colonized for economic exploitation through either guile or force or both. The
exploitation needed to be perpetuated and that could only be done by controlling not
just the bodies but the minds of Africans. Hence, western systems of education were
introduced to instil into the minds of Africans the superiority—economic, political,
social, cultural and ideological—of the western ways of life, thereby filling their
minds—simultaneously—with a sense of inferiority about all things and ideas which
were African. Teaching and learning of European languages and literatures—English,
French and Portuguese—became a part of the school education curricula.
Progress by Bunyan, for instance, became an almost essential text in various parts of British Africa. It is, therefore, no surprise that when the first generation of African literates—those 'been-o's, as they came to be known in the English parts of Africa—came to write their first narratives in English, these were based on Pilgrim’s Progress and the Bible.

3.3 AFRICA—FIRST PUBLICATIONS IN ENGLISH: ETHIOPIA UNBOUND, EIGHTEENPENCE

Since this missionary activity on the continent began in a big way in the 19th century primarily on the west coast—Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, etc.—where the ‘freed’ slaves had been settled, it is only natural that the first education facilities by westerners were also introduced in the same region and in course of time the first shoots of creative writing also sprouted from the same soil. E. Casely-Hayford’s Ethiopia Unbound published in 1911 is perhaps the first long narrative in prose by a African. The book is a ‘hotch-potch of ideas’ wherein Casely-Hayford tries to focus on a number of contemporary issues including education, christianity and colonialism. The modes of narration too vary from realistic to fantastic.

R.E.Obeng’s Eighteenpence(1943) is considered by some to be closer to what may be called modern African novel rather than Casely-Hayford’s Ethiopia Unbound. The book is an allegory where characters are representatives of qualities. The influence of the Bible and Pilgrim’s Progress is more obvious in Eighteenpence than on Ethiopia Unbound.

Both these writers paved the way for the first major narrative to be recognized as a novel: Amos Tutuola’s The Palm Wine Drinkard.

3.4 AFRICAN WRITINGS AS PART OF NATIONAL STRUGGLES

As we have stated in the introduction, literary activity by modern African writers—including that of novelists—began in a big way only after the second world war, primarily as a result of the conscious decisions by emigrant Africans in Europe who under the inspiration of thinkers like Amie Caesar, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon and George Padmore, opened a ‘second front’ as it were, and stepped up their cultural activities to assist the freedom struggles in their respective countrys back home. As Amilca Cabral put it, national liberation movements are “the organized political expression of the struggling people’s culture.” This, however, is not to give an impression that there were no literary activities in various parts of Africa before this. But with only forty nine of seven hundred odd African languages having been subject to a written form, the literary efforts in pre-colonial Africa were primarily oral and a rich body of what Ngugi wa Thiong’o called orature had existed in most African societies. There were of course languages like Swahili and Hausa in East and West Africa respectively and Sesotho in South Africa which had the tradition of written literature.

3.4.1 Professionals’ and Writers’ Meets in Paris, Rome—International Links

A formal status to the efforts of emigrant Africans was accorded when in 1956, a meeting was organized in Sorbonne, Paris under the auspices of “Presence Africaine” a journal devoted to various aspects of Africa and its people that was being published
from there under the editorship of Alioune Diop. The meeting adopted a resolution that stated, among others, that there was no nation with culture, no culture without a past and no authentic cultural liberation was possible without political liberation first. This meeting was followed by a second one in Rome in 1959, which proclaimed, among others, that ‘political independence and economic freedom are indispensable prerequisites of fecund cultural development in underdeveloped countries in general and in the countries of black Africa in particular.’

Political scientists like Phillipe Decrane and Thomas Hodgking, writers like Jean Paul Sartre and critics like Lilian Kesteloot recognized immediately the significance of such literary efforts. Phillipe Decrane, for instance, considered Sehghor’s theory of negritude as the literary counterpart of Pan Africanism whereas Ms. Kesteloot opined that African writers “have produced original works only when they have become politically committed.”

Soon this body of African writers forged links with others in underdeveloped countries, particularly of Asia, and a larger body of Afro-Asian writers came about whose initial meetings were held in New Delhi in 1956, Tashkent in 1958 and Cairo in 1962.

### 3.4.2 Goals of African Literatures—Social, Cultural and Political

Thus literary rejuvenation in Africa became a part of a large cultural renaissance that had evolved close links with political struggles of various countries on other continents. An African writer, therefore, used his pen not only like the barrel of a gun but he also carried a pen in one hand and a gun in the other—literally. Sedor Senghor, Augustino Neto, Mamadu Dia, Tafawa Balewa, Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah were not only the first ranking political leaders of their respective countries but their leading writers as well. The aims of African writers—novelists included—were, therefore, overtly political and there were three principal reasons for which they wrote, each of which was implied in the resolution quoted above. These were first to bring out the rich cultural heritage of Africa to debunk the colonial propaganda that Africa had no culture, no history, no past and that Europeans had intervened in Africa to “civilize” it. Critics have called this phenomenon as “Prospero Syndrome.” This had led to distortions and even halting of their cultural development under the policies of cultural imperialism pursued by the colonial powers of which creating a class of “been to’s” evolues and assimilados were the extreme forms. The second aim of these writers was, therefore, to step up the struggle for their cultural liberation. However, since no ‘authentic cultural liberation’ was possible without political liberation first, the third and the most significant aim of these writers was to support their respective national liberation movements. In this, they were inspired by the writings and research of Cheikh Anta Diop from Senegal who had collected adequate evidence from the fields of anthropology, archaeology, language, literature and history to assert that the ancient Egyptian Civilization had been set up and developed by black Africans. The hands of modern African writers— including those of novelists—were therefore quite full with political commitments from the very beginning.

### 3.4.3 The Language Question—Mediums of Creative Writings

Before moving on to the examination of the rise and development of novel in Africa, let us make a few observations about the choice of languages by African writers for their creative writings. This like the other observations about African writers affected the novelists as well. Since the aims for which African writers had taken to writing were overtly political, they had to choose the mediums of their creative works keeping such objectives in mind. Since their primary objectives were to aid and assist their respective national liberation struggles, they needed to reach their messages—which were not only to inform about their cultures, their histories and their pasts but also the present state of affairs under colonialism—to the educated, politically aware and liberal minded people in the ruling countries so as to create an empathy for their
cause of political independence. Thus they chose the languages of their European masters—English, French, Portuguese—as the vehicles of their thoughts. Simultaneously, they also wanted to reach that limited section of the reading public in their own countries—those “been to’s” and assimilados—who had lost faith in their own cultures and their pasts and who were not only resigned to their colonized fate but who were also “sold” to it, thanks to the impact of European education systems and the accompanying crumbs. In short, such writings were also aimed at what Ngugi wa Thiong’o has called “decolonizing the mind” of the African educated middle class. Then there was, of course, the third reason on a number of African languages lacking a script and hence the inability of many a writer to adopt it as the medium of expressing his creative abilities. This question of the choice of European languages was later to develop into a big controversy, particularly among novelists like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Nurudin Farah. The choice, we may say, to conclude the debate on this point, was made consciously and after careful considerations, keeping in mind the then objectives of supporting political struggles in various parts of Africa.

3.5 THE RISE OF MODERN NOVEL IN AFRICA

The rise of the novel as a genre in Africa coincided with the rise of African intelligentsia whose members were—primarily—the products of mission-run schools who had been fed on the staple diet of the Bible and Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. And the time too was of violent social upheaval not only in Africa but all around the world. After the end of the second world war, the Soviet Union had emerged as a global power and had become a rallying force not only for a large number of newly independent nations but also for those who were still struggling for political independence in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A socialist revolution had succeeded in China. India and a number of nations in Asia had gained freedom from colonial rule. The Vietnamese had defeated the French. The economies of colonial powers lay in shambles. All this had great morale-boosting impact on the African bourgeoisie which was leading these struggles for political independence. They realized, perhaps for the first time, that the Mzungu—that’s the Swahili word for the white men—were after all not invincible. Sensing success, they stepped up their struggles. Members of the intelligentsia, the literary counterparts of the African bourgeoisie, too had been inspired by these events and also by the role played by their counterparts elsewhere, particularly in Asia. We have already referred to the beginning and developing of such contacts between writers of Africa and Asia at conferences in New Delhi, Tashkent and Cairo.

3.5.1 Assimilating Native Traditions of Narration

The genre of novel is a European transplant in Africa since, its birth coincided with the arrival of literacy and the western systems of education based on it. However, the transplant could sink its roots very quickly into the soil and soon throw around new shoots primarily because the soil was very conducive to its growth. The tradition of long narratives—both in prose and in poetry—had existed in most African societies for long. In fact, in some societies this tradition had been formally institutionalized through professional narrators—the Griot singers and the Giccandi players, for instance—who moved from place to place very much like our own sankirtan jathas, or singers of Hari Katha or the baul singers of Bengal. These folk narratives themselves were open-ended and individual narrators kept on varying the text spatially and temporally by adding episodes and incidents of local and contemporary interests. This provided the narrator with ample opportunities to give free reins to his fertile imagination and interpolate the text thereby secularizing it in the process. Let us add here that these narrators combined in themselves the functions of singers of epics, social chroniclers and the reciters on specific religious occasions. Now the first novels in Africa could and did draw their strength from the tradition of such
narratives whose taproots had been buried deep for centuries. It is no wonder, therefore, that early African novels drew their sustenance from fables, folk tales, proverbs, sayings and similar cultural material. Let us illustrate this point by taking a couple of examples from the Nigerian novel.

## 3.6 SOME EARLY NOVELS

One of the first novels to come out of Nigeria in the fifties—1952, to be precise—was *The Palm Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola. In fact, many scholars consider Tutuola to be the grand sire of modern fiction in Africa. The novel created a sensation. Before elaborating on that let us look at a small excerpt from the novel:

> I was a palm wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age.  
> I had no other work more than to drink palm wine in my life... My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all of the rest were hard working, but I myself was an expert palm wine drinkard... (Tutuola, 1952:7)

The novel was praised and condemned simultaneously—of course by different groups of people—for the same feature but again for wrong reasons. Tutuola's writer colleagues most of whom had been to the mission-run schools and the university—Tutuola unfortunately had not gone beyond class six—were embarrassed by his "irregular" use of English. His western critics, however, hailed it as a novel use of English. Dylan Thomas referred to it as "young English by a West African" and Anthony West saw in it "the very beginnings of literature". However, they all agreed on one thing: that *The Palm Wine Drinkard* was some kind of a "freakish first" which was an "unrepeatable happy hit." However, Tutuola repeated the hit no less than five times after the publication of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. It was then that it dawned on both his Nigerian colleagues as well as western critics that there was more to the novel than just its plain bad English. And that something more was the Yoruba folk material that Tutuola had so cleverly built into his narrative, bending the structure of English language as well as the novel as a form to carry the burden of his narrative. And it was in this that the strength of the novel lay and not in its bad English. In this respect Tutuola was a path breaker who had grafted successfully the African narrative on to the western novel and the mutated form—although still called a novel—was soon adopted by his successors not only in Nigeria but all over Africa.

### 3.6.1 Things Fall Apart—Encounter with Europe as a Theme

Chinua Achebe was perhaps among the first to notice the immense possibility of such "hybridization". He, however, avoided the most obvious of Tutuola's pitfalls namely his "unacceptable" English. In his first novel—*Things Fall Apart* published in 1958, six years after the publications of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*—Achebe replaced Tutuola's crooked English sentence structure by simple, crisp, short but correct structures and Yoruba folk material by his own Ibo myths and fables, customs and rituals, superstitions and sayings. The result has been there for everyone to see. Hailed as a modern classic, *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into scores of modern major languages of the world—and some minor ones too—and has sold more copies than any other modern novel. On the continent, it replaced Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as an almost compulsory school text. However, it was not only in matters of language and style that Achebe had differed from Tutuola. If it were so, Achebe would be a poor pupil and not the trend setter that he became with his first novel. More significantly, Achebe had altered the political agenda with his *Things Fall Apart*. Updating his theme, Achebe had chosen the "encounter" phase of Nigerian history as the subject of his novel—an encounter between the Ibos of Umofia and the white missionaries and administrators. Universalising his theme as any great writer does, Achebe presented this encounter as an encounter between Africa and...
Europe, between two different races and above all between two different ways of life. Through his sociological details—and there is no dearth of them including the copious use of Ibo proverbs and for which Achebe was accused of being an ancestor-worshipper and a supporter of the raffia skirt culture—Achebe was proving the political point that Africans were no “yesterday people” and that African history was not, to borrow his own words, “one long night of savagery.” However, Achebe, unlike Tutuola, was not prepared to present the African past uncritically. Okonkwo and the Umuofian people with their obstinacy and a rigid way of life as their besetting flaw are as much responsible for the tragic going under of their society as are the white colonizers with their superior technology. As stated above, Achebe’s reference to his past did not go down well with a number of his critics, particularly the European ones. Apparently, some of them could see through Achebe’s clever use of invocation of his past to subserve his present political ends. They had, for instance, not objected to Tutuola’s invocation of the Yoruba past.

3.6.2 Early Writings of Ngugi wa Thiong’o

It is by foregrounding the colonization of Africa on the agenda of African fiction writing that Achebe became the trend-setter and many novelists across the continent began to write similar novels. So significant had been his influence that six years later when Ngugi wa Thiong’o was writing his first novel—The River Between—on the eve of Kenyan Uhuru he modelled it on Things Fall Apart. Ngugi’s portrayal of the “encounter” between the Gikuyu and the white missionaries has been considered to be so exact a parallel to Achebe’s depiction of the encounter between the Ibo and the whites that some critics have considered The River Between stepping out of the very pages of Things Fall Apart. This, however, is an exaggeration because Ngugi’s novel, drawing as it does, its inspiration from Achebe’s novel, is very different from Things Fall Apart in more than one ways. The hero of The River Between—Waiaiki—unlike Okonkwo is a child of two worlds: he is the son of a traditional Gikuyu religious leader and a mando mugo but is educated at a mission-run school. The white missionaries have not only already arrived in Makuyu-Kameni region but have already entrenched themselves by winning themselves a few converts like Joshua. The “encounter” has already developed into a full-fledged “conflict”—the immediate provocation being the custom of female circumcision which is condemned by the white missionaries as “savage” and “barbaric”. Ngugi, in fact, deliberately chose this custom of circumcising the girl-child as the basis of the conflict since it had its roots in Kenya’s recent history. Female circumcision had been a major point of conflict between the various Kenyan tribes and the British colonial administration. It had led to drastic divide—the setting up of Independent schools and even Independent churches by the Kenyans—thereby radicalizing their struggle for political independence in order to save their cultural independence. It was something which, as we have mentioned earlier, had been on the original political agenda of African writers since the early fifties. Ngugi’s theme, therefore, is not only more complex that that of Achebe’s but it also lays more stress on the conflict aspect of the encounter by mixing myth with reality, Lord Gikuyu with Jomo Kenyatta. And again, Ngugi is more radical in expressing his views about the havoc wrought by colonialism than the mild-mannered Achebe. But perhaps it was the model of colonialism in East Africa which was responsible for stronger political overtones of East African writers. East Africa, unlike its western counterpart, had to contend with the additional menace of “settlers” which made their freedom struggle much more complicated and difficult. Freedom struggles in neither Ghana nor in Nigeria had to go through as violent and bloody a phase as the so-called Mau Mau struggle in Kenya between 1952 and 1957. The greater intensity of the political struggle had, of course, brought rich dividends for Kenyan writers of fiction. A number of Kenyan novelists—Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Meja Mwangi or Godwin Wachira, for instance—built their central works around the theme of Mau Mau.
3.6.3 South Africa—Racial Clash as Fiction: Paton, La Guma, Gordimer

Whether it is *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o or *Carcase for Hounds* (1974) and *Taste of Death* (1975) both by Meja Mwangi or *Ordeal in the Forest* (1967) by Godwin Wachira, the emphasis is on “protest”—something which East African fiction of the sixties shares more with South African fiction rather than with West African writings. Protest as the major theme of their writings was included from the very beginning of their careers, by major South African writers whether white or black or coloured or even by those of Indian origin. This was primarily due to the policy of apartheid—separate development—pursued by successive racist South African governments since 1948. We shall not go into the implications of this policy for the people of South Africa here since these are too well-known. However, what we would certainly like to comment upon is its implications for writers in South Africa, particularly the novelists. The policy of Apartheid by keeping various communities apart on the basis of pigmentation and enforcing it ruthlessly through scores of draconian laws had insulated South African writers from one another’s world and had forced them to write in a “fractured society” about a “fractured society.” As Nadine Gordimer who by being both white and a woman represents a minority within a minority, put it—

> Living in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalized as South Africa’s has been under the colour bar, the writer’s potential has unscaleable limitations. (*Literature and Society in South Africa, p. 161*)

Alex La Guma, who as per South African labellings was a coloured writer, observed that—

> The problem is living in one set of compartments and knowing only of your own life, and then trying to inject yourself into the life of the environment of another part, another party. (*Literature and Society in South Africa, p. 161*)

The result is that early writings of Alan Paton—*Cry the Beloved Country*, for instance—and Nadine Gordimer’s—*Burger’s Daughter* or the short stories, for instance—get labelled as white writings, whereas those of Peter Abrahams—*Mine Boy*, or *Tell Freedom*, for instance—and those of Alex La Guma—*A Walk in the Night* and *A Threepfold Cord*, for instance—belong to the coloured constituency.

As observed above, the basic political agenda of these novels was “protest.” However, the manner of protest by each one of them was her or his own, governed by her or his welt anschauung which in turn depended on which side of the colour bar you actually were.

3.6.4 Corruption as a Major Theme of Post-Independence African Fiction

As the sixties neared, African hopes soared. Uhuru was in the air. Ghana got its independence in 1957 and Nigeria in 1960. The process of the decolonization of Africa had begun in a big way. As the people celebrated and waited with bated breath for the fulfilment of their dreams, it appeared that the committed African novelists, particularly of the protest and conflict variety would have to hang their spikes or at least change their tune if not the song. But as colonialists who had gone out of the front door sneaked in from the back door, and as bourgeoisie that had come to power in most newly independent countries of Africa changed to its true comprador character, as imperialism made inroads into Africa through various aid and trade agreements, democratic set ups in a large number of African countries, fragile as they were as yet, were threatened. As coup after coup took place in various countries, as military juntas tightened their grips over reins of political power, as unemployment figures soared and as corruption riled rampant in these countries, as people’s hopes
sank lower than their economic status, and as their dreams of an egalitarian society soured, the African writer was forced once again to wage yet another political battle—this time against the ruling cliques of his own fellow countrymen. Novelist after novelist made corruption, coups and cliques as the themes of their books. The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born by renowned Ghanaian writer A.K. Armah, is perhaps one of the most powerful portrayals of such situations. Achebe’s A Man of the People, Meja Mwangi’s Going Down River Road, and Kill Me Quick. Mwangi Ruheni’s What a Life, Sembene Ousmane’s Xala and Petals of Blood by Ngugi wa Thiong’o are all novels written about the theme of corruption in various African nations.

Petals of Blood by Ngugi wa Thiong’o is quite different from the other novels not only in terms of his more radical and more openly pronounced views about the neo-colonialist regime of Kenya, but also in providing greater space to women and their problems. Wanja is as much the principal character of the novel as her male counterparts, Munira, Abdulla and Karega. In fact, she is one of the personas through which the author expresses his views about the neo-colonial phase of African governance. Not only Ngugi but a large number of other authors also came to focus on the problems of women, those doubly-disadvantaged victims of colonialism who were exploited first as black Africans and second for being women. Ngugi, Ekwensi, Ousmane, and Oculi have all made the problems of women in post-independence Africa, particularly their sexual exploitations, the bases of their novels.

3.6.5 The Emergence of the Political Novel in Africa—Ngugi’s Devil on the Cross

Finally, as neo-colonialism tightened its grip on Africa in the seventies and the eighties, as unpopular collaborationist regimes and military juntas failing to solve the basic problems of food, shelter and clothing of the masses, let loose more repression, as famine, hunger and civil war stalked the continent, the novelists further fine-tuned their songs. Novel and novelists both became politically more radical. In his Devil on the Cross, for instance, Ngugi builds the story around the worsening living conditions of ordinary Kenyans and blends it with generous use of technical terms of political analysis based on class. Written in the form of a political fable, it indict the ruling comprador bourgeoisie through a satire that is, at times, as scathing as Swift’s in A Modest Proposal. But the most significant feature—political—about Devil on the Cross was its original publication in Gikuyu, Ngugi’s mother tongue. Ngugi had earlier decided to give up the use of English for his creative writing and the reasons he had cited were political. Continued use of English in free Kenya, he had said symbolized the colonized mind and had also alienated him from the Kenyan masses with whom he needed to interact in order to reach his political message to them. He, of course, drew a lot of flak for this decision of his, particularly from his fellow novelists. Nurudin Farah, for instance, criticized him very bitterly for becoming a “backwater fish”. Even Chinua Achebe had reservations about this decision of his. However, the way his maiden attempt at novel writing in Gikuyu has been received has vindicated the political correctness of Ngugi’s decision. Very often, groups of people pooled money together to pay for the beer of a professional reader to listen to excerpts from Devil on the Cross in restaurants and beer-bars. Publication of novels like My Son’s Story by Nadine Gordimer, Mattgari by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Patriots by Sousa Jamba, an Angolan writing originally in English and copious references made to various political movements and real episodes in these novels shows that literature still continues to be closely aligned to politics in Africa. And it has not always been an alliance on behalf of the people as is the case with Sousa Jamba’s Patriots where the author is clearly on the side of the UNITA, considering it to be a more democratic front. However, by the time the novel was published, events in Angola had proved his partisan stand to be wrong.

This relationship between literature and politics has, however, not been a one-sided affair. It is not only politics as fiction—not always. It has also been the other way round—at least sometimes. How else does one explain the convulsions of a fictional
coup—in *A Man of the People*—leading to a real one or a fictional hero—Matigari in *Matigari*—scaring an oppressive regime so much as to invite an arrest warrant against himself. In Africa, it is not only novelists who have led the politics of their respective countries as was the case with Abubaker Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria but it is also the novel itself which had led politics sometimes—literally—as was the case with both *A Man of the People* and *Matigari*.

### 3.6.6 Fiction by African Women

The most powerful political statements about women have, however, been made by women novelists themselves. More and more women in Africa have been taking to writing—novel writing in particular—and we do know that the very act of writing is a political act for women. Grace Ogot from Kenya in her *The Promised Land*, Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria in her *The Joys of Motherhood, Destination Biafra* and *Second Class Citizen*, Flora Nwapa from Nigeria in her *Women are Different*, Rebecca Njau from Kenya in her *Ripples in the Pool*, Mariama Ba from Senegal in her *Scarlet Song*, Bessie Head from South Africa in her *Maru* and *The Collector of Treasures*, Farida Karodia also from South Africa in her *Coming Home* and Nadine Gordimer in her novel *My Son’s Story* and numerous short stories—have all made women a significant part of the political agenda of African novelists. But it would be unfair to the women novelists from Africa if we attempted to state that their themes are restricted to the problems of women alone, for they have not only raised other problems confronting the African people at large but have been focusing on women only in the overall context of colonialism and its aftermath namely neo-colonialism in Africa.

### 3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have learnt about the development of the novel in Africa. Beginning with the pre-colonial tradition of oral narratives, the novel in Africa developed as a hybrid under the influence of western novel writing and the Bible, both of which were introduced on the African soil after the continent’s encounter with Europe. The African novel, from the very beginning, had overt socio-political goals, namely, of countering the western propaganda that African societies were primitive, savage, devoid of any cultural and historical developments. Therefore, the novel in Africa—together with other genres of writing—played a crucial role in decolonizing the minds of Africans. Contemporary novel writing in Africa is highlighting the socio-political problems faced by the people of many post-colonial nations in Africa.

### 3.8 QUESTIONS

1. What was the nature of oral narratives in Africa? Discuss.

2. Discuss in details the circumstances leading to the transplantation on the African soil of the genre of western novel.

3. What were the major influences on the African novel in its initial phase of development?

4. Why did Achebe choose “encounter with Europe” as the theme of his first novel—*Things Fall Apart*?

5. How and under what circumstances did Ngugi wa Thiong’o shift the themes of his books from that of “encounter” to “conflict”? 

Modern Novel in Africa

7. Why do recent developments in African fiction show a trend towards writing a more radical political novel?

3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


