

Complicity and Responsibility in Contemporary African Writing: The Postcolony Revisited by Minna Johanna Niemi

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If complicity, unlike collusion, which is always intentional, is understood to mean participating, knowingly or unknowingly, in a system that is unethical, then we live in an age of complicity. From the carbon footprint of the high-flying transnational elite to the refugee in the camp getting water in a plastic bottle from a relief organisation, we are all, in one way or another, complicit in structures that threaten human or non-human existence. This is the complex topic examined by Minna Johanna Niemi, using African literature as a case study. Niemi considers, more specifically, selected novels and essays from West Africa, and Southern and Eastern Africa. Implicitly determined by the genres studied, and consciously problematising the collective complicities thrown into relief by Marxist analyses, Niemi focuses on the crucible in which the individual is tested in the intersections of threats to existence historically at play in Africa—colonialism and slavery; settler colonialism, neocolonialism and institutionalised racism; toxic nationalism and patriarchy. Given the unique ways in which Africa has been caught up in multiple systems of oppression, virtually all of its serious literature presents, in one way or another, some form of complicity. Against this wide canvas, Niemi has concentrated on issues of complicity created by the representation of characters living in an undemocratic state.

Niemi's book directs attention to eight literary case studies showing complicity. The reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* focuses on the unnamed main character who is seen successfully to negotiate a path out of complicity with the corrupt, consumerist, increasingly totalitarian state, managing to avoid a withdrawal into solipsistic isolation. In the figure of the magistrate in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, we see the inner questioning of the protagonist complicate



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the distinction between the good man and the good citizen in the distorted mirror of the apartheid state created in the novel. The magistrate's self-accusation in this context slides from inner dialogue into the confessional mode since he recognises the impossibility of escaping complicity with the terrifying authority he both represents and tries to ameliorate. Coetzee is considered again in the next chapter, but here the focus is on his essays. Coetzee's meditation on the complicity of the writer living in a totalitarian state is contrasted with fellow South African, André Brink's essays and fictional practice. Niemi suggests that most of Coetzee's contemporaries, including Brink, identified in an unreflecting way with the literary resistance movement, which upheld an uncomplicated dichotomy between the morally tainted state and the morally pure writer. By contrast, Coetzee opens up the grey area of the unavoidable "implicatedness" of resistance in structures of apartheid authority. In the debate between Coetzee and Brink, Coetzee's position, which foregrounds inescapable complicities, is endorsed. Niemi suggests that: "From this perspective, authors who think they can wash their hands of the dilemma are deceived. Creating autonomous art—an ideal Coetzee has embraced in his own aesthetic project—is not apolitical, but more profoundly political" (82). In the next chapter, Armah is considered again, but this time his novel *Fragments* is compared with Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The hero, Baako, in *Fragments* is paralleled with the "shadow" protagonist, Nyasha, in *Nervous Conditions*. These characters represent the conscious and unwilling complicity of the culturally alienated, economically privileged intellectual with structures of colonial and corrupted national power. Combined with societal and family pressures, conscientious individuals are shown in these novels to succumb to mental illness. The figures inhabiting the texts considered up to this point are all unwilling accomplices who in some way take responsibility (the second key term of the monograph) for their implication in the unethical. In the second half of the book, Niemi studies characters in novels who are knowingly complicit in structures of oppression. She again looks at *Nervous Conditions*, but this time from the perspective of the main character, Tambu, and then extends the analysis to the other novels in the trilogy, *The Book of Not*, and *This Mournable Body*, with attention falling predominantly on the novel that closes the trilogy. Niemi tracks Tambu's mounting complicity with neoliberal ideology through the trilogy until in *This Mournable Body* "care for herself as an economic agent" (128) is her prime motivation. In the chapters on Michiel Heyns's *The Children's Day* and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, Niemi debunks the assumption of the innocence of children to show how children knowingly and with tragic outcome collude with destructive apartheid masculinities in the South African setting and virulent Somali nationalism in the Somali context. Niemi closes the study with a consideration of the complicity of disavowal of a Western readership when reading about poverty, violence and political instability in African novels. Postcolonial malaise is read as endemic to Africa rather than significantly created by the history of Western colonialism and imperialism in Africa.

Niemi, in writing the monograph, is consciously reflective of her own potential theoretical complicity. It is mainly European intellectuals, apart from Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, who are the interlocutors of these African texts. Niemi engages most

prominently Hannah Arendt, but also Jean-Paul Sartre, Theodor Adorno, Melanie Klein, and others. However, the author makes a point of highlighting the complicity of these thinkers, in some cases, with the dominant racist political culture of their times. She also reverses the concept of the theoretical paradigm, allowing the African literary texts to interrogate and modify the European theoretical apparatus she employs. One wonders, however, what an *endogenous* reading of complicity in these novels might look like. Following Beninese philosopher Paulin Houtondji's elaboration, an endogenous stance acknowledges indigeneity in its constant *renewal* in local environments, rather than assumptions about the stasis of tradition. What unanticipated light might be revealed on questions of complicity and responsibility in the tyrannical postcolony if one undertook the labour of disclosing its endogenous ethics and theory? In closing, a brief observation about the title, *Complicity and Responsibility in Contemporary African Writing*. The texts studied go back to 1968. More than fifty years on, I am not sure they all still are "contemporary."