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To cite this article: Matthew Taunton (2024) “Their ideas are imprisoned in action”: reflections on *The African Novel of Ideas*, *Safundi*, 25:1-2, 31-36, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2023.2272987](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2023.2272987)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2023.2272987>



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Published online: 16 Nov 2023.



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## “Their ideas are imprisoned in action”: reflections on *The African Novel of Ideas*

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 September 2023; Accepted 7 October 2023

I read *The African Novel of Ideas* not as an Africanist, but as someone interested in the novel of ideas as a form, who has worked predominantly on British literature and culture. Jackson’s arguments have helped to inform a forthcoming book called *The British Novel of Ideas: George Eliot to Zadie Smith*, which I am co-editing with Rachel Potter, and which tries to recover the form from the critical obloquy under which it has long labored. Jackson’s book is (surprisingly, perhaps) one of only a handful of serious scholarly works that have attempted a positive definition the novel of ideas: in the novelistic traditions and the reception contexts I know best, the category has usually been invoked to dismiss novels that seem excessively discursive or didactic. “At times [Ian McEwan’s] novels can feel more like essays pinned on to a fictional character’s thought,” wrote Ian Patterson in a memorable panning of *Machines Like Me* (2019) in the *London Review of Books*.<sup>1</sup> Such statements interest me not because I particularly want to wade into a debate about the merits of McEwan’s fiction, but because of the (widely accepted) protocols of literary value they imply. There is an institutionalized tendency to value fiction that prioritizes experience, psychological depth, and personal relations, over knowledge, understanding, debate, or philosophical argumentation. Jackson writes: “the phenomenon of seeing “experience” as the novel’s main currency is so widespread, and so multivalent, that I am not prepared to make a grand case for its causality” (22).

Foolhardy though we may be, Rachel Potter and I do, in the introduction to our book, attempt to sketch something of a genealogy for this critical judgment, and the rejection of the novel of ideas that goes along with it, focusing on a key point of origin in Anglo-American literary modernism. T.S. Eliot praised Henry James for having “a mind so fine no idea could violate it.”<sup>2</sup> James himself, defining his own practice against that of that great novelist of ideas, George Eliot, promised to produce

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<sup>1</sup>Patterson, “Sexy Robots,” n.p.

<sup>2</sup>Eliot, “In Memory,” 44.

‘exemplary works of art’ that would have “less “brain” than *Middlemarch*” but “more form.”<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf complained that Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells had turned the novel into a vehicle for making didactic sociological and political arguments. J.M. Coetzee wrote in *Elizabeth Costello* that novelistic realism is “premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things”.<sup>4</sup> And Sianne Ngai is only the latest in a long line of critics to associate the novel of ideas with aesthetic failure, bemoaning the tendency to stuff undigested essays into the mouths of sketchily drawn characters, and complaining that novels of ideas give dramatic dialogue precedence over narration and summary. The insertion of the “readymade” idea into the text is a “gimmick”. The novel of ideas relies on “ancient didactic devices” such as “[a]llegory, direct speech by narrators, and direct speech by characters” which “distance the novel from its métier—narration—and systematically push its form closer to those of the essay, lecture, or play.”<sup>5</sup>

In their pursuit of formal perfection, such critiques sideline a lot of messy, socially conscious, didactic, ramblingly discursive, and downright odd novels (like the “fluid puddings” of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, as James disparagingly termed them).<sup>6</sup> Some of the best novels are fluid puddings but our critical frameworks are designed for the exaltation of *petits fours*. “[T]o attempt a novel of ideas is to give oneself a handicap: the parochialism of our culture is intense,” wrote Doris Lessing, in her reflections on the British reception of *The Golden Notebook* (1963).<sup>7</sup> *The African Novel of Ideas* shows how, when a parochial outlook becomes the guiding aesthetic language of a “world literature,” it compounds certain patronizing attitudes toward African writing, which has too often been read as a repository of oral folk tales and authentic expressions of ethnocultural identity.

Jackson provides us with a fresh impetus to read and to reevaluate the many fascinating works of African literature that don’t fit that template, with the work of J. E. Casely-Hayford being a case in point. His *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) is “a syncretic mix of philosophical treatise, fictional vignettes, political manifesto, and autobiographical history” (50). Jackson, as I read her, is not making a claim for the value of this novel *in spite of* its promiscuous generic hybridity—its didacticism, essayism and discursivity—but *because of* this. To ask “[w]hat of understanding ... —as distinct from feeling, observing, or even agitating—as a mainstay of literary ambition?” (14) is to disrupt long-held assumptions about what makes good fiction. That Jackson’s provocation should, if its logic were extended, enable more receptive critical readings of works by the likes of H.G. Wells, G.K. Chesterton, Rose Macaulay, Iris Murdoch and Ian McEwan (to take only the British case covered by our forthcoming book) is an unexpected side effect of her argument, and it suggests that this argument will not always work in an anti-colonial or even a progressive direction. Indeed, picked up in different social and political contexts, its effects might turn out to be unpredictably heterogeneous.

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<sup>3</sup>James, “Review,” 359.

<sup>4</sup>Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 9.

<sup>5</sup>Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 106.

<sup>6</sup>James, *Letter to Hugh Walpole*, 237.

<sup>7</sup>Lessing, “Preface,” 13–14.

By positioning discursive philosophical debate as an important and valuable feature of African fiction and of African intellectual life, Jackson's book offers an alternative to the "anthropology fallacy" identified by Henry Louis Gates Jr., according to which "[a]ll African art is collective and functional."<sup>8</sup> Registering the significant presence of individualism in many of her chosen texts, Jackson critiques conceptions of "ethnophilosophy," which would locate the ideas of a people in an anthropology of their "traditional practices, proverbs, religious beliefs, and the like" (15). Here, the institutionalized attitudes of literary criticism and anthropology seem to overlap. Take E.E. Evans-Pritchard for example. Analyzing the ritual practices of the Azande people of Southern Sudan in his most famous study, he wrote that "their ideas are imprisoned in action and cannot be cited to explain or justify action."<sup>9</sup> He might have been a literary critic praising a perfectly realized Henry James novel. Finally, *here* are some people who don't walk around with essays pinned to their thoughts! Whose ideas are fully integrated into embodied practices and actions! No gimmicks here!

Mid-century anthropologists celebrated "oral" societies in similar terms. In a sense, what Evans-Pritchard saw and admired in the tribe (as he called it) was a social totality united along ethnic lines, whose discursive life was complete because they could not (as it appeared to Evans-Pritchard) see it from the outside. Reflecting on why the Azande never seemed to question their oracles, even when they turned out to be wrong, Evans-Pritchard wrote:

Their blindness is not due to stupidity: they reason excellently in the idiom of their beliefs, but they cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts.<sup>10</sup>

Evans-Pritchard was serious about wanting to dispel racist myths about the "stupidity" and irrationality of the peoples he studied (even if he could never himself escape the snares of racial thinking). Zande culture *was* rational and discursive, he argued, but essentially monological in the specific sense above. It is, implicitly, the disembodied portability of the written word that encourages (or forces?) literate peoples to see their own languages, thoughts, rituals, and beliefs through the ideas of others. This in turn gives literate populations the sometimes-disconcerting feeling of having to *choose* from a smorgasbord of world views and ritual practices (Marxism and Yoga, say), rather than inheriting the features of a specific *ethnos* from their ancestors. Such are the assumptions of Evans-Pritchard's anthropology as I understand them.

Mikhail Bakhtin's references to the oral culture of the Russian peasantry make some related assumptions, though his is a stronger emphasis on the superior value of literacy as the essential source of dialogism. He wrote pityingly of an illiterate Russian peasantry "not yet able to regard one language (and the verbal world corresponding to it) through the eyes of another language."<sup>11</sup> Peasants appeared to Bakhtin as an unreflecting repository of oral tradition, superstition and ritual practice, impoverished by being trapped in a monological linguistic universe. It was literacy—

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<sup>8</sup>Gates, "Criticism in the Jungle," 5.

<sup>9</sup>Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, 32.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>11</sup>Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, 296.

of which the novel form was the highest expression—that was the antidote to this benighted condition.

Drawing on Eileen Julien's *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (1992), Jackson warns us against reproducing a simplistic binary between orality and literacy, and moreover points out “it is *really* essentialist to suggest that Africa is somehow intrinsically more disposed to oral than textual expression” (17). This is surely right. Yet, while critiquing the essentialism that provides an entirely spurious explanation for African orality, Julien also insisted that the “primarily oral character of traditional African verbal art” is “a fact,” albeit “a fact whose significance and implications are, I believe, often misrepresented.”<sup>12</sup>

As I read her, Jackson goes a little further than Julien in showing how the novel form, including in Africa, departs thoroughly from any so-called primary orality. Novels may frame and depict “oral” culture, but they tend to view it with varying degrees of detachment. Even African novels which may on first reading seem acutely anthropological in their depiction of precolonial, tribal African life—such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which Jackson treats to a brief but illuminating discussion—can be read as novels of ideas. Okonkwo, the protagonist of Achebe's novel, does not, in the main, question the codes of behavior that he lives by, even when it is incredibly hard to live by them. He rarely reasons outside “the idiom of [his] beliefs” (in Evans-Pritchard's terms) because these appear as stable features of the ethno-cultural lifeworld of the tribe (to use Achebe's term). But Jackson argues convincingly that Achebe's novel is no straightforward rear-guard defence of tribal life: it is instead a “tool” which allows Achebe to “reflect at a distance on the pitfalls of the culture whose denial he nevertheless protests” (149). In a novel such as *Things Fall Apart*, ideas that may seem encoded in patterns of behavior (“imprisoned in action”) come into conflict with ones—like those of the Christian missionaries who wreak so much destruction in Achebe's novel—that circulate, readymade as it were, in an international culture of print.

Jackson's book made me reflect that the novel form is often thinking about this precise tension. On the one hand novels (especially novels of ideas) capitalize on the disembodied portability of the written word (and even more so the printed or typed word) which enables ideas to float free of particular bodies and socio-temporal contexts, and to move, in mediated ways, around the globe. On the other hand, novels index and validate forms of thought and ideation that are fully embodied and embedded in an ethnocultural way of life: in habits, behaviors, actions and rituals. (Perhaps we ought also to allow that ideas in novels are in many cases *partly* articulated and *partly* acted out.)

While in *Things Fall Apart* this opposition maps broadly onto the confrontation between European colonists and Africans that the novel stages, we should heed the warnings of both Jackson and Julien and resist any essentialist explanation for this fact. After all, the anthropology of everyday life is an endemic feature the European novel. Balzac's ‘études des mœurs’ (for example) self-consciously styled themselves as quasi-scientific studies of characters seen as socio-biological types whose ideas were

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<sup>12</sup>Julien, *African Novels*, 7.

to be found embodied in their habits and manners (as well as in the essays that Balzac does occasionally pin to their thoughts). As noted above, to counter the equation of Africanity with orality, Jackson's book foregrounds African fiction that freely deploys readymade, discursive and essayistic ideas. It is true that when Casely-Hayford published *Ethiopia Unbound* in 1911, the majority of Africans could not read it. But those who could and did were confronted with a novel that ignored formalist strictures and eschewed an "ethnophilosophy" of tribal culture, in order to stage philosophical and political debates in the best tradition of the novel of ideas. "Speech and writing are both modes of language, and both modes are ours when we have the means to produce them," wrote Julien, wisely.<sup>13</sup>

The novel of ideas, because of its use of the readymade idea, circulating in print and often far from the context of its origins, may seem the literary form that is furthest of all from the anthropological conception of culture and its emphasis on embodied habits and routines. Perhaps, though, some of its power comes from the way it investigates the conflicts and congruences that exist between ideas that are fully externalized discursively, and those that are embedded, embodied, or imprisoned in action.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

**Matthew Taunton** is an Associate Professor in Literature at the University of East Anglia. His books include *Red Britain: The Russian Revolution in Mid-Century Culture* (2019) and *A History of 1930s British Literature* (2019, co-edited with Benjamin Kohlmann). He is currently writing a book called *The Collective Voice* and editing (with Rachel Potter) *The British Novel of Ideas: George Eliot to Zadie Smith*. He is senior deputy editor of *Critical Quarterly*.

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<sup>13</sup>Julien, *African Novels*, 24.

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