

BOOK REVIEW

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The action of *The Lucky Man Bar* is set in both Zambia and Nepal. There are also snippets of action that occur in Congo and Greece. In Zambia, the action vacillates mostly between the city of Lusaka and the small town of Kafue. The descriptive narration of the Kafue area suggests that the author is very familiar with the geography of the area in and around Kafue. A good example is the description of the physical features of the area where the drive takes place in the prologue. This is indicative of the fact that the author actually worked in the area for Sino Hydro, a Chinese construction company. Some of the similarities between the author and the narrator, as a matter of fact, invite questions regarding whether or not the novel is a palimpsest of part-fact and part-fiction.

The author also appears to be well-schooled in classical Greek literature as is suggested by the repeated allusions to Greek mythological characters and culture. For example, on page 72 Elvis is likened to “a Greek hero in an ancient Greek sculpture or painting”. On page 121 there is an allusion to one of the famous figures of Greek mythology and religion, Dionysus – the god of wine, fertility and pleasure - through the mention of a painting of the Bacchus, the Roman version of Dionysus.

The Lucky Man Bar is a reflection of African life, and Zambian life in particular, in a variety of ways. The events and characters in the novel can be related to the Zambian experience. Haiting’s characterisation techniques, in building the characters of the novel, makes it easier for a Zambian to relate to the characters and their experiences. His onomastic vision captures the types of names associated with Zambians and – in the case of Nepal – the Nepalese characters bear names reflective of Nepalese culture. It is worth noting, however, that in his onomastic choices the author settles for the name *The Lucky Man Bar* for bars in both Kafue and Nepal. This, in part, maybe attributable to the semiotic significance of the bar as a springboard for infusing narrative devices. The bar – any drinking place – is a gold mine of stories about events past, present and future, notwithstanding the debate about the reliability or non-reliability of a drunken narrator.

What makes *The Lucky Man Bar* peculiar and noteworthy is that it is the first novel written about Africa by a Chinese national using the English language. More specifically, it is the first novel written about Zambia by a Chinese national. It is therefore a book exploring Zambian culture from the perspective of the Chinese culture. It is narration through Chinese eyes from the all-pervading perspective of an omniscient narrator.

When a writer writes about a culture other than theirs, when they write about a society in a culture other than theirs – as often happens with the travel genre – one of the elements critical readers are interested in is the question of authenticity. That is to say, to what extent can the representation of the cultural eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of a particular society by an outsider be considered authentic?

It all comes down to perspective: How does the writer view the culture they write about from the perspective of the outsider especially in light of the insider-outsider dichotomy? Do they portray the other culture objectively or they merely project already existing prejudices and negative stereotypes? These portrayals might be through direct description or through indirect suggestions such as allusions which in themselves have the power to influence opinion (Chilala, 2017).

Colonial literature was characterised by the negative portraiture of Africa and Africans as fiction writers and anthropologists, as well as some missionaries, sought to demonstrate that Africa was indeed a “dark continent” in need of the light of western civilisation and culture. Boehme (1995: 2), describes colonial literature as “literature reflecting a colonial ethos”. Some colonial literature not only portrays Africa and Africans negatively but also glorifies and justifies what Brown (1995: 58) refers to as the “deculturating practices of imperialism”.

In his seminal work *Home and Exile* (2003) Achebe notes that some of the works that fall in the category of books that stereotype Africa and Africans are Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1988) and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1962). He refers to this genre as “sensational writing about Africa and Africans” (2003). Although not falling into the category of colonial literature, Shiva Naipaul’s 1978 book *North of South: An African Journey* has been criticised as a catalogue of racist views about Africa and Africans. The book is a narration of Naipaul’s experiences while travelling, in the 1970’s, through some African countries: Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia.

Despite their negative portrayal of Africa, these works were perceived as great novels from the perspective of European readers and critics, with the Time Magazine of 20th October 1952 describing *Mister Johnson* as “the best novel ever written about Africa” (Achebe, 2003, p22). However, African readers were not amused, not least Achebe, who writes in *Home and Exile* (2003, p23-4): “My problem with Joyce Cary’s book was not only his infuriating principal character, Johnson. More importantly, there is a certain undertow of uncharitableness just below the surface on which his narrative moves and from where, at the slightest chance, a contagion of distaste, hatred and mockery breaks through to poison his tale.” Achebe (2003) adds that Cary “has a very strong aversion to the people he is presenting to us” as well as “to the towns and villages where these people live, where the action of his novel takes place”.

Reading Haiting’s *The Lucky Man Bar*, however, one does not see any indications of a prejudiced portrayal of the indigenous Zambian people by the narrator or the writer. Haiting simply tells the story of the experiences of a Chinese man in Zambia and Nepal. This is an important and impressive characteristic of the novel, not least because it is not easy to write about another culture through one’s cultural lenses as a traveller or sojourner.

Thematically, *The Lucky Man Bar* handles a number of pertinent subjects though the central theme is love. Many novels deal with the theme of love. However few, if any, deal with the theme in such a comprehensive manner as *The Lucky Man Bar* does.

Love is the main theme of the novel but it deals with it in its various manifestations, both “genuine love” and “pseudo-love”. The novel exhibits narratives of flirtation, infatuation, sexual affairs, obsession, promiscuity, and romance among others.

The stand-out case of infatuation and obsession is that of Urkha the main character towards Elena. On page 63, for instance, after meeting Elena, Urkha conducts a search on Facebook with the intention of locating her Facebook page. When he does, he analyses every post and the attendant comments. When he sees a post of a charcoal sketch portrait of Elvis, one of his workers, he feels a flash of jealousy; in fact, he is envious of Elvis. It would appear he wishes he were the one in Elvis’ “privileged” position. Elena’s tragic ending – acquiring HIV and committing suicide – greatly affects Urkha.

Urkha’s obsession takes him a step further: he selects one of Elena’s single photos, colour-prints it and uses a binder clip to clamp it on the screen of his partition desk. However, this is not the only time that Urkha browses through Elena’s Facebook page. Urkha’s obsession comes to the fore in a poignant manner when, as we are told on page 122, he sees Elena’s face in a glass of rum he is taking. On page 78 he admits liking her “in a sexual kind of way”. His is a lustful obsession, a distorted form of love.

Another thematic thread related to distorted love is that of promiscuity. Elvis is a womaniser, but so was his father Oliver who had been a truck driver. Generally, the drivers in the novel are associated with promiscuity and having multiple sexual partners is considered “normal”.

The theme of death is evident and pervasive enough to be classified as a motif. It is almost as if the narrator has an obsession with death. The theme of death permeates the pages through dreams and in a physical sense. For example, the death of Elena and Augustine’s demise. In fact, the novel’s prologue starts with Urkha’s dream about the death of his driver, McQueen. In the dream, he asks McQueen, “Are you afraid of death?” In response, McQueen says, “Everyone is afraid of death...”

The author’s notable preoccupation with the theme of death is akin to modernist and postmodernist writing whose preoccupation with death is largely reflected in the famous Latin phrase, “*Timor mortis conturbat mei*” which translates to, “The fear of death overwhelms me.” The preoccupation with death and the fear associated with it is reminiscent of the writings of such authors as Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway and Don DeLillo particularly in his seminal 1985 novel *White Noise*. Another predominant theme of *The Lucky Man Bar* is with respect to Zambia is unemployment. The recruitment office in Kafue is epitomic of the challenge of unemployment, which many Zambians of all ages face, particularly young people. The office is characterised by never-ending long lines of people looking for employment, most of them ready for any type of job as long as it earns them an income; most of them walking away without getting a job.

Stylistically, *The Lucky Man Bar* employs a simple, flowing style of narration. Additionally, it resorts to literary devices such as the epistolary narrative technique. Repeatedly letters are used to move the narrative forward and provide additional –

but vital – information. On page 141, for instance, Urkha reads a letter written by Antony. The contents provide additional information to the backstory which helps us understand the motivation behind the behaviour of some characters.

The Lucky Man Bar is certainly not the best novel written about Africa by a non-African and has its fair share of flaws. Be that as it may, the work is a trail-blazer: first such work by a Chinese writer on Africa and on Zambia in particular. Haiting, it might be argued, takes the eminent place of way-paver to other Chinese writers. His novel, perhaps, also provides a template for non-Chinese writers with regard to how to handle the insider-outsider dichotomy, when writing about Africa or indeed any other culture other than theirs.

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