The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

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CHAPTER 8

Postcolonial Modernity

Gertrude Stein's Modernism came in part from her psychology experiments. As we have seen, discovering "automatic writing" was crucial to discovering modern ways to plumb the depths of the mind, and Stein used what she found there to innovate one of the modern novel's most difficult and abstract styles. But there were other inspirations as well – particularly the work of the Cubist painters, and above all the work of Pablo Picasso. He helped to make painting modern around 1907, when he began to paint in a strange new abstract style: in such paintings as *The Women of Avignon*, he depicted the human form not in realistic detail, but in jumbled masses of flat planes and crude shapes. What inspired him was African sculpture, which had recently become a newly influential presence in European museums. African sculpture inspired Picasso's Cubism; his Cubism inspired Stein's modern fiction; and if we follow this line of influence backwards, we see again how much the forms of the modern novel were shaped by the expansion of culture into the wider territories of the world. Or, rather, we see how a certain new feature of that expansion was responsible: as we learn in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, "Europeans were forced to realize that their culture was only one amongst a plurality of ways of conceiving of reality and organizing its representations in art and social practice."[1] The plurality of the modern novel, its questions about reality and its interest in finding new styles of representation – these were matters of aesthetic form, but first they were matters of encounter with new worlds beyond Europe and America, encounters in which westerners were finally forced to see other cultures as real alternatives.

Edward Said says much the same thing in *Culture and Imperialism*. "The formal dislocations and displacements in modernist culture . . . [are] a consequence of imperialism": things like modern irony, fragmentation, and even the hope of making fiction redemptive were consequences of challenges to western control over the world.[2] No account of the modern novel can overlook the way peripheral cultures and situations made this fundamental contribution to its forms. But the reverse is true as well. Accounts of the development of peripheral cultures – of their emergence from imperialism into independence, of their postcolonial movement from peripheries to centers of their own – do well to take into account the contributions made by the modern novel. For the forms of modern fiction have helped emerging cultures to imagine new possibilities, to rewrite the language of oppression, to give new shape to time and to space. They have played an active part in postcolonial progress, for many of the same reasons other modern writers have thought fiction might redeem the modern world.

The kind of influence African sculpture had on the writing of Gertrude Stein has since become much more direct. Since 1907, African writers have themselves modernized fiction, by shaping it to the needs of different cultures and different modern objectives. And other postcolonial writers have likewise replenished the novel's modern impulse by making it an ever more vital factor in cultural change. They have done so in large part because the forms of modern fiction (especially once those forms were replenished by postmodern energies) were already well suited to their needs. Ready for linguistic diversity, for questioning realities, for making life new, the novel promised to help in the fight for cultural success. How it did so – how the novel contributed its forms to postcolonial progress, and how it was reshaped and renewed in the process – is the subject of this chapter, which explores how postcolonial fiction has given the modern novel a role in global modernity.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrote *Jane Eyre*, we have noted, in order to rewrite the fiction of the ideal woman. But the revision had another target as well. *Jane Eyre* only briefly mentions that its "madwoman" comes from the Caribbean, from a colony of Great Britain. It could mention such a thing only in passing because it was written from within the imperial mindset; in much of English literature written from *Jane Eyre* to *Heart of Darkness*, colonial people were less than

peripheral concerns, a distant backdrop for the English stories. They often figured like *Jane Eyre*'s madwoman: as distant, mysterious, unknowable caricatures, people without substance, without identities or cultures other than those that enriched or intrigued their colonizers. When imperialism came to a crisis, this began to change, although it was still something Chinua Achebe could complain about, as he did, when writing of *Heart of Darkness*, that Conrad used "Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor . . . reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind."[3] When the empire gave way to the commonwealth, this role changed more, and writers like Achebe and Naipaul began to supply the other side of the story – to write fiction from the point of view of the mysterious periphery. And then the "commonwealth" mentality gave way to the *postcolonial*, and things changed completely. The postcolonial situation, the situation now of struggle in newly independent nations for full cultural self-determination, led to a new kind of writing, one in which writers not only wrote from the periphery, but wrote against the very ideas and attitudes that had put them there. They rewrote *Jane Eyre*, for example: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys makes the "peripheral" story central, so that people could finally see where that madwoman came from, and why – how the neglected story of colonial life was really vital to the truth.

But Rhys did not just retell the old story in the same way, with the omitted information put back in. She knew she needed a new style for the new story, or else the imperial mindset might not change. Had she just made a different story the central one, the idea that some stories are central where others are not would persist. So she developed a new form, in which no story is central, in which the story moves from person to person unannounced, so that we never feel centered in any most important point of view. This kind of innovation was typical of writers like Rhys. Those writers in the Carribean, in India, in Africa and elsewhere who had begun to describe their cultures more authentically and extensively from the inside soon came to realize that such description really required of them a whole new way of thinking about fiction. It was not enough, they found, to apply the old rules of fiction to their new identities, concerns, and subjects. Those old rules seemed to have built into them the very colonialist presumptions that had tended to exclude "commonwealth" writers in the first place. Certain presumptions about the way human selves develop, certain

western spiritual, political, and economic priorities, and even the west's fundamental habits of thought and language came to seem contrary to the things these writers needed to say. As Canadian writer Dennis Lee put it, "the language was drenched with our non-belonging."[4] And so they set about remaking the novel so that it could better express non-western beliefs, feelings, habits, and priorities.

The result is the postcolonial novel. The term refers to fiction written by people of formerly colonized cultures, in which "those people who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it . . . carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers."[5] More than that, however, it refers to a mindset, a theory, and a style – to a departure from the colonial way of thinking as well as the colonial political situation, and to a new kind of writing based upon the departure.

Postcolonial fiction is "post" in two ways. First of all, it deals with what happens to colonized peoples and places after colonialism has ended. It describes the positive and negative developments in places such as Nigeria, where the end of imperial rule meant new possibilities of cultural self-determination but also a kind of chaos – both the pleasure and thrill of freedom and the pain of developing indigenous cultural and political systems. In this sense, the postcolonial condition is a question: what will the newly independent nation become? And the fiction devoted to asking this postcolonial question works very crucially as a form of experiment, providing answers to the question in such a way as to test them.

The postcolonial condition, however, is also a mindset – a way of thinking, or, more specifically, a state of mind now free of the presumptions and attitudes and even the language that made imperialism possible, desirable, and effective. To be postcolonial means to know that the attitudes of both the colonizers and the colonized entailed wrong presumptions in many areas – about human nature, about economics, about political rule. Having rejected these presumptions, the postcolonial attitude involves an effort to replace them. Here again fiction helps: postcolonial fiction is all about designing plots whereby the old presumptions give way to newer, better, fairer ones. As the peoples of postcolonial nations and former imperialists alike try to reconceive international relations and rethink the identities of non-western life, postcolonial fiction has served as a kind of crucible. For its structures and styles have had to develop out of the old into the

new, much in the way that postcolonial societies themselves have had to try to make the shift into fully viable self-realization.

To become postcolonial, in other words, fiction has had to accomplish changes like those that have had to take place at the level of politics, government, and social planning. For it had been steeped in the cultural logic that had allowed imperialism to work: as we have seen, its plots and attitudes had tended to discourage dissent and to promote western middle-class values. But not entirely: the novel had also had styles and attitudes ready to work against imperialism, when the right moment came. The challenge fiction faced at the moment of postcolonial independence was to find a way to put its skeptical, oppositional, contrary, subversive, exploratory, and reframing tendencies to work in the service of those writers and thinkers trying to write and think a way into true cultural change.

This, then, is how the modern novel helps in the postcolonial project. It aids in the effort to go postcolonial, by rewriting the political fictions that helped to create and maintain the imperial dynamic. How exactly has this rewriting taken place? Sometimes, very literally. As we have seen in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the rewriting sometimes involves taking old books, written within the imperial aesthetic, and changing them, to tell the other side of the story. It has been a matter of "appropriation," to seize the story, "re-place it in a specific cultural location, and yet maintain the integrity of that Otherness, which historically has been employed to keep the post-colonial at the margins of power, of 'authenticity,' and even of reality itself."[6] Beyond such appropriations, there are many other postcolonial changes that have remade modern fiction. One fertile preoccupation has been the moment of independence – the event with which postcolonial nations have come into being. Many postcolonial novelists have focused their attention on the problem of any such moment, stressing the fact that no such transformation can happen right away; others have even gone as far as to question the very temporality behind the belief that it could. Always concerned with time, the modern novel could help explore the temporality of nationhood. Similarly, it was ready to help in a number of other ways: its talent for mixing languages helped explore the *hybridity* at work in cultures now necessarily part western and part indigenous; its focus on alienation helped understand the state of *exile*; its openness helped to follow the *migrant identities* forced by postcolonial unrest; its insight into the means of mimesis – how we make up

our worlds – meant insight into the *mimicry* in which colonial people often felt obliged to engage; and its stress on consciousness helped detail the alternation within the *double consciousness* created in people part of both the imperial world and the unique decolonized culture.

For our purposes, it is important to focus upon the way these postcolonial tendencies dovetail with – and then also remake – the inventive tendencies ready in the modern novel. Again, the modern novel has helped cultural decolonization with its styles of defamiliarization, of heteroglossia, of shifting temporalities, of questioning the relationship between the individual and society, of perspective, and of revealing the presumptions to authority in any act of speaking. And in the process, new life has come to its once-new forms.

We see this reciprocity at work in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi (the first name is the surname) is well known for his reflections on the problems African cultures face as they try to "decolonise the mind." Getting past colonialism, he says, means much more than just attaining political and economic self-determination. For the very *minds* of colonial peoples have been determined and structured by the languages, priorities, and habits of their oppressors. It is not as if there were some purely African mind just waiting for liberation to once again become itself; rather, the African mind has become largely a product of western intentions, and to decolonize itself it has to find ways to regain its own authentic mentality. It must engage in "an ever-continuing struggle to seize back [its] creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space." These means are mainly those of language. "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, and indeed in relation to the entire universe," and yet in the face of imperialism, "writers who should have been mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement of their continent also came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition."[7] Great attention must be paid, Ngugi says, to the forms and habits of expression that have been the footholds of oppression. These forms and habits must be rewritten and rethought – varied and revised so that they can be reshaped and stretched to cover and include both old and new African needs.

A Grain of Wheat shows this rethinking and revising getting started. The novel tells the story of various lives in Thabai, a Kenyan village,

four days before Uhuru, or independence. What should be glorious days, however, are not, as the novel's different protagonists reflect upon the terrible ways in which the events leading up to independence have embittered or ruined them. For the years before independence in Kenya saw brutality and betrayals of many kinds, as the "Emergency" declared by the British cracked down on rebel "Mau Mau" forces, and people's loyalties were tested beyond reason. When independence came, it therefore could not be the great beginning for which people had hoped; too much had been betrayed – and too much corruption seemed to continue into the future of black rule. "Life was only a constant repetition of what happened yesterday and the day before"; "the coming of black rule would not mean, could never mean the end of white power": in order to convey these ironies, and in order to convey a sense of the ironic difference between Uhuru celebrations and his protagonists' regrets and resentments, Ngugi plays with the presentation of *time*. The modern novel's gift for temporal disorder becomes, in this postcolonial novel, a way to stress the vast, tragic difference between past dreams and present realities – between hopes for the future and the past truths that undermine them. The temporal shocks help to "decolonise the mind." They undo the smooth sequences that might make a reader presume easy progress from past oppression into the independent present; they stress the illogicalities and breaks that make past and present fit poorly, and in so doing they shake readers out of the bad logic through which some would have wanted to make independence sound easy.

We get another angle on the effort to shake the mind of imperialist ways of thinking in the work of white South African novelist Nadine Gordimer. In *July's People* (1981), she imagines a disastrous future for South Africa, in which the rebellion against the apartheid regime has become an all-out war. The members of a prosperous white family have to flee their home, and they find shelter and protection in the remote village of the man who has been their faithful household servant for years. Living now under his protection, and ultimately subject to him, the white people have to change the way they think about him:

> The decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them in two sets of uniforms, khaki pants for rough housework, white drill for waiting at table, given Wednesdays

> and alternate Sundays free . . . he turned out to be the chosen one in whose hands their lives were to be held; frog prince, saviour, July.

Now in his hands, they have to see him, finally, as a complete and even superior human being, rather than as the two-dimensional black underling he had been for them before. And this does not just mean getting to know the real man: it means facing hard cultural differences, and realizing how much their happy lives had depended upon wrong power relationships and unwarranted privileges.

Taking us through this process of postcolonial awakening, Gordimer dramatizes the difficulty and the necessity of retraining the mind and removing from it the bad presumptions that have enabled racial injustice. Toward this end, she makes use of certain techniques long available in the modern novel, and suits them to new purposes. Psychological fragmentation, rendered in disjunctive phrases and paragraphs, reflects the trouble her characters have in piecing together their past of privilege with their present disempowerment. And she lays very effective stress on the subjective meaning of objects: that characteristic complication, present since the days of Joyce and Woolf, here helps Gordimer to show how the real meaning of such things as cars, keys, clothes, and even toilet paper really depends upon the personal contexts in which we use them. Once those contexts change – as they do for Gordimer's white family in the black village – then such objects change as well and must be redescribed. Though fictional, this redescription is in fact essential to a political process in which "whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures," changing the "hierarchy of perception" that endorsed the bad political hierarchy of the past.[8]

These novels by Gordimer and Ngugi emphasize how the methods of modern fiction have helped postcolonial progress. If such things as psychological fragmentation and revealing the subjective "hierarchy" of objects show how minds might go postcolonial, then it becomes clear that fiction's techniques for rediscovery can recreate political consciousness. But we must see this the other way around as well: the need to decolonize the mind renewed the modern impulse in fiction, by giving it a new, crucial reason for being.

All this comes together – indeed, all of postmodernism, too – in what may be the most important work of postcolonial fiction: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Here, the moment of India's

independence in 1947 becomes the focal point of a massive allegorical treatment of Indian history. The novel's protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is born at the very moment of Indian independence, and this makes him stand for India – for better and for worse:

> I was born in the city of Bombay . . . once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more . . . On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world . . . I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.

Saleem's life story becomes the story of his nation. But the result is deliberately absurd. Once it becomes a real human story, the "birth of independent India" proves itself to be impossible; it becomes a sort of postmodern joke, in which failure, fragmentation, and magical disasters dominate. The joke of "independence" becomes, for Rushdie's novel, inspiration for rampant postmodern excess, parody, and play. This in turn becomes the basis for a whole new way of thinking, not only about modern political realities, but about the nature of the way we make fictions about emerging worlds.

Because Saleem is born at the moment in which India becomes an independent nation, people come to see him as representative of the hopes for India's future. Rushdie then makes him a way to explore the nature of those hopes. Saleem takes on all the features people might have liked the new India to have; he is strangely responsible for all kinds of major events; and his body eventually suffers for all of India. Like postcolonial India itself, his body begins to fragment – to break apart, just as India divided into two nations and then fragmented further into cultures that after all could not hold together: "Please believe me that I am falling apart . . . I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug – that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history . . . has started coming apart at the seams." And like postcolonial India Saleem becomes subject to new political tyrannies and economic disasters. This fabulous connection between the individual character's story creates a marvelous new way

to make the novel's traditional connection between the individual and society. Typically, novels question this relationship – and perhaps ultimately find ways for even the most rebellious individual to fit in. *Midnight's Children* forces a total fit, and in so doing questions the possibility that the social whole can be an adequate context for truly individual lives.

But what makes *Midnight's Children* most important to the development of the modern novel is the way it combines the political agenda of postcolonialism with the styles of postmodernism. The key point of connection here is metafiction. Saleem is not just a character in the novel. He is the novel's narrator – or, more accurately, its author: he is trying to piece together the story of his life, which is also the story of India. The harder it gets, the more we learn both about the difficulties of telling a whole story and about the difficulties of encompassing modern India or imagining its independence. Saleem is racing against time. His body, like the nation of India, is falling apart, and it seems as if his survival and the survival of the country depend on his power to put it all into a narrative. So we learn about the constructive powers of storytelling; we learn about its relationship to the existence of selfhood and of nationhood; and we learn, also, about the points at which storytelling in the modern novel must fail to be adequate to postcolonial needs. In other words, things work both ways: metafiction in *Midnight's Children* is all about the political fictions of postcolonial independence – their power, their tricks, their failures; and India itself is, in turn, all about fiction – what its status as an independent nation does to the way people imagine themselves, their worlds, and the connections between them.

Since the publication of *Midnight's Children*, postcolonial modernity has continued to modernize the novel – making it a better vehicle through which to diversify and expand cultural consciousness. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1994) is a surprising example of how the novel has developed to meet new needs. Here we have another very symbolic character: the novel's protagonist is an abiku child, the kind of child who, according to Nigerian folklore, really belongs to the spirit world, and, in trying always to return there, brings sadness to the families into which it gets perpetually born:

> In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms . . . The happier we were, the closer was our

> birth. As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as abiku, spirit-children. Not all people recognised us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life.

But in *The Famished Road*, the abiku decides to do what he can to remain in the world of the living. And yet the spirit world does what it can to tempt him back. Right away, as a result of this plot dynamic, we get a new mode for the modern novel: realism gets lost to a degree that is rare for a novel, as the abiku spends so much of his time swept up in spiritual visions and wandering along the spirit road. We see what Nigerian folk-culture might do for the western form of the novel. The novel's materialism – resisted throughout the twentieth century, but always likely to return in unexpected and powerful ways – gets completely undone by the abiku's utter detachment. What's more, this materialism gets re-evaluated. A spiritual essence, the abiku longs for the material world, and so we see it differently. We see it not as the hindrance or cheapening thing other modern novels have made it out to be, but as an understandable limitation of human life, something indeed tragic but not beyond redemption.

The great significance of the abiku's spirituality does not really become clear until the end of *The Famished Road*. Then, we finally see what his struggles have been trying to tell us. He symbolizes independent Nigeria's struggles to be born. Just as the abiku departs again and again out of the real world back into unreality, so do possibilities for Nigerian emergence into the real worlds of modernity:

> The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child.

But this connection is not quite what it would seem. Okri does not see this as a failure. For it is not really a negative thing that Nigeria should fail to enter into the world of modernity, if the failure is really a matter of staying in the world of spiritual ideals. Nigeria is waiting for the right moment to be born; in the meantime, it is, like the abiku, adrift in a state of more ideal possibility. And that state contrasts powerfully with other ways of thinking about postcolonial Africa, in which the continent is all failure and disillusionment, and its problems in becoming modern are just disasters. In Okri's way of thinking, there is a whole world behind the sad reality, which will one day embody itself in actual progress, perhaps, but which, in a larger way of thinking about things, makes the present seem less significant.

The shift in thinking here – from tight focus on a disastrous postcolonial present, to a longer and transcendent view of more extensive possibility – is a marvelous way of "decolonizing the mind." It contributes, to a present-focused and materialistic attitude, a transcendent and timeless correction. And as with *Midnight's Children* we get the sense that the modern novel helps, in its form, to bring this alternative attitude into existence. Here, this happens as a result of a strange fit between the spiritual story of the abiku and the more realistic tendency built into the novel as a form. The abiku's perpetual return to the spirit world perpetually defeats plot; moreover, his character never builds. Folk tradition therefore sits uneasily with novelistic convention. But it works well with the unconventionality of the modern novel, and indeed renews it, by finding in African religion new reasons for plot and character to change. So we might say about *The Famished Road* what we have been finding about postcolonial fiction more generally: it shows us how the modern novel has migrated to new places, sustaining itself by contributing to the making of new and better realities.

What is true about the postcolonial modern novel is often also true wherever language and representation have been key to the development and self-realization of marginal cultures. It is true as well for the fiction of minority groups *within* western cultures. Here, too, we have efforts to represent and dramatize the problems and possibilities of hybridity, in everything from language to custom to personal identity. We find efforts to rewrite the standard plots of the dominant culture

to reveal the bad presumptions within them and to find space beyond them for alternatives. Again, we get unprecedented variations of perspective, and new ways of negotiating the authority given to narratorial voices.

But one key difference makes "multicultural" fiction a realm of unique expansion for the modern novel. Multicultural writers have had to take a greater interest in coexistence, diversity, and cultural exchange; they have unique concerns with the necessity to live within, alongside, or in spite of the dominant culture – as opposed to the more emphatic need fully to "decolonize" or enact full independence. The questions to ask, then, include these: what about the modern novel appeals to the minority writer as he or she makes the effort to create a good balance between cultural difference and cultural assimilation? To what use does he or she put the novel's way of clarifying the relationship between the individual and the social whole? How does the novel's power to mix languages help the minority writer to find means of description, explanation, and testimony that balance alternative cultural requirements? How do its ways of challenging grand narratives with its "local" propositions help the minority writer to debunk exclusive attitudes about national culture? And it is then necessary to ask the reverse kinds of questions, about the way the modern novel changes as a result: once the multicultural writer has made use of them, how do the modern novel's techniques of perspective, reconciliation, and "local" treatment improve? How, more specifically, might minority customs diversify the role the modern novel plays in social ritual? Or how might the minority sense of the sacred find a new "higher reference" for fiction?

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) dramatizes the difficulties of the multicultural demands placed on a young Chinese-American woman, who must find a way to remake her Chinese heritage so that it can meet the needs of a modern American woman. Kingston's heroine finds herself in a classic multicultural perplexity: her Chinese heritage is rich with inspiring stories and ennobling role-models, but also rife with sexist limitations; her American present, while perhaps better suited to her womanhood, would have no place for the heritage that is necessarily so much a part of her identity. Her task is to create a new identity, out of what the different cultures provide – and to do so despite the fact that the powers of these competing cultures necessarily dwarf those of her own young sense of self-

hood. What makes her able to do so – and what makes *The Woman Warrior* a particularly modern approach to the question of multicultural identity – is the power of storytelling. She comes from a culture in which this power links women back to strong mythic histories. Her mother has this power of "talk-story," and passes it on to her: "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities." But those stories leave her unsure "how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America"; and they would restrict her to traditional Chinese roles. And so she ultimately revises them, retaining the power but losing the limitation. The novel ends, "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine." In the conflict and continuity between mother and daughter – this struggle between tradition and change that is also a modernization of the power of storytelling – Kingston gives the modern novel a symbol for the struggles that would help to enable new cultural identities and also pattern a multicultural literary form. Here, and in the many novels that would pursue this approach to fictions of identity, storytelling itself becomes the ground upon which new identities are built – and the ground into which new multicultural layers are laid down.

Often this new ground is broken by the arrival of *oral* culture in the world of written fiction. In Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), for example, the storytelling methods of native-American Ojibwa culture dissolve novelistic structures of perspective into a communal mode of fiction, with surprising results for such fundamentals as plot and time-sequence. Once the burden of the story is shared, no single authority fixes its key points in time or space; these spread around, and the openness that results is a key feature both of this one novel's main theme and of a new time-sense available to fiction in general. Another novelist steeped in indigenous oral culture is Leslie Marmon Silko, whose *Ceremony* (1977) makes Laguna tale-telling a basis for something even more ambitious: a new kind of "ceremony," able symbolically to rescue American cultures from the witcheries of destructive modern technology. *Ceremony* mixes various forms of ritual and poetical discourse, to tell the story of a Laguna man whose experience in World War II has left him cursed and ill. His illness, shared apparently by the land as well, is the sort of thing his people might once have

cured with traditional ceremonies; now, however, its modern aspect makes a new ceremony necessary. This demands a quest, and its success ultimately leads beyond the ceremony itself to the discovery of larger problems and larger solutions. The ultimate witchery plaguing all cultures is the mass destruction threatened by nuclear technology; the larger solution, in a sense, is a recognition of the way all cultures are linked together in the face of this common threat. This final multiculturalism gives *Ceremony* a remarkable trajectory: the novel generates a ceremony out of Laguna tradition and new resources, as we see in its mixed forms of oral and written telling, and then it broadens this ceremony to include redemptions like, but more diverse than, the positive effects the modern novel had long been hoping to achieve. We get a novelistic pattern supremely rich in "higher reference": one that finds a new way for the modern novel to act as a redemptive ritual through its ability to plot diverse cultures together into a single ceremonious story.

Such has been the multicultural novel's larger advantage. Not only has it told the stories of marginalized peoples, and not only has it proven a fine means for minority writers to experiment with mixed identities and to remake old forms for modern purposes, it has offered up to the larger culture allegories for modern redemption. The fragmentations within the minority psyche and within the marginalized community have turned out to reflect, at different levels and often in more immediately painful ways, the fragmentations of modern culture more generally. So when multicultural novels propose fictions through which fragmented minority psyches and communities might heal themselves, we also get ceremonies that imagine ways also to draw modern cultures in general back from the brink of chaos. When you recall that such ceremonies had always been the goal of the modern novel – that so many modern novels had hoped to make fiction a way to imagine new forms for new communities – you can appreciate the extent to which multicultural fiction, in its efforts to solidify minority identities, also builds upon the novel's powers to imagine redemptive structures of all kinds.

Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1984), for example, is at once a hymn of hope for the future of New Zealand and a triumph for fiction's redemptive take on modern crisis. Once again, we have a novel that works well at different levels: in its style and feeling, it is almost a kind of ritual poem, and it beautifies novelistic prose with elements of Maori

phrasing; in its outlook, it draws the realism typical of novels up and down into spiritual heights and depths, as spirits intervene to make grim stories suddenly go good; its characters introduce wholly new human possibilities – of, for example, womanhood utterly unconcerned with sexuality, and utterly disempowered imperialists; and its plot moves with matchless force from total chaos to a remarkable, positive new beginning. *The Bone People* has three characters, who seem at first to promise a fine nontraditional multicultural family, but who deteriorate into strife, violence, and madness. In all this we have not only a new story about the human failures forced by modern dislocation and anguish, but an allegory of the situation in New Zealand: these are representatives of the country's warring factions, whose competing interests seem perpetually to lead to disaster. And finally we have even more. *The Bone People* pulls out of its nose-dive into chaos on the wings of ancient help – the help of the "bone people," an ancient tribe whose legacy, symbolized in a stone, marks a place for a new cultural beginning. Overleaping the recent history of social strife to reach for a better model for multicultural diversity, the novel finds a way to ground a better future in better traditions. It finds the cultural point of reference around which different cultures might gather, and not just in terms of its plot. That finds New Zealand's different cultures coming together as a multicultural "family" under the aegis of ideals they can be willing to share in common; but *The Bone People* is itself such an ideal, as well, for it models such sharing, and weaves together the story-selves of different cultures into another "ceremony" for modern redemption.

That *The Bone People* and *Ceremony* could enact these ceremonies says surprising things about the adaptability of the modern novel's mission. It seems very unlikely that a form innovated in order to find a way to shape the life of middle-class London, or to mime the fragmentation of the African-American culture of the 1920s, should connect up to multicultural ceremonies among the Maori or within Chinese-American families decades later. And perhaps it does not: perhaps these forms are not the same form, and it makes no sense to class Woolf and Hulme, Toomer and Kingston, in one category. Perhaps the novel is a loose enough form of writing to contain very different forms of expression, and perhaps that openness ought to discourage us from enclosing together books that hardly resemble each other at all. Unless putting them together can explain them better by bringing out

something they do have in common, despite differences of years and cultures and languages. If they are all in fact modern novels, then they share a belief that the ceremonies of innovative story-making can resist or undo or take advantage of the loss of traditional structures of society, belief, and feeling. They share this vital idealism, and even at the risk of neglecting the more important differences among them, we can learn a lot about their cultural purpose by seeing how it makes them alike.