

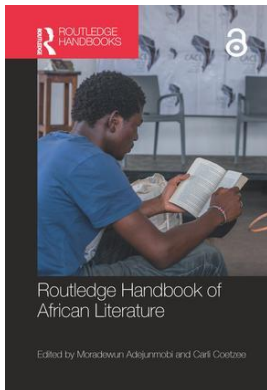
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.104

On: 06 May 2021

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of African Literature

Moradewun Adejunmobi, Carli Coetzee

Ethics and the politics of the ordinary in African literature

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315229546-3>

Chielozona Eze

Published online on: 26 Mar 2019

How to cite :- Chielozona Eze. 26 Mar 2019, *Ethics and the politics of the ordinary
in African literature from: Routledge Handbook of African Literature* Routledge

Accessed on: 06 May 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315229546-3>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Ethics and the politics of the ordinary in African literature

Chielozone Eze

In the past three decades, there has been increased attention paid to the place of ethics in literary scholarship. Martha Nussbaum's 'Flawed Crystals' (1983) and *Love's Knowledge* (1990) broke new ground in this regard, as did Adam Newton's *Narrative Ethics* (1995). *The Turn to Ethics*, edited by Marjorie Garber et al. (2000), brings together some of the most important thinkers on the issue. In African writing, as in literary scholarship, there has been a noticeable shift away from the postcolonial impulse to write back to the empire. There is now more emphasis on everyday practice and the body, especially the degree to which it feels pain. Of relevance in this regard are Zoe Norridge's *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (2013) and my *Ethics and Human Rights in Anglophone African Women's Literature* (2016). Cynthia R. Wallace's *Of Women Borne* (2016) highlights the redemptive place of suffering in narrative and the need for readers to acknowledge and respond to that with humility. Joseph Slaughter's discussion of the genre of the *bildungsroman* in his *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007) makes a persuasive argument for the power of narrative to script human rights. Cajetan Iheka in *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2018) extends the ethical inquiry in literature to the area of ecology.

Interest in ethics in African studies scholarship is not restricted to literature. Rijk van Dijk, Astrid Bochow and Thomas G. Kirsh (2017, 447) provide an insightful anthropological reading of ethics in Africa that encompasses people's everyday struggles. In particular, they examine how organizations and social movements in Africa, such as the NGOs, state agencies, labor unions and religious organizations, act as agents of the good in society and propagate ideas about how people can lead good, prosperous lives (250–252). There is a useful way to understand ethical agency in Africa, with which I fully agree. Literature takes us in a different direction and provides us with opportunities for introspection, especially regarding our relation to ourselves, to others and to reality. Working from the assumption that ethics is about the individual's response to the practice of the everyday, and how to conduct oneself, especially in relation to others, this chapter seeks to map out the contours of ethical agency in African literature. It examines the question of ethics and the politics of the ordinary in literature.

Literature is highly individualized, in its production, its consumption and in the subjects represented; this remains the case even when a literary text takes up concerns that affect a larger group. In one of its many forms, such as narrative, literature addresses the world primarily

through imaginative representation. It is this that separates literature from polemics or political tracts, which are appreciated for advancing specific arguments, but not essentially for their expressiveness. Whereas texts produced for other professional purposes might offer an opportunity to pursue an interest in ethics as ideals in practice among discrete social groups, literature (stories, poems, drama and so on) tends to focus on individuals, and how these individuals relate to themselves, to the *other* and to society in general. Given that literary works are conceived as ends rather than as means, it might seem contradictory to speak of the potential of the literary for ethics. But it is also true that being a highly individualized intervention does not make the creation of literature an isolationist act, nor does it consign the reader to a monastic, meditative quietude.

The literary text, as an intervention that can address the details of everyday practice, necessarily calls for some form of responsibility in society. This responsibility comes about because the attention to everyday practice delivers the *other* to us as vulnerable. To be sure, how people will respond in the face of other people's vulnerability cannot be determined ahead of time; but it is also true that there is responsibility in that response, or lack thereof. In this way, therefore, paying attention to the ordinary in our everyday lives uncovers many ethical and political opportunities. For one, it raises awareness of the power of individuals to script the texts of their lives and the implication that the hitherto unknown moral agency has on other lives and on society.

The ethical and political implications of attention to the ordinary in literature involve, among other things, two interrelated ideas: firstly, recognizing oneself and others as conditioned by our common humanity, and secondly, relating to oneself and others accordingly. In exploring the ethical implications of attention to the ordinary in human interactions in literary texts, this chapter seeks to answer the following questions: what are the implications of the presentation of ordinary, everyday actions as ethical for our understanding of the polis? How might literature contribute to a different understanding of what the polis is and what our responsibilities are as members of the polis? In engaging the above issues, I discuss Petina Gappah's 2015 novel *The Book of Memory* and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* from 2017. I argue that some works of literature depict ordinary and everyday actions as a space for ethical and therefore political action, and the fact of extending ethical recognition to other humans as a political intervention. The ethical stakes in a literary work can be understood on two levels: in the relationship between characters, and between the narrated world and the reader.

Gappah's *The Book of Memory* tells the story of Memory, a girl living with albinism in Zimbabwe. Neither black nor white, she is the object of ridicule because of the color of her skin in a land of black people. Ironically, Lloyd, a wealthy white professor adopts her. Lloyd sees his own fate as a white man in Zimbabwe reflected in her condition. Members of a nationalist band kill Lloyd, but frame Memory for the murder and she is condemned to jail. While awaiting trial, she tells her story in the hope that the presiding judge will be lenient after hearing it. In Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, which is set in Nigeria, Akin (the husband) and Yejide (the wife) are ostensibly in a loving marriage. Yejide is distressed because of her failure to conceive after years of marriage. Her mother-in-law arranges a new wife for Akin. But the cause of their childlessness is Akin's inability to consummate the marriage. Yejide does not comprehend this, because, having married as a virgin, she has little understanding of what sexual intercourse between a man and a woman actually entails. Akin arranges for Dotun, his younger brother to have a sexual relationship with his wife in order to impregnate Yejide. The two children born as a result of Yejide's liaison with Dotun both inherit a congenital disease, sickle cell anemia, and die in childhood, leaving Yejide racked with guilt over her acts of adultery. Yet she is pregnant with a third child. After learning from Dotun that his sexual involvement with her

was not accidental, but instigated by Akin, Yejide feels betrayed by Akin. When her third child, Rotimi,¹ becomes sick shortly after her first birthday, Yejide leaves Akin in the belief that her third child will also die. But Rotimi does not die; she survives. Yejide returns to the family unit several years later for the funeral of her father-in-law, and must then fight to gain her surviving daughter's love and trust.

These two novels are ethical and political, not because they address matters of political malfeasance or urge the populace to engage in political activities, but rather because they focus on how the choices made by individuals in their daily lives affect other people. My analyses will concentrate on significant encounters and choices in the narratives, and the degree to which they help our understanding of ethics and political agency. My use of the term *politics* differs from the popular understanding which refers to the act of engaging in partisan political activities. While I do not explicitly dismiss this reading of politics, my notion of the term relies on Hannah Arendt's Aristotelian definition as 'the human condition of plurality,' in which the exercise of free speech in the open arena is possible (Arendt 1958, 7). I will discuss this more fully in the subsequent sections of the chapter.

Literature, the ordinary and ethics

There are certain elements in Aristotle's definition of tragedy in his *Poetics* to which every understanding of narrative as ethics returns directly or indirectly: an 'imitation of an action' that 'arouses pity and fear' and thus affects a '*katharsis* of such emotions' (Aristotle 1996, 6). Stories, which are recreations of people's actions or encounters, are typically told to arouse a response (perhaps not exactly pity and fear) in the listener/reader. In this way, stories establish a relationship between two worlds: the narrated world and that of the reader. Lawrence Buell (2000, 6) believes that the meeting point of ethics and literature is the relationship 'between texts and readers.' But this is not just a casual meeting. In texts, readers are asked to imagine the lives of people (characters) they will never meet; the ethical dimension at the heart of an encounter with the literary text lies in this act of imagination. It is in this light that David Palumbo-Liu (2012, 3–9) argues that literature delivers the lives of others to us and challenges us to respond and to relate to them. The encounter between the reader and the people he or she will never meet becomes truly ethical when the relation is initiated in the form of identification with characters, worldviews or events, or rejection of the same. Either way, judgment is involved precisely because one weighs the positive and negative aspects of what one identifies with or rejects. It is, of course, possible to identify with something out of pure instinct, or out of loyalty to one's tradition, but even that implies acceptance of the decision behind the forming of that tradition. Every judgment implies responsibility. Ethics as transmitted in literature, as Adam Newton (1995, 12) argues, 'signifies recursive, contingent, and interactive drama of encounter and recognition, the sort which prose fiction both crystallizes and recirculates in acts of interpretive engagement.' The phrases 'drama of encounter and recognition' and 'interpretive engagement' capture the essence of literature as ethics, which is rooted in the relation of one character to another, or of readers and the world that is presented to them. In literary works, a representation of the everyday lives of characters offers a particularly apt opportunity for observing the drama of encounter and recognition.

Njabulo Ndebele is perhaps the most famous African philosopher and literary scholar to draw attention to the everyday and ordinary in literature as a space for ethical and political intervention.² Though he addressed apartheid-era South African writing, his arguments apply to much of African post-colonial writing. In his essay 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary' (1986), he critiques the apartheid-era South African writers who adopted protest literature as a means of

confronting apartheid. Ndebele terms the approach of these writers ‘spectacle’ because they produced ‘spectacular representations of reality’ (144) and failed to focus on the practice of everyday life of black South Africans. Like spectacle, their writing preferred ‘the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details ... It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it’ (149–150). For Ndebele, this attention to the ordinary and the everyday is also a form of self-making, which is a necessary precondition for creating a flourishing community.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 1989, 165) defines spectacle as ‘a piece of stage display or pageantry, as contrasted with real drama ... an event or scene regarded in terms of its visual impact.’ In regard to politics and the human condition, *spectacle* is often taken to mean whatever is staged, which would include the act of inflicting gratuitous pain in order to maintain power. In general, the spectacular paints reality in broad strokes.³ Ndebele notes some of the major characteristics of the spectacular, especially in narratives: ‘it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge’ (1986, 149–150). Spectacle fails to pay attention to the details of the human condition of pain and pleasure; it acts through the prism of ideology. Ndebele argues that rather than the spectacular events of history such as colonialism, apartheid, military dictatorship, the ‘ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest [in literature] because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions’ (156). This, to be sure, is counterintuitive. Why should writers not take a spectacle such as colonialism or military dictatorship head-on? But herein lies the irony. The moment narratives engage the large issues rather than the minutiae of people’s interaction, they replicate the ideological flaws of the spectacle, which then obliterates analytical insight.

To further appreciate Ndebele’s notion of the spectacular and its implications for ethics in literature, it helps to consider Martin Buber’s notion of an ‘I–Thou’ relationship. Buber (1970, 50) differentiates between experience and relation. One experiences the world of things but stands in relation to the world of humans. When we relate to people, we cease to see them through the lens of utility; rather we begin to understand that they make our existence whole. Relation is not a one-way attitude; it is reciprocity, and reciprocity recognizes the dignity of the other. Experience, for Buber, is ‘remoteness from you,’ but relation reduces that remoteness (60). If the remoteness between me and you is nullified, there is then the possibility of encounter, which is the basis of actual life (62). In this encounter, the individual, ‘I,’ could meet the other, *You*, as ‘my You.’ The phrase ‘my You’ seeks to present the other, who is otherwise an indifferent ‘You,’ as very close to the subjectivity of ‘I’ to the degree that there is no longer an estranging distance caused by abstractions such as ideology. Spectacle is like ideology because of its focus on generality rather than on individuality, on an exteriority rather than an interiority; it prevents an ‘I’ from relating to the other as ‘Thou’; rather, the ‘I’ relates to the other as an ‘It’ – a thing to be used.

The ordinary as the political

According to Arendt (1958, 3), politics is a defining aspect of the human condition, and it can be reduced to one simple act: speech. She states, ‘Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being.’⁴ Speech thus has meaning only within the context of democracy, government of the people (*demos*), of equals; their equality is rooted in the human condition.⁵ For Arendt, three fundamental human activities form the basis of the human condition: firstly, there is labor, the activity which entails

the 'biological process of the human body' (7) that is activated in the sustenance of life. Secondly, there is work, the activity through which humans produce the artificial 'world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings.' Finally, there is action, which is 'the activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter'; and which 'corresponds to the human condition of plurality' (7). Without action, the human condition would not be possible; this is the condition 'of all political life' (7). Arendt states that, 'action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality' (9). The fact of being born reduces all to a common denominator; being born underscores the individual's vulnerability and therefore his or her dependence on others. As Arendt states: 'To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence' (26). The implication is, of course, that no human should be considered a tool or means to other humans' ends.

In the remaining parts of this chapter, I discuss *The Book of Memory* and *Stay with Me* in the context of action, and of being born. I focus specifically on childlessness and albinism, both of which highlight the centrality of the body in the discourse of the ordinary. Ultimately, the goal is to answer the question of how literature sharpens our ethical awareness and exposes the political structure of the ordinary.

The issue of childless marriages has occupied African women's writing, from the work of pioneer Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* (1966), to an early-twenty-first-century enunciation by Lola Shoneyin in her *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010). Nigerian professor of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Friday Okonofua (1997), Ghanaian Professor of Nursing, Ernestine S. Donkor (2007) and others have discussed the social and cultural repercussions of childlessness in African societies. Typically, childlessness in marriage is seen as a curse. Furthermore, women in childless marriages suffer because they are believed to be responsible for the condition of infertility, even when that is not the case. Adebayo's *Stay with Me* explores this issue and raises questions that have profound ethical resonance. What is the value of an individual to society? Or more pointedly, what is the value of a woman's body to her family? Do men and women occupy an equal ethical and political space within a given community? Akin marries Yejide, knowing that he is incapable of consummating a marriage and impregnating a woman. Yejide has no idea what sexual intercourse between a man and a woman entails because she married as a virgin. The narrative chronicles the series of humiliating incidents that she experiences because her community considers her body to be deficient. As a woman in the depicted society, she knows that her body does not possess the same value as her husband's; her body is valued only to the degree that it serves the purpose of reproducing. The subordinate position that her body occupies emboldens people around her to make judgments about her body and determine the use to which it must be put. This condition irritates her. She states, 'A number of my in-laws had been in our home previously to discuss the same issue. Discussion being: they talked and I listened while on my knees' (Adebayo 2017, 7). In this instance and following Arendt (1958, 3), one could say that Yejide is denied speech, and thus the right to function as a political being.

Narrating in a sarcastic tone, Yejide exposes other people's meddling in her marriage and their claim to know her intimate life better than she does. In denying her freedom of speech, they give her to understand that she is there to serve a single purpose: procreation. They do not consider her as possessing subjectivity. Their relation to her is mediated by the spectacle of patriarchy. Expressed in Buber's terms, they do not relate to her; they experience her. She describes the smile she wears when she joins her husband in the sitting room where his family members are gathered to talk about her marriage to Akin. It is a smile that says, 'Even though you old people know nothing about my marriage, I am delighted, no, ecstatic to hear all the important things you have to say about it. After all, I am a good wife' (8). Her emphasis on her

smile alerts the reader to her desire to speak, but the impossibility of doing so. Her sarcastic use of the phrase ‘good wife’ draws attention to the expectations for married women in this society. A good wife, like a good servant, is one who has no opinion, no desires. Her life is therefore predetermined. She is not an interlocutor or an equal partner in speech.

The ultimate humiliation of Yejide’s body is that even though the reason for her inability to conceive lies with Akin, she is still viewed as the cause of the problem, and women are paraded before Akin to be made pregnant – that is, to be conferred with meaning. Akin, the man, is thus the ultimate giver of meaning. The ethical issue here is the unequal relational economy between Akin and Yejide. More particularly, it is about Akin’s inability to be honest and open with the woman he calls his wife. That condition results from the fact that, to a degree, he perceives reality through a prism; he ignores the ethics of the ordinary, of relation. To be sure, this condition is equally inimical to Akin. The condition which forces Akin to be fundamentally deceptive even to himself deserves to be brought to conversation. The truth is that Akin cannot relate even to himself in an ethically fulfilling way. Living with the secret of his own sexual inadequacies and the knowledge that he orchestrated his own wife’s adultery, he is not what one might call a happy person. This is because the power conferred on him by patriarchy (the power to give meaning to women’s bodies), does not by itself enable him to stand in relation to the world of humans. Attention to the ordinary allows us to see the outcomes of exercising power in an unethical way.

In the belief that the problem of childlessness in Akin and Yejide’s marriage lies with Yejide, Akin’s family arrange a second (and hopefully more fertile) wife for Akin, Funmi. The goal is, of course, to ensure that Funmi produces a child, preferably a boy, to carry on the family name. Funmi and Yejide are considered to be the means to a predetermined end. Ironically, and typically of oppressed people, the condition to which both women have been subjected engenders unfair competition and hatred between them while Akin pretends to be above the fray. In painting these characters who are denied speech by their community, especially in matters relating to their bodies, Adebayo has constructed a microcosm of the political condition of her society, in which the privileged and the underprivileged, those who have a voice and the voiceless, exist in parallel universes even within the same spatial economy. This, of course, does not mean that her narrative is allegorical; rather, it is a portrayal of the human condition in a way that initiates what Newton (1995, 12) has called an act of ‘interpretive engagement.’

The context of the story suggests that the second wife of a man in a polygamous marriage ingratiates herself to the first wife, so that the first wife can create a space for her in the life of their common husband. This is what Funmi seeks to achieve with gestures such as calling Yejide ‘mother’ (30–31) as a sign of respect. But Yejide finds both of them diminished and does not hide her contempt for Funmi. Because Yejide has no social or legal mechanism for fighting the condition that erodes her dignity, she falls back on what she believes is a proven means through which women assert themselves in African patriarchal societies such as hers: ‘I simply had to get pregnant, as soon as possible, and before Funmi did. It was the only way I could be sure I would stay in Akin’s life’ (38). Becoming pregnant increases a woman’s stake in a man’s life and giving birth to a male child doubles her worth as a human being (56). The situation thus reduces her to a means and therefore increases the value and power of the man. When it becomes known that Yejide is pregnant – even though it turns out to be a phantom pregnancy – people express their wishes for the gender of the child. Her mother-in-law tells her in a burst of joy: ‘You must give us twins. Two fat boys, fat baby boys’ (56). In seeking to become pregnant before her co-wife does, Yejide admits her utilitarian value. It is also ironic that her mother-in-law, as herself a woman, is part of the system that diminishes the female body. Why else would she wish for two boys? Yejide’s sarcastic tone draws attention to her interiority and

challenges the reader to see reality from her perspective. She is fully aware that she is a tool in the imagined happiness of the group. Her mother-in-law is willing to admit her into 'the human condition of plurality' only if she gives birth to children, and preferably to sons. It is, therefore, no surprise that she considers herself useless when the child she does give birth to dies of sickle cell anemia (125–126). Yejide will eventually abandon her third child, Rotimi, when she fears that this child, too, will die – an ill-advised decision to which I will return later.

Thus far, in the ordinary practices of the everyday, Adebayo seeks to achieve the political goal of placing individuals at the core of interactions in society and thereby asserts that they should be taken as ends, not means. Here, consideration of the feelings of individuals replaces any ideology that is thought to serve society. Eventually, we learn that all this domestic drama plays out against the background of military coups and political turmoil (Adebayo 2017, 94). In addition to the political turmoil, there are indications that the society is also beset by high rates of violent crime. It is important for our understanding of ethics that Adebayo does not make the spectacle of the military regime the centerpiece of the narrative. Instead, she enables us to raise questions about society's relationship to its weaker, less privileged members. We see the parallels between the objectification of life in a society ruled by the military and one ruled by abstract principles, rooted in tradition, one that functions from the standpoint of human nature.

Arendt (1958, 9–27) differentiates between the human condition and human nature. The human condition surrounds the lives of individuals as part of a community, while human nature seeks to capture the general, abstract thing that is thought to be common among individuals; it seeks to establish the norm. Those who aim to define human nature seek to establish the essence or an absolute condition of things and often resort to ideology. Arendt's notion of human nature and Ndebele's conception of the spectacular have one thing in common: they are based on abstraction and involve neglect of the ordinary. Spectacle is a tool deployed by those who have a particular ideologically determined goal, in other words, by those who are beholden to their notion of human nature rather than to the human condition. They deploy it to deny others their freedom and agency; in other words, they deny them an ability to live as full members in the polis. Ideologies function under the premise of human nature, with an understanding that all humans have a certain disposition by nature. Racism, sexism, tribalism and bigotry are all results of obsession with human nature. In *Stay With Me*, Yejide's in-laws do not interact with her as a fellow human based on the parameters given by the fact of a shared natality. Instead, they relate to her on the basis of human nature; in their encounters with her, they do not relate to her as a 'You,' that is, in ways in which they themselves would like to be treated.

In *The Book of Memory*, Memory begins her story by announcing the condition that makes her a stranger and an object of ridicule in her society. She is '*murungudunhu* ... a black woman who is imbued not with the whiteness of *murungu*, of privilege, but of *dunhu*, or ridicule and fakery, a ghastly whiteness' (Gappah 2015, 2). She is 'black but not black, white but not white' (7). In her understanding, her body is not deserving of admiration because it is an object of pity. She sees her ugliness reflected in another albino, 'Lameck, who had a squashed face and red, blotchy skin that broke over his arms and face' (54). Every time Memory passes Lameck, she sees 'the flies that settled on his mouth.' She is afraid of Lameck and so does not wonder that people are afraid of her (55). This condition makes her arrive at a devastating self-judgment: 'I see now, of course, that he was just as much a misfit as I was' (55).

Memory's painful honesty about herself might appear somewhat self-deprecatory, but it achieves the first goal of narratives in the realist tradition: to bring the human condition to the fore, and in regard to ethics, to elicit some degree of relation from the reader. The truth is that albinos have experiences such as those described by Memory (Brocco 2016). When Memory

becomes honest about herself, it is to draw her listener's attention to the condition of her body as that of a fellow human. It is, at the same time, a body that had been 'othered' by society's oppressive gaze. But by giving a name associated with the act of remembering to a human rejected on account of her body, the narrative makes it difficult for the depicted society to represent its past misdeeds as mere abstractions, instead of as crimes against fellow humans.

Memory's difference from the norm poses an ethical challenge to her society. She regrets that society sees her as the other; she is an abnormality, not part of human nature as conceived by her people. People do not see her as an embodied being; they hardly imagine the pain she experiences owing to her difference, her 'white' skin. She is to her community what the 'Negro' is to the white society in Frantz Fanon's famous analysis of the lived experience of the black man (Fanon 2008, 89). Just as painful, and even more so, her mother sees her condition as a curse that can be taken care of with the help of the spirit world. It is a curse because it is not part of human nature to be born that way. She allows her relation to her daughter and to the world to be dictated by diviners and prophets (Gappah 2015, 105–103). As Memory explains, 'My mother believed in the spirits and the mediums through which they spoke. She believed in healers and diviners' (118). From Memory's perspective, religion stands in the way of her mother taking her (Memory's) body seriously; her mother sees Memory as an 'It' rather than as a 'You.' Indeed, religion conditions her mother to conceive the idea to send Memory to a foster home, a gesture that Memory interprets as being sold. This is one of the instances in which the ethical has far-reaching political relevance. Memory's mother's inability to relate to Memory in ordinary terms implies a denial of speech. Memory also observes that religion does not contribute to people's self-esteem. The opposite is the case. She tells of a church service she attended in which the preacher unleashed words that debased rather than uplifted the faithful (116). From her perspective, religion is a tool which suppresses individual speech. Ndebele's definition of spectacle as establishing a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge (1986, 149–150) applies to religion; it views individuals as predetermined by their essences, derived from the religion's divine being. But that conception of humanity makes politics, understood as an act of persuasion or of speech between equals, impossible.

What was said earlier about Yejide's voice as a political act goes for Memory as well. Memory invites the reader to take a second look at her body; this second look will be achieved the moment the reader begins to listen to her story. In effect, Memory initiates what seems like a dialogue with the reader and seeks to achieve with the reader what she could not achieve with her mother. She speaks and the reader listens. With her, narration becomes not only a means of understanding the self and initiating a relation to others, it also becomes a life-saving act. Memory, who has been falsely accused of murder, narrates that Vernah, her lawyer, 'told me that I should write down every detail that I could remember, that I should record everything that could make a sympathetic case' (Gappah 2015, 10). Memory hopes that when the trial begins, the judge who had heard her story will sympathize with her. The judge stands in for the prospective reader who is asked to understand Memory's condition. Memory even refers to herself as Scheherazade from *One Thousand and One Nights*, who also must tell a story to live (87). The reader knows that she is not guilty of the crime for which she has been jailed. Here, then, she narrates to make her listeners see reality from her own perspective and to see her as a person with interiority, a person deserving of co-feeling. Ethics in literature takes place precisely in such moments when listeners or readers recognize the character's interiority, and when they engage in what Newton (1995, 12) has called the 'interactive drama of encounter.' In Memory, literature becomes fully ethical, a means of initiating relation.

Thus far, in these two novels, the protagonists' bodies are presented as fragile and vulnerable. The novels' attention to vulnerable bodies is ethical and political, and it is so without relying on

spectacle. It does not accuse. The first task of literature that seeks to rise to the level of ethics and to dramatize a different kind of life in the polis is to defy abstraction and to focus on the ordinary; thus, in presenting their bodies as ordinary and vulnerable, Yejide and Memory pose simple questions to their immediate world: what is my body to you? What am I to you? Who am I to you? These questions and the ethical relation they imply form a template for our recognition of others. They challenge the characters in the narrative world (and by implication the readers) to take an ethical stand. Indirectly, these novels also question the understanding of politics of societies that tolerate discrimination against vulnerable bodies.

Recognition and care as contours of everyday agency

In the introductory part of this chapter, I stated that employing ethics as a political tool involves two related ideas: firstly, recognizing others as conditioned by our common humanity, and secondly, relating to them accordingly. I understand this relation as recognition and read it as an integral part of ethics in literature. In their focus on the ordinary, or what Ndebele (1986, 156) calls ‘man-man, man-woman, woman-woman, man-nature, man-society relationships,’ *Stay With Me* and *The Book of Memory* reveal the ethical demand of attention to the ordinary: recognition. Their attention to the interior lives of these characters, that is, how they felt being ignored or recognized, is a good example of how narratives effect changes in society. Specifically, Gappah and Adebayo present us with moments and characters who, in drawing attention to themselves, make us aware of the gratuitous pain society inflicts on them and how this pain robs them of their human rights and dignity. We become aware of their plight, their demand that they be heard, their demand for a right to have a say in matters related to their own bodies, and ultimately their demand for recognition.

Recognition is the immediate implication of our attention to ordinary practice. We discover one another as conditioned by our common humanity. Community is where recognition is conferred; that is, in action and speech, we recognize one another as beings without whom our existence as humans would not be possible. This, at least, is the implication of the African traditional conception of being, expressed in the saying, ‘I am because we are’ (Menkiti 1984, 171). As the Nigerian-American philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti states, individuals acquire personhood only in the community. Personhood is attained not in the abstract, but in being with others, in the daily exercise of encounter and, I would add, in the practice of the ordinary with others. We are, as it were, exposed to one another, for without the other, action would not be possible.

The demand for recognition or simple human relation is at the core of Memory’s wishes. She states, ‘I longed to be like all the others. I tried to get as dark as the other children. I longed to belong’ (Gappah 2015, 57). She is invisible in a society that acknowledges only dark-skinned people. She prays ‘for God to darken [her] skin’ (58) because ‘If [she] could not be like the others [she] would be invisible’ (59). The desire to belong is simply an expression of the most basic human need for relation; it is at the same time an expression of the most political need: the need to make one’s voice heard. Memory finds some degree of recognition in her relationship with her father. In contrast to her mother, her father takes her to the hospital; he takes care of her. Memory appreciates this simple act, and she shares one of her most profound moments of recognition and affirmation. She has prepared food for her father. In gratitude, he puts his arm around her and weeps. When he lets her go, he tells her it was what he needed (131–132). Memory’s father puts into words what Memory has always wished for herself: human touch. It is ironic and humanely more fulfilling that Memory’s father seeks affirmation from Memory; he wants Memory to affirm him, and in so doing, he gives her a sense of worth

and affirms her as well. Lloyd extends the ethical gesture that Memory's father began when he adopts Memory. She says, 'Lloyd and I listened to cassette tapes by Fleetwood Mac and Depeche Mode' (167). Listening to music together is a metaphor for mutual recognition; it binds them and creates some commonality and a template for shared experience. With Lloyd, Memory finds that she 'could belong' (170). Lloyd is like a father to her. Indeed, he treats her like her father did – through touch – which, in the context of Memory's difference, is an important gesture of affirmation. When Memory returns from overseas studies, Lloyd welcomes her back like a daughter, calls her name, puts his arms around her, and lifts her off her feet (208). When Memory hugs Lloyd, she completes the circle of mutual affirmation that Lloyd has initiated. In Memory, therefore, Gappah pleads for the recognition of people with albinism, who bear the most visible markers of difference and otherness in a country of dark-skinned people. She exhibits a political gesture.

Although the narrative in *The Book of Memory* appears to be an allegorical representation of the nation's dealing with its past, and thus with politics, we should not assume that Gappah's preoccupations in this novel relate mainly to what Ndebele views as a spectacular notion of politics. By keeping the narrative focused on the ordinary life of Memory, the author concentrates our attention on ethical responses to difference. The novel seems to suggest that even the most intractable political conundrums of the past and the present are best understood in terms of our willingness to extend recognition towards individuals, especially those bearing visible markers of difference, and our willingness to treat them as human subjects rather than as abstractions.⁶

I now return to the irony of Yejide abandoning Rotimi in the belief that she would die like her other two children. Adebayo does not intend Yejide to be perceived simply as a victim. Yejide consented to an affair with her brother-in-law. She, too, owes others recognition. The twist in the narrative, in regard to ethics, however, is that she is given that which she sorely needs, but which she has denied others. When she returns to Akin to take part in Akin's father's burial, she is shocked to learn that Rotimi, her daughter, is alive; Rotimi draws her into her arms and calls her 'Moomi,' a Yoruba term of endearment for one's mother. It is of profound ethical significance that Rotimi recognizes her mother in such an endearing format, given that Yejide had abandoned her in the belief that she would die. Yejide is overwhelmed by the joy of affirmation and recognition: 'I shut my eyes as one receiving a benediction. Inside me something unfurls, joy spreads through my being, unfamiliar yet unquestioned, and I know that this too is a beginning, a promise of wonders to come' (Adebayo 2017, 270).

One of the important scenes in *Stay with Me* is when Rotimi bonds with Akin (222). Akin happily narrates that:

one morning she (Rotimi) looked up at me one fist beneath her chin as though she was pondering what she was about to say and said, 'Baba'. She said it two more times before she went back to sleep, as if she knew that I needed to hear the word again.

(223)

This seemingly magical moment underscores the affinity between Akin and the child who is not his, but whom he now takes as his. It is of great ethical relevance that Akin accepts Rotimi as his child. In this gesture, he makes up for the flaws in his relationship with Yejide. This moment of profound encounter encapsulates the most important ethical insight in *Stay with Me*. The child with sickle cell anemia does not die; she stays with the man who is not her father and, in calling him father, affirms him, just as he has affirmed her. This mutual affirmation is like that between Memory, her father and Lloyd, and acts as a lineament for affirmation in society; it

provides us with the best example of an ethics that is rooted in the ordinary. Recognition does not necessarily have a biological basis; it is our admission of our natality and vulnerability, and consequently our positive response to it. It is a revealing irony that Rotimi (a daughter rather than a son) confers recognition and meaning on Akin. This reversal of roles in a patriarchal society signals a new ethical-political trajectory in the functioning of that society.

Conclusion

In the introductory part of this chapter, I established Rijk van Dijk, Astrid Bochow and Thomas Kirsch's anthropological reading of ethics in Africa. In particular, the authors examined how groups interact with other groups in society. Whereas a religious group or NGO can prescribe to people how to organize their lives, the best works of literature are never prescriptive. They do, however, draw attention to what human flourishing is all about, and they do so by focusing on ordinary, day-to-day life. The ethical, political function of imaginative narratives of the ordinary is to dislodge the teleological frame of ideology and abstraction; it restores the dignity of the other by placing him or her within the axis of our co-feeling. The task of literature as ethics is to present humans as possessing subjectivities and to place them in action in society. Literature helps us to become aware of the nexus of vulnerability and dependency.

Ndebele (1986, 156) speaks of individuals as possessing interiority when he states, 'It will be the task of literature to provide an occasion within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up.' For him:

The new literature can contribute to the development of this subjective capacity of the people to be committed, but only on the basis of as complete a knowledge of themselves and the objective situation as possible. The growth of consciousness is a necessary ingredient of this subjective capacity.

(156)

I read this subjective capacity in terms of ethics. It is that which begins from the moment humans recognize one another as subjectivities that are nevertheless interconnected and mutually dependent on others, given the fact of our natality. The questions: 'who am I to you?', 'what is my body to you?' or 'what am I to you?' can therefore be approached by listening to the questioner tell who she is. If the questions have to be answered, this has to be done within the contexts established by the meeting of two worlds, that of the narrator and that of the listener. Ethics is no more than acceding to the demands of the meeting of these two worlds, the world of the 'I' and that of the 'You'; it is the admission of the interiority and subjectivity of the other, the recognition of the other as possessing dignity and a moral space.

In an earlier publication, I celebrated the fact that African literature occupies itself less and less with the Empire (Eze 2016). Led by women authors, African literary texts write back to the body, and to the degree that the body feels pain, instead of to Empire. The authors of *The Book of Memory* and *Stay with Me* belong to that new generation of authors; they are not concerned with how the West tells a single story of Africa, or how it writes about Africa. They are interested in delivering the lives of Africans to other Africans and thereby challenging them to respond ethically. It is satisfying that Gappah and Adebayo do not dwell on the most spectacular forms of life in the polis in their novels. Rather, by focusing on the ordinary, they call society's attention to the necessity of mutual recognition of one another in public spheres.

Notes

- 1 The title of this novel comes from the Yoruba name and phrase, Durotimi (often abbreviated as Rotimi), which translates as 'stay with me.'
- 2 I have discussed Ndebele more fully in *Race, Decolonization, and Global Citizenship* (Eze 2018).
- 3 Empire and colonialism are spectacles, as is everyday corruption in a failed democracy.
- 4 Speech is also understood as logos, thought, or the ability to hold a formal discourse. In ancient Greece, only free men were thought to possess this ability. Women, children and slaves were not considered free and able to engage in the noble task of speech.
- 5 We extend the understanding of speech to include the ability and the audacity to express how one feels and what one thinks, how one wants to conduct one's life.
- 6 I am grateful to the editors, Moradewun Adejunmobi and Carli Coetzee, for this suggestion.

Bibliography

- Adebayo, Ayobami. 2017. *Stay With Me*. Canongate: Edinburgh.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Aristotle. 1996. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin Books.
- Brocco, Giorgio. 2016. 'Albinism, Stigma, Subjectivity and Global-Local Discourses in Tanzania.' *Anthropology & Medicine* 23(3): 229–243.
- Buber, Martin. (1923) 1970. *I and Thou*. New York: Simon Schuster.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2000. 'What We Talk about when We Talk about Ethics.' In *The Turn to Ethics*, edited by Marjorie B. Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 1–13. London: Routledge.
- Donkor, Ernestine S. 2007. 'The Impact of Perceived Stigma and Mediating Social Factors on Infertility-related Stress among Women Seeking Infertility Treatment in Southern Ghana.' *Social Science Medicine* 65(8): 1683–1694.
- Eze, Chielozone. 2016. *Ethics and Human Rights in Anglophone African Women's Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eze, Chielozone. 2018. *Race, Decolonization, and Global Citizenship in South Africa*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Gappah, Petina. 2015. *The Book of Memory*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Garber, Marjorie, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds. 2000. *The Turn to Ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Iheka, Cajetan. 2018. *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. 1984. 'Person and Community in African Traditional Thought.' In *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, edited by Richard A. Wright, 171–181. New York: University Press of America.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S. 1986. 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa.' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12(2): 143–157.
- Newton, Adam Zachary. 1995. *Narrative Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Norridge, Zoe. 2013. *Perceiving Pain in African Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nwapa, Flora. 1966. *Efuru*. London: Heinemann African Writers Series.
- Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 1983. 'Flawed Crystals: James's The Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy.' *New Literary History* 15(1): 25–50.
- Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Okonofua, Friday. 1997. 'The Social Meaning of Infertility in Southwest Nigeria.' *Health Transition Review* 7(2): 205–220.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. 2012. *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shoneyin, Lola. 2010. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. New York: William Morrow.
- Simpson, J. A. and E. S. C. Weiner. 1989. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Slaughter, Joseph. 2007. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- van Dijk, Rijk, Astrid Bochow and Thomas Kirsch. 2017. 'Introduction: New Ethical Fields and the Implicitness/Explicitness of Ethics in Africa.' *Africa* 87(3): 447–461.
- Wallace, Cynthia R. 2016. *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering*. New York: Columbia University Press.