

**Annotation of Gerald Gaylard's "Mastering Arachnophobia: The Limits of Self-Reflexivity in African Fiction", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 37.1 (2002), pp. 85-99.**

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This article rests on the idea that, since the end of the twentieth century, African literature has witnessed a move away from social realism and has come to address political issues in a much more oblique and disaggregated manner. The essay proposes to view the dismembered politics represented in contemporary African fiction as a web in which agency is embodied by a spider that is constantly shifting like the trickster Ananse, thereby challenging the status quo. According to Gaylard, the evasive trickster epitomises the capacity to relentlessly examine and repeatedly reposition the self. The resulting sense of provisionality, the author contends, finds expression through the device of self-reflexivity.

Gaylard proceeds to review the potential dangers of this approach – which include self-indulgence, removal from the "real" world and ethical relativism – and he then focuses on its utility: since it concentrates on writing, it can uncover some of its codes; it can reveal the social potential and shortcomings of literature, in particular socio-historical situations; and it can help one to assess oneself and subsequently effect change. These arguments are substantiated through brief references to a number of African authors – among whom are Dambudzo Marechera, Jamal Mahjoub and M. G. Vassanji – but the analysis mainly relies on the writings of J. M. Coetzee and particularly his novel *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), a narrative centred on the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. Thus, while the theoretical aspects of this essay may stimulate the reflection of all scholars in the field of postcolonial literary criticism, the chosen texts will most likely be of interest to

Coetzee specialists only.

Gaylard concludes by stating that, while self-reflexivity is treated with scepticism by contemporary African authors, it has several important practical functions, such as the examination of the role of the writer in the "post-colonial" state. Ultimately, then, despite certain limitations, its practice seems inescapable.