

Utopia within Dystopia: *Stand on Zanzibar* as Speculative Postcolonial Literature

John Brunner's sprawling dystopian novel, *Stand on Zanzibar*, contains within it a powerful narrative thread of utopianism based on post-colonial nostalgia, which functions as an alternative vehicle for the motivation of its audience towards self-reflection and positive change. This unique construction allows Brunner to explore the twin terrains of fear and hope in describing his futuristic vision, and to play upon his audience's duplicitous appetite for both in an attempt to sound an alarm warning against terrible things to come should Western society continue along its chosen path.

Science fiction is the literary home for dystopian vision, in part because dystopian tales are frequently set in the future and rely on speculative assumptions involving technologies and environments that do not exist either in history or the present time. Contrastingly, postcolonial literature moves from the present to the past and back again, hinging on nostalgia and memory to construct for readers an image of the world that can change because it must. In *Stand on Zanzibar*, which is set forty-two years after its date of publication, Brunner considers a future in which technological advancement has led to catastrophic overpopulation, an uncontrollably and unpredictably violent populace, and a complete breakdown of interpersonal relationships. But by inserting the brightly shining utopian vision of Beninia into the heart of his novel, Brunner extends a long arm into the tool shed of postcolonial writers and achieves the singular feat of comfortably straddling two deeply distinctive genres in the process.

This exploration requires the explanation of several key concepts in the novel. First, it will be necessary to determine what qualifies *Stand on Zanzibar* as a dystopia and what function that classification serves. Then, we will explore Beninia as a utopian vision of hope while

placing hope within a postcolonial context. Finally, we will draw on specific examples in the text to locate the novel within the genre of postcolonial literature.

John Hickman describes dystopian fiction as a creative vehicle offering “the most direct means to denounce the social evils that authors perceive emerging in contemporary society” and lists among the functions of science fiction in general, “[helping] to identify the possible consequences that might flow from personal and public policy choices, especially those involving new technology” (141-142). Brunner’s created universe in *Stand on Zanzibar* features a society at the mercy of a probability-predicting super-computer, which leads humanity along its descent into an array of dire and destructive consequences stemming from state and corporate policy decisions. The most obvious of these is the intrusive eugenics legislation imposed upon the citizens of all the developed nations in the story, deemed necessary by governments seeking to curb population growth and purge the populace of genetically undesirable traits. Brunner seems to be reacting to a nascent trend towards superficiality and overconsumption in his own time. He intuitively connects advances in medicine and science with a long-standing human desire for immortality, and predicts the commoditization of health and longevity along with it.

Similarly, Brunner invents “muckers,” ordinary men and women who suffer temporary insanity which pushes them to commit horrifying acts of violence against anyone unlucky enough to be near them. Chad Mulligan, the sociologist whose voice serves as a representation of the author’s throughout the text, identifies the mucker phenomenon as a result of overcrowding and the loss of any sense of self or personal space, comparing life in the densely populated cities to being in a jail cell, where

[the] bars are the competing members of your own species, at least as cunning as you on average, forever shifting around so you can’t pin them down, liable

to get in your way without the least warning, disorienting your personal environment until you want to grab a gun or an axe and turn mucker.

(Brunner 67)

These terrifying realities in Brunner's vision squarely place the work in the realm of dystopian fiction, first by hinting at what may have gone wrong in the past to yield such a future. Then, Brunner draws on what Rob McAlear defines as the rhetoric of fear to offer a persuasive argument for making whatever changes are necessary to remove the possibility of such a future ever arising (24).

This appeal to the reader's sense of fear implies a relationship between the author and his audience that is pivotal to understanding dystopian fiction as a genre. McAlear suggests that dystopias use the moral code of a particular society to turn the focus of individuals inward, where they can become enlightened enough to see that the steps they take at any given moment do, indeed, lead somewhere, and that where they lead may not be good for society as a whole (26). Chad Mulligan, continuing his musings on the debauched state of the modern Western global citizen, appears to be the willing, if at times reluctant, harbinger of fear, promising little else but a nightmare for the slowly awakening reader: "Your life from birth to death resembles the progress of a hopelessly drunk tightrope walker whose act has been so bad up til now that he's being bombarded with rotten eggs and broken bottles" (Brunner 67).

According to McAlear, the strategic function of fear in dystopian vision is mirrored by the similarly strategic function of hope in utopian vision (25). In *Stand on Zanzibar*, there is an anomaly that defies every principle of fear presented by the larger dystopian vision. This aberration takes the form of the African nation of Beninia, a state without a hierarchical bureaucratic structure that preys on or imposes itself on its citizens, but is instead governed as a

family, with its president as the proud patriarch with his arms around each and every one of his children, the citizens of his nation. Although it is a poor country, it does not suffer from conflict, oppression and war; although it is not a rich country, it enjoys great wealth in the human capital of compassion and communion. At first glance, Beninia fits a kind of textbook definition of a utopia, as a geographical locale, where everything – though not perfect – is as it should be. If the novel as a whole functions as a dystopia because of violence, murder, mayhem and muckers, then Beninia functions as a utopia within it because,

there aren't any murders, there aren't any muckers, there aren't any tempers lost, there aren't any tribal squabbles, there aren't any riots, there's nothing of what people in supposedly more fortunate countries have come to take for granted.” (Brunner 428)

Beninia is a pillar of hope, reaching up from the depths of a fearful planet. But Bill Ashcroft makes an important distinction between the concept of utopia and a theory of utopianism, shifting the focus from an actual, idyllic location to a larger, more ambiguous realm, where “the spirit of hope itself” communicates the “essence of desire for a better world” (8). A utopia is a place people can dream of visiting; utopianism reflects the possibility of metaphysical transformation and realignment based on a liberating ideology (13). Beninia is not just a place where many of Brunner's characters go; it is also an idea that changes each person who tries to resist it.

Ashcroft defines utopia as a future construct, and indicates that implicit within utopianism is an “operation of memory,” which functions as a bridge between the present and the past (9). And yet, even with this distinction, it seems obvious that Beninia still fits within the definition of a classic utopia: the novel is, after all, set in the future and is still well within the

realm of science fiction. But Ashcroft continues, using the concept of memory to place utopianism in a postcolonial context by asserting its usefulness, not as a glimpse into the past, but as a glimpse into the very present worlds of what people want and need to see in their history, and how what they see can lead them towards the future. Brunner's Beninia, although presented in a novel set in the future, is a representation of the very real present for the characters in the novel. Nowhere is this clearer than in the stories of Begi, introduced as a Beninian counterpart to Jesus Christ. Many tales surrounding the life of Begi are relayed throughout the story, but in one section, Brunner makes the curious choice to show how the mythology surrounding Begi is not only ongoing, but evolving along with the story. After the General Technics operations in Beninia begin and the corporate element is physically introduced to the country, Brunner slyly reports, "There is a new Begi story. Nobody knows where it got started. It's called Begi and the American" (430). What in utopia is a simple leap into the future becomes in utopianism a cyclical journey through time, tethered to history, and hope; reflection and anticipation.

Ashcroft cites the "Myth of Return" as a dominant theme in postcolonial utopianism, describing "its most extreme form... as the desire to retrieve some essential authentic cultural identity that existed before colonisation happened" (10). Brunner, writing in Great Britain in 1968, on the heels of the cascading revolutions for independence throughout Africa, would almost certainly have been aware of at least one side of this phenomenon. Brunner, presenting the European viewpoint, chooses two couples with opposing yet mirrored motives for seeking to enter Africa through the window opened by American corporate interests. Victor and Mary Whatmough are a married pair of British ex-colonizers, who long to return to the glory of true, material superiority, in which subjugated people are only as valuable as they are capable of

service and are so devoid of value as to be instantly replaceable. Living lives of increasing disappointment in England, the idea of returning to Africa becomes an obsession; for Victor, it becomes an ultimatum, which eventually leads him to suicide when that possibility is finally lost forever (509).

Jeannine and Pierre Clodard are French nationals engaged in an unusually close sibling relationship whose parents, though evicted from Algeria during its struggle for independence before having children, instilled in those children a powerful longing for a homeland they would never see. Jeannine, sharing a wistful moment with her brother over the Africa-shaped emptiness that persists within them, laments, “We’re not expatriates... We’re extemporates, exiled from a country that vanished even before we were born, of which our parents made us citizens without intending to” (Brunner 260). For this pair, as well as for the Whatmoughs, the news that they will not be going to Beninia prompts the crossing of a line from which there is no return. The Clodards, however, do not cross over the threshold between life and death, but rather push their emotionally incestuous relationship into the physical, sexual realm (518).

Key to the concept of the myth of return is the function of nostalgia within postcolonial literature. Dennis Walder defines nostalgia as “a cultural phenomenon that... connects people across national and historical as well as personal boundaries” (935). Certainly, the anathema on display in the indecent bond between Jeannine and Pierre, based solely on the perceived notion that each of them is the only other person who can understand who they are and why they are, is explained within this context. Svetlana Boym, writing about nostalgia, delineates two types of nostalgias: the restorative, which concerns nationalism and myth-making in an effort to reconstruct something that, although lost, remains true in the eye of the beholder; and the reflective, which hovers beneath the weight of loss and longing, and lives among dreams and

wishes (41). Both are represented in *Stand on Zanzibar*, and both are essential to understanding the novel as a work of postcolonial fiction.

In order to arrive at this understanding, it is important to define the word *postcolonial*. Dennis Walder brings the term into sharper focus, using it to “identify a range of experiences and representations produced by intercultural and transnational conflict, migration, and enforced settlement” (936). Here is where the two longing pairs of European ex-colonizers (and would-be colonizers) are joined by several other characters in a dance between constructed memory and transformative hope. Brunner, having ingeniously predicted the widespread globalization that has come to define the twenty-first century, introduces a number of characters who are affected by these kinds of experiences and representations.

The European exiles exemplify Boym’s paradigm of restorative nostalgia, but when addressing the issue of the reflective, we can pluck from the central characters of the novel freely. Part of what makes reflective nostalgia reflective is the “[qualifying] awareness that the past cannot be restored” and “is approachable through ‘stories and secrets’” (Walder 940). This brings to mind Brunner’s Norman House, the African-American, or Afram, General Technics Junior Vice President who undergoes an unsettling transformation that leads him to become the head of the company’s operations in Beninia. Early in the novel, Norman recalls a memory passed down to him by his grandfather of his family’s slave past, and specifically of the violent, brutal punishment of an ancestor after an act of insubordination. That this memory is not a pleasant one does nothing to dim the power of it; Norman recalls the memory because he is forced to reenact it, shamefully cast in the role of the oppressor. What is important here is that it places Norman within an African context, long before he sets foot in Beninia. It opens a need within him, to relate to a part of himself he has subdued; first, he approaches Elihu Masters,

American ambassador to Beninia and another Afram who will ultimately become his guide on his journey back to himself through Africa. When he arrives in Beninia, he is told by Gideon, another Afram expatriate working at the American Embassy, that the country will “digest” him (Brunner 342). What Gideon does not say is that Norman, along with many others, will also digest Beninia.

The America in John Brunner’s vision of 2010, from a postcolonial perspective, is not much different from the America of 2012. African-descended Americans do lose their sense of self as they stretch and bend into assimilating postures. In the novel, it is first Elihu, then Gideon, then Norman; all fall to the myth of return that for them, as descendants of slaves, predates colonialism and the postcolonial period. Norman, offering an impromptu and impassioned compliment to Beninia’s leader, President Obomi, breaks from professionalism and speaks personally:

But what I wind up thinking is—is that I half-wish the slave-traders
hadn’t steered clear of Beninia. Because I’d be rather proud to think
my own African ancestors came from Shinka stock. (428)

Perhaps most interesting about this is Norman’s observation of the response of his team of colleagues to his statement, one of whom, a white man, “was apparently nodding violent agreement, not a reaction one would expect from a Caucasian in Beninia.” Eventually, even Chad Mulligan, the meta-John Brunner within the novel who denounces all products of the mass-marketed, unfettered capitalistic society – including himself – goes to Beninia and becomes a new-Beninian. So anyone and everyone of any and every phenotype, is susceptible to the powerful pull of postcolonial or, in Beninia’s case, anti-colonial Africa and its infectious, irresistible belongingness. And in this globalized, dystopian vision where people are forced to

undergo sterilization or exile, where neighbors murder their neighbors out of jealousy or boredom or rage, where women are forced to abort their children or be imprisoned, where homelessness requires a permit, and where siblings can be born longing for a home in a foreign land, everyone is an expatriate, and everyone is colonized. And if everyone is colonized, then everyone is equally available to break their bonds and be freed. Walder notes, “Although we may find it easy in nostalgic retrospect to identify friend and foe, oppressor and oppressed, on closer inspection we may find it less easy” (937). Brunner even goes so far as to invent a genetic marker within the lineage of the Shinka people, which holds the promise of a return to humanity for the depraved inhabitants of his dystopia. Beninia is where they all must go to decolonize. Beninia is where they all go to de-epitify. Donald Hogan Mark II, in exile from himself and his home as an unwilling but controlled government agent in Yatakang, muses over the promise of the genetic optimization program, even as that promise threatens to further destabilize the nations of the world:

Somehow, the entire human race seemed momentarily united in a single entrancing dream—the hope that the next generation they would bequeath to Mother Earth would be whole, healthy, sane, capable of making amends for the rape they had inflicted in olden days. (358)

What Donald does not yet know is that soon, after he is driven to kill and kill again, and once he is broken, demilitarized, and drugged into compliance, he will find himself within reach of this dream, thanks to the utopian specter of Beninia.

John Brunner, in choosing to inject his dystopian epic with a lasting, pungent breath of hope, tilts its trajectory through the science fiction genre and into the multi-tongued world of postcolonial literature. For all the brutal and senseless deaths and for each exploitative or cruel

act, Brunner sends one tiny ray of light to illuminate a path out of the darkness. Perhaps, as Bill Ashcroft asserts, it is true that “all achieved utopias are degenerate”; we are lucky, then, that Brunner’s Beninia exists in a fictional universe where it does not and cannot rule or overwhelm us (9). It only persists. It merely digests. Nestled within the concept of possibility is the promise that what we cannot know might still be; Ashcroft considers utopianism “fundamental to human consciousness because humans are always striving forward, anticipating, desiring” (9). Depicting complex creatures who readily admit to a taste for carrots while secretly sporting a sadomasochistic urge for a stick, what Brunner seems to be sure of as he offers Beninia up into the fire-streaked skies, is that without hope, even fear will eventually become a bore. And what bores us can never hope to free us, because we are curious creatures, destined to follow the twisted paths we invent, constructing and deconstructing ourselves—and our environments along the way.

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