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# The Fiction of Development: Knowledge, Authority and Representation

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**Abstract:** *This article introduces and explores issues regarding the question of what constitute valid forms of development knowledge, focusing in particular on the relationship between fictional writing on development and more formal academic and policy-oriented representations of development issues. We challenge certain conventional notions about the nature of knowledge, narrative authority, and representational form, and analyse these by comparing and contrasting selected works of recent literary fiction that touch on development issues with academic and policy-related representations of the development process, thereby demonstrating the value of taking literary perspectives on development seriously, based on the fact that certain works of fiction are better than academic or policy research in representing central issues relating to development, that they also frequently reach a wider audience and are therefore more influential, and finally because the line between fact and fiction is a very fine one. The article finally provides a list of relevant works of fiction that we hope academics and practitioners will find both useful and enjoyable.*

**Key words:** *development knowledge, representation, narrative authority, fiction*

**Word count:** 8,071 (including references)

## 1. INTRODUCTION: DEVELOPMENT AND REPRESENTATION<sup>1</sup>

*My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, above all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything.*<sup>2</sup>

*But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling like dew upon a thought, produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.*<sup>3</sup>

“Development” is one of the key organizing concepts of the modern era. As such, ideas and images of development are inevitably represented in a wide variety of ways, whether within academia, the policy world, or the general public domain. To this extent, it can be contended that all forms of development knowledge can be – and historically have been – largely understood as a series of “stories”. This is true not only in the pragmatic sense that to have an impact on public opinion or within academia, even the most elaborate equations and sophisticated data analyses need to be able to be expressed in everyday language (Denning, 2000), but also in the deeper philosophical sense that all knowledge claims are necessarily embedded in particular subjective understandings of how the world works, as was famously pointed out by Walter Benjamin (1989) in a classic essay entitled “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”.

Benjamin not only contended that all knowledge of reality is unavoidably subjective but also that it is inevitably mediated by the representative forms which describe it, and that different modes of representation therefore impart different visions of the world. He was of course not the first to highlight this issue, which can be placed within a broader philosophical tradition going back in the West to the 4th century BC and Plato’s famous “Simile of the Cave”, and even further in the East, to the 6th century BC parable of the blind men and the elephant recorded in the Buddhist *Udana*. We take Benjamin (1989: 9-10) as our starting point, however, because he saw this concern as critical for the social sciences, arguing that the key challenge for these was consequently the creation of “a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds”. Benjamin made it his life’s work to design a form of representation which would capture the subjective dimension of social reality whilst simultaneously allowing an objective knowledge of the world.<sup>4</sup> Our purpose in this article is more modest, and we seek merely to suggest that there may be a case for widening the scope of the development knowledge base conventionally considered to be “valid”.

In particular, we focus on the potential contribution that works of fiction can make to development, our intention being to lay down a challenge to practitioners and academics within the field to include fictional representations of development issues within the epistemological scope of what they consider to be “proper” forms of development knowledge. The article begins by making some general remarks about the nature of

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors alone, and not necessarily those of the respective institutions with which they are affiliated. Please address all comments and questions to d.w.rodgers@lse.ac.uk, d.lewis@lse.ac.uk, and mwoolcock@worldbank.org. For helpful discussions and comments we are grateful to Xavier de Souza Briggs, Paola Grenier, Scott Guggenheim, Naila Kabeer, Jenny Kuper, Vijayendra Rao, Sue Redgrave, and LSE Development Studies Institute MSc students from 2002-03 and 2003-04. The usual disclaimers apply.

<sup>2</sup> Conrad (1984 [1897]: 1).

<sup>3</sup> Byron, (1973 [1819-24]: 182).

<sup>4</sup> This culminated in Benjamin’s celebrated *Arcades Project*, an unfinished palimpsest of assorted notes, quotations, and aphorisms which attempted to put together a new theory of history embodied in a new literary and philosophical historiography (see Benjamin, 1999).

knowledge, narrative authority, and representational form, highlighting in particular the common ground that exists between fiction and non-fiction. We then explore the contributions that a number of works of modern popular fiction touching on development themes potentially make to our understanding of development, and juxtapose these with the contributions of more formal academic and applied approaches. A final section draws some conclusions and proposes a list of relevant works of fiction that we feel may be of interest to those whom we will have persuaded of the importance of our endeavour.

## 2. KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY, AND NARRATIVE FORM

There clearly exists within development studies a hierarchy of authority which determines what constitutes “valid” development knowledge. Although much of the sound and fury in today’s development debates clearly stems from what can be described as a “clash of epistemologies”, in which different understandings of the means and ends of development come into contact with one another, in many ways there exists a much deeper schism that affects the very nature of what is considered knowledge and what is not. This involves decisions about the acceptable form that development “stories” can take to be deemed serious. Even if in recent years there have been some attempts to broaden the development knowledge base beyond traditional academic monographs and policy manuals – including perhaps most notably the World Bank’s “Voices of the Poor” initiative,<sup>5</sup> for example – these remain overwhelmingly the standard representational form for the dissemination of development narratives within the discipline. As such, they can be said to constitute the benchmark against which other forms of knowledge representation are measured within development studies – broadly construed as encompassing both the academic and practitioner worlds – and those that do not match up are generally discarded or ignored, including in particular literary forms of representation.

To a certain extent, this situation mirrors a fundamental divide that is generally seen to exist between literature and social science. As Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1992: 218) succinctly outlines – and simultaneously undermines – the separation between these two approaches derives from at least three factors:

“The first is that one is fiction and the other is non-fiction: the basis for telling the story is different. However, this is relative. There are many writers who use factual events for their novels and many social scientists who use fictitious reality to illustrate their theses... The second is that social scientists are obliged to be systematic, that is, to demonstrate a method, which is also relative. Writers often have a very systematic method... The third is the presence or lack of aesthetic expression, and this is a difference that, following R.H Brown ... I propose to abolish.”

The historian Hayden White (1973) implicitly goes even further in dismissing this distinction when he contends that social science draws its authority from its perceived aesthetic value rather than the use of putatively “factual” data or “objective” theory. Focusing in particular on nineteenth century historical accounts, he shows how these were structured along similar lines to the realist novel, with their force and persuasion deriving principally from the deployment of rhetorical strategies. According to White, this was because ultimately all interpretation is fundamentally rhetorical in nature; it is a process that occurs when there is uncertainty as to how to describe or explain a phenomenon, and consequently figurative

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<sup>5</sup> See Narayan *et al.* (2000a & 2000b), and Narayan and Petesch (2002). See also the “Voices of the Poor” website at: <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/voices/>.

rather than objective means of persuasion will inevitably be resorted to. From this perspective, the line between literature and the social sciences becomes a very fine one.

This is also the case when storytelling is considered historically, as one of mankind's oldest methods of possessing information and representing reality. Certainly, as Michel Foucault (1984) has perceptively pointed out, those texts that we today categorize as "literary fiction" – stories, poems, plays – were in fact once accepted as the primary media for the expression of essential truths about human dilemmas and understandings of the world, in the same way that in this day and age positivist scientific discourse is received as authoritative *pro forma*. Indeed, fiction is arguably to a large extent frequently about very issues that at a basic level are the subject matter of development studies: the promises and perils of encounters between different peoples, the tragic mix of courage, desperation, humour, and deprivation characterizing the lives of the downtrodden, and the complex assortment of means, motives, and opportunities surrounding efforts by outsiders to "help" them. From this perspective, one might even say – with apologies to the William Shakespeare – that in many ways stories "are such stuff as [development studies] are made on".<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, as was pointed out over two thousand years ago by the Roman poet Horace, the role of literature has historically always been not only "to delight" but also "to teach".<sup>7</sup> Sir Thomas More for example famously claimed that he was compelled to write his powerful political tract *Utopia* (1516) as "a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared by honey, might a little more pleasantly slip into men's minds" (More, 1964: 251). This prescriptive ideal was perhaps most clearly expressed in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain during the debates around the so-called "republic of letters" that the industrial revolution and the spread of literacy were seen to be creating (see Keen, 1999). Literature was seen as politically charged within the context of Britain's changing social conditions, and a powerful vector for the shaping of public values and morality. As the British anarchist William Godwin (1993 [1793]: 20) put it:

"Few engines can be more powerful, and at the same time more salutary in their tendency, than literature. Without enquiring for the present into the cause of this phenomenon, it is sufficiently evident in fact, that the human mind is strongly infected with prejudice and mistake. The various opinions prevailing in different countries and among different classes of men upon the same subject, are almost innumerable... Now the effectual way for extirpating these prejudices and mistakes seems to be literature."

Seen in this way, it can be contended that as the scholarly and policy communities continue to grapple in the beginning of this new millennium with ways to ameliorate their theories and strategies of development, turning to novelists, poets, and playwrights for inspiration and ideas could plausibly be instructive. The two following sections endeavour to take literary perspectives on development seriously, teasing out a number of themes and lessons from selected examples in order to demonstrate to those who primarily concern themselves with more formal – empirical, theoretical, and applied – representations of development that alternatives narratives may also be of potential interest.<sup>8</sup> We do not claim to be either exhaustive or representative in our choices of literary works, which are dictated by our own personal readings. Moreover, although some of the works of fiction we make

<sup>6</sup> See Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act IV, scene 1, line 155.

<sup>7</sup> Horace's original expression was that literature – and more specifically poetry – should be both "sweet and useful" (see Horace, 1959: 75). Its oft-cited formulation as "to teach and to delight" is generally attributed to the 16<sup>th</sup> century soldier-poet Sir Philip Sydney in his famous *Apology for Poetry* (2002 [1595]).

<sup>8</sup> In some respects there are parallels between this article and Sherman (2001), who uses literary sources to document changing public attitudes toward the poor in turn of the nineteenth century Britain.

reference to have been written by writers from the developing world, it is important to note that we are in no way attempting to construct a case for literature being a “voice from the developing world” nor are we trying to propose an overview of developing world literature. Rather, our focus is on literature in general as an alternative representational genre through which to gaze at development, and the authors we have selected are those that, for different and idiosyncratic reasons, we feel have important things to say regardless of their origins.

### 3. LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT

In her recent study of non-governmental organization (NGO) issues in the Philippines, Thea Hilhorst (2003) begins by making a strikingly unfavourable comparison between mainstream academic writing on NGOs and the portrayal of the world of NGOs in a recent work of popular fiction. Hilhorst opens her monograph with a brief discussion of Helen Fielding’s novel *Cause Celeb* (1994), a mainly light-hearted chronicle of the adventures of Rosie, a disenchanted London public relations manager who becomes involved in international humanitarian efforts to address famine in an African country.<sup>9</sup> Hilhorst’s (2003: 1-2) point is that, perhaps unexpectedly, Fielding’s novel presents a relatively nuanced picture of international development work and organizational life:

“In the novel, Rosie’s NGO does what organizations do: it has a mission and clear objectives, staff with differentiated responsibilities, and it works with a budget for planned activities. Yet the novel also brings out how this NGO is shaped by actors in the organization and their surrounding networks. These people carry out activities according to their understanding of the situation and follow the whims of their personalities, motivated by various combinations of sacrifice, self-interest, vanity and compassion. It also places the humanitarian activities in their political context, both in the local situation of a country at war and in the politics of development bureaucracies and fundraising. Finally, the novel delightfully turns the refugees into real people—good *and* bad, loveable *and* pitiful—who actively endeavor to enroll NGO staff members and visitors to provide the necessary assistance.

Fielding’s novel is strikingly different from most of the scholarly literature on NGOs. Reading this literature, one is usually presented with a black-and-white picture in which managers play the lead roles, all other actors remain silent and the organizations unfold their objectives in a participatory way. One wonders what these tidy organizations have to do with the other realities that reach us from developing countries, including social and political movements, conflict and fundamentalism. And one keeps wondering what really happens inside the organizations and how this relates to the lives of the NGO staff, volunteers and beneficiaries.”<sup>10</sup>

Hilhorst goes on to ask the question of “why would Helen Fielding succeed in giving this real-life account of an NGO where development scholars have failed, apart from the obvious reason that she brings her literary talent to this task?” The answer, she contends, is that development

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<sup>9</sup> Changing emphasis to a completely different subject matter, Fielding later went on to write the hugely popular and influential *Bridget Jones* novels.

<sup>10</sup> Many other scholars and practitioners have made similar use of literature to highlight an issue, although few explicit their logic for doing so as clearly as Hilhorst. Von Struensee (2004), for example, uses Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Bride Price* (1976) as a means of introducing the subject of bride price in a recent overview paper on the domestic relations bill in Uganda. In a related manner, it is common for social scientists to preface their work with literary citations, implicitly because they are revealing of the issue being written about (and no doubt also because this tends to generate a certain aura of cultural sophistication).

research on organizations in general and on NGOs in particular has paid too much attention to the formal organizational world and has assumed its boundaries, thereby ignoring the stories of the people who work in and with these organizations as well as the formal and informal relationships which link everyday practices across formal organizational boundaries. The nuanced portrayal of the NGO world in Fielding's novel contrasts strongly with this lack of imagination and depth, and illustrates well the point that informs our argument in this article, namely that fictional accounts of development can sometimes reveal different sides to the experience of development and may sometimes even do a "better" job of conveying the complexities of development than research-based accounts.

Akhil Gupta (2005) similarly demonstrates the power of fiction in a recent article where he draws on both academic and literary works in order to write about corruption in India, including in particular, the novel *Raag Darbari* by Shrilal Shukla (1992 [1968]). According to Gupta (2005: 20-21), this latter narrative is not only "one of the richest works of fiction about the postcolonial Indian state" but arguably "a work whose insights into politics and the state in rural India are without comparison". Indeed, Gupta goes on to claim that "it is hard for me to think of another novel or ethnography that gives a more clearly etched picture of the large villages and small tehsil towns". At the same time, however, it can be argued that Gupta (2005: 21) effectively treats *Raag Darbari* as quasi-formal research when he claims that its sharp portrayal of social reality derives from the fact that Shukla

"served in the U.P. state provincial service, and then the Indian Administrative Service, being posted mainly around Lucknow. He could thus draw upon a lifetime of experience and observation in those settings that form the stage for the novel".

While this may well be the case, much of the force of the book clearly also derives from its literary qualities as a novel, however. *Raag Darbari* won one of India's most prestigious literary awards – the Sahitya Akademi Award – in 1970, and is widely considered to have taken the satirical genre to new heights within the context of Hindi-language post-Independence literature. The novel is a picaresque comedy that draws readers in through a series of inter-linked stories that are in turn satirical, ironic, and tragic, making witty use of vernacular wordplay and caricature, and providing rich, fine-grained descriptions of post-Independence rural small-town India. It furthermore ends on an unambiguous and in many ways prophetic message about the venality of local politics and the vise-like nature of poverty in the countryside that did much to change dominant perceptions of rural India at the time. In particular, the dramatic finale that suggests that migration is the only hope for the rural poor radically challenged prevalent romantic stereotypes of the Indian countryside being idyllic, harmonious, and timeless in a way that many academic and policy texts on rural India pointedly failed to do during the 1950s and 1960s. As such, *Raag Darbari* arguably constitutes an example of literary fiction that can be considered "better" than much of the academic or policy-oriented research from this period as a result of its nuanced understanding and detailed depiction of key development issues.

Another way in which literary fiction can claim to often be "better" than academic or policy texts is that it will generally reach far more people and may therefore be more influential than academic or policy works in shaping public knowledge and understanding of development issues. Sometimes this is clearly the result of a specific conjunction of events. For example, the US invasion of Afghanistan and continuing "war on terror" have obviously played a significant role in the success of Khaled Hosseini's extraordinarily popular novel *The Kite Runner* (2003), which has arguably done more to educate Western readers about the realities of daily life in Afghanistan (under the Taliban and thereafter) than any government media campaign, advocacy organization report, or social science research. Generally, though,

the critical and public popularity of novels that deal with such themes is at times surprising. Take, for example, Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (1996), which was the winner of the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize, was nominated for the Booker Prize, and was selected by the US television personality Oprah Winfrey as her "book of the month choice", thereby guaranteeing it massive sales. The novel is set primarily at the time of the 1975 State of Internal Emergency period in India, and traces the fortunes of fictional four characters as they try to survive communal tensions, rural to urban migration, downward socio-economic mobility, state violence of population control programs, and the fragile search for mutual support networks, productive activity, employment and informal social services in Bombay.<sup>11</sup> It is a relentlessly downbeat novel which concerns itself with almost unbearable hardship and tragedy, and yet the powerfully-drawn characters which inhabit a vividly described world allow the book to transcend its difficult, even unattractive subject matter towards a universal appeal based on a kind of "humanism with politics".

What makes *A Fine Balance* particularly germane for our purposes is Mistry's clear intention to do more than simply entertain. He prefaces his work with a quotation from Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, which deliberately seeks to blur the boundary between "truth" and "fiction":

"Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself: perhaps it will not amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true."

*A Fine Balance* thus explicitly attempts to communicate to a mass audience a wide-ranging set of insights about development processes that are all too often either ignored or de-personalized within academic or policy accounts, without compromising either complexity, politics or readability in the way that literature is often accused of doing.

The same is true of another recent Booker Prize-nominated novel that has a South Asian theme, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (2003). This rapidly became a fixture at the top of the UK bestseller lists following its publication, and led to its author joining the ranks of the prestigious "Granta New Young British Novelist" list. The novel chronicles the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who is sent to Britain at age 18 to marry Chanu, a man twice her age. It provides a rich narrative of the joys and difficulties of her new life, magnificently situating it within wider descriptions of the Bangladeshi migrant community in London that tracing its fears, tensions, and aspirations. A particularly important element of the novel is the juxtaposition of Nazneen's life in London with that of her sister, Hasina, who has remained in Bangladesh. Through a series of letters, we see how Hasina's life becomes increasingly difficult after she leaves her violent husband, migrates from her village to Dhaka, falls afoul of prevailing gender norms, and loses her job in a garment factory when she is accused of behaving in a "lewd manner". The novel thus encompasses a wide range of themes centred on development and social change: the experience of migration to the UK, the politics of organizing within migrant communities, inter-generational relationships, rural-urban migration, tensions around gender and culture, and the activities of charitable non-governmental organizations among destitute women workers in Dhaka.

There is also another reason why this novel is particularly relevant to our argument. While it is reasonable to suppose that an author's reasons for writing a novel are bound up in a complex bundle of creative, personal and professional motivations, *Brick Lane* is at least

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the book has been used as a set text for several university courses on subjects such as rural-urban migration, urbanization, and "livelihoods".



partly inspired by recent academic research on Bangladeshi women. At the end of the book, the first acknowledgement is to the University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies academic Naila Kabeer, “from whose study of Bangladeshi women garment workers in London and Dhaka (*The Power to Choose*) I drew inspiration” (Ali, 2003: 371).<sup>12</sup> Kabeer’s (2000) book is a study of gender and labour markets within the context of the simultaneous growth of women’s employment in the garment sectors of Dhaka and London. The book contrasts employment conditions for women among Bangladeshi communities in the UK, where women work as home-based machinists in an apparent throwback to a nineteenth century form of economic organization, with those in Bangladesh, where women from the 1980s onwards have increasingly moved out of seclusion into wage employment within modern, large-scale, export-based garment factories. Ali first became aware of *The Power to Choose* while working for Verso Press, where she was given the manuscript to work on.<sup>13</sup> Here then is a novel which, perhaps unusually, builds on academic research to construct a fictional narrative, responding no doubt to the powerful and evocative testimonies provided by the real women who speak through Kabeer’s book.

#### 4. TEXTS, NARRATIVES AND POLICY

The power of literature to effectively convey complex ideas and images of development ought not to be surprising. Over forty years ago, Lewis Coser published the first edition of his classic but unfortunately now out-of-print *Sociology through Literature*, an unprecedented introduction to sociology through an eclectic collection of literary fiction. Citing Henry James in the introduction to his volume, Coser (1972 [1963]: xv) argued that “there is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place”. As such, writers of fiction “have provided their readers with an immense variety of richly textured commentaries on man’s life in society, on his involvement with his fellow-men,” to the extent that literature can constitute a key form of social evidence and testimony.

Coser (1972 [1963]: xvi) was careful not to suggest that literature could replace “systematically accumulated, certified knowledge”. Rather, he saw them as complementing each other, but argued that “social scientists have but too often felt it is somewhat below their dignity to show an interest in literature”. This “self-denying ordinance” was highly problematic according to Coser (1972 [1963]: xvi), who contended that

“there is an intensity of perception in the first-rate novelist when he describes a locale, a sequence of action, or a clash of characters which can hardly be matched by ...sociologists. ...The creative imagination of the literary artist often has achieved insights into social processes which have remained unexplored in social science.”

Seen in this way, it may be particularly useful to compare and contrast literary views on development with the ideas and perceptions of academic social science and the public policy world, in order to glean new insights and novel perspectives (so to speak).

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that the novel also pokes fun at academic work. At one point, Nazneen’s husband Chanu cites the London School of Economics “World Happiness Survey” to support his argument for returning to Bangladesh: “Research led by professors at the London School of Economics into links between personal spending power and perceived quality of life has found out that Bangladeshis are the happiest people in the world. And LSE is a very respectable establishment, comparable to Dhaka University or Open University.” (Ali, 2003: 290). A further irony here is that despite this LSE study being cited from time to time in the press and on websites, we are unable to find any conclusive evidence that it ever existed.

<sup>13</sup> Kabeer, personal communication.

Certainly, the themes emanating from what might be called “policy” documents – the official texts produced by multilateral development agencies, government planning offices, and large NGOs can often be rather starkly contrasted with those of fictional writing on development. For example, on the one hand in a recent study of what he terms “technopolitics”, Timothy Mitchell (2002) shows how Egypt’s development problems are construed by the World Bank as functions of demography and geography – too many people producing too little food because of not enough arable land – which in turn give rise to corresponding agricultural and irrigation projects. On the other hand, literary authors such as the Nobel Prize winning Naguib Mahfouz, in his novels *Adrift on the Nile* (1993[1966]) and *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (1993 [1983]), or Ahdad Soueif in her Booker Prize nominated novel *The Map of Love* (1999), provide very different analyses, respectively pointing to factors including modernization and the concomitant spread of anomie, religious fundamentalism, and the colonial legacy as critical to explaining Egypt’s development predicament.

Similarly, the recent and influential World Bank (2000) report *Can Africa Claim the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?* – co-authored with several other development organizations – is another example of such disjuncture. It optimistically and proactively affirms that Africa’s future depends on “determined leadership”, “good governance”, “sound policies”, “improved infrastructure”, “investments in people”, “reduced conflict”, “higher economic growth”, and “reduced aid dependence”. While all of these factors are undoubtedly eminently sensible from an “orthodox” point of view, they are also very much representative of the so-called “post-Washington Consensus” prescriptions rather than any “story” for Africa based on the careful analysis of the continent’s historical development. This is particularly stark when measured up against fictional accounts such as Nobel Prize winning novelist Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or J. G. Ballard’s *The Day of Creation* (1987). Achebe’s novel details the lasting legacy of colonialism in Nigeria, including the conflicts generated around cultural practices, but it also traces the power struggles that traditionally run through tribal communities, showing these to also be a source of change and constant struggle. Ballard’s *The Day of Creation* actually focuses directly on development practice insofar as the central character is a doctor – significantly named Dr. Mallory – running a WHO clinic in an unnamed underdeveloped, drought-plagued, and poverty ridden West African country caught in the midst of a civil war. As the novel unfolds, Mallory is confronted with the perversity of the processes and manifestations that he once saw as epitomising development, ultimately concluding to the futility of the process as conceived on Western terms.

Our argument here is not so much that academic or policy approaches to development are necessarily “wrong” or flawed, nor is it that we think novelists should be put in charge of development ministries. Rather, our point is that understanding how different – and especially competing – stories get framed is critical to understanding how and why certain ideas in development ultimately become public ideas (and, concomitantly, how and why some do not). As Mark Moore (1987: 80) has astutely noted, ideas that become dominant public ones frequently do so insofar as they

“distinguish heroes from villains, and those who must act from those who need not. ...[T]o the extent that these distinctions fit with the aspirations of the parties so identified, the ideas will become powerful. If powerful people are made heroes and weaker ones villains, and if work is allocated to people who want it and away from people who do not, an idea has a greater chance of becoming powerful”.

This is of course an issue that can be said to affect fictional literature about development and more formal development literature equally. But part of the problem with the policy – and to some extent also the academic – literature of development is that it often serves to construct

development problems in a way that justify the response of the particular policies they advocate (see Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 1995, and Mitchell, 2002).

As Emery Roe (1991 & 1994) has suggested, to a large extent policy documents can be understood as “narratives” that frame what and how development problems are discussed by powerful actors, validating the ubiquitous role of (and interventions by) professional “experts”, and legitimizing efforts to construe deeply complex historical and political issues as being most effectively – and most “rigorously” – addressed through technocratic means, for example through the adoption of “better policies” and “stronger institutions” as determined by “solid evidence” and “rational planning”.<sup>14</sup> Such documents privilege certain forms of information, explanation, and “evidence”,<sup>15</sup> and in conjunction with the politically powerful places from whence they emanate – and the inherent need that Weberian organizations have for presenting problems and solutions in neat packages (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004) – thereby according a particular status to certain forms of knowledge, authority, and representation.<sup>16</sup>

As scholars-practitioners ourselves, we are acutely conscious both of the multiple perspectives that exist on the development process as well as the constant need to frame complex development issues in ways that resonate with broad audiences – students, advocacy groups, politicians, bureaucrats – and are plausibly “actionable” by front-line staff. This often means accepting a certain amount of “blueprint development” that “tell[s] us at once that things happen ‘like’ the way they are described – after all narratives relate things causally – without, however, reflecting the fact that things happen ...so uncertainly” (Roe, 1991: 296). Another way of putting this is that having a “good story” is essential if one wants to make a difference in the world (as most people in development surely are). Seen in this way, though, if policy documents can be read as “stories”, then it can plausibly be contended that works of fiction, as original *bona fide* “stories”, also potentially have much to contribute to the storehouse of knowledge on development processes, manifestations, and responses. When one story is a more compelling means of articulating a situation than another, then development scholars and practitioners ought to perhaps think more positively about it, be it a novel, a poem, or a play rather than an academic monograph or policy report.

## 5. CONCLUSION: DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LITERATURE

Without falling into the trap of intellectual relativism, in which all “stories” are viewed as equal and thus none can claim to be superior, we have contended that relevant fictional forms of representation can be valuably set alongside other forms of knowledge about development such as policy reports or scholarly writing, as valid contributions to our understandings of development. Many of the fictional accounts of development-related issues which exist reveal different sides to the experience of development to more formal literature, and may sometimes actually do a “better” job in conveying complex understandings of development in certain respects. Furthermore, works of literary fiction often reach many more people than academic texts and may therefore be more influential than academic work in shaping public knowledge and understanding of development issues. If more people get their ideas about development from fiction than from academic writing, then surely the

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<sup>14</sup> See also Scott (1998) for a discussion of similar processes in relation to the development of the modern state.

<sup>15</sup> The same can be said of some academic contributions – see for example Collier and Gunning (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, on the basis of his close engagement over many years with a large development project in Western India, David Mosse (2004) in fact goes so far as to suggest that policy documents are largely *ex post* rationalizations of development practice, with both means and ends shifting in accordance with political fortunes and (perceived) project efficacy. At the same time, see Bebbington *et al.* (2004) for a response by “insiders” to the use of public documents to divine and assess World Bank “policy” in the realm of social development.

fiction of development itself constitutes a potentially important site for the study of development knowledge.

The challenge is therefore to understand better the relationships between different accounts and forms of representation within development writing, as well as noting the multiplicity of voices and logics. In the UK at least, the inter-disciplinary field of development studies has for the past decade and a half been struggling with two persistent dilemmas. The first is the “impasse” in development theory identified by David Booth (1985, 1993 & 1994), while the second is the tension between theory and practice set out most vociferously by Michael Edwards (1989) in his accusation of the “irrelevance of development studies”. We would like to add to this list the idea that there is perhaps also a crisis of representation in development research, which is highlighted by the power and success of the fictional accounts of development ideas and processes which we have drawn attention to in this paper. In order to properly understand and communicate notions of development, it is perhaps necessary for us to develop forms of writing that can engage with the economic and political realities and human struggles and challenges of development in ways that go beyond the conventional academic and policy forms of development writing, and much may be learnt in this regard from fictional forms of representation.

As Anthony Giddens (1984: 285) has pointed out, “literary styles is not irrelevant to the accuracy of social descriptions”, because “the social sciences draw upon the same source of description (mutual knowledge) as novelists or others who write fictional accounts of social life”. Indeed, this is something that is being increasingly recognized in the opposite direction, with literature studies now beginning to borrow from formal development writing, as illustrated by the literary critic Olakunle George (2000) in a recent essay comparing Mahmood Mamdani’s well-known political science monograph *Citizen and Subject* (1996) with the literary writings of Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. Taking such efforts as an example, it is clear that a richer and “truer” perspective on the experience of development is most likely to be achieved by holding the insights and imperatives of literature, social science, and policy-making in tension with each other, irrespective of which one is more “truthful”. Ultimately, as Mario Vargas Llosa (1996: 320 & 330) has pointed out, although while it may well be that “novels lie”, it is also the case that “men do not live by truth alone; they also need lies”,<sup>17</sup> and as such development studies can only benefit from broadening its sources of knowledge to include what we might term “the fiction of development”.

### **Recommended reading list of literary fiction on development**

NB/ All books are English-language or translations. Different and other language editions of these works may exist.

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<sup>17</sup> We are grateful to James Dunkerley for bringing this citation – and that previously quoted by Sir Thomas More – to our attention in his inaugural lecture for the Institute for the Study of the Americas delivered at the Chancellor’s Hall, Senate House, University of London, on 25 October 2004.

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