

# Writing from the Margins, or the Decentering of English Literature<sup>1</sup>

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Human experience, as insights provided by 'the linguistic turn in philosophy' have made abundantly clear, is prestructured and thus predetermined by language. Therefore, every sign we use is a 'signifiant signifié' (Sartre 1972:52), which implies that—instead of being a transparent window on the world—it is already replete with meanings derived from a more or less arbitrary construction of reality that, in a dialectic process, is subject to certain changes within that reality: '... the social world is seen through classifications which in their turn are motivated by the social world itself' (Lima in Cerquiglini 1983:511). The language game 'English' is in no way exempted from this process, especially in view of the more recent socio-political-historical changes brought about by what goes by the name of 'decolonisation' referring as it does to the assertion of the colonised's cultural identity in the wake of (in this case British) colonisation.

It is not only the primary code of language 'as such' but also the secondary linguistic code of literature that is affected accordingly:

... the linguistic centre of English has shifted. This is so demographically. Great Britain now makes up only a small portion of the English-speaking totality (Steiner in Schiff 1977:9).

George Steiner observes, and he was one of the first to foresee the potential for literary innovation such altered conditions are capable of giving rise to:

So far as literature might be seen as an index of language energy, one finds that a significant portion of the writing being produced not only in American English, but also in African, Australian, Anglo-Irish or west Indian idioms, displays an inventive élan, an exploratory delight in linguistic resources, a sheer scope largely absent from the British scene (Steiner in Schiff 1977:18).

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The literary scholar or the university teacher of English wanting to keep abreast with the immense widening of horizons resulting from this development is faced with a daunting task, namely that of completely overturning the existing canon along with its euro-centric priorities: He has got to leave behind the narrow confines of the English Great Tradition in favour of an anglophone world that is infinitely more variegated. In this context it is not surprising at all that it should have been a German-Jewish-French-British cosmopolitan like George Steiner who was one of the first to overcome the limitations of what constitutes 'English culture', along with their nationalist overtones, imposed by conservative critics such as F.R. Leavis, as can be seen from his programmatic statement:

... there is the obligation, the opportunity to make our sense of the history of the English language and of its literatures more comprehensive, more responsive to the great tributaries from outside (Steiner in Schiff 1977:19).

## II

Such a premise goes a long way towards rendering meaningless any assumptions of essential and thereby central 'Englishness': A whole range of theoreticians with widely differing approaches such as Jacques Lacan (1966:89-97), Michel Foucault (1966), Jacques Derrida (1967), Edward Said (1978) or Niklas Luhmann (1987) have each shown that every concept of selfhood implies the construction and hence the suppression or marginalisation of the Other, a process where axiological considerations also come into play: '... the concept of good and evil is a positional one that coincides with categories of Otherness' (Jameson 1981:115). What is made clear by a statement like this is that the difference between self and Other is entirely based on a semantic 'détour' (Derrida) whereby the self is only definable in terms of what it is not. Thus any seemingly 'natural' 'metaphysics' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989:33) of Eurocentrism stands revealed as an artificial division of the world into a centre and its periphery that largely owes its existence to a combination of Western economic and military superiority which, in their turn, ensured Western control of the modes of symbolic representation. Only in such a context was it possible to posit the European self as the centre, or better, as the norm, and to despise the Other as a degenerate deviation from that norm. Put in very simple terms this meant: '... others have less humanity than oneself ... (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989:88)'.

## III

Clearly the dominance of the centre and its imprimatur on experience must be abrogated before the experience of the periphery can be fully validated (Kureishi 1986:31)

—this precisely would be the consequence arising from an understanding of the symbolic, and hence artificial, opposition between a centre and a marginalised periphery: 'The Empire Writes Back', to use a famous slogan coined by Salman Rushdie. What is at stake here is to deconstruct the old binary oppositions, thereby establishing proof that any self is inextricably enmeshed in a 'rapport de l'identité à l'autre' (Derrida 1990:11), an insight that automatically leads to the dissolution of those oppositions: '... the old either-or begins to break down' (Griffin in Hutcheon 1988:62).

Timothy Mo, in his novel *An Insular Possession*, has shown in a highly graphic manner to what an extent Europe's supposedly centristic and dominant position vis-à-vis its colonies had been, right from the start, a de-centered relationship of mutual dependence: The whole intercourse between Britain and her various colonies was, as he sees it, based on two economic triangles, 'the West Indian and Atlantic Triangle' and 'the East Indian Triangle' (Mo 1987:29-32), both of which intersected or interpenetrated each other to form a kind of David's star with either section being unable to exist without the other—African slaves were shipped to the West Indies and America, there to work on the plantations where the tobacco, the sugar cane and the cotton much needed by Britain were grown; the cotton in its turn was processed by white slaves in the mills of Northern England, to be exported to India where the opium was grown that was needed in order to pay for the tea and other goods imported from China to Britain. So much for the intricate mechanism of the two triangles.

Literature, especially the novel, cannot remain unaffected by such interdependences: The colonial and more especially the postcolonial novel produced on the fringes of the Empire is bound somehow to question the centre's assumption of centrality, in the process evolving its own particular aesthetics with the spectrum extending from the initial imitation via the gradual adaptation and transformation to the final rejection of the centre's narrative modes of representation. To what an extent the essential categories of the European bourgeois novel get challenged due to this, will be our main concern in the following.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), as Terry Eagleton has argued with typical aplomb, must be regarded as the most perfect example of a colonialist aesthetics in that such a radically modern departure from the more established means of novelistic representation could only have come into existence in a peripheral, semi-colonial backwater like Dublin:

Modernism and colonialism become strange bedfellows, not least because the liberal realist doctrines from which modernism breaks free were never quite so plausible and entrenched on the colonial edges as they were in the metropolitan centres. For the subjugated subjects of empire, the individual is less the strenuously self-fashioning agent of its own historical destiny than empty, powerless, without a name; there can

be little of the major realists' trust in the beneficence of linear time which is always on the side of Caesar (Eagleton 1990:322).

Eagleton's equation of Modernism and (Post)Colonialism is an extremely valuable insight placing as it does literary developments on the fringes of the Empire within the context of artistic achievements such as Modernism or Postmodernism that are normally considered to be the sole property of the centre. Seen in this light the (post)colonial novel's attack against European conceptions of the self and of the world at large is a double-barrelled one: Firstly it is directed against the bourgeois ideology, briefly definable as 'value order, meaning, control and identity' (Hutcheon 1988:13), secondly against the realist novel whose *écriture*, in the words of Roland Barthes, is the 'diagrammatic figure' or 'proportional analogy' (1985:248) of that ideology and can thus be construed as the very embodiment of European economic individualism. It is undeniable that classical realism with its emphasis on 'l'absolutisme de l'individu et des choses' (Kristeva 1969:107) was closely tied to the ideals and aspirations of the European middle-class. George Steiner is certainly right in stating 'the decline and partial rout' (Steiner 1979:342) of those ideals in a world that has changed quite drastically, and the tremendous thematic as well as formal upheavals of the novelistic genre have to be seen in this context.

Pierre Bourdieu has aptly demonstrated to what an extent European realism, especially when viewed against the background of modern or postmodern innovations the genre has undergone recently (or not so recently), is tantamount to a narrow-minded 'ethnocentrism':

... society, in granting certain representations of 'reality' the privileged status of realism, confirms its own tautological certainty that only the image of the world conforming most closely to what it considers to be reality is the one that is 'objective' (1974:163).

If one defines realism as the interplay between

well-made plot, chronological sequence ... the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence (Waugh 1984:7)

the main novelistic categories of character, action, space and time that combine to make up its representation of the world lead to narrative situations where reality is always shown as being reliable as well as transparent. These quasi-mythical European 'fantasmes du réel' (Lyotard 1988:19), however, must be overcome in order to make us realise that there are numerous other possible constructions of reality that are not

commensurate with our categories of perception, thereby exposing the classical Western novel that usually goes by the exclusive name of 'The Novel' as the merely 'regional version' (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa & Madubuike 1985:19) of a genre that is multifarious in the extreme and that gets practiced all over the world and under socio-historical conditions that differ vastly from the European context.

#### IV

The postmodern transformations and the ensuing decentering of the narrative situation by which all traditional notions of what constitutes character, action, space and time have become overturned (Hoffmann 1988:145-224) thus creating the strange sense of unreality prevalent in the postmodern novel, are equally to be found in the (post)colonial novel, always of course bearing in mind that in this case the conditioning factors, because of an altered cultural context, are different. But even so the analogy holds, as will first be shown by analysing how the closely interwoven categories of character and action get undermined.

While the alienation of the postmodern self basically derives from the fact that it is no longer free to dispose of its cogito because of constant interference from the unconscious as well as the distorting power of language, the (post)colonial subject is faced with an even more complex situation: For the colonial 'mimic man' (Bhabha 1984:125-133) neither the unconscious nor the language he uses nor the crises he is faced with are his own because they have been superimposed from the outside: In a colonial 'politics of dominance and subservience' (Ashcroft et al. 1989:35) there is a vast potential of alienation where numerous factors combine to render self-determined action and a sense of selfhood extremely difficult if not altogether impossible. What has also to be taken into account is the fact that the ego, as Michel Foucault has argued, is a fairly recent European 'invention' of mankind, and that subject positions in other non-European cultures are much less clearly defined.

The repercussions this has for the *écriture* of the novel, as already indicated in the quotation from Terry Eagleton, are more explicitly stated in Timothy Mo's opposition of the Western and Eastern tradition of writing:

... our Western novel ... addresses itself rather to the individual as hero or heroine, from the delineation of whose dilemmas, material and moral, most of its energy and interest springs (Mo 1987:361).

Against this is to be set the Chinese novel where, since individuals have 'no intrinsic importance in themselves', 'the adventures of a group' form instead the focus of interest (Mo 1987:361). This applies equally to other non-European literatures as Lewis

Nkosi has shown with regard to African novel-writing where, as he rightly observes, the clash of individual and communal values which the European model is principally based on, remains a more or less alien element because it is 'essentially hostile to African traditional society' (Nkosi 1981:4-6).

All these diffusions of the individual naturally determine the formal properties of the (post)colonial novel, especially in the way the action is structured: Where subjects, for one reason or another, are not in control of their acts of volition and cannot, or do not want to, determine their own course of action, there is not to be found the usual linear sequence of implementing an action complete with its syntagmatic 'parcours' (Greimas in Du Sens 1970:179) from volition via knowledge and capacity to the final deed plus the ensuing change of affairs brought about by it. All there remains are strangely incomplete 'reduced forms of action' (Hoffmann 1988:176) where passivity has superseded activity and imagination has displaced the reality principle. The normal step-by-step logic of action with its implications of causal necessity has thus been supplanted by a contingent, loosely associated series of events.

The consequences such a deformed (post)colonial logic of action has for the plot-construction of the novel have also been suitably developed by Timothy Mo:

... the Western novel ... unfolds itself along a path which to all intents and purposes is linear .... It may ramble, but essentially it proceeds along a course of cause and effects, each contributing to the momentum of the whole. The plot is a veritable engine which advances along its rails to a firm destination (Mo 1987:359).

The Chinese novel, however, along with other non-European manifestations of the genre, is a departure from this norm:

[It] moves in a path which is altogether circular. It is made up of separate episodes ... which may refer only unto themselves and be joined by the loosest of threads (Mo 1987:359).

All this goes hand in hand with a different concept of time: European culture, as Mo puts it, is 'committed to progress and advance', whereas the Chinese one 'looks in upon itself and has no notion of progress but a spiral decline from a golden age to a brazen one, in letters as well as in all else' (Mo 1987:359). The two opposing notions of time are best metaphorised, as Mo does, as a mighty river against a calm lake. It is noteworthy in this context that the non-European concept of time comes very close to resembling the postmodern assumption of living in an era of post-histoire or of negative progress where all the old historical teleologies no longer seem to be viable. Another factor responsible for the loss of linear 'temporality' and hence for the further 'spatialisation' of time under (post)colonial conditions is formed by the numerous

non-synchronous elements prevailing in a hybrid, syncretistic world of mass-communication where tradition and modernism, past and present or future, because of the clash of cultures representing vastly different stages of development, are strangely intermingled and inverted (Ashcroft et al., 1989:36-37)

For the *écriture* of the novel this means that the Aristotelean notion of narrative as *mimesis praxeos* with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end is no longer a viable one. In a novelistic tradition where events and actions are arranged in a chronological order a 'natural' sense of temporality is capable of evolving from which the linear progression of the narrative 'then-and-then' (Ricoeur 1988:108) borrows its irreversible quality. Such a temporal ordering gives rise to the notion that we are, in fact, dealing with what can be termed 'referential time' or 'time as such' which is felt to be homologous with the linearity of narrative discourse—hence the conception that narrative is marked by 'une coïncidence temporelle avec son objet' (Genette 1969:60). With an aesthetics of non-temporality, however, where narrated time manages to free itself from the linear constraints of narrating time imposed by the syntagmatic scanning order of its linguistic presentation, it is the achronical coexistence of events that reigns supreme: Events and the narrative meanings derived from them are all part of a 'spatial form' where the temporal perspective, contrary to any 'natural' chronology, freely vacillates between past, present and future and time is subjected to the non-referential, geometrical configurations of purely aesthetic structures utterly devoid of any time element.

'Space becomes temporalised, time becomes spatialised' (Hoffmann 1988:115)—this postmodern insight is at one with Derrida's opinion that the incessant referral of any sign to its simultaneously existing yet unmentioned Other causes both a 'temporalisation' as well as an 'espacement' of meaning. With regard to the (post)colonial novel this has the effect of isolating narrative situations to such an extent from their context that they become mere episodes that are logically as well as temporally unrelated with what went on before or what comes afterwards, even to the extent that they congeal to become timeless tableaux or reflexions, or proliferate to turn into extensive descriptive passages that render any ongoing and coherent chronology impossible. Thus, to use Umberto Eco's words, a 'poetics of action' has been supplanted by a 'poetics of cross-sections' (1965:222-227). The only principle of coherence remaining in this case consists in formal patterns of paratactic, circular, contrastive, serial and other relational kinds of arrangement.

Mutatis mutandis such non-Aristotelian ways of telling stories can also be found in oral narratives where the narrator constantly digresses or repeats himself so that '

the transformation of experience into story is achieved only partly (if at all) according to the rules of 'closed' literary narrative (Jauss 1984:344).

This is of major importance for the (post)colonial novel, as Salman Rushdie's (1985:7f) or Chinweizu's (1988:xvii-xl) emphasis on the relevance of the oral tradition for Indian or African writing has shown. At any rate, what is rendered extremely difficult by an anti-teleological type of narrative is the sense-making operation of the reader because where the narrative has no 'natural' or 'fixed' end-point, dictated by its chronologic, it is more or less impossible for the reader to arrange all its facets of meaning in such a way as to form a coherent whole that satisfies his desire to know what the story is 'all about'. The (post)colonial novel is thus the very artistic embodiment of a 'new and overwhelming space which annihilates imperial time and history' (Ashcroft et al. 1989:34), of a spatial concept of time that is aimed directly at subverting the centre's arrogant assumption of linear time or history being all on its side.

Space as—in the sense of Kant—that category where changes of our perception of the world are made visible is not, of course, exempted from the process of decentering described so far: A subject incapable of acting that is forced to withdraw into passivity or imagination, a fragmentarised spatial time—all these are not the distinguishing qualities of a universe where space is a stable entity. Whereas the centered subject experiences geographical or social space as a reliable communal or physical environment—in Raymond Williams' words as 'knowable community' (Williams 1974:14)—this is rendered fluid or unstable when the alienated (post)colonial subject encounters it as 'unknown, unknowable, overwhelming society' (Williams 1974:14). As soon as experience becomes precarious any observation of space gets refracted into a multitude of aspects that resist being assembled into one coherent picture. This means that space which is normally something immobile becomes changeable and hence temporalised. The loss of reality induced by a fluid spatial dimension has been described by the Indian author Amitav Ghosh as

the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the street one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood (1989:200).

Moreover, in a (post)colonial world village temporalised space becomes an entity equally as syncretistic as spatialised time: Just as the blessings of Western civilisation (to name but a few: Coca Cola, Hilton Hotels, Toyota cars) are to be found in Bombay the same as in London, there is also the chance, in a kind of reverse process, of the culture and values of the periphery encroaching on those of the centre, which would be the clearest possible proof of the theory that 'the centre no longer holds' (W.B. Yeats), of things falling apart not on the despised fringes but at the very centre of the world.



This becomes tangible in the hypothetical changes of the European environment imagined by Gibreel Farishta, one of the protagonists in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*: If the average temperature in London were to rise by only ten degrees centigrade the city would change beyond recognition—there would be an abundance of palm trees and other exotic plants everywhere, the social and sexual mores of the inhabitants would improve considerably because their natural British reserve would give way to emotional spontaneity. Especially the loss of the protestant work ethic would mobilise resources of creativity that have been lying dormant for so long. This would become most strikingly visible in the improvement of English football: Instead of powerful kick-and-rush play one would get more refined ball treatment and better intellectual control of the game. 'The tropification of London' (Rushdie 1988:354f) would indeed be a late but perfect revenge wrought by the periphery on the centre because the supposedly negative qualities of the despised Other would thus finally catch up with the self, or as Hanif Kureishi has argued: After thirteen years of Thatcherism certain parts of South London look just as dilapidated as some of the less nice areas of Calcutta, complete with large numbers of Indian shops and take-aways (Kureishi 1990:224).

## V

The four main constituents of the narrative situation we have dealt with—character, action, space and time—normally stand in a relation of proportional analogy with 'the real structure of human experience' (Cervenka 1978:93), as the Czech structuralist Miroslav Cervenka has put it. The transformations described so far, however, have led to the dissolution of the usual actantial as well as spatio-temporal contiguities to such an extent that the result achieved is 'a considerable deviation from everyday experience' (Cervenka 1978:123). The spectrum of deviation extends all the way from an irrealism that is mainly due to a discontinuous *écriture* withholding from the reader 'la consolation des bonnes formes' (Lyotard 1988:31) via a wildly fabulating, magical realism where the real and the 'phantastic' intermingle right to the metaphorically distorted world of the grotesque. One may safely say that all these types of irrealism are to be found in (post)colonial fiction.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that the world as presented through the looking-glass of the (post)colonial novel is not compatible with a stable European-bourgeois conception of reality. In addition to the general tendency of all oppressed to seek refuge from a dire reality in the realm of imagination the (post)colonial novel, because of its experience with systematically distorted realities, is imbued with a sense of how much reality 'flickers', to use a Baudrillardian formula, since its world is, after all, nothing but the inauthentic, symbolically constructed simulacrum of an original that is not there in the first place. Sometimes those fictitious constructions are so vio-

lently imposed that reality never again recovers from the harm inflicted upon it by the various powers that be. A perfect example of this is the way Chinua Achebe in his novels analyses the transition from pre- to postindependence in Nigeria and the new interpretations of reality caused by such changes.

In view of such distortions it is small wonder that the chronotopos in the (post)colonial novel should frequently be a 'phantastic' or grotesque one, especially as 'phantastic' in this context does not involve a 'positive' widening of consciousness in the sense of removing barriers normally erected to contain its energies. On the contrary, the phantastic is here conceived as a negative force:

... via the distortions of the conventional surface of things the spuriousness of 'normal' reality gets exposed, thus laying bare the otherwise hidden essence of being in all its depravity (Hoffmann 1978:126).

All of this leads to a healthy mistrust of the realist mode of narration whose implicit endeavour it is to pass itself off, in spite of its manifest partiality as well as its limitations, as the only thinkable version of reality, or as Colin MacCabe has argued:

... the whole text works on the concealing of the dominant discourse as articulation—instead the dominant discourse presents itself exactly as the presentation of objects to the reading subject (Rice & Waugh 1989:134-142).

This tendency on the part of the dominant discourse to repress all other voices and their differing constructions of reality is counteracted in the (post)colonial novel by a 'systematic refusal of any such dominant discourse' (Rice & Waugh 1989:134-142). Accordingly the texts are often refracted into a multifaceted polyphony, thereby unashamedly laying bare their own status as mere artefacts without any claim to referentiality. Thus the dominant discourse is made to compete with a host of other voices.

The postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty has formulated the epistemology to go with such an aesthetics of plurality: 'True' reality can never be seized absolutely in, as it were, vertical acts of representation, but only as a horizontal sequence of artificial interpretations that need revising time and again and whose endless regress implies the polyphony of a plurality of truths all of which are endowed with the same rights (Rorty 1982:92).

As the discourse of realism ever since Julia Kristeva has been discredited as being unashamedly 'paternalistic' or 'phallogocratic' it is best countered by a narrative style that may be considered as the appropriate female mode of signification. Omar Khayam, the first-person narrator in Rushdie's novel *Shame* who first sets out to write

the story of his life solely guided by the limited range of his male perception of things, finally comes to realise:

... the women seem to have taken over; they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to couch my narrative in all manner of sinuous complexities, to see my 'male' plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its 'reverse' and female side (1983:173).

If power is installed via discursive constraints on what can or cannot be said, then the first step to emancipation consists in making heard the previously suppressed voice of the Other. 'Le multiple, il faut le faire ...' (Deleuze, Guattari 1980:13)—such a demand is adequately fulfilled in the (post)colonial novel which is—in the sense of an iconical 'form enacting meaning' (Leech & Short 1981:242)—the formal manifestation of its own content by being the very epitome of centrifugal multifariousness.

Timothy Mo has described the multiple textual or discursive realisations this may lead to in the non-European novel as a loose sequence of

poetry, fable, song, and essays, lists of goods, recipes, formulas for patent medicines, and even spells, [all of] which ... may appear altogether dispensable and supernumerary to the author's requirement as failing to advance the tale or deepen the reader's understanding of its characters (Mo 1987:359).

Sometimes such syncretism goes so far as to completely blur the discursive borderlines existing between various genres as is the case in Mothobi Mutloatse's *Proemdra*, a portmanteau word made up of prose, poem and drama. In a text like this the generic identity of the novel as an essentially narrative type of discourse has been forsaken altogether.

To sum up: Through the dysfunctional, truly 'menippean' (Kristeva 1969:107) syncretism of its discourses the (post)colonial novel quite consciously resists any easy identification of its formal or thematic potential. The specific way in which it helps to dismantle the classical narrative model of representation that, as has been shown, owes its chrono-logical coherence to a socio-historical context, is the essential contribution the non-European novel is capable of making to the overall picture of the contemporary English novel: Helping to free it, as the third important innovation of the genre after or alongside Anglo-American Modernism and Postmodernism, from its self-imposed limits of vision so that finally we Europeans '[devenons] conscient de la relativité, donc de l'arbitraire, d'un trait de notre culture ...' (Todorov 1982:317).

Thus the English novel has 'inherited' from the outside, from the periphery, such a vast aesthetic potential that more often than not it appears to be 'more english than English' (Ashcroft et al. 1989:195). At least in the realm of literature Todorov's

postulate is thereby fulfilled: 'Vivre la différence dans l'égalité' (Todorov 1982:310). Put otherwise: Seen in this light Babel was not a regrettable accident in the history of human communication but, on the contrary, a unique stroke of good luck (Steiner 1975).

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