

Postcoloniality and African Writing: A Millennial Postscript

Lekan Oyegoke

Preamble

Postcoloniality, the fledgling theory of colonial and post-colonial discourse, stands the risk of going prematurely moribund at the turn of the century and millennium. Its self-destruct mechanism takes the form of a paradox: there is a suggestion that all there is to be said on the subject of postcoloniality appears to have been said, while at the same time the theory seems scarcely to have scratched the discursive surface of things even now at the close of an eventful and memorable twentieth century and second millennium. The theory appears to be both new and old in a teasing, contradictory way.

It may well be that it is only the signifier 'postcoloniality' that is new or fledgling and the amorphous object of its discursive interest stretches 'like a patient etherised upon a table', to borrow a line from T.S. Eliot's famous dramatic monologue, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Postcoloniality's body of elusive signifieds has its historical toe pointing in the direction of 1885 and beyond, in the temporal mists, while its groggy head lolls uncertainly in the descending computerised haze of the looming year alias 'Y2K'. Presiding over postcoloniality's morbidity are two categories of partisans: the modern and postmodernist intelligentsia and the not-so-modern political elite weaned on sometimes medieval, sometimes colonial sociopolitical values.

The twilight years of the present century and millennium have hatched a number of books and several essays that examine postcoloniality. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman's reader entitled *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* is an important collection of essays by respectable thinkers and theorists of Third World cultural and literary studies. The selection of contributors enables a tracing of the genesis of postcoloniality back to the humanism of the Negrismo movement of the Americas and the Caribbean and of which Negritude was a part, in the ideas of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and, subsequently, the Freudian cultural psychotherapy of Frantz Fanon and the Marxist socialist political radicalism of

Amilcar Cabral. While Homi Bhabha appends his discursive signature to certain aspects of Fanon's poetical and cultural thesis, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's incisive analysis privileges an often neglected aspect of Third World studies: the genderised patriarchal politics of colonial and post-colonial discourse. Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o take opposing sides on the problem of language in African writing, while Edward W. Said and Aijaz Ahmad oppose each other over the famous orientalist divide.

However, underlying the sheer eloquence and presence of the impressive array of perspectives in this book is an equally articulate absence of certain notable voices that should be pertinent to a study of colonial discourse and post-colonial theory. Homi Bhabha laments the neglect of the ideas of Franz Fanon in recent Literary scholarship; but apart from Fanon other glaring omissions make one pause for a reassessment of scholarly bearings. Excluded from the collection of essays and extracts of theses are the ideas and observations on the political history of African cultures by the brilliant Caribbean historian Walter Rodney. Missing are the controversial but stimulating views on African literature by the Nigerian troika of Chinweizu, Onwuekwia Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. Also unrepresented are the analytical insights of Senegalese Cheikh Anta Diop, and the Afrocentric aesthetic of African-American Molefi Kete Asante.

It seems that this stage of postcoloniality is rather uneasy about strident radical voices. There is therefore what appears to be a strategy of quietening things down through a selective exclusion of radical perspectives. The ideological implication of some of these omissions from works devoted entirely to postcoloniality and the study thereof is the subject of the present millennial postscript to colonial and post-colonial discourse.

Postcoloniality

Several scholars have observed that postcoloniality is a remarkably heterogeneous intellectual enterprise. This point receives interesting treatment by Stephen Slemon writing under the title 'The Scramble for Post-colonialism' in an important reader entitled *De-scribing Empire* published the same year as *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, both of which appeared five years after the seminal *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin.

Slemon seems correct in suggesting that postcoloniality is a growing academic industry of mainly Western institutions of learning, marked by a disorderly scramble for and pragmatic appropriation of the discourse of empire. This is all in line with some of the reservations about postcoloniality expressed by such scholars as Salman Rushdie, Aijaz Ahmad, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Post-colonial discourse appears to have taken off in multiple directions at once and its discursive thrust is mired in a mush of philosophical abstractions and aesthetic overgeneralisations which seek to validate the hegemonic hold of imperial metropolitan centres of power over the colonised, expropriated margins of empire. Apart from the telling sub-text of textual exclusions and absences in some of the influential publications on the subject of colonial and post-colonial discourse, the wary literary traveller in the thorny thicket of postcoloniality cannot but be taken aback by its proclivity sometimes towards what may be described as sophistry in aid of selective and partisan ideological positions in c~ and literary matters. There is, for example, the tendency by post-colonial theory to dismiss as 'essentialist' or 'nativistic' certain unresolved pragmatic issues at the heart of the African cultural experience.

Postcoloniality seems to be an attempt to tidy up a part of the chaos and confusion that have characterised Literary studies this century. But, ironically, even this theory has been caught in some of the contradictions it set out to remove. This is perhaps an inevitable development, as postcoloniality itself has appropriated for its own ideological purpose some of the givens in the older theories that have proved to be false and fallacious.

Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (1994:2) are correct in their reading of history when they describe a stage of postcoloniality:

The colonial phase, particularly the rapid acquisition of territories by European nations in the late nineteenth century (most famously in the 'Scramble for Africa'), represents the need for access to new (preferably captive) markets and sources of raw materials, as well as the desire to deny these to competitor nations.

However, what they don't say, and which none of their contributors sufficiently privileges, but which Walter Rodney describes eloquently in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is that Africa would have evolved differently politically, economically, and culturally, were it not for Western European hegemonic interference. Postcoloniality will dismiss as essentialist any suggestion that Rodney's thesis perhaps holds the key to an effective resolution of the perpetual political conflict and cultural and economic chaos in which post-colonial Africa is engulfed. That Africa's path to peace and prosperity perhaps lies in a care' considered unravelling of European-packaged colonial and post-colonial Africa as well as a carefully thought out repackaging of Africa in line with some of the post-colonial possibilities that would have been.

The reality is that post-colonial territorial boundaries still mark off 'markets' for Europe and are unworkable as nation states: the borders have been too arbitrarily

and artificially arrived at to constitute a basis for peace and progress, unchanged. The forced and superficial national character of post-colonial African countries is the right kind of nursery bed for growing empty-headed political puppets and megalomaniacs and power-drunk military dictators whose sole assignment seems to be the preservation of colonially drawn political boundaries in post-independence Africa.

Post-colonial theory should be more interested in the cultural reasons for the unworkability of the post-colonial African nation state, but it does not appear to be. This should be unsurprising because, like other theories concerned with the African cultural and literary experience, postcoloniality has adopted a culturally homogeneous definition of African writing. It is the writing in the former language of colonialism which in this case is English. If this is the basic assumption of post-colonial theory with respect to African writing, its failure to appreciate the cultural implication of the political scenario described by Rodney becomes understandable.

Many proponents of post-colonial theory tend to be dismissive of discursive strategies propounded in aid of an aesthetics of African cultural expression that privileges indigenous language cultural experience in Africa. Hence the general disregard by the theory of the Afrocentric postulations of the likes of Cheikh Anta Diop, nuclear physicist, historian and Africanist, who has argued for a greater show of confidence in African languages and thought systems by African scientists, educationists, and the political elite. Diop's pragmatic afrocentricism using Wolof is a precursor of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's cultural radicalism and renewed interest in his first language, Gikuyu. And then Diop's and Ngugi's afrocentricism is an advance on the partial reformist afrocentric aesthetic argued by the likes of Chinweizu, Onwujekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike as well as Molefi Kete Asante. Whereas the afrocentricism of Chinweizu et al and Asante scours the African traditions for an indigenous validation of cultural and artistic expression in the colonial language of containment (English), Diop's and Ngugi's afrocentric aesthetic argues for an adoption of both the African cultural experience and its original language of expression, for example, Gikuyu, Wolof or Valaf, Xhosa, Yoruba, Zulu, etc.

Postcoloniality is dismissive of Diop's and Ngugi's brand of cultural radicalism for two main reasons, it would appear. Firstly, and as has already been mentioned, post-colonial theory in its present ideological thrust is a partisan academic enterprise whose aporia lies in its desire to further Third World cultural, literary interests while at the same time operating within a historical framework of Western philosophical strategies of cultural, political, and economic containment of the peripheral colonial other by the imperial metropolitan self. Secondly, the vast cultural empire comprising anglophone, francophone, and lusophone Africa is too tempting a booty for postcoloniality to acknowledge that the same factors which prop up an extant post-colonial cultural empire are the ones responsible for Africa's inherent political and economic instability.

Some of the ideological positions taken by postcoloniality seem to fly in the face of reality, as has been indicated. The point may be illustrated further by using an example drawn from contemporary Europe. The eddying currents of the repeated and present balkanisation of central Europe are not much dissimilar to the centrifugal forces seeking to rend post-colonial Africa down the very middle. Europe is at present re-emerging as a powerful regional bloc, but historically the break-up of Europe has been antecedent to a reunification. A similar pattern of development must apply to Africa even more so than to Europe, given the genesis of the conflict of interests in Africa in the Berlin 1885 arrangement by a divided Europe.

The point therefore is not really whether the post-colonial political structures of Africa should unravel before Africa can move forward, but rather it is a question of when this would happen. A peaceful dismantling appears to be a *sine qua non* to peace, to stability, and to progress in the continent. Furthermore, a collapse of the present post-colonial cultural empire will, or perhaps, should translate into a privileging of monolithic structures defined by specific indigenous African languages. But where there will be culturally heterogeneous political entities, these should be the results of a negotiated agreement by all the indigenous language groups concerned. Regional economic and cultural blocs can only be negotiated subsequently. Regional blocs will be ineffectual if they are made up of unstable member states, as seems to be the case in twentieth-century Africa.

Postcoloniality can harbour within its totalising heterogeneous character quite an unsafe blinding dose of hypocrisy. It seems all right for other people to have a language that informs/ describes/ defines their identity, but it is not right if an African asks to be similarly defined by the language into which they are born in Africa. It is tribalism and a sacrilege: the only good African is the one lost in a nondescript globalised post-colonial world 'described' by a European language.

Furthermore, postcoloniality, proceeding dialectically from a premise of binary opposition, has conceptually separated the metropolitan centre of empire from a margin made up of the former colonies of B- but it fails to carry through its deconstructing of cultural imperialism. The margin is understood as including the likes of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Anglophone Africa, and Asia—in the case of Britain. The homogenising principle is not only the colonial experience but also the presence of English. However, unlike Australia, Canada and New Zealand, Africa has, in addition to the globalising English, its own specific indigenous languages. But it would appear that certain post-colonial theorists actually believe that these languages are either non-existent or unimportant. Yet, it seems obvious that although the separation of the language of colonial and post-colonial discourse into 'English' (for centre) and 'english' (for periphery) is theoretically engaging, the conclusion for Africa must be somewhat different.

Postcoloniality foregrounds 'english' in preference to 'English' in literary

discourse. This argument is tenable in cultural contexts in which 'english' is the sole or main language. In Africa, as has already been noted, 'english' is scarcely a sole language; the ideological ascendancy of this language is in opposition to many a downgraded indigenous African language. The logical progression of the post-colonial dialectics that splits up colonial language into 'English' and 'english' should therefore involve a privileging of the indigenous African language in opposition to a new hegemonic centre in 'english'. This, in my opinion, constitutes a part of postcoloniality's unfinished business; and pursuing this line of reasoning should not be reduced to a dismissable 'essentialism', 'nativism', or 'tribalism'. There is a pejorative hint of the fallacy of *argumentum ad hominem* on the part of post-colonial theory when it deploys such dismissive epithets with respect to certain aspects of the aesthetics of African cultural experience.

There is no doubt that postcoloniality has made the study of the cultural products of former empire rather energetic and exciting in recent times. But the insights it has yielded notwithstanding, it still leaves many of the unresolved issues of African writing unanswered in a definitive way. This should perhaps be unsurprising in view of some of the flaws of the theory, as noted above, and its recycling of some of the discredited assumptions and pedagogical strategies of older theories of literature respecting the African cultural experience.

Postcoloniality has been unable to define African literature in a way that makes clear that it is a product not only of hybridity and multiculturalism, as Homi Bhabha contends, but also inherent contradictions that make it African-literature and not-African-literature. African-literature is anglophone African writing, while not-African-literature is comparable to European-literature, a loose term, not for a specific literature, but for a collection of specific literatures informed by specific languages. African-literature is conceptually the African writing in 'english' ('french', 'portuguese') while not-African-literature is the sidelined indigenous language literature, waiting to be liberated from official policies that perpetuate its relegation and underdevelopment.

There is also the question of audience. Having embraced a monolithic conception of African writing, postcoloniality adopts a homogenised, culturally uniform audience for the African literary experience. The theory imagines the audience to be all of Africa or sub-Saharan Africa, the reality being that it is only the intellectual class using 'english'. The audience for African writing is split between the Africans using 'english' and those using an indigenous language, and the audience is further splintered by the factors of orality and literacy.

In the midst of this universal chaos and confusion, Marking cultural life and literary studies, the majority of the political elite have remained wonderfully consistent in their seeming indifference and complete nonchalance. Founded in 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) defined for itself right at the outset, a

myopic lame-duck approach to the cultural underpinnings of the perpetual political and economic instability of its member states. The OAU decided in its charter not to have anything to do with the post-colonial territorial boundaries which, as was earlier mentioned, began as European 'market' possessions. However, given the climate of euphoria and optimism of the times, the OAU's ignorance could be excused. But since the 1960s Africa's political history has been marked by a plague of irredentist and secessionist conflicts and other ethnically fuelled civil wars and wars of aggression. Predictably, apart from Tanzania and South Africa, there is scarcely a post-colonial African country that has deemed it necessary to formulate a national language policy, let alone pursue one. The ruling elite seem unshakeable in their resolve to hold together the colonial borders through a coercion of the general citizenry. How long this measure will hold out in the twenty-first century and third millennium, only God knows.

Postscript

The 1986 Nobel prize for literature winner, Wole Soyinka, has recently criticised the OAU for ignoring its problem of inherited colonial boundaries. Soyinka's call to the OAU to revisit this momentous issue has caused scarcely a stir in the continental body. Post-colonial theory might find the OAU's non-response rather reassuring: the colonial and post-colonial status quo lingers on.

In closing this postscript, Kwame Anthony Appiah's (1991:356) comment seems pertinent:

What happens will happen not because we pronounce on the matter in theory, but will happen out of the changing everyday practices of African cultural life.

It is a truism that change is what history is made of, and the political history of Africa will be no exception as both postcoloniality and the OAU are borne into the twenty-first century and opening phase of the third millennium by the unfolding force of reality. A part of the unsettling reality, research has shown, is that increasingly post-colonial anglophone Africans are gaining linguistic competence in neither English nor the indigenous language, in a way that compounds the problem of a vanishing reading culture—barely out of its infancy in many parts—while the ultimate loser is literature.

Department of English
University of Swaziland

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