Postcolonial Discourse and African Language Literary Studies in South Africa

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1. Introduction

The impetus for this article is the painful realisation that, other than Barber's and Swanepoel's recent articles, there seems to exist no substantial body of critical texts which cover cogently the pertinent relationship between the recently flourishing postcolonial discourse and the existing corpus of African language literatures. The advent and consequent development of postcoloniality as a theoretical, methodological and political term, especially after the unmourned passing of grand apartheid and the subsequent (inter)nationally celebrated interment, have generated and enlivened numerous, acrimonious debates on the appropriateness and applicability of the label to South African literary studies.

This article therefore arrives belatedly in the wake of, and therefore draws extensively from, Karin Barber's interventionist article in the critical arena where, she argues, some trajectory of postcolonial criticism threatens to efface African-language literature from 'African' literary studies. Also not insignificant, and even more contextually, is C.F. Swanepoel's (1998) recent article which attempts to deconstruct the centre-margin dichotomy that obtains in (post)apartheid literary studies. The central objective of Swanepoel's article is thus to expose and unmask, through a critique of the centre-margin dichotomy that pertains between literatures, the ironical dis-continuities inherent in South African literary practice with the aim to pave a traversable way for an Afrocentric postcolonial discourse.

In the light of these unprecedented theoretical developments in postcolonial studies, this article seeks to explore the possibilities and challenges of realising what Swanepoel (1998:21) calls 'the multilingual national concept of South African literature'. This aim will be achieved by probing the dialectic between multilingualism and globalization and the extent to which it impacts on African-language literatures in South Africa. The observations made and the tentative conclusions reached could perhaps be helpful in the attempt to re-position/re-orient African-language literatures in the ongoing local and global discussions and debates on postcoloniality.

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2. South African Literary Studies: Post-Apartheid or Postcolonial?

The demise of the Nationalist Party's nefarious grand-narrative of apartheid in South Africa, and the concomitant birth of a nascent democracy spearheaded by the African National Congress-led Government of National Unity, not only almost coincided historically with the lively advent of debates on the concept postcoloniality. But most importantly, it heralds the beginning of renewed interest in South African literary studies whose main terms of reference are couched in the language of nationalism and 'nation building', concepts which betray the deep-seated yearning to (re)construct a truly representative South African national identity. Carrim (1995) captures the mammoth task that faces the emerging dispensation as follows:

> The challenge before our new democracy is to provide the space for people to express their multiple identities in a way that fosters the evolution of a South African national identity.

It is within the reconstructive ambit of this transitional political climate and the ubiquitous 'post' literary discourses that this article seeks to dis-locate literary studies in South Africa by examining the contentious relationship of African-language literatures to the concepts 'postcolonialism' and 'post-apartheid'; for many, these coterminous concepts are mistakenly conceived as synonymous especially in the light of the recently emerging debates and discussions on literature in the 'new' South Africa.

The concept postcolonialism is problematic to define and describe mainly because of the geographical diversity of the places of origin of its semanteme, colonialism, and the wide-ranging areas of application that postcoloniality covers. Despite these terminological difficulties, in the brief scope of this article, colonialism should be understood as a discourse which describes the prevailing conditions in South Africa as a British colony and, by extension, as informed by the epistemological inclinations resulting from the colonial condition. While recognising the confusion and abstruseness surrounding the term, I am tempted to provide the following as a working definition of the expansive terrain of postcolonial studies without, of course, laying any pretentious claims to erudition. In my view, postcolonialism refers loosely to a burgeoning critical discourse which deploys various, often conflicting methods and theories derived from a diversified ensemble of discursive practices to study the congeries of interactions and intersections—political, economic, artistic, military, literary, etc.—between (once) powerful European empires and nations affected in one way or another by colonial subjugation and domination, during the reign and after the decline of the phenomenal, but differently experienced moment of colonialism.

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The term post-apartheid is the least difficult to comprehend in that, first and foremost, it refers to a specific historical period which comes after the sudden demise of apartheid and, secondly, it is particularly useful to Black South Africans as a viable political term. Annamaria Carusi (1991:96) argues the matter pointedly:

> For the black majority, whose literature however has a minority status in terms of the South African and international canon, to speak of post-colonialism is pre-emptive; in terms of political desirability, it is anyhow more useful and more practical to speak of 'post-apartheid': the colonizer cannot be got rid of, precisely because he does not see himself as such.

The familiar term, post-apartheid, which evokes a false sense of collectivity bordering on the verges of utopia is outrightly rejected in this article for the reason that it seems to mask the palpable tensions and disjunctions that prevail at the moment in South African literary studies. Furthermore, and because of its historical specificity, the term is not readily amenable to use as a stylistic marker or textual feature as is the case with postcolonialism.

Literary critical practice in South Africa should resist the essentialist identities that were constructed by the apartheid driven orthodoxies which, more often than not, always relegated African literary studies to the margins of literary studies. Within the ambit of the much contested space of contemporary literary studies, African literature finds itself distorted or appropriated to dogmatically serve as a carrier of the European cultural baggage.

The designation, 'South African Literary Studies', begs several questions. First, it presupposes that there exists unproblematically a single and unified literature in South Africa with 'one, all inclusive literary history' (Van Vuuren 1994:269). This impression is erroneous because although its literatures coexist independently within the diverse and differently experienced South African situation, they also developed in isolation from and in ignorance of each other. This view has led the self-declared 'albino terrorist', Breyten Breytenbach, (1986:79) to make the following radical observation:

> First of all it must be said that *a South African literature* in fact doesn't exist—or if it does then it is simply defined by the South African situation. What we writers share is the specific South African *situation*, but we experience its influence in different ways depending on whether we belong to the exploiters or the victims.

Due to the undeserved overemphasis on the coloniser/colonised binarism, there exists a gaping lack of a unified South African literature reflective of a common linguistic,

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racial, religious, cultural, or even historical heritage; hence it becomes imperative that there be a re-examination of literary studies in the country, in order to usher in what one might call a 'national literary studies'.

Secondly, the term seems to suggest that the field falls squarely within the parameters of a clearly defined and consensually constructed critical practice within which all the literatures can be easily subsumed in an all-inclusive monolith framework—an integrative South African Literature. A brief consideration of the numerous thematic, theoretical, descriptive and critical surveys which inhabit the South African literary landscape starkly reveals that any attempt at an integrative literary history usually flounders, mainly because its forward thrust is hindered by an overzealous reliance on the existence of cultural homogeneity and linguistic purity. The charge levelled against the surveys is that besides their failure to apportion equal space for the treatment of the various literatures, they tend to override linguistic differences, historical specificities and cultural idiosyncrasies which distinguish literatures from each other.

It is not surprising then that the formulation of an integrative history is almost a futile exercise if serious consideration is given to the fact that South African literature has so many uneven contours which arise mainly from its multilingualism and the inevitable influence of international literary trends that it is 'bound to be relative and exclusive' (Viljoen & Hentschel 1997:6). This aside sentiment notwithstanding, the envisaged literary history should boldly attempt to adequately address and deal effectively with both local issues and global trends that have become commonplace in international literary debates.

In its vast theorisations on African Literature, postcolonial discourse falls prey to critical complicity because it tends to focus specifically on African Literature written in the variety of 'englishes' while relegating its rightful, primary object of study, African literatures in the indigenous languages, to the marginal wastelands of literary studies. The most common reason proffered for the omission, elision to be exact, of these indigenous literatures is that their marked linguistic difference renders them inaccessible for scrutiny by the perverted colonialist gaze of Western scholars, unless they are presented conveniently for perusal by the masters in the proliferating but usually 'unreadable' translations. For Deepika Bahri, their paradoxical existence as absent presences in the literary sphere signals a potential threat to the revisionary mission of postcolonial theory. He writes:

> the relegation of non-Western textual productions to a realm not so much peripheral as invisible ... is an astute strategy if one is going about the business of attempting a coherent theory, but the very presence of these productions poses the most potent threat to any theory from which they are absent (Bahri 1995:66).

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Postcolonial discourse should therefore avoid being trapped in this pitfall by striving for a wider inclusiveness of all literatures, especially the so called 'minor' literatures, in order to safeguard its viability as an analytic tool which respects difference in diversity. Notwithstanding its theoretical expediency, postcolonial discourse is therefore not without its glaring discontents for, in its well-intentioned mission to give voice to the muted subalterns, it ends up replicating those power structures which it seeks to critique, oppressive structures which were first strategically installed by colonialism and later perpetuated by segregatory practices such as colonisation and apartheid.

This systematic silencing of the indigenous languages is perhaps a result of the marginal status that is condescendingly accorded the African languages and literatures in the academic ivory-towers by some Black heirs of European academic value systems who are ironically 'only partially competent in the mother tongue' (Kunene 1996:16). It is therefore imperative that African scholars and academics steeped in Eurocentricity should critically interrogate their complicity with colonial thought in the academy, paying particular attention to their unwitting contribution to the growth of the European literatures at the expense of their indigenous African literatures. Understandably, Aruna Srivastava (1995:13f) challenges the postcolonial academic to become actively involved in the impartial promotion of indigenous cultural texts:

> The postcolonial academic, it seems to me, must work out her reasons for silence, for certain kinds of grading strategies and types of assignments, for certain modes of transmitting knowledge, for her defensiveness and ignorance on certain occasions, for her position for advocating for students and colleagues alike, her position on what constitutes academic freedom, 'proper' scholarship and the like.

The postcolonial academic must selflessly strive for the dis-alienation of indigenous languages and s/he must ensure that the autochthonous develop a positive attitude towards their indigenous languages and literatures instead of pandering to the negative linguistic stereotypes created by the coloniser with the villainous aim of stifling their expeditious growth.

It is advisable that any party interested in the reformulation of the rubric African literatures so that it can genuinely accommodate and subsume under its under its broad wings both White and indigenous literatures should, however, guard against propagating nationalist ideas based solely on the untenable grounds of racism and ethnicity. A holistic literary history, it seems, can only be realised through the collaboration of experts from the disparate literatures:

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> a fully informed and competent account of South African Literature can only arise as the outcome of carefully allocated and organized teamwork. It is highly significant that no committee of the various departments concerned has even been set up in any South African university for that purpose (Gérard 1979:4).

As Albert Gérard has it, it is imperative that collaborative projects such as that pioneered by the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages at the University of Durban-Westville be initiated all over the country to address this thorny issue. However, such massive projects require elaborate but flexible methodologies and interpretive tools, allowing researchers the latitude to use various theories ranging from the rigid formalist approaches to the fragmented gamut of recent postmodernist reading strategies. While the encyclopaedic method seems best suited for the purpose at hand, its main shortcoming is that it fails dismally to accommodate competing theoretical approaches, seeking instead, to deploy in an almost canonical fashion, 'accepted' and 'recognised' approaches to texts.

3. African Language Literatures: Challenges and Possible Solutions

In 1972, the eminent Kenyan writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, published a seminal essay appositely entitled 'On the Abolition of the English Department' which, as the title explicitly suggests, calls for the abolition of English departments and the subsequent establishment of African languages and literatures as autonomous disciplines at university level. Its central contention is that for African literatures and languages to gain a credible purchase in tertiary institutions, English departments should be rigorously reconfigured and at the centre of the displaced curricula, should feature prominently the indigenous literatures. Only later, when there is a considerable measure of certainty that the African languages and literatures have taken root and are blossoming without difficulty, can attention be shifted to the study of European literatures albeit from an Africanist perspective. While he might seem to be uncritically advocating for a radical move towards Afrocentrism and the return to a protean precolonial traditionalism, Ngugi's rejectionist argument is genuine and can only be clearly understood in the context of those post-independent countries where indigenous languages were almost completely exterminated through the hegemonic imposition of colonial languages and imperialist cultures to the detriment of the former.

Contrariwise, in our present volatile context, where inconsiderable linguistic differences could trigger, unprovoked, ethnic rivalry resulting in senseless bloodshed as is commonplace in embattled Kwa Zulu-Natal, it would indeed be a healthy

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alliance to see all the eleven languages thriving parallel to each other or even convergently in the bid to nurture the cherished spirit of multilingualism. While I fully agree that it is necessary to place more emphasis on all the languages, indigenous languages, which for the most part were grossly neglected insofar as government subsidies are concerned, definitely need more financial support as well as integration and efficacious usage as indispensable communicative tools within the business sector and government so as to equal the unrivalled status accorded English and Afrikaans in these important spheres.

There is in this regard a pressing need to write back the history of African language literatures into the mainstream 'canon' since literary historiography in apartheid South Africa concerned itself exclusively with English and Afrikaans literatures 'to the exclusion of oral traditions and the other indigenous languages' (Van Vuuren 1994:267). In his writings, Steve Biko, the martyred luminary of the Black Consciousness movement who stood firmly to his dying day a staunch adversary of apartheid, sought to provide a guiding light in this respect by eloquently articulating the centrality of an alternative history as the first step in the tedious road to mental decolonisation:

Among the many reasons often suggested for the ostensible developmental stasis characterising African language literatures, Neville Alexander distinguishes the lack of a stable reading culture as the most serious obstacle to the healthy evolution of African language literatures. He neatly sums up this dilemma thus:

> There can be no doubt that the lack of a reading culture in the African languages in South Africa is the single most important sociocultural factor that explains the continued low status of these languages (Alexander 1996:11).

It follows then, that one of our major challenges is to encourage the growth of a culture of reading, with African language literatures occupying centre stage because such indigenous prioritisation would, ultimately, 'dis-establish the dominance of traditional EngLit' (Coullie & Gibbon 1996:16) from our university curricula, thus bringing to fruition Ngugi's dream.

The growth of African language literatures is also hindered by the fact that in what has mainly come to be regarded as a multilingual society, White South Africans speak either English or Afrikaans or both and, to cite Alexander once more, 'fewer than 1 percent of them know any of the African languages' (Alexander 1996:11). Breaking out of the waning 'colonial bilingualism (English/Afrikaans)' (Alexander 1996:11) demands sheer determination from Whites, lest it is realised painfully 'as the power relations shift invariably in favour of blacks' (Alexander 1996:11). The struggle to de-polarise the linguistic hierarchy between Black and

White South Africans will indeed facilitate the process of destabilising the centre-margin identities maintained by these groups.

But then, what is the relevant prerequisite in the process of constructing a national literary history in South Africa? Traditionally, the construction of a national literary history presupposes the existence of a 'single dominant language' (Wade 1996:238) articulating the foundational sovereignty of the nation. In South Africa such a desirable goal is frustrated by the existing multilingualism and, most importantly, the constitutional sanction of the hegemonic dominance of one language over others. In the present context, Johan van Wyk (1996:34) succinctly dismisses language as the proper site for forging a national literary history:

> In South Africa .... With different language groups merged into one national identity, literary history cannot be conceived on the basis of language.

Instead of serving as a crucial site for (re)constructing a national literary history, the language issue—especially the displacement of English and Afrikaans as 'official' languages with the self-imposed status of representing 'national' languages—emerges contradictorily as a crucial scene of resistance where political contestation over the linguistic status of the eleven languages is spectacularly staged.

Seen from this rather jaundiced perspective, it stands to reason that before settling for amalgamation within global nationalism, African languages should first develop themselves and mature as autonomous ethnic literatures before aspiring for a national status in order to avoid the risk of dissolution in the process of transition. On reaching the projected maturity in terms of scientific and terminological development, these ethnic literatures should then avail themselves for syncretisation and hybridisation by the other neighbouring ethnic literatures without being unnecessarily hostile to what we could term 'ethnic imperialism', thus constructing around themselves a complex South African identity.

Such an intertextualised identity could be realised by firstly ensuring that our children are for the most part taught in the African languages at school and, perhaps, also during the formative years of tertiary education. Secondly, they should, as a matter of fact, also learn another indigenous language and literature over and above English and/or Afrikaans. The critical dialogue which will ensue from this linguistic marriage would create a 'national' globalism which is able to account for local cultural exchange. Diana Brydon (1991:196) describes this new formation as follows:

> This new globalism simultaneously asserts local independence and global interdependencies. It seeks a way to cooperate without cooption, a way to define differences that do not depend on myths of cultural purity or

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> authenticity but that thrive on interaction that 'contaminates' without homogenising.

The salient point that I want to make here is that it would be expedient for our White counterparts to have working knowledge of indigenous languages in order for them to be able to appreciate the ethical nuances inherent in African language literatures in their source languages and not as second rate translations. In turn, the general tendency to use the rubric South African literature as though it meant English and Afrikaans literatures only would be substantially diminished, making ample room for African language literatures to feature equally with their European counterparts.

Conversely, it is absolutely necessary for Blacks to have sound knowledge of some of the various languages and literatures that are spoken and produced by the different African language groups other than their own in order for them to gain access independently to the rich literary heritage of this rainbow nation. Sound knowledge of the myriad linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these ethnic groups is indispensable for the (re)writing of a well-informed, unbiased and all-inclusive South African literary historiography, one in which all South Africans can unreservedly take pride.

South Africa finds itself in a unique position wherein it is not only characterised by a complex multilingualism which pertains inside the country only; as it were, the country has to vie continually for recognition in the international literary arena with competing neighbouring African states while simultaneously resisting continued dominance by the previous two 'official' languages. The obsessive impulse to remain sequestrated within the narrow enclaves of national borders without venturing to make cross-border contacts and collaborations could have adverse consequences for South African literary practice. Tim Couzens (1990:3) recognises the gravity of the parochialism likely to ensue from the confinement when he pessimistically opines:

> We are, in the near future, in danger of studying only South African literature. In so doing we will become as Saddam Hussein or PW Botha, people who seldom venture beyond their immediate horizons.

The timely recognition and successful negotiation of this double-bind would guarantee the literature a veritable South African identity which does not depend entirely on things 'purely' African or European to define, on our behalf, a distinctive national identity. The debilitating effects and inexorable impact of Western cultural imperialism, it appears, cannot be simply wished away as much as the profound influence of the rest of Africa cannot be ignored by South Africans. In this raging confluence, South Africa might wisely

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> wish to be allied to both worlds yet seek to maintain its independence from each, proffering the kind of international integration that does not require surrendering its own unique national character (Lindfors 1996:29).

Because 'post-colonial theorists embrace hybridity and heterogeneity as a characteristic of the post-colonial mode' (Brydon 1991:195), they should reject as false the notion of cultural authenticity which was enforced by the twin evils—colonialism and apartheid—through the separate ethnic development policies in the search 'for a new globalism that is neither the old universalism nor the Disney simulacrum' (1991:196). After all, as Arif Dirlik (1994:329) notes, globalism is the primary target of postcolonialism since the term's goal is

> no less than to abolish all distinctions between the center and periphery as well as other 'binarisms' that are allegedly a legacy of colonial(ist) ways of thinking and to reveal societies globally in their complex heterogeneity and contingency.

Postmodernism, as the preceding section illustrates, is therefore a potent instrument for imploding the centre-margin polarity and any other objectificatory hierarchy likely to be perpetuated by enabling discourses such as postcoloniality in their moments of intense commitment when inattentiveness could cloud their celebrated penchant for self-criticism.

4. Postmodernism: Unwelcome Saviour?

Why pull yet another overburdened term into the academic fray to redeem African language literatures from being rendered obsolete by global literary trends? Indeed, Helen Tiffin (1998:170f) warns against the general tendency to use postcolonialism and postmodernism as though the two were synonymous and therefore interchangeable when she writes:

> It is ironic that the label of 'postmodern' is increasingly being applied hegemonically, to cultures and texts outside Europe, assimilating post-colonial works whose political orientations and experimental formations have been designed to counteract such European appropriation.

To me, at least, the significance of the term postmodernism, despite its purported hegemonic and obfuscatory tendencies, lies precisely in its possession of the unassailable ability to re-situate African language literatures into the mainstream of global literary studies, while simultaneously enabling the literatures to retain their

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distinctively local provenance. The discourse of postmodernity, Chantal Mouffe (1998:30) argues persuasively, fulfils one of the primary requirements of multicultural societies in that it is perpetually driven by 'the need to acknowledge the particular, the heterogeneous and the multiple ... [it is] ... a forum for creating unity without denying specificity'.

Due to its unconstrained self-reflexivity which places premium value on difference in diversity, postmodernism should be unconditionally welcomed into the fold of these raging critical debates because it is self-consciously aware of the limitations Europe has over its former colonies. By acknowledging the insignificance of hierarchies, especially those obtaining between Africa and Europe, postmodern discourse affirms the truism that all cultures are mutually interdependent and that when 'lesser' cultures come into contact with 'high' cultures they are nonetheless influenced in many unexpected ways.

What is even fascinating about postmodernity, as Carrim's statement also suggests, is that it rejects the notion of a protean and fixed identity, fostering instead, multiple identities which are constantly in transformation. In the words of Robert Young (1990:19), postmodernism 'can best be defined as European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world', a theme espoused widely by postcolonial theorists and writers.

Evidently, as the foregoing discussion attempted to demonstrate, though circuitously, the endeavour to fashion an integrative South African national literary history is bound to fail precisely because individual writers and critics, institutions, approaches and methodologies cannot be adequately re-presented within the narrow confines of nationalism since they variously owe allegiance to other multiple relationships. Similarly, Horsman and Marshall claim that (1994:230):

> Multiple allegiances are possible, even as the importance of the nation-state system as an organizing principle has yet to be institutionally challenged on any thing like a global scale. Individuals are increasingly encouraged to view themselves as members of groups—not national citizens exclusively, not members of social class, but as blacks, as Slovaks, as Muslims, as French-Canadians, as born-again Christians, as gays, as environmentalists, and so on.

Both postcolonial discourse and postmodern theory play a major role in encouraging global (inter)nationalism by deconstructing the fixed conceptions of nationalism based on vaguely defined borders and by resisting the possibility of arriving at a unified identity undefiled by fragmentary forces such as history, religion, or ethnic boundaries. In the final analysis, it is worth noting that the fact that postcoloniality evades definition because of its multiple references to a vast plethora of contending

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theoretical and methodological practices renders it so amorphous that it could simply pass unnoticed for any of the numerous versions of postmodernism.

5. Conclusion

The eleven South African languages are so contiguous that they actually provide a necessary interface where literary studies can be instrumental in dissolving the self/other dichotomy which is currently operative in South African literary and cultural studies. Furthermore, by making themselves amenable to the influence of postcolonial discourse, African language literatures can create their own unique form of national globalism which challenges head-on the foundations of international globalisation.

Evidently endowed with the rare ability to capture vividly the mutations within both the local and global literary scene, African language literatures are best poised to straddle the diversified postmodern scene. This move, however, requires that the literatures innovate their themes, style, ideological disposition and move away from the strict requirements of educational publishers who usually stifle imaginative creativity with their stylistic prescriptions to writers, and most importantly, divorce themselves completely from the restricting orbit of Western literary 'standards' in the carnivalesque search for postcolonial critical standards.

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