

Dissolved black identity in dominant critiques of black South African literature written in English

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Abstract

This paper outlines dominant views of South African English literature critics from the 19th century to the present. Against this backdrop, I examine some English texts written by blacks in order to demonstrate how attempts by some critics subjectively to strengthen some postmodern notions such as transnationalism have blurred the differences between black and white South African English fiction. I argue that in their essays black critics such as Daniel Kunene, Es'kia Mphahlele and Mbulelo Mzamane (all 1992), on the one hand, adopt a literary-historical approach to a consideration of South African literature written in English, pointing to a yet to be clearly articulated tradition of black South African English writing. On the other hand, white critics such as Ernest Pereira, Sally-Ann Murray, and Geoffrey Hutchings reveal how the South African fiction by white writers that they discuss basically shows how the writers of fiction endemically handle the South African milieu differently from the way their black counterparts do. This study seeks to show that such a differentiation is necessary, for present and future South African literary criticism to be balanced and enriched. I demonstrate that benefits of this kind of a rethinking of the humanities subsuming acknowledgement of heterogeneity in studies of South African English literature, include sustainable social cohesion.

Introduction

The fact of the South African nation consisting of varying cultures equally deserving of recognition calls for effective intercultural dialogue on many fronts. Among the many benefits of effective intercultural dialogue is social cohesion.

I argue in this paper that dominant critics of South African English literature have failed to promote intercultural dialogue through literary studies. I find contestations like Olivier's (2014:18) a worthy contribution towards confronting what I see as the challenge of having to give South African English literature an adequately nuanced definition. For now, the definition of South African English literature is not satisfactorily inclusive. Yet such inclusiveness is necessary in order for reference to South African English literature to account fully for the societal and cultural heterogeneity of the South African peoples. I use data I glean from selected literary texts to point to such a culturally coarse texture constituting the subject matter of South African English literature.

Castle's (2007: 3) observation that literature "is the product of a particular person or persons in a particular society and culture at a particular time" cannot be ignored without critics having to pay the price of a flawed criticism and theorising of South African literature written in English. I demonstrate in this talk that such a flawed scrutiny of our literature has accompanied its development across the various historical beacons South Africa has gone through as a nation of varying peoples. I focus mainly on one period of identifiable features tying together South African English literature written by imaginative writers of and representing in their works black African cultural traits. Consistent with the view I adopt of the historical nature of literary theory and literary criticism, I explore features of this single literary period within a seamless continuum of metonymic parallels weaving through black South African English literature from the 1800s to the post-apartheid era.

I illustrate in this paper how failure of South African English literary criticism to acknowledge the difference of a literature written by blacks impedes intercultural dialogue. The arts, including literature in the context of post-apartheid South Africa according to Mapadimeng (2013:71), are "well placed to promote intercultural dialogue" through which the South African

nation can celebrate difference. I argue that characterising, recognising and appreciating the “strangeness” of South African English literature written by blacks is a gateway to the unity we aspire to as a nation. The “strangeness” I refer to here is a building block of empowering diversity. Once “strategically and creatively harnessed”, diversity should help “to forge social cohesion” according to Mapadimeng (2013:72).

In this talk I critique literary criticism of South African English literature even as I make sure that I do not isolate such a discussion from the literary theoretical framework within which it has been explored. After all, such a complementary view of literature subsuming the nature of its literary critical discourse and literary theory is no-optional in the consideration of any of the literatures of the world. Cogent motivation for scrutinising literature in conjunction with its two complements is expressed by a writer such as Castle (2007:2), in his definition of literary criticism as “the practical application” of literary theory to a literature one is focusing on.

Employing Castle’s (2007: 3) description of the function of literary theory as helping critics “to understand both the particular contexts and the ideological points of view that help shape literary texts,” I explore South African English literary criticism through what I see as most helpful features of postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory. I adopt such a theoretical vantage point purposefully to engage with the particular South African context and the ideological points of view crisscrossing within it. I argue that the evolution of literary theory to its current stage can effectively be used within such a longitudinal theoretical approach. I avoid applying one superficial and deceptively stable and absolute theory across a historical trajectory, hence my application of a whole matrix of postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory. As Castle (2007:4) aptly remarks, “literary theories proliferate, with multiple and contesting versions of a given general theory ... existing simultaneously and with equal claims to validity.”

Within a continuum parallel to that travelled by evolving postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory, I point out what I see as periodic coincidences of the evolution of South African English literature alongside the emancipation of this literary theoretical framework. It is my conviction that developing literary theory moves through even as it is shaped by progression of

history. Highlighting this history bound feature of literary theory, Castle (2007:15) refers to the complex of literary theoretical interfaces and interactions as “this network of creative and conflicting relations” giving “vivid intellectual life to specific historical epochs; the Modernist era of the 1920s and ‘30s, the Poststructuralist ‘turn’ in the 1960s and early ‘70s, the rise of historicism in the last decades of the [twentieth] century.”

I highlight what I perceive as the frailties of critics’ ideological lenses as they scrutinise South African English literature across the ages. I collect data from what I identify as representative critics across the historical beacons of South African English literature, in order to explicate what for me are the marginalised discourses hegemony silences. In more concrete terms, in my inaugural lecture I deal with what I say is a dissolved black identity to this day, within the dominant discourse of South African literary criticism modernistically seeking to impose a normative sense of structure. I argue that there is a distinctly black South African literature poststructuralistically chafing against an unscrupulous formalist lumping together with what domineering critics see as a teleologically determinable structure collapsing black and white South African English literatures.

I gather data for demonstrating the existence of a black South African English literature deserving unhomogenised characterisation by looking at it both typologically and topologically.

The 1800s: Early influences of South African English literature written by blacks

In typical western totalisation of the beginnings of some aspect of literary practice, Castle (2007:17) traces the roots of literary theory to “classical Greece” including “Longinus ... theory of the sublime, in which language is recognized as a powerful means of transporting the mind of the listener.” The same writer observes that such a broad classical literary theory “had a profound effect on aesthetic theory well into the nineteenth century” (Castle 2007:17). As I consider critics’ evaluation of black South African English literature of the 19th century, I do so proceeding from the backdrop of the world literary theoretical premise exemplified by Castle (2007). Such an approach is consistent with my suffused contention that from time to time South African English literature has been analysed with a skewed western hegemonic bias.

It is significant that Mphahlele (1992:38) traces the origins of South African English literature written by blacks to the period just after the arrival of British settlers, among them Christian missionaries, in 1820. A Xhosa man by the name of Ntsikana composed Christian hymns in both isiXhosa and English, sometimes translating his hymns from the original isiXhosa (Mphahlele 1992:38; Booij 2008:13). Ntsikana and his followers creatively sang the missionary inspired Christian hymns to the beat of Xhosa traditional drums, accompanied with indigenous dancing patterns (Mphahlele 1992:38). Arguably such early written forms of South African English literature produced by blacks were critiqued by white literary critics of the time and of later epochs through a lens inspired by classical literary theory.

The literary analyses of the white critics departed from the Eurocentric tradition also in the sphere of literary criticism, not just in literary theory. The critic Sally-Ann Murray (1992:25) significantly points out that Olive Schreiner's 1883 novel *The Story of an African Farm* bears hallmarks of the British romance genre, a tradition pursued by later writers such as H. Rider Haggard of the *King Solomon's Mines* and *She* fame, albeit imaginatively mediated by ways in which the different South African writers of white descent "[turn] the romance conventions" in their own individual ways. Such roots of white South African English literature differ from the genealogy of black South African English literature. It is such divergent origins of this white division of the literature that have a bearing on the growth of white South African English literature beyond the 19th century. Alan Paton's 1948 novel *Cry the Beloved Country*, for example, bears leanings as the critic Geoffrey Hutchings (1992:184) comments, on "a tradition of English Puritanism whose great figures include Sir Thomas More, John Milton, John Bunyan, Jane Austen, George Eliot" and the others.

Black South African writers of fiction appear to have predicated their works on a different outlook from that of the white writers and critics. In ways that should have intrigued the 19th and later century critics perhaps as a subliminal break with narrow nationalist notions naturally binding the Xhosa tribe together then, Ntsikana's hymns were the first literary pieces in those days among the blacks ever to be composed by an individual outside of the communal mould (see Mphahlele 1992:40). Affirmation by literary critics of any age of such sublime employment

of literary language would have put some spotlight on Ntsikana's composition as explosion of a sure black African idea of the national, and as a sort of transnational achievement evidenced by abrogation of western modes of writing. According to Boo (2008:13), Ntsikana's poetic hymn compositions, sung and regarded as classics to this day, "spoke to the cultural and traditional experiences of Africans" and "appealed to the (lyrical) nature of Africans." For me, even predominantly white critics of South African English literature at that time, inclined towards dominant Eurocentric literary theory of the time, should have identified the difference in the creative resonances of this early 18th century black South African writer.

Ntsikana's infusion of traditionally western hymns with resonances of black identity has escaped inquiry even of the dominant white critics of South African English literature thinking within the frame of transnationalism today, at least as a disturbance of western hegemonic views of hymnal composition. What is perhaps the cross-cultural thrust of Longinus's subliminal view of language as a powerful means of transporting the mind of the listener (in Castle 2007:17) is at play here. The foreign hymnal form of the colonisers, through what language does to the mind, transcends the cultural assimilation it is intended for, and unlocks some self-defining self-assertion on the part of the Xhosa writer. For me such an analytical approach was a tool theoretically even closer to the history bound critic of the early 1800s when classical literary theory still held sway.

In late 20th century poststructuralist critical terms, the achievement of Ntsikana's abrogation of hymns as codes of western hegemony does make sense within a theory known as New Historicism, with its literary and cultural analysis from a materialist standpoint presupposing that the subject is neither stable nor autonomous, but the *subject of* social, cultural, and historical forces (Castle 2007:41). This is why the indigenous lyrics and rhythm of traditional Xhosa music temporally bear the brand of the western Christian hymn. The dialectical linguistic and mental product is larger than both indigeneity and imperialism.

Produced intellectually by the Christian missionary project established in Lovedale in 1826 (Mphahlele 1992:41), Tiyo Soga took the black South African literature project further with a deepening agency. Tiyo Soga's historical narratives and other writings tilted towards a more

cautious embracing of western Christianity than was Ntsikana's stance (Mphahlele 1922:41). Showing more markedly a continued African cultural consciousness, Soga collected and published Xhosa proverbs (Mphahlele 1992:41). One cannot but appreciate parallels between this practice by Soga in the 19th century with Sol Plaatje's early 20th century preservation of Setswana idioms and proverbs in writing. Preservation of this sort has invariably and across historical periods been followed by infusion of such African idioms into English fiction produced by the collectors themselves.

Significantly and in furtherance of the hybridised identity project, Soga juxtaposes the crafting of his literary artefacts with missionary Christianity. The critic Ndletyana (2008:17) echoes this in his remark that, like Ntsikana, Soga was a Christian priest who "turned his educational training towards awakening the very same national pride and consciousness that his missionary teachers had denounced."

Varied vacillations between a more aggressive or timid assertion of indigenous African personality continued when John Ntsiko and John Tengo Jabavu entered the scene in the 1880s. According to Mphahlele (1992:41), Ntsiko "expressed his sense of disillusionment in the new creed" of Christian moral liberalism even more radically than Soga. The teacher and journalist Jabavu proved too moderate to other black writers and political activists of the time (Ndletyane 2008:39). This culminated *inter alia* in Jabavu's acrimonious ideological clash with Plaatje (Ndletyana 2008:39). In the 1890s the writer and journalist Mpilo Rubusana "collected proverbs and praise poems", "wrote political articles", helped translate the bible into isiXhosa and wrote books also in English including *History of South Africa from the Native Standpoint* (Mphahlele 1992:43; Ngqongqo 2008:47-50). A significant trend had coalesced by this time, of black South African English writers practically observing no demarcation between the English and African language manifestations of African thinking expressed creatively in fiction.

During the same period as black writers Ntsikana, Tiyo Soga and John Ntsiko, the works of the white South African writer Thomas Pringle appeared. According to the critic Ernest Pereira (1992:3), the influences on Pringle's style and content were the European Romantics Byron,

Scott, Campbell and Wordsworth. The next works of a white writer to follow were those of Olive Schreiner.

My account of analyses of the 19th century black South African literary output must have demonstrated that black South African writers of English literature adopted a cultural response to the encounter of colonial imperialism that was the opposite of docile acquiescence. In this way, these forerunners asserted a distinctive African identity in the literature they produced, of a genealogy dissimilar to that of its white counterpart. One of the many achievements of black South African writers was negation of what Mphahlele laments in *The African Image* (1974) as a misrepresentation of black identity in South African English literature produced by white writers.

Common threads through South African English literature produced by blacks from the 1900s

Some of the black South African novels written in English belong to the 1930s. According to Castle (2007:36), literary criticism in this era on the world stage was swept by hermeneutical innovations in the form of the Reader-Response theory spearheaded by theorists such as Roman Ingarden, which brought to bear on the pragmatics of the reader's response to and creation of a literary text. Hermeneutics is derived from the word "hermeneutic", meaning "the science or art of interpretation" (Eagleton 1996:57). Before what Castle (2007:36) describe as hermeneutical innovations of the 1930s, the existentialist Heidegger's 1927 work marked a clear break with Husserl's transcendental phenomenological notion of universal types or essences of phenomena. Hermeneutical phenomenologists such as Heidegger based their notion of literature "in questions of historical interpretation rather than ... transcendental consciousness" (Eagleton 1996:57).

Critics of South African English literature of the 1930s can be given the litmus test determining their interpretation of literature either in transcendental universals denying the different historicity of English literature written by blacks, or in due recognition of existentialist specificities creating and created by black writers and the black characters they depict in their narratives.

In 1910 Thomas Mofolo completed the novel *Chaka* in which he “invested his hero with human qualities denied him by historians, missionaries and administrators, who saw in Shaka only the unmitigated savagery of a beast” (Mphahlele 1992:45). Around 1925 the black writer Mqhayi radically infused black literary-historical forms in all his writing including prose he wrote in English (Qangule 2008:55). Black critics like Qangule (2008:55) have credited Mqhayi as an embodiment of “the transition of African narratives from the oral tradition to the written word.” Nationalist thought harking back to the days of a world view imbued with orature is thus sustained in the early 20th century. This after its marked crystallisation in the 19th century, attested to by the works of writers such as Ntsikana, Soga and Ntsiko in their varied harnessing of African maxims to create a different literature from that produced by their white counterparts. In this way, the constant of positing a nationalism alternative to that of white writers remains in place since its continual shaping and refinement by different black writers starting in the 19th century.

Around the year 1928 the Mosotho writer Sekese of the Morija publishing staple produced Sesotho heroic poetry translated into English (Mphahlele 1992:45). According to Mphahlele (1992:45), other Basotho writers to follow were Segoete and Mopeli-Paulus who wrote both in Sesotho and English. A little later the coloured writer Peter Abrahams’s novel *Mine Boy* written in English thematically continued the concerns of these earlier black South African English writers. The inscription of indigenous thinking alongside hybridised black existence continued in this era.

Other English titles produced by blacks include Rolfes Dhlomo’s novella published in 1928 (Mphahlele 1992:49). In the novella a picture is created of the African as disoriented by evil city life as her/his rural abode is turned into a wasteland (Mphahlele 1992:49). In his 1948 novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Allan Paton famously handled the same theme, if with liberal ideological leanings contrasting with the overall Afrocentric stance of the black writers. Sol Plaatje’ novel *Mhudi* was published in 1930 within such a genealogical matrix. As Mphahlele (1992:48) observes, the concerns of Rolfes Dhlomo’s narrative find continuance in Herbert Dhlomo’s 1940 poem “Valley of a Thousand Hills.”

What I have outlined as evidence of existing endemic manifestations of black identity in a category of South African literature written in English need to be acknowledged by academics and critics. There remain frailties of seeking certainty in deceptively fixed structures of thought as in natural sciences and technology, to this day visited literary criticism. Olivier (2014:18) exposes the fallacy of such inclinations in literary criticism, with the analogy that “the natural sciences and technology cannot, by themselves, give any guidance on the axiological manner in which human beings should orient themselves in the world.” Congruous with a view of reality as made up of self-constituting hermeneutic manifestations, analysts of South African English literature have to pin down and define a self-defining distinctness of black South African literature written in English constituting a rupture with its white counterpart. Otherwise, the critics will fall into the trap of some neo-Modernist cultural homogenisation.

Black identity influences as exemplified in Mofolo’s *Chaka* and Plaatje’s *Mhudi*

Within the world theoretical context, the publication of Thomas Mofolo’s and Sol Plaatje’s novels *Chaka* and *Mhudi* in 1925 and 1930 respectively coincided with the third phase of Modernism and rise of Formalism. According to Castle (2007:23, 24), the “dominant mode of Formalism in the US and Britain in the 1920s and 1930s was ... New Criticism.” One prominent tenet of New Criticism is that “the text’s internal unity” falls short of complete reification and accommodates “a kind of empiricism” (Eagleton 1996: 41). This is an aspect of Formalism developed by structuralists to see “the aesthetic object” as existing “only in human interpretation of this physical fact” (Eagleton 1996:87).

Chaka was published in Sesotho in 1925 and later translated into English first in 1931 by F.H. Dutton and, then in 1981 by Daniel P. Kunene (Kunene 1981: xiii-xiv). The translator of the 1981 version of *Chaka* I am using, Daniel P. Kunene, is explicit about the care he takes to preserve the Sesotho and isiZulu idiom and linguistic features in his English translation (Kunene 1981: xix – xxiii). For me the language path travelled by this novel classifies it best within the oeuvre of black South African English literature that is the subject of this study. The linguistically inter-textual process *Chaka* has gone through in Kunene’s translation is the same moulting the other works under consideration have undergone, in their appropriation of African language

modes of meaning making through suffused intra-textual translation. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the translator deliberately went about working on the translation complicitly with both the ideology of the black writers of the 1800s and discourses of the black fiction of the era.

Literary critics of Eurocentric allegiances have been and continue failing to see such African language stretching of the estranging or defamiliarising effect of novelistic literary elements, as making distinct the black English novel in non-Formalist reference to historical meaning outside of the literary text. True to Eagleton's (1996: 5) remark that Formalists held literary enstrangement to be "enstranging only against a certain normative linguistic background", for a Eurocentric literary critic not sensible to the texture of a novel like *Chaka* with its multi-layered linguistic defamiliarisation, the normative view of literary art prevails, limiting estrangement only within sociolects otherwise perceived to be constant across all cultural identities of the world. For adherents of the New Criticism staple subscribing to a reference of literary formal elements to reality outside the text that does not take full account of the cross-cultural intertextuality of black South African English works, a novel such as *Chaka* does not strike as distinctively black.

One more formula for black cultural representation is the use of African folktales in the English version of Mofolo's *Chaka*. In the exposition of the novel, the persona casts in high relief commotion caused by the difaqane wars. This the persona achieves by juxtaposing the text's disruptive imagery with images conjuring an atmosphere of peace that reigned before violent displacement. The not yet scattered nations are depicted in Nguni mythical terms as being in peace they had enjoyed "from the day ... the Great-Great One, caused the people to emerge from a bed of reeds" (4). Lending a similar folkloric ring to the narrative, the writer describes a traditional healer as taking "the bile of a yellow snake ... the very one through which [the Matebele] said the spirits sent the messages" and mixing the bile with some of her medicines to give to the boy Chaka to drink (8).

In typical allegory of black folktales, when Chaka's father Senzangakhona's other wives become jealous of Chaka's mother Nandi, the marital rivals use the traditional medicine man to turn

“Senzangakhona’s heart away from Nandi, so that whenever he tried to visit her he would feel so afraid that he would go back at once” (10). Fearing that Chaka might be too timid to go down to the river alone to apply the emboldening potions as prescribed, the female traditional healer administers a vaccine and medicine consisting of some ingredients and “the liver of a lion, the liver of a leopard, and the liver of a man who had been a renowned warrior in his lifetime” (14). Typically black folkloric paradox is evident when livers of animals and human flesh are flung in the same bag in a manner conflicting with black cultural spirituality holding human life sacred where the killing of a human being is taboo.

Prose typifying South African English literature written by blacks continues in Plaatje’s *Mhudi*. Mphahlele (1992:48) is among prominent black critics who observe that there is use of folktales in *Mhudi*. Plaatje confesses to consulting oral sources for Setswana idioms and proverbs, in a manner parallel to Kunene’s during the *Chaka* translation project. Plaatje’s sources as he crafted his English medium novel *Mhudi* were “his grandmother, daughter-in-law of his great-grandfather, and her brother” (Mphahlele 1992:47). The presence of African language idioms in *Mhudi* suggests immanent communication among characters in their own indigenous languages despite the surface level English medium of the tale. This is why Stephen Gray (1992:69) sees Plaatje’s approach as a “transcription of oral tales into written English.” Of course I demonstrate in this paper that the function of Plaatje’s and other black writers’ splicing of English diction and syntax with oral tales is more profound than a mere “transcription of oral tales into written English” (Gray1992: 69).

The demanding unriddling of the pun in the protagonist Mhudi’s question, “Tell me, father, are these Zulus really human beings?” (36) is a case in point. The heroine Mhudi ponders this question as she and Ra-Thaga share details of their experience of the cataclysmic attack by the Matebele. Literally the Matebele warriors teasing this question out of Mhudi are human beings like the Barolong and Batswana peopling the drama of the novel. From an African idiomatic perspective, however, it may be said that the Matebele warriors are not people – in the sense that they are not humanistic.

Their not being human is not as straightforwardly literal as it may seem. It is the imperialist tendencies the writer manipulates them to manifest that exclude them from being human beings. Perhaps their historical acquisition of a new description as Matebele and no longer Zulus signifies such figurative banishment from what makes a person a human being. The bigger answer betraying the loftiness of the character Mhudi's thinking is that, the Ndebeles of Mzilikazi characterised in the novel *Mhudi* are not real people but symbolic figures standing for European colonial expansionism.

Plaatje's divesting the Matebele warriors of the appellation human being acquires conviction as he describes their revenge of the killing of their induna Bhoya. Mzilikazi's fighters are portrayed ignobly as "spearing women and children", to the extent of even grabbing a baby from its mother's back and dashing "its skull against the trunk of a tree"; while another child whose mother has just been speared to death is pierced with the same blade after which a Matebele soldier holds "the baby transfixed in the air"; and later when Mhudi is about to run away from chief Tauana's capital of Kunana where "hordes of Matabele soldiers [dance] round a bonfire" in grotesque celebration of the senseless bloodbath, "a big naked soldier" fiendishly waves an assegai in the air before inhumanly plunging it into the body of Mhudi's "little brother who was still strapped to [her] back"; and one of Mhudi's acquaintances dies as a result of losing blood after she has "had one of her breasts ripped open" with a spear by one of the Matebele soldiers (32, 33, 40, 41).

It can be said that such exaggeration of a real historical event reproduced in the novel *Mhudi* succeeds in purposefully invoking an inglorious image befitting the heartless dehumanization associated with western colonial expansionism. The subtle effect of the interplay of images representing dehumanising westernisation like "an English artist ... conducting an orchestra" (27), with images of the domain of the Barolong in which their traditional civilisation flourishes "under their several chiefs who owed no allegiance to any king or emperor" (25), is a hint at the masked portrayal of Europeans and the havoc they visit on indigenous peoples in the 19th and earlier centuries.

It is with the same effect that Plaatje sarcastically describes the Matebele's subjugation of the Barolong as "the new administration" and a "new discipline" that "was not stern", because it left the Batswana "in undisturbed possession of their old homes and haunts", with the proviso that "each chief paid taxes" (29). There is no mistaking reference in these descriptions to western hegemonic power, with its known subtle use of hegemonic discourse in subjugating invaded nations of the subaltern world in so insidious a manner as to succeed in enlisting the acquiescence of the victims themselves. There were coexisting Formalist and structuralist streams of literary criticism coinciding with the publication and subsequent analyses of a black South African English novel like this one. For example, the structuralist view that "sign-systems by which individuals lived could be seen as culturally variable" overlapped in the public space with notions of the deep laws underlying the "workings of these systems" being "universal, embedded in a collective mind which transcended any particular culture" (Eagleton 1996: 94-95). From the point of view of a nonTswana cultural identity, the subjugation of the Barolong by colonial forces is laudable, as opposed to the ignominy the discourse of *Mhudi* reveals it to symbolise.

Ra-Thaga laments the Matebele wiping out of the Barolong by stating that the Barolong "in their wars never tarnished their spears with children's blood" (38), and were "noted for their agility and dexterity with the sword – a clean sword that never stained itself with the blood of a woman" (38). In lauding the humanity of the victims, Plaatje proceeds to portray the pillaged Barolong as bearing the "trait of measuring strength with bearded men, and never defiling their spears with women's blood" (40).

The thread of indigenous idiom and concepts is sustained in the novels *Chaka* and *Mhudi*. The translator of *Chaka* describes courting and subsequent marriage between Chaka's father Senzangakhona and mother Nandi by means of Sesotho lexical items *ho kana*, invoking other black indigenous love games like *sedia-dia*, as an indication that the characters in the novel are subjective human beings possessing an agency inflected by black nationalist culture. This technique is reinforced in diction that is only ostensibly English. One example is when the translator described Nandi as "already damaged" by the time she is married to the character

Chaka's father. This is literal translation from the Sesotho idiom whereby impregnating a virgin premaritally is called *go senya*/to damage the lady. The technique invests the work with indigenous African thinking that negates colonisation of the mind in true black South African nationalist spirit. For a Formalist critic conforming to the elevation of literary form above content and the view of only art as "the critic's business" as opposed to art's "relation to social reality" (Eagleton 1996:3), unfortunately the culturally inflected form of a novel like *Chaka* escapes notice.

Such stylistic dexterity pervades also the text of *Mhudi*. One example is when Chief Tauana instructs his regiments to murder Mzilikazi's emissaries when they come to extort tax from the Barolong, using the verb "lose." This is a literal translation of the Sotho verb for losing someone through death, *loba*/lose. Unlike the invocation of horrendous murder, the Sesotho word *loba* significantly points to the relative humaneness with which the Barolong monarch wants the messengers executed. This trait consistently distinguishes the nobleness of Barolong warfare from Matebele vile battles. As with Mofolo's *Chaka*, Plaatje employs the lexicon as an index of indigenous thinking informing the discourse of the novel.

Same as its forerunners of the 19th century, black South African English literature of the 1930s defies critical lumping together with its white counterpart. Such a simplistic fusion is not concerned with the historicist-hermeneutic reality the former building block of South African English literature grapples with consistently.

Criticism of South African English literature after the 1930s

I resume my critique of literary critics of black South African English literature, this time focussing on the era from the 1950s up to the post-apartheid period.

It is worth noting that only a few lone voices of black critics of South African English literature continue to exist also post the 1930s. This is testimony to extant white hegemonic analyses of texts written in English to this day. To illustrate, in the 1992 collection of essays by South African critics of English literature of the region, of 34 contributors the only blacks are Es'kia Mphahlele, Kolawole Ongungbesan, Peter N. Thuynsma, L.G. Ngcobo, Mbulelo Visikhungo

Mzamane, Vernon A. February, Njabulo S. Ndebele and Daniel P. Kunene (see Chapman, M., Gardner, C. and Es'kia Mphahlele 1992). The dominance even today of a legacy of accredited literary journals propagating traditional white ideology does little to alleviate the dearth of non-token black literary critics of South African English literature.

To continue with my longitudinal approach to literary theoretical context within which world and South African literature has been produced and analysed, let me mention that structuralism in its various refinements evolved towards a more helpful enlistment of the world outside of the system of literary signs or outside of the deep structure believed to generate the socialised discourses of literary works. The 1960s and 1970s saw the expansion of postmodernist narrative theory departing from formalist foundations (Castle 2007:36). Such postmodernist theories of fabulation and metafiction argued that postmodern fiction tended to comment on and thematize its own linguistic and narrative practices" (Castle 2007:36). Perhaps the heroic folkloric self-praise of enacted poetry such as Ingwapele Madingoane's and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo's during the Soweto of the 1970s and 1980s should have attracted universal acclaim. Ingwapele Madingoane and the other Soweto poets do connect to the theoretical base of consciously acknowledging their literary creations as artificial narrative acts, re-staging traditional African poetic forms. In keeping with the view of culture as non-static and as a social construct, however, the Soweto poets in this category attain topicality in their epic sublimity resonating with the struggle mood then intense in the wake of 16 June 1976 student uprisings. The critic Mashudu C. Mashige's (2006: 59) observation about the "worker poet" Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo's craft is testimony of such an achievement of the Soweto poets: "Through his skilful borrowing from traditional oral forms such as *izihasho* and *izibongo*, Hlatshwayo uses his poetry to articulate a worker-centred vision of an egalitarian South Africa that will be without exploitation and oppression."

Castle (2007:41) describes New Historicism of the 1980s as a "mode of reading literary texts" from a materialist standpoint that relied on contextualizing them within an archive of other typically non-literary texts, leading to a "thick historical description of the discourse environment in which the literary text in question is produced." In spite of such an empowering

literary theoretical environment, contemporary English narratives produced by people of black cultural identity such as Miriam Tladi, Laureta Ngcobo and Sindiwe Magona could not get noticed for their effective deviation from normative conceptions of the South African English novel, as far as the predominantly white fundis of South African English literature during the 1970s and 1980s were concerned. These unacknowledged black voices within the South African English literary landscape transnationalised the hitherto exclusively white concept of the South African nation in ways they should have been recognised for their enrichment of literary discourse.

Significantly, recent analyses of post-apartheid South African English literature written by blacks point to a distinctive handling of notions like nationalism and transnationalism in this literature. One example is a 2014 article by Rafapa and Masemola published in *Alternation* 21(2), with the title “Representations of the national and transnational in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.”

Regarding the direction of post-apartheid English literature in South Africa, De Kock (2011: 21, 22, 23, 25,) argues that a common black and white post-2004 South African literature written in English resulted from a “transnational turn” that “ushered in a much bigger world” where “the desire was to step beyond the enclosure of the national”, which can also be described as “the struggle [for liberation].” It is worth focusing on the evolutionary juncture of literary theory corresponding to the time De Kock writes about this supposed culturally homogenising feature of South African English literature in the 1980s and 1990s. Such an observation can rightly be interpreted as De Kock’s (2011) attempt to show that South African literature written in English responded since the 1980s and 1990s to global theoretical evolution from modernist to postmodernist scientific thought. This is why he highlights what he sees as a discursive shift of such a literature from the sense of orientation represented in the way the writers of fiction centralise the theme of apartheid and the struggle against it. This can be seen as his way of abandoning modernist adherence to a somewhat secure idea of what a concept like nationalism represents.

However, there is a sense in which an observation such as this by De Kock (2011:25) is accurate only as far as South African English literature written by whites is concerned. For me, such a remark is apt more for the category of South African English literature characterised by allegiance to western notions of adventure and exploration. These are the motifs white South African English literature had been echoing and transplanting onto the South African colonial scene, since its genesis exemplified in Thomas Pringle's and Olive Schreiner's seminal works of the 19th century.

One can say that the critic De Kock's 2011 assertions of South African literature assuming a transnational hue were in a sense a return to a somewhat modernist imposition of one Eurocentric sense of reality on an alien South African socio-historical territory. It is at this point that a different perspective of black South African English literature should have been highlighted. It is an oversimplification to assume that the cultural-historical sensibility of black and white writers in the 1980s and 1990s were identical, thus leading to a uniform type of literary representations of both the theme of apartheid and a move away from preoccupation with it, across the two categories of writers.

The critics Tomaselli and Muller (1992:478) rightly observe that "cultures are distinguished in terms of differing responses to the same social, material and environmental conditions." Literary critics functioning in the postmodernist period cannot but be responsive to New Historicism's presupposition that the subject reading a literary work is neither stable nor autonomous, but the ever unfolding product of social, cultural, and historical forces (Castle 2007:41). Perhaps such a persistence on a common structuredness can be attributed to what Castle (2007:33) describes as the pursuit of an identifiable form of a sense of the world existing during postmodernism, albeit in a questioned state. The same period of poststructuralist thinking continued to be influenced by postmodernism, because poststructuralism and postmodernism both co-exist and diverge.

Harries (1997:7) helpfully points out that modernity's inseparability from a somewhat fixed centre of reason and technology is responsible for the "concern with the shape of the modern

world” straddling both modernism and postmodernism, the latter functioning as a “phenomenon of modernity’s bad conscience, of its self-doubt.”

My stand is that by lumping together the divergent discourses of black and white South African English literature, the dominant group of critics discorded with the then ambient thrust of poststructuralism overlapping dialectically with postmodernism. Castle (2007:33) is hinting at a theoretical complex of the time in his remark that postmodernism “is concerned primarily with a critique of modernity and a repudiation of aesthetic Modernism” while poststructuralism with its emergence in the 1960s during the peak period of structuralism is committed to the ongoing critique of structuralism and the development of new theories of language, textuality, and subjectivity, putting structuralism to the test. This is why Castle (2007:33) observes that the theory of deconstruction, made famous then by the theorist Derrida, was a trope of poststructuralism despite what he sees as its shortcomings of being “ahistorical and uninterested in social and political questions.”

Conclusion

I have discussed the common genealogy and discourses of South African English literature written by blacks. I used the features of such a black South African English literature to illustrate how its hegemonic interpretations spanning the 1800s and 2100s have, wittingly or unwittingly, dissolved black identity that for me is eponymous with the pervasive poststructuralist subject forged on the discourses of its surface by the metanarrative systems underlying its form.

From a theoretical perspective, it should be in order to lament a normative structuredness imposed on chafing South African English literature written by blacks. Foucault (1995:170-194) traces the source of such literary criticism remaining latent in today’s postmodern world, to the age of modernism. Within such a framework, it is understandable why writers such as Clarkson (2005:454) interpret the post-1994 fiction of the black South African English writer Phaswane Mpe as testimony to an eroded African identity; and De Kock (2011:22) perceives in South African English literature produced from 1994 to 2004 a freeing “transnational turn ... fulfilling creative writers’ desire cross-culturally “to step beyond the enclosure of the national.” The

salvaging aspect of the poststructural theoretical framework of the current period is that more nuanced and inclusive notions of the transnational have emerged. One example is the view that “Transnationalism ... does not dilute national and cultural identities; rather, it encourages the assertion of identities that can be legitimately claimed as proof of having constituencies” (Pommerolle and Simeant 2010: 91).

An affirming feature of critics with views of the transnational differing with those of writers such as Pommerole and Simeant (2010) is that, scientifically they pay attention to the need in today’s postmodern times to explore how South African literature written in English aligns or breaks with the idea of certainty, latent in our postmodernist age. To their credit, such critics of South African English literature do probe the nature of such affiliation or disaffiliation with possibly stabilised reference points of reality, in typical postmodernist angst. It is with such a critical lens that De Kock (2011:25) argues in affirmation of the “special status” of apartheid and the idea of the nation of South Africa as “a political hotspot” diminishing since the 1980s and 1990s.

The critical insight of post 2004 critics of black cultural identity sound redeeming. In Njabulo Ndebele’s words, “it is necessary to first engage with strangeness, for the celebration of difference “to become meaningful and sustainable” (In Mapadimeng 2013:73). Ndebele significantly points out the outcome of a homogenising aesthetics that fails to engage difference and diversity as “further perpetuation of past divisions as opposed to overcoming it” (in Mapadimeng 2013:73).

In order for South African English literature to be critiqued with requisite rigour today, first the imbalance in recognising the unidentical original influences of its black and white components has to be acknowledged. Eurocentric critics thus far dominating the teaching of South African English literature do not yet seem to concede to this fact in their professional practice.

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