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**Assimilation and rejection: the problematic of globalism
in relation to post-colonial literature**

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Postcolonial studies in the 1990s, at least in the literary field, were largely articulated around the conflict between two opposed attitudes towards the relationship existing between North and South in the wake of the mass migrations which followed the post-independence era. On the one hand, assimilationists like Salman Rushdie (1990) or Homi Bhabha (1994) have called for modes of representation reflecting what Rushdie calls the “mongrelisation” process characterizing the new multicultural societies coming into being in many Western cities: “Melange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world” (Rushdie 225). In literary terms this approach is best reflected in the genre known as Magic Realism, a deceptively simple category including many different types of writing, but which has nevertheless become a convenient shorthand term for novels like Rushdie’s own *Satanic Verses*, or Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, which seamlessly combine the codes of Western realism with traditional elements taken from indigenous legend.

The opposition to this trend is represented by a whole array of Marxist critics (Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, Timothy Brennan, Fredric Jameson) who consider post-independence cosmopolitanism as a smokescreen serving to hide the disparities that persist between the metropolitan centres and the former colonies. This view is most clearly expressed by Aijaz Ahmad:

Various countries, from the three continents, have been assimilated into the global structure of capitalism not as a single cultural ensemble but highly differentially, each establishing its own circuits of (unequal) exchange with the metropolis. [...] An average Nigerian who is literate about his own country would know infinitely more about England and the United States than [...] about most countries of Africa. (Ahmad, 1987, 10-11)

For Ahmad, the cosmopolitan writers, as privileged members of the intellectual jet-set, are in no way representative of the immigrant masses seeking political or economic havens in the West: "Postcoloniality is designed [...] to cover up the origins of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much victims as beneficiaries" (Dirlik, 1994, 353).

At best these writers are seen as entertainers recycling indigenous material into a sort of post-modernist free-for-all designed, like native artefacts, to cater for the Western taste for the exotic: "The Third World becomes the place of the unconscious, [a] rich source of fantasy and legend recycled by the intelligentsia, [...] loosened from any territorial context and juxtaposed in ways that provide a constant frisson of pleasure" (Franco, 1988, 505).

On the basis of a somewhat hasty analogy, the carnivalesque dimension pointed to by Bakhtin (1984) as a distinctive trait of the novel as a genre is used to establish a parallel between the Magic Realist novel and the historical propensity of carnival to turn away from its subversive role by pandering to the commercial norms of a dominant ideology. This point is made by the cultural historians Peter Stallybrass and Allon White

(Stallybrass and White 40) who have shown how Renaissance exhibitions of exoticism—West Indian midgets or giant Tongans swallowing raw meat—simply reinforce the West’s view of itself as the centre of civilisation.

I wish to show to what extent these theories—to be brief, respectively those of the assimilationists and the nationalists—though largely correct as to the evident imbalances existing between the North and the South, are nevertheless dependent on a reductive, binary view which is in many ways as illusory as the assimilationist process which they denounce. This polarity fails to do justice either to the colonial situation itself or to the extremely diverse narrative strategies which have developed in its wake. Each of these, in its own way, points to a variety of contexts which may defy attempts at ready-made classifications such as those devised by the two groups mentioned above.

The binary approach itself has a long history in the field of postcolonial theory. Its historical roots lie in a form of thinking which the African American commentator Henry Louis Gates has referred to as “critical Fanonism,” a simplification of Franz Fanon’s idea, expressed at the height of the independence struggle, that the road to salvation for the colonies passed by a complete break with the West on every level, whether economic, political, aesthetic or even psychological. It is in this context, for example, that critics like Chinweizu (1985), head of the the so-called *bolekaja* school in Nigeria, launched his violent attacks (*bolekaja* literally means “come down here and fight”) on Wole Soyinka’s attempts to establish parallels between Greek mythology and the cosmology of his own people, the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. However, faced with the actual problem of what to write about and how to write about it, the first generation of Anglophone West African writers very soon came to realize that a simple return to African oral traditions and native culture was no longer possible so great had been the encroachments of British power in almost every field, and this even in the context of “indirect rule.”

When Chinua Achebe, the father of African Anglophone literature, embarked on his attempt to show that the empty spaces on Joseph Conrad's map of Africa as illustrated in *Heart of Darkness* had in fact been filled for a long time by people already pursuing a sustained correspondence with the West (C. Achebe, 2009, 83ff), he seemed to be positioning himself within the terms of a binary logic which early postcolonial theory has described as the Empire "writing back" to its former masters.

Achebe, himself, however, was well aware that his enterprise marked a break with the literary concerns of his forefathers and was conceived entirely within the conditions of production established by the colonial context. To communicate at all, either with the British readership he had in mind, or a potential African readership made up of town-dwellers themselves largely cut off from knowledge of their own history and cultural traditions, Achebe had no choice but to have recourse to English (1965), a necessity further compounded by the fact that this area of Africa is characterized by the estimated existence of some two thousand languages and regional dialects.

Indeed, the question of readership lies at the heart of any discussion concerning the entanglement of apparently opposed cultural traditions, not only from a linguistic point of view, but also in the field of aesthetics and literary form. The problematic nature of the attempts made by some African writers to achieve an aesthetic break with Western norms is best illustrated by Amos Tutuola whose transcriptions into English of popular Yoruba folktales (1953, 1954) achieved considerable success in the West in the 1950s. Hailed by Dylan Thomas in Britain and Raymond Queneau in France as a brilliant manipulator of the coloniser's language, Tutuola became a source of embarrassment to African intellectuals for whom his use of English had less to do with invention than with an imperfect mastery of basic syntax. Meanwhile his novels made little impact either on a more traditional African audience still more accustomed to oral renditions of popular tales in the local languages, or on an urbanized lower-middle-class readership attuned to locally published, often didactic, novels in English dealing with ethical questions related to the need to adapt to life in the new towns.

Stephanie Newell has shown (2000, 6) to what extent these popular novels, considered by innumerable Africanist scholars writing from the 1960s to the 1990s as naïve imitations of the text-book classics of English literature, do in fact reflect, at a fundamental level, the manner in which an extraneous culture has been absorbed by a swiftly evolving society. Instead of rejecting it out of hand, the new society has in reality appropriated it—to use another popular postcolonial concept—in order to adapt it to its own needs. Although products of colonialism, the reading societies which flourished in Ghana in particular as early as the 1930s (Newell 57), provided the basis for the emergence in the 1950s and 60s of a new kind of literature, little known in the West. With its emphasis on reciprocity—public readings and debates (Newell 35), the publication of readers’ comments in re-editions of a given novel—this new urban or “market” literature in a way recreated the give and take conditions and the notion of public performance specific to the conditions of production and transmission prevalent in the oral tradition.

One of the great paradoxes here is that these locally published novels, with their emphasis on topical themes, only obtained visibility in the West if they were able to conform to the norms of “Africanness” established by the London-based publishing company Heinemann. At that time, the latter’s “African Writers Series” held a virtual monopoly over all writing from the former colonies. A good illustration of this is the manner in which Asare Konadu’s popular novel of 1969, *Emilia’s Promise*, was only accepted by Heinemann once the Ghanaian author had agreed to change the somewhat humdrum title to the suitably exotic *Ordained by the Oracle*.

It was partly in reaction to this that West Africa’s most radical writer of the time, Ayi Kwei Armah, irritated by the failure of his bold attempt in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) to provide a Ghanaian audience with an account of its past history written in the oracular style of the traditional griots, decided in the early 1980s to sever all ties with Western circuits of distribution by setting up his own publishing house and writer’s workshop in Popenguine, Senegal (Armah 295ff). Armah’s gesture is the symptom of a

wholesale rejection of Western influence. This is even more clearly demonstrated by his complementary desire to make of Popenguine a research centre in Egyptology on the basis of Cheik Anta Diop's theory that Ancient Egypt was in effect a Negro civilization (Diop 1960). Armah's project may thus be seen as part of a counter-offensive against the domination of Western discourse, an attempt to deconstruct the mechanism of intellectual hegemony analysed in Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (1991).

Although comprehensible, this extreme attempt to remove African history from the encroachments of Western influence by relating the source of the Continent's culture and imaginative energy to a specifically African locus, carried with it the risks of an epistemological break. This in itself could have reinforced the isolation of a continent whose existence was now considered by many as inevitably bound up with its involvement, desired or imposed, with the rest of the world.

What characterizes much African writing of the 1980s is precisely this desire to bridge the epistemological gap between North and South not, as with Achebe, via a binary, one-way process where the neglected pole seeks to impose its visibility on the other through the process of writing back, but rather on the possibility of reciprocity, of cultural interchange.

This trend is well illustrated by Kojo Laing's 1986 novel, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, whose plot rests on the attempt of two towns, Tukwan in Ghana and Levensvale in Scotland, to achieve an economic and cultural partnership on the model of the post-war twinning process organized between various European cities. Within the framework of a visit to Levensvale by the Tukwan delegation Laing is able to present an almost encyclopaedic account of both Ghanaian and Scottish culture, including a number of inventories evoking in considerable detail the food, vegetation and music, as well as the religious and political systems of each country. His analysis of Scottish culture may in itself be seen as an attempt to get beyond the conventional pattern whereby African

society *alone* is explained to the world, whether this be done by the Western anthropologist or by the African intellectual.

But more important than this, the novel is structured on a strategy of reciprocity which consists in awakening the reader's curiosity so as to incite him, whether he be African or Western, to acquire the codes whereby he may be able to understand, as if from the inside, a society so different from his own. For the Western reader this is illustrated, for example, by the presence in the text of innumerable Akan words which, as a sort of thumb-nose gesture to earlier African novels, are only very partially explained by an extremely succinct and incomplete glossary. On the other hand, non-Scottish readers are expected to have inside knowledge not just of Scottish culture but also of its various sub-cultures. When an old Scottish grandmother's mind is described as "(ranging) over her Celtic origins" (69), or when she has dreams of "streamwater ... (turning) into (the) urine gathered at a ... football match" (69), we are confronted with statements which will remain incomprehensible to those who do not know the subtleties of religious rivalries in Glasgow, or the peculiar sanitary habits of Scottish football fans.

However, despite the hybridity of the new society thus being formed – illustrated, for example, by fish and chips cooking quite naturally in the Ghanaian heat (128), or by old Scottish ladies replacing whisky by the Ghanaian spirit *akpeteshi* (58) – Laing ultimately shrinks away from the syncretism of those novels which Rushdie salutes as so many "love-songs to our mongrel selves" (Rushdie 4). Alerted by an invasion from the north, the Tukwan delegation is obliged to rush home to protect the town and the novel ends on a somewhat ambivalent note with the dominant mood of scepticism being allayed only by the arrival in Ghana of Donald Mackie the son of the mayor of Levensvale.

Brenda Cooper puts this ending down to a "fit of panic" on Laing's part (Cooper 212), as if this writer, for all his refusal to be branded as an African writer and his claims to "derail everything in relation to myself" (Laing 106), had indeed been confronted by

the sheer novelty of his enterprise with the corresponding fear of ending up as a literary maverick.

However, there remain two other categories of writer for whom the question of belonging does not present itself—withstanding the remarks of people like Aijah Ahmad—in the form of a polarised struggle between the conscious need either to reject or to assume a dual heritage.

There is the case first of all of those so-called “second generation” immigrant writers who, unlike the Magic Realist writers Rushdie and Okri, were born in Britain and who consider themselves first and foremost as British not only in terms of nationality but also from a cultural point of view. The predicament of these writers is well illustrated in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), an apprenticeship novel describing what may be called the “coming into awareness” in the 1970s of a young Anglo-Pakistani from Greater London. Like Kureishi himself, who first visited Pakistan when he was already a teenager, Karim, the hero, considers the polarity of the world not in terms of East and West but, more in keeping with his own experience, as the space separating central London from the suburbs.

The innocence of the protagonist from this point of view is such that when he finally makes it to London he expresses his amazement at the sight he and his young suburban friends have of the capital’s fashionable youth with the superbly unconscious ironical remark: “We could have been from Bombay. We’d never catch up” (Kureishi, 1990, 128). Like Kureishi himself, as described in his autobiographical account *The Rainbow Sign*, it is only gradually that Karim will be made to face the fact that his family did indeed originally come from Bombay and that he must somehow come to terms with what he refers to as “these strange creatures—the Indians—[...] that I’d spent my life denying” (Kureishi, 1990, 212).

It is clear, however, that Kureishi is not in the position of those Indian writers like Rushdie or Mukherjee whose voluntary exiles from India have contributed, according to Timothy Brennan, to depriving that country of the possibility of developing a truly

“national mythos” (Brennan 50) in the wake of independence. For Kureishi a national mythos of this kind can only be created for an acculturated immigrant on the level of fantasy with the concomitant risk of crossing the borderline into extreme forms of cultural nationalism. This point he makes with prophetic lucidity in his short story *My Son the Fanatic*, published seven years before the London bombings of 2005, with its account of a young Bradford-born British Pakistani’s sudden plunge into Islamic fundamentalism.

Kureishi’s situation is different again from that of a writer like the Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose migrant status in the West was brought about by political and ethnic persecution in his home country and who finds himself cut off both culturally and linguistically from any hope of communicating with a local audience.

A member of the Arabic Omani community which, for several centuries, held the reins of economic and, to a certain extent, of political power in Zanzibar, Gurnah’s family found itself expelled from the island in the wake of the so-called “Africanisation” programme launched against the Asian and Omani communities after independence. From this point of view his position is different from that of the writers mentioned so far in the sense that his community of origin subsists only in the form of a persecuted minority at home and a somewhat nebulous scattering of individuals in various other parts of the world. Although his novels are inevitably, and sometimes dramatically, concerned with the postcolonial *topos* of identity construction, he eschews both Rushdie-like tendencies to surf on the growing hybridity introduced by globalization as well as the relatively straightforward attempts made by Achebe and Laing to confront different cultural systems through strategies of “writing back” or “bridging.”

In contrast to the latter, Gurnah’s strategy is based on a peculiar combination of disenchantment and irony which leads him less to affirm his cultural specificity as to exploit, trickster-style, his British narratee’s ignorance of African history and culture. In the novel *Admiring Silence*, for example, the central character merely comforts the prejudices of his so-British father-in-law by informing him that the new government in

Zanzibar has “legalized cannibalism” (Gurnah, 1996, 21) and that the mythical prowess of East African long-distance runners is largely due to the equally mythical conditions in which all the members of a growingly urbanized society are supposed to have been brought up: “I told him that I used to wake up at 4 in the morning, milk the cows, weed the fields, help with the harvest and then run six miles to school on an empty stomach every day” (ibid., 23).

However, the *true* irony of the narrator’s position lies in the fact that his capacity for invention is soon shown to be the corollary of his incapacity to remember a past whose spatio-temporal remoteness ultimately condemns him to the solitude of an interiorized form of exile. In a sense Gurnah is painfully aware, like the Marxist commentators mentioned before, of the great cultural gulf separating the metropolitan centres from the colonial margins. However, instead of assuming a nationalist posture which is clearly denied him, he seeks on the contrary to find harmony via a rapprochement with those who, like him, have come to live on the margins of this geopolitical divide. At the end of *Admiring Silence*, the protagonist thus plans to meet up with a Kenyan Asian woman met on the plane, and herself the victim of “Africanisation.”

At the same time, Gurnah’s strong awareness of isolation as an integral aspect of modern living conditions opens his eyes to forms of displacement which ultimately transcend the more familiar North/South framework in which the *topos* of acculturation is usually approached in novels from the former colonies. In *By the Sea* (2001), the protagonist Saleh becomes friends with a female British immigration officer whose Jewish ancestors have wandered from Haifa to Spain to Trieste, to Geneva and finally to London in the wake of historical upheavals occurring outside the framework of British colonization. Moreover, both novels abound with references to abandoned peoples—Austrians turned into Czechs and then into Germans, displaced Kosovars, uprooted Romanians—whose plight, in its sheer ubiquity, appears less as a historical account of

historical conflicts than as a quasi-metaphorical representation of the human condition itself.

By adopting such a stance, Gurnah turns his back on the familiar ideological battle between assimilationists and nationalists which I have identified in this discussion as central to the tensions endemic to globalism, thereby opening up the possibility of a new – and perhaps less ideologically oriented - exploration of human interaction in the contemporary world.

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