

Boleswa Writing and Weathercock Aesthetics Of African Literature

Lekan Oyegoke

Summary

Postmodernist “thinking about thinking” allows for speculative reflection which avers that “Boleswa literature” like “African literature” is non-existent. Basic to this kind of proposition is the suggestion by Saussurean linguistics of systemic differential and oppositional relation in language between sound image and concept and the Barthesian postulation of a semiological associative distinction between signifier, signified and sign in the study of myth where myth is defined as speech but a peculiar type of discourse. Literature is speech comprising different types of discourse – poetry, prose – based on a primary mode of discourse that is language but which also manifests variously as forms of metalanguage. Boleswa literature does not exist, not because “Boleswa” is only an acronym from three southern African countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and is no geographical entity in a strict legal sense, but because arguably it names a part of African literature which itself does not exist. This supposition is premised in part on an ideational extension of the problematic and identification and identity crises in the African cultural experience. Literary history reveals how a search for a suitable poetics, an ideal aesthetics of the African literary terrain often has lapsed into an exercise in the circuitous, enigmatic and contradictory. Still, the discursive pursuit, despite its potential for futility, can, in its dynamics, also be exciting: this essay attempts a speculative review of the study based on African literature using the weathercock as a trope to probe the bizarre, the paradoxical, and the engaging, in the African literary landscape, with reference to Boleswa as signifier, signified and sign.

Opsomming

Daar word in die postmodernistiese “denke oor denke” ruimte gelaat vir spekulatiewe refleksie oor die stelling dat “Boleswa-literatuur”, net soos “Afrika-literatuur”, nie bestaan nie. Onderliggend aan hierdie soort stelling is die Saussureaanse linguistiek se voorstel van ’n sistemiese, differensiële en teenstellende verhouding in taal tussen klank, beeld en konsep en die Bartesiaanse veronderstelling van ’n semiologiese, assosiatiewe onderskeid tussen aanduiders, aangeduide en teken (*signifier, signified and sign*) in die studie van mites, waar mite as spraak omskryf word, maar weliswaar ’n ongewone tipe diskoers. Literatuur is spraak wat uit verskillende tipes diskoers – poësie en prosa – bestaan op grond van ’n primêre modus van diskoers wat taal is, maar wat ook verskillend as vorme van metataal tot uiting kom. Die Boleswa-literatuur bestaan nie – nie omdat “Boleswa” ’n akroniem is

JLS/TLW 32(4) Dec./Des. 2016
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2016.11889



wat saamgestel is uit die naam van drie lande in Suider-Afrika (Botswana, Lesotho en Swaziland) of omdat dit nie 'n geografiese entiteit in 'n streng wetlike sin is nie – maar omdat dit stellig 'n deel van Afrika-literatuur benoem wat eenvoudig nie bestaan nie. Daar word van hierdie veronderstelling uitgegaan, deels op grond van 'n ideasionele uitbreiding van die problematiese identifisering van die Afrika-kultuur en die identiteitskrisis wat gevolglik ondervind word. In die literêre geskiedenis word blootgelê hoe 'n soeke na 'n geskikte poëtika, 'n ideale estetika van die terrein van die Afrika-letterkunde, dikwels verval tot 'n oefening in omslagtigheid, die enigmatiese en weerspreking. Ten spyte daarvan dat dit potensieel futiel kan wees, kan die diskursiewe nastrewing, betreffende die dinamiek daarvan, steeds 'n opwindende oefening wees. Daar word met hierdie opstel gepoog om 'n spekulatiewe oorsig van die studie gebaseer op Afrika-literatuur te gee deur van die weerhaan as troop gebruik te maak om diepgaande ondersoek in te stel na dit wat bisar, paradoksaal en aantreklik in die landskap van die Afrika-letterkunde is, met verwysing na Boleswa as aanduider, aangeduide en teken.

Preamble

Poststructuralism maintains a principled stand that separates sign from referent and between the literary work as a finished closed object and a text as a site of performative discourse that is open at both ends, is topless, bottomless, in order to concentrate solely on language, and the text as an instance of discourse, a practice in language that is marked by infinitude of outcomes. The fluid, open-ended yet evanescent system of signifiers is the pragmatic locus of deconstructive activity which has revised conventional recipient status and upgraded the role of reader and critic in the flow of cultural production. As Roland Barthes puts it paradoxically:

There are no more critics, only writers. We can put it still more precisely: from its very principles, the theory of the text can produce only theoreticians or practitioners (writers), but absolutely not “specialists” (critics or teachers); as a practice, then, it participates itself in the subversion of the genres which as a theory it studies.

(Young 1981: 44)

The disjunction between signifier and signified in the study of the African literary terrain offers up interesting possibilities for what Jonathan Culler has described as “thinking about thinking”; which phrase aptly captures the present preoccupation of critical practice with pragmatic speculation as opposed to the empirical orthodoxy of formalism and different shades of literary criticism before structuralism and, subsequently, poststructuralism evolved. The evasive answers to shifting and shifty problems in the philosophy of criticism may be gleaned effectively more from the systemic interstices of language than from the ontology of dialectical materialism. The African literary landscape is an immense conundrum of linguistic and cultural dichotomies underlain by a dynamic that is worthy of speculative attention according to a postmodernist definition of theory.

“African writing” is a vague semantically safer, less suspicious, less conflictual terminology than “African literature”. It is a looser label that is inviting of less normative attention than the other, and has as a result attracted less controversy than “African literature”. Another reason “African writing” has been a seemingly relatively sociologically innocent tag for cultural activity is that, as a mark of identification, it is a less favoured, less popular method of characterising literary production: comparatively “English writing”, “French writing”, “German writing”, “Portuguese writing”, for example, is a rarity applied to taxonomical usage in English to describe literary production. More common usage is “English literature”, “French literature”, “German literature”, “Portuguese literature” where “literature” replaces “writing” in designation as well as conceptually.

A review of history of the attempt to contain literary production in Africa in straitjackets of cultural nomenclature is frequently an illustration in the bizarre, the contradictory, and the unfathomable. “What is African literature?” is a question that invites of a more challenging reflection than “What is African writing?” As a signifier African literature seems suggestive of a kind of presence and an equation with some signified that is amenable to arrest, capture and annotation. The comparison of identificatory tags for literary production in other lands with the African cultural experience and the supposition of equity in those other cultural experiences between sign and concept probably encouraged the belief that there is such an item as African literature, a position that is being questioned with greater vehemence than previously since Obi Wali. By extension and affinity within the African literary canvas, there is an assumption of a conceptual presence that undergirds the signifier “Boleswa literature” which seems worthy of problematisation in aid of exciting speculative possibilities.

The present discussion essays a reflection on the connection(s) between sign and concept in the dynamics of literary production in Africa and the study based on it. This conceptual project is undertaken under some basic assumptions: first, that the locus of postmodern theory is discourse and is thus about language and its point of departure is a Saussurean separation of the system of signs from the world of concepts which in its vast potential for twists and turns and alluring speculative praxis leaves discourse open-ended with the infinitude of possibilities; second, is the point that “theory” like “science” or “knowledge” generally does not come in colours – thus “philosophy” is philosophy regardless of who inputs it, and hence “thinking” is thinking and is irreducible and cannot be racialised; third, that the entire reflective critical exercise might dissolve in a fit of pique, lapse into sheer futility, and that accords with postmodern ferment. The word “aesthetics” is deployed in this discussion in a general sense as a fleeting label for the assumed dynamics of linguistic and cultural production.

Weathercock Aesthetics

In *Mythologies* (1957) Roland Barthes, while discussing semiological possibilities in the realm of myth and proposing myth as a type of speech, contends:

Let me therefore restate that any semiology postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified. This relation concerns objects which belong to different categories, and this is why it is not one of equality but one of equivalence. We must here be on our guard for despite common parlance which simply says that the signifier expresses the signified, we are dealing, in any semiological system, not with two, but with three different terms. For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other, but the correlation which unites them: there are, therefore, the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms. Take a bunch of roses: I use it to signify my passion. Do we have here, then, only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that: to put it accurately, there are here only “passionified” roses. But on the plane of analysis we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign. It is as true to say that on the plane of experience I cannot dissociate the roses from the message they carry, as to say that on the plane of analysis I cannot confuse the roses as signifier and the roses as sign: the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning.

(Easthope & McGowan 1992: 16-17)

Barthes, in his rather expansive elaboration, stresses the importance of the distinction between labels “for the study of myth as semiological schema” and explains further that the semiological three-dimensional pattern outlined of the associative fluidity (conjunction and disjunction) of signifier, signified and sign configures differently in Saussurean linguistics, Freudian psychoanalysis and Sartrean dialectical criticism: “In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.” (Easthope & McGowan 1992:16-17).

It is a given that literature is a secondary mode of discourse that is based on language which is a primary mode of discourse. But a third order of discourse which Barthes names metalanguage is the object/subject of the above semiological speculation. The present discussion has in its optics metalanguage as it relates to literature and, predictably, to language. The systemic vitiation of meaning, meaning in a conventional sense, and objectification of language as a system of signs in Saussurean linguistics and

Barthesian philosophical treatise empties literature of a fixed referent whether as “writing” or “criticism” or subsequently “commentary” as time and speculative study have told. What then is Boleswa – signifier, signified or sign?

The cock is a bird that has made quite an impression in the objective world and in the popular imagination of different communities, as cultural anthropology reveals, through its inclusion in myth and folktale from different climes and times. The adoption of and significance attached to the domesticated male fowl as a character and a trope in oral cultures and recorded mythologies probably stems from its ability to “tell the time”, to crow in signals that mark the rhythmic temporality of daylight and weather patterns. Folktales in Africa frequently refer to “cockcrow at dawn” when a cock crows to herald the approach or appearance of dawn while it might still be dark.

The avian heraldry goes eerily sinister in Wole Soyinka’s poem “Death in the Dawn”:

On this
Counterpane, it was –
Sudden winter at the death
Of dawn’s lone trumpeter. Cascades
Of white feather-flakes ... but it proved
A futile rite. Propitiation sped
Grimly on, before
The right foot for joy, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, Child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished.
Traveller you must set forth
At dawn.
I promise marvels of the holy hour
Presages as the white cock’s flapped
Perverse impalement – as who would dare
The wrathful wings of Man’s progression ...

(Moore & Beier 1998: 246-247)

The figure of a male fowl was adopted by climatology and worked into its terminology and technology in a function as an instrument known as weathercock, a weathervane which *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* describes simply as being in the shape of a male chicken: “a metal object on the roof of a building that turns easily in the wind and shows which direction the wind is blowing from”.

The weathercock in a role that shows wind direction is deployed in this essay as a figure to capture the volatility of certain features of the dynamics of the study of African literary production. In a manner similar to the

movement of a weathercock which is capable of rotating full cycle either clockwise or anti-clockwise, the attempt to tie the signifier "African literature" to a signified has flitted and foundered on the vagaries of historical and socio-political contradictions which subverted an initial presumption that the literature was a cultural development that coincided with continental boundaries and black displacements and diasporic placements in other parts of the world outside Africa. Early enquiries and studies in the subject by scholars and Africanists the likes of Albert Gerard, Philip D. Curtin, Claude Wauthier, Janheiz Jahn, had a global angle on the subject; which perspective presumably influenced the naming of that eminent international concourse of literati: African Literature Association (ALA). The aesthetic weathercock which has held up the signifier "African literature" in its beak in universalist orbital swerves that gave it out as black writing in different parts of the world has also been fluximal in agreement with different trajectories suggested by the discursive weathercock and turned up with further labels that have served to conflate critical conjecture. There have arisen such signs as "African American literature", "Caribbean literature", "South African literature", "Nigerian literature", "Ghanaian literature", "South Sudanese literature", "Boleswa literature", to cite only a few usages from a cultural scenario awash with indeterminate tags and labels for literary production.

The weathercock aesthetics of African literature has been marked by certain dialectical strategies in an attempt to resolve chimeric conceptual puzzles that have been triggered by the imperative and semiology of sign in human experience. How does "African literature" stand to these other literatures? Are they geographical manifestations of "African literature"? Are these other literatures linguistic cousins of "African literature"? Are these literatures only ideological clones of "African literature"? The attempt to find definitive explanation for nomenclature by trying to align signifier with geographical territory has dissolved in conceptual mirages and supplants of forests of disputative question marks. For example, if it is inexplicable how "African literature" stands to polyglot "South African literature", is it explainable how "South African literature" stands to "Afrikaans literature," "siSwati literature", "Xhosa literature", "Zulu literature", to name a few cultural labels ascribed to literary production in South Africa? A similar question is asked of literary production in most sub-Saharan African countries. What does "Nigerian literature" label in Africa's most ethnically and linguistically diverse country? How does the signifier relate to some four hundred indigenous language cultural/literary formations at both oral and written levels?

The aesthetic weathercock's bearings have been Pan-Africanist, sub-continental, regional, nationalistic, linguistic, ideological, in mutating swings of signifier in relation to variable shifts of concept. The southern African experience tests the cultural waters suitably. Hitched at before 1994

in the said weathercock aesthetics, it was not fashionable in critical discourse, generally speaking, to describe Afrikaans literature as a part of African literature; ideological and political parameters seemed central to deciding which works by an author could feature as “African literature” and which ones were routinely excluded. An interesting example at individual authorial level was the run-away popularity of *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton and the telling critical neglect of an engaging read by the same author with the title *Too Late, the Phalarope*. The latter novel is a critique of the potential for tragedy of the Morality Act of apartheid South Africa, an artistically controlled dramatization of the Act’s role, fundamentally, in the circumstantial disgrace and dissolution of Afrikaner family presumptions and sense of self-worth.

Andrew van der Vlies offers some background to the former title in his interesting study titled *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read all Over*:

Its remarkable afterlife continues, it seems fair to say, because it has satisfied an array of ever-changing context- and period-specific desires. Its model of Christian humanism, trusteeship and reconciliation spoke to white, middle-class, American readers, anxious about racial tensions in their own country ... in a letter in May 1948, Paton mused about the possible reception of the novel in South Africa, fearing that it would “be very different from the American”, that it would “arouse unconscious antagonism” and that “instead of attacking the cause of their antagonism” his critics would “attack ... its art.”

(Van der Vlies 2007: 72)

Cry, the Beloved Country was adopted and promoted generally mainly for ideological rather than aesthetic considerations, while the better crafted *Too Late, the Phalarope* lapsed into obscurity for a similar reason. Also circumstantially ignored were the works by authors the likes of Ingrid Jonker, Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, writing mainly in Afrikaans, perhaps because of the negative political associations of that language of their creative expression, the courageous ideological stance of these writers against the inhumanity and unjustness of the system notwithstanding. But the South African political, historical and cultural experience is nothing if not unique in Africa; as Michael Green observes in his review of social history, literary history and historical fiction in South Africa: “The resulting sense of a community created out of difference may also be read directly into current attempts to transform the signifier ‘South Africa’ from a term of deeply contested geographical significance to a national one that is able to encompass fractures of region, ethnicity, gender, and class.” (Green 1999: 131).

Linguistic Enigma

What Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui have referred to as the “language question” in their interesting collection of essays with the title *The Power of Babel* poses a daunting challenge for the weathercock aesthetics of African literature:

It is generally acknowledged that the African continent constitutes the most complex multilingual area in the world. The complexity results from the high numbers of languages, the way they are distributed, the relatively low numbers of speakers per language, and intensive language contact in many areas of the continent resulting in widespread multilingualism. It is thus difficult to know exactly how many languages there are in the continent, partly because of the problem of delineating languages and dialects; moreover, there is considerable variation among language names in different areas.

(Mazrui & Mazrui 1992: 17)

What then flounces across this kind of cultural terrain in the garb of “African literature”? Or hitched to a linguistic topography such as this, what may a notional weathercock be indicating as “the” item of cultural production named “African literature”? Weathercock, as defined, enables speculation in a forest of conceptual posers. Its poetics appears rewarding to ponder the rather bizarre, temperamental, seductive motions of the study itself that had accompanied literary production in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa. The wind moving the weathercock has cavorted in conceptual cycles and momentary ontological fixes – Intercontinental; Pan-African; Continental; Sub-Saharan; Regional (that is, West African, East African, Southern African, etc.); National (that is, Kenyan, Malawian, South African, Zimbabwean, etc.); Linguistic (Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone); Ideological (Capitalist, Socialist) – in mutating swings of capricious attempts to align signifier with signified in an intellectual search for answers in a continental cultural puzzle forged by historical and political circumstances.

The Mazruis have an apt comparative summation of the scenario using two examples of a rarity in the African historical experience of the potential for linguistic nationalism which was a constituent item of the core and which drove the dynamics of statehood in European history:

The Somali have never attempted to impose their language on anybody else over the centuries. Afrikaans, on the other hand, is widely perceived by many South Africans not only as the language of the former oppressor but the actual instrument of oppression. Many South Africans believe that Afrikaans was forced not only on millions of school children but also on rural workers, peasants, broadcasting media, domestic employees, and simple neighbours in Afrikaans-speaking areas. Unlike the Somali language, Afrikaans was not

simply defended against outsiders – it was imposed upon them. Did Afrikaners carry linguistic nationalism too far? Was the downgrading of the “other” languages of South Africa unique?

(Mazrui & Mazrui 1992: 7-8)

The role of language in the construction of power and as a driving force of culture and history is well studied. European history records the dominance of Latin beyond the epoch of the Roman Empire, and French, up until the Enlightenment period before the ascendancy of English to, first, a national, and then, a global height, in which position English is still regally poised, although linguists point to a rising global rival in Chinese language. Latin is said to be a dead language, but in practical terms much of what constitutes Latin still makes itself available for use, appropriated and embalmed as it is, mostly lexicographically, in the very maws of the English language. The global language is famously a repository for lexicons from countless other languages apart from Latin: French, Greek, Arabic, etc. as is well documented by sociolinguists and other scholars.

In the preface to *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*, Nicholas Ostler observes:

Human thought is unthinkable without the faculty of language, but language pure and undifferentiated is a fantasy of philosophers. Real language is always found in some local variant: English, Navajo, Chinese, Swahili, Burushaski or one of several thousand others. And every one of these links its speakers into a tradition that has survived for thousands of years. Once learnt in a human community, it will provide access to a vast array of knowledge and belief: assets that empower us, when we think, when we listen, when we speak, read or write, to stand on the shoulders of so much ancestral thought and feeling. Our language places us in a cultural continuum, linking us to the past, and showing our meanings also to future fellow-speakers.

(Ostler 2005: xix)

What is the language of African literature? This is a subject of speculation. What are the languages of African literature? seems to be a nonsensical question. Also naïve appears the suggestion of “African literatures” as ontologically given cultural items. But there can be the language of African writing because “African writing” is sufficiently nondescript and elastic to accommodate the multi-ethnic multi-lingual complexity which the Mazruis refer to, while in a gesture of futility “African literature” attempts to delimit the provenance of cultural production in a more specific way. The elasticity of “writing” as a signifier facilitates reference to the writings of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, or Ayi Kwei Armah and the categorisation according to which language has been adopted for its production. It also enables identification of which particular linguistic and literary traditions are implicated in each variety of writing. “Writing” in this

sense appears to be a more ideologically neutral label than “literature”: it is suitably vague and paradoxically much neglected in critical discourse whose concern is literary production of the type associated with sub-Saharan Africa all the way down to the southernmost tip of the African continent.

Boleswa is an acronym and a label popularised by the ivory tower to name intellectual cooperation. But it also has ideological underpinnings which are historical: each of the countries that have lent their name to the formulation have had a similar colonial experience starting out as Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland and on attainment of political independence from British colonialism becoming the Republic of Botswana, Kingdom of Lesotho and Kingdom of Swaziland. There is a literary tradition common to the three countries, a factor of the colonial heritage: access to a book, the all-time best-seller that has had the most influence on world literature – whatever this (“world literature”) stands for – the Holy Bible; access to what has transformed itself into a global language in the course of a couple or so centuries, the English language; hence, access to William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, John Milton, and several others of this ilk in the Leavisite annotation of a great tradition and more, that is, in all the genres and not only that of prose literature; access to a critical tradition in the manner defined by T.S. Eliot for all genres including poetry; while holding on to indigenous system(s) of signs or language(s) of creative expression through pluralistic semiological modes comprising sound and things, intangible symbols and objects, namely, signifieds-turned-signifiers in the Barthesian sense, resulting in forms such as folktale, myth, and dance, ritual, etc., which all constitute discourse in a dynamic logjam of socio-cultural complications which the Mazruis discuss in their book.

The Kingdom of Swaziland is geographically small but climatically and topographically fascinating because of its variety of cool mountainous high veld and hot and dry low veld. The mountain that is wide of the Malagwane Hills and is known locally as Mabeletjitji, with floating wreaths of mists and clouds over two of its prominent peaks on the outskirts of capital city Mbabane, might have offered British writer Sir H. Rider Haggard the irresistible setting for the suspenseful action in his best-selling novel with the title *King Solomon's Mines* in which a map refers cryptically and tantalizingly to “Sheba's left breast”. Sheba is biblical, and historical, the name of the queen from Ethiopia who visited Israel with a large entourage in order to satisfy her curiosity about the fabulous wealth and famed wisdom of the richest monarch, the third king of Israel, Solomon. Visually, the twin mountain peaks pose like the breasts of a maiden lying supine in the hazy horizon under the clouds: the aesthetic illusion is of course subject to all kinds of interpretation, as geography transfigures momentarily into metaphysics and the abnormal. In contemporary experience Swaziland has continued as a site for engaging literary works such as *The Amaryllis*, a realist novel by Lucy Z. Dlamini.

Illustrative is Pierre Macherey's explanation of a pertinent scenario in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978) in a general context of the operation of what might now be described as commentary as opposed to criticism:

“Spread eagle”, a heraldic term: one with wings outstretched. And thus the critic, opening the book – whether he intends to find buried treasure there, or whether he wants to see it flying with its own wings – means to give it a different status, or even a different appearance. It might be said that the aim of criticism is to speak the truth, a truth not unrelated to the book, but not as the content of its expression. In the book, then, not everything is said, and for everything to be said we must await the critical “explicit”, which may actually be interminable. Nevertheless, although the critical discourse is not spoken by the book, it is in some way the property of the book, constantly alluded to, though never announced publicly. What is this silence – an accidental hesitation, or a statutory necessity? Whence the problem: are there books which say what they mean, without being critical books, that is to say, without depending directly on other books?

(Easthope & McGowan 1992: 21-22)

Despite Macherey's rhetorical conclusion, his position is clear that (critical) commentary speaks to certain silences or gaps that reading a “finished” book uncovers and attempts to fill in because of the fluid character of (literary) discourse. For example, the character, Gagool in *King Solomon's Mines* is a witch because of the attitude to power, an obsessive demonic desire for influence, for control of other people; but is also a farcical caricature of the black African, taken together with the general portraiture of the Africans who are in sharp contrast to the white characters in the novel. But the novel is inscribed by several anthropological and mythopoeic traditions: Gagool is a sign for a seductive predilection for the paranormal, the diabolical, which attains a nightmarish climax in *Ayesha, or She Who Must Be Obeyed* by the same author. In both novels the highly suggestive setting (and objective correlative) of mountain peaks is signified-turned-signifier inviting of the kind of dialectical complementary intervention by the reader/critic which Macherey describes. The latter novel indirectly confers an Asian, Tibetan, link on the former; or vice versa, the former inputs an African connection on the latter. But the question arises, what sort of African connection?

Bechuanaland is by contrast topographically more expansive than Swaziland and not quite as mountainous as the latter, being mostly flat land whose fascination lies more in the exciting variety of fauna than in the exotic luxuriance of flora, with wildlife comprising the likes of elephants, lions, black and white rhinos, deer, baboons, antelopes. As the award-winning poet Barolong Seboni puts it poignantly in the lyrical lines from “The grass is no longer singing”, a lamentation on the outcome of combined aggravated hostility on the terrain and its denizens by global freak weather patterns involving human-made greenhouse condition and the cyclical El Nino phenomenon:

JLS/TLW

The trees are permanently brown
some lie chopped and bundled on the ground.
Only bloody bushes thrive here
bone-like thorns flourish instead of fauna.
And the dry wind fans flaming petals of fire
that flower in place of flora.

(Seboni 1996: 4)

The scorched terrain, which in recent times has produced writers the likes of Barolong Seboni, Moteane Melamu, Unity Dow, Bessie Head, might have been part of the rather expansive, sometimes rolling lush sometimes hilly, setting, and suitably panoramic, spanning multiple African cultural frontiers in aid of a novelistic quest that strings together a structure of incidents and adventures that spills outside Boleswa for Haggard's novel *Allan Quatermain*. With a title like this and protagonists who are British, how African is this and the other novel by himself? As already pointed out, these works are discourse inscribed by criss-crossing discursive dialogue: authorial observation which begins as what Marxism represents as ideological schema in various forms – distorted, partial, false, accurate – gets augmented by and is further inscribed by material from travelogues and travel books that are informed by adventurers/informants and ultimately shape what Edward W. Said has described as a “textual attitude”.

In a critique of Rudyard Kipling, while presenting the general outlines of project Orientalism, Said avers:

Being a White Man was therefore an idea and a reality. It involved a reasoned position towards both the white and the non-white worlds. It meant – in the colonies – speaking in a certain way, behaving according to a code of regulations, and even feeling certain things and not others. It meant specific judgments, evaluations, gestures. It was a form of authority before which nonwhites, and even whites themselves, were expected to bend. In the institutional forms it took (colonial governments, consular corps, commercial establishments) it was an agency for the expression, diffusion, and implementation of policy towards the world, and within this agency, although a certain personal latitude was allowed, the impersonal communal idea of being a White Man ruled. Being a White Man, in short, was a very concrete manner of being-in-the-world, a way of taking hold of reality, language, and thought. It made a specific style possible.

(Easthope & McGowan 1992: 62)

That Mountain Woman of Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* is a character and a trope, a woman who could have come from pre-colonial Basutoland, the most mountainous of the three countries under consideration as Boleswa, going by the jocular cognomen of characterisation. Lesotho is described picturesquely by Wikipedia as: “a high-altitude, landlocked kingdom encircled by South Africa, is crisscrossed by a network of rivers and

mountain ranges including the 3,500-high peaks of Thabana Ntlenyana. On the Thaba Bosiu plateau, near Lesotho's capital, Maseru, are ruins dating from the 19th-century reign of King Moshoeshoe. Thaba Bosiu overlooks iconic Mt. Qiloane, an enduring symbol of the nation's Basotho people". In the novel, the character is both mystical and human: "When that Mountain Woman was pregnant she went to give birth in her village in the mountains, as was the custom with a first child. Since we never had anything to do with the mountain people, we only know about the events there from the stories that people told." (Mda 2002: 32).

That Mountain Woman may be mysterious, she is a figure of humour as well: "Xesibe, Noria's father, came to the workshop, stood pitifully at the door, and pleaded with Jwara, 'Please, Jwara, release our child. She has to eat and sleep.' But Jwara did not respond. Nor did Noria. It was as though they were possessed by the powerful spirits that made them create the figurines. Noria's mother, the willowy dark beauty known to us only as That Mountain Woman, was very angry with Xesibe: 'How dare you, Father of Noria, interfere with the process of creation! Who are you, Father of Noria, to think that a piece of rag like you can have the right to stop my child from doing what she was born to do? That Mountain Woman had razor blades in her mouth.'" (Mda 2002: 29-30).

Unlike Haggard's Gagool with a proper name but a cardboard character of morbid humour, Mda's nameless female mountain character is a Barthesian sign of a different kind of power play and humour: domestic, humane, feministic, rustic, strong, and human. She is also unlike the tragic figure and quiescent trope of the noble savage sketched by Aphra Behn in *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* with the name Imoinda. That Mountain Woman's feminist mystique is dignified and comparable to the universal portrait sketched in Leopold Sedar Senghor's poetry in which terrain blends with humanity, romantically, and personality is an extension of topography, and although these are the lowlands of the West African savannah, the Futa Jallon Highlands from which springs River Niger is tellingly indicative:

I will pronounce your name, Naett, I will declaim you, Naett!
 Naett, your name is mild like cinnamon, it is the fragrance in which the
 lemon grove sleeps,
 Naett your name is the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees
 And it resembles the savannah, that blossoms forth under the masculine
 ardour of the midday sun.
 Name of dew, fresher than shadows of tamarind,
 Fresher even than the short dusk, when the heat of the day is silenced.
 Naett, that is the dry tornado, the hard clap of lightning
 Naett, coin of gold, shining coal, you my night, my sun ...!
 I am your hero, and now I have become your sorcerer, in order to pronounce
 your names.
 Princess of Elissa, banished from Futa on the fateful day.

(Senanu & Vincent 1988: 58)

“I will pronounce your name” was first written in French and is in translation here in English. Again the question: What language names African literature? What language names South African literature? What language names Boleswa literature?

Surreal Fragmentation

When the capricious wind stills that moves the notional weathervane and the aesthetic weathercock rests in inertia, there is a fragmentation of connections as well as a vitiation of disconnections. The monolithic African subject fractures into a multicultural multilingual multiracial signified that is in a state of flux: that once attractive cultural subject/object and solo fixture of convenient critical discourse disappears from the ken of critical observation and is replaced by dynamics of cultural heterogeneity and motion. Africa is fissured, and thus fragmented, the signifiers detach in dialectical praxis of convergence and divergence; afloat, the unsustainability of the illusion that there is a necessary connection between signifier and signified plays out sometimes in quick sometimes in slow motion. The subject splinters: geo-political lines fade away and sociolinguistic forms surface in hazy surreal outlines that twine and intertwine in fluximal shapes that resemble the question mark(s) at the end of the language question(s) in African writing gone viral.

The “African” in “African literature” is emptied of signification and points at nothing in particular; so too the variants of “African literature” such as “East African literature”, “West African literature”; “South African literature”, “Boleswa literature” etc. Boleswa literature, especially, is void of signification for this and the other reasons already given as mainly historical.

Conclusion

The locus of this discussion is discourse known as metalanguage of a variety associated with the theory and criticism of literature. The metalanguage in question is a construction out of a form of speech that is called literature and is also commonly described as a secondary mode of discourse or second-order discourse while it is itself constructed out of primal language that is referred to as a primary mode of discourse or first-order discourse. Scholars have argued an arbitrary and disjunctive connection between the system of symbols and that of things, between signifier and signified and a reification of signified which converts it into sign.

“Africa” in African writing and African literature is a signified adrift and in conjunctive and disjunctive relations with concepts of literary production

depending on the whims and caprices of current poetics of literary production. Features of the signified convert into signs that drive the cavorting circular motions of a poetics that is referred to as the weathercock aesthetics of African writing: in the process African writing presents an illusion of being less problematical than African literature. As a signifier African literature is baulked of concepts in the writings in hundreds of languages in the African continent and the weathercock aesthetics is unsurprisingly bewildered and capriciously silent on the development that the African subject is no longer culturally monolithic having splintered into amorphous multicultural, multilingual and multiracial heterogeneity in constant flux. Signifieds/concepts in the subject transform unilaterally into signs (objective correlative) with which to read the evanescent subject: the seductive sites of commentary thus become the shifting and revolving motions of signifiers, signifieds and signs on the multiple planes of primary, secondary and tertiary discourse. “African literature” of which “Boleswa literature” is a part is marked by absence.

References

- Easthope, Antony & McGowan, Kate (eds)
 1992 *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Buckingham: Open UP.
- Green, Michael
 1999 Social History, Literary History and Historical Fiction in South Africa. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 12(2): 121-136.
- Mazrui, Ali A. & Mazrui, Alamin M.
 1992 *The Power of Babel: Language & Governance in the African Experience*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Mda, Zakes
 2002 *Ways of Dying*. New York: Picador.
- Moore, Gerald & Beier, Ulli (eds)
 1998 *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ostler, Nicholas
 2005 *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Seboni, Barolong
 1996 *Windsongs of the Kgalagadi*. Gaborone: MacMillan Botswana Publishing Co (Pty) Ltd.
- Senanu, K.E. & Vincent, T.
 1988 *A Selection of African Poetry* (New Edition). London: Longman, 1988.
- Van der Vlies, Andrew
 2007 *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read all Over*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

JLS/TLW

Young, Robert (ed.)
1981 *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. London: Routledge &
Kegan Paul.

Lekan Oyegoke
University of Botswana
Julius.Oyegoke@mopipi.ub.bw