

Introduction

Theorising African-language Literatures in the Twenty-first Century

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African-language literatures have grown in surges during the period of decolonisation that spans nearly 50 years. Despite impressive publications, two tendencies in the appreciation of African-language literatures have dominated: there is the literary quasi-anthropological perspective whose focus has been to excavate African-language literatures in search of preserved traditional African values, very much perceived as immutable. While this approach has put African-language literatures on the world literary map, the same approach has discouraged vigorous theoretical interpretations of these literatures by using different theories. The result has been that in discussions of African literatures, most of the times critics are thinking of those literatures written in English, Portuguese, French and German. African-language literatures' theoretical criticism is therefore occluded. Furthermore, critics of African literature have been predisposed by this approach to "go it soft" and not to be critical or adventurous in applying varied grids of theories of literature that have become universal human heritage. African-language literatures are therefore impoverished as they are mostly not subjected to rigorous critical scrutiny using diverse literary theories.

● On the other hand, claiming to supersede the perceived rigidity of nationalist and Afrocentric theories of African literatures, postcolonial theories emerged, and suggest that African-language literatures could be explored for the value of resistance they can offer to different forms of oppression. Unfortunately, the kinds of postcolonial approaches imposed on them have tended to search mainly for open modes of rebellion or resistance as can be expressed in them. The result has, in some cases, been useful exposure of these literatures to typologies of postcolonial theories, but in most cases a singly focused or monolith attempt to use only postcolonial theories has resulted in the suppression of the full potential of the meanings that African-language literatures can offer. In the process, the literary

richness of value embedded in African-language literatures composed from diverse cultural contexts has been compromised. Also, African-language literatures have not been “allowed” to suggest their own theories.

The articles contained in this issues of *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap* attempt to revise these faulty assumptions. The issues fill this theoretical void by examining African-language literatures through the formal means of the novel, film, poetry, and also through theoretical treatises mapping out the question as to when and why in the literary history of African literature the issue of writing in indigenous languages became an academic problem.

Maurice Vambe’s “Postcolonial Shona Fiction of Zimbabwe” directly addresses the challenges that emerge from a simplistic imposition of postcolonial theory on African-language literature. His article differentiates versions within postcolonial theory that helps him to take to task Primorac’s self-defeating approach that introduces a theory categorising Shona literature as an intra-tribal outfit of the Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika people, et cetera; an approach whose ultimate goal is to fritter the concept of Shona literature until it is barely recognisable as an aspect of Zimbabwe’s national culture. Vambe reinstalls a version of postcolonial theory whose promise in the analyses of Shona literature is to guarantee a refusal to retrieve from literature moments of African historical urgency that are constructed as intact, because within its scopic regime, national culture is a fluid cultural arena.

In “He(Art) of the Metre: Poetry in the ‘Vernacular’”, Fasan Rotimi Omoyele opines that the historical rise of African literature in European languages, particularly English and French, as a social and disciplinary practice directed at the recuperation of the fractured African persona and world view following centuries of misrepresentation in Western-authored texts, has conferred on it an adversarial tone. This quality is generally viewed as the archetypal character of African literature that is productive of other categories of ethnic/national literatures including those in the indigenous languages of Africa. The article argues that protest (commitment) or agit(ation) prop(aganda) as this category of literature is called, is more often than not seen as the hallmark of African-language literature irrespective of its linguistic orientation.

Urther Rwafa’s “Media and Development: The Politics of Framing Gender Struggles in the Postcolonial Zimbabwean Shona Films” explores the role of African language in media and development, focusing on how the genre of film is used and can be manipulated in framing gender politics in Zimbabwe. To *frame* gender struggles is to set an agenda on what people should think about in respect of the contradictory roles that men and women play in society and culture. In this article, some selected films in the Shona language such as *Mwanasikana* (1995) (Girl Child), *Kapfupi* (2009) (The Short One) and *Nhasi Tave Nehama* (1993) (Today We Have Neighbours)

have been sampled out to explore gender struggles inherent in the Zimbabwean society. The article argues that framing gender in the discourses of the films *Mwanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) and *Nhasi Tave Nehama* (1993) calls attention to perceiving gender struggles in certain ways and in the process manifesting as far as possible the buried narratives often obscured by visual and verbal forms of representing life. Rwafa suggests that it is the duty of film critics to retrieve and force to the surface the silenced and suppressed readings of film since they can carry in them potential to suggest to the audiences some alternative opinions and reactions to reality often taken for granted or viewed as commonsensical. For Rwafa, while a *frame* can impose *what* should be thought about, it does not necessarily dictate *how* audiences interpret its meanings. Rwafa concludes by suggesting that in the debate on the use of African languages, the film mode can provide a space of liberation supplied by the frame, emerging as it were from the contestations of the verbal and visual images inside a frame's boundaries. The notion of semiotic disobedience noted in Rwafa's article is carried forward in Kuria's article.

Kuria's "Speaking in Tongues: Ngũgĩ's Gift to Workers and Peasants through *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*" is a deconstructive reading and assessment of Ngũgĩ's performance in his latest and largest novel, *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, which is in three volumes. The reading is premised on the Derridian idea that texts and their discourse propositions contain within themselves seeds of their own deconstruction or undoing. The article argues that *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* contains within it seeds of destruction of the very ideological values that Ngũgĩ seeks to validate. The article demonstrates that Ngũgĩ does not manage totally to reach his targeted audience of workers and peasants in his novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* because reading is a skill that is acquired through teaching, and in Kenya most of the peasants and workers do not have elementary education to enable them to read the novel.

In "The Zimbabwean Liberation-War Novel in Shona: An Analysis of the Symbolic Value of the Guerrilla as Legitimizing Discourse of Nation", Muwati and Mutasa team up to discuss the Shona war novel published in the early 1980s as an avatar of human-factor content for the fledgling nation. The two critics demonstrate how the "war" novel manipulates history for nation building and national identity formation purposes as well as for the fortification of a heroic tradition. It achieves this by creatively blending history, myth and legend in a manner that defines the past, present and future trajectory of nation in terms that ironically undermine its own protocols of representing "authentic" narratives of war, peace, nationhood and development. The article shows how the novelistic form attempts to command for itself the status of the biography of the nation and how this makes the search for and enunciation of ennobling human-factor content and values of nation building seemingly inseparable from the painstaking and contradictory process of narrating the nation.

In the article “Negotiating Property Rights in Southern Africa through the Novel *Magora Panyama: A Legal Perspective*”, Beauty Vambe and Budeli Mpfariseni explore the notion that the novel form can dramatise the contestations of legal dualism based on customary law and the Roman Dutch Law traditions of modern statutes found in Africa. Focusing on one novel, these researchers exploit the occasion to reveal how literature debates and represents ways through which ordinary Africans negotiate property rights using traditional and modern legal frameworks. This article imposes on art the duty of providing Africans with moral/legal values by which to live in the present day and age. At the same time the article contests the obscurantist assumptions in customary law and the rapid coldness of modern law that can be used to dispossess some members of the African families of their possessions through traditional strictures and modern linguistic legalese.

The last article in this issue, “In Search of Doctor Dolittle in Zambian Bemba Fiction” is by Bernard Mwansa Nchindila. Nchindila, in his discussion of the Zambian writer Stephen Mpashi’s work *Pano Calo*, attempts to provide an analogous analysis of *Pano Calo* with the material acted in the movie *Doctor Dolittle* by the African American actor Eddie Murphy who depicts Doctor Dolittle as possessing the power of speaking to animals. Mpashi’s material is presented in the Bemba language, one of the major Zambian vernaculars. For ease of access the material has been synthesised in English. The article makes an attempt at bringing to the surface the potential role of the Zambian literary material in the vernacular in informing modern-day popular culture. It rejects the notion – peddled by critics for long – that Zambia is a space of literary drought.

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