

Special Issue

Introduction: Theorising African-Language Literatures in the Twenty-First Century

Maurice Vambe

This special issue on theorising African-Language Literatures in the Twenty-First Century is a continuation of Volume 27, number 3, September 2011. Therefore, this issue does not need any special introduction to highlight the concerns addressed in the articles.

The African-Language literatures have grown in surges since the years of decolonisation that span 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 the African-language literatures using different theories. The result has been that in discussions of African literatures, critics are mostly thinking of those literatures written in English, Portuguese, French and German. Theoretical criticism of African-language literatures 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 a varied grid 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 the resistance they can offer to different forms of oppression. Unfortunately, the kinds of postcolonial approaches imposed on African-language literatures have tended to search mainly for open modes of rebellion or resistance as can be expressed in the African-language literatures. The result has, in some cases, been useful exposure of African-

language 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 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 has become an academic problem. Innocentia J. Mhlambi’s “Basing Aesthetic Issues on African Discourses” “engages with existing modes of criticism to ask whether these are the most appropriate and whether they might not be limited understandings of African-language literature”. She argues for a theoretical approach that should “allow us to read old themes and texts in new ways while locating the emergence of new post-apartheid themes in African-language literature”. Naomi L. Shitemi’s “Rethinking, and Mainstreaming African Literature in the Academia” applies “African feminism as a guiding framework” to reread and understand African-language literature that has had to struggle to “fit into the pigeonhole” and definitions of literature that emphasise the written word. In “Ethnic; or National: Contemporary Yoruba Poets and the Imagination of the Nation in *Wa Gbo ...*”, Senayon S. Olaoluwa uses *Wa Gbo ...*, an anthology of contemporary Yoruba poetry, to “tackle the reductionist conception of African literature written in African languages by arguing that in spite of the limits imposed on it by the fact of linguistic provinciality, this category of literature does more than articulating exclusively ethnic sentiments and modes of nationalism as a counterforce to the literature written in European languages”. N.S. Zulu’s “Gender and Cultural Representations in the Sesotho Novel” examines *Moeti wa Botjhabela* (1907) and argues that the novel gives “one a glimpse, albeit broken and fragmented, of the gender relations of the community ... [that] serves Sesotho cultural representation”. In the article “Sophonia Machabe Mofokeng’s *Leetong*: A Metonymy for Political Repression in South Africa”, Johannes Seema analyses the short story genre provided by the collection *Leetong* [On a Journey] to reveal how the “short stories constitute a body of protest fiction ... [against] political repress” in South Africa. The article “Kiswahili Poetic Aesthetics: From the General Identities to the African Prodigy” by Wendo Nabea and Pamela Ngugi assesses the evolving Kiswahili poetry aesthetics. The article argues that the “various methods that have been employed to ascribe Kiswahili poetry ... derive from some generalized and unstable postulations ... such as orality, and literacy ...”.

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That after all shows that this art “displays African genius”. D.S. Matjila’s “Poetry and Patronage: The Sociocultural and Historical Vision of Raditladi’s *Sefalana sa Menate*” “investigates the creative aptitude of the poet and his portrayal by means of poetry of the sociocultural setting of his time and the Batswana’s journey from past to present”.

Collectively, the articles in this issue capture the vibrancy and dynamism of African-languages literature that expresses itself in different genres.

Maurice T. Vambe
University of South Africa
vambemt@unisa.ac.za