

Basing Aesthetic Issues on African Discourses

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Summary

In the view of many commentators, the picture with regard to African-language literature is bleak. To many critics, African-language literature both in the present and the past is a failed enterprise. In their view it is a literature dominated by the demands of the school market, and it has tended to produce repetitive and childish plots. It is a literature that has failed to respond to the socio-political and historical realities from which it has emerged (Chapman 1996; Mphahlele 1992; Kunene 1991, 1992). Many critics and commentators expected that after 1994, the situation might change. However, for many critics, this promise has not materialised. Instead, much African-language literature simply repeats old themes, styles, discourses, plots and strategies of characterisation (Grobler 1995; Mtuze 1994). This article seeks to engage 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. It also seeks to utilise a new approach, formulated by Barber, whose studies focus on African everyday culture and draw on Bakhtin's (1981) and Lefebvre's (1947) studies of ordinary people and everyday life experiences, a domain which African-language literature addresses. Such an approach will allow us to read old themes and texts in new ways while locating the emergence of new post-apartheid themes in African-language literature.

Opsomming

Baie kommentators skilder 'n droewige prentjie van letterkunde in die Afrikatale, en verskeie kritici meen dat pogings om letterkunde in Afrikatale te ontwikkel, beide in die verlede en vandag misluk het. Volgens hulle word letterkunde in die Afrikatale deur die vereistes van die skoolonderwysmark oorheers en is gevolglik geneig om dieselfde kinderagtige intriges voortdurend te herhaal. Dit is 'n letterkunde wat nie daarin geslaag het om op die sosio-politieke en historiese werklikhede waaruit dit ontstaan het, te reageer nie (Chapman 1996; Mphahlele 1992; Kunene 1991, 1992). Kritici en kommentators het verwag dat die situasie ná 1994 sou verander, maar vir baie is daar nooit aan dié verwagtinge voldoen nie. In plaas daarvan word letterkunde in Afrikatale grootliks gekenmerk deur die herhaling van ou temas, stylvorme, diskoerse, intriges en karakteriseringstrategieë (Grobler 1995; Mtuze 1994). Hierdie artikel is daarop gerig om die bestaande vorme van kritiek te ondersoek om vas te stel of hierdie kritiek toepaslik op letterkunde in Afrikatale is en of daar nie miskien 'n gebrek aan insig ten opsigte van letterkunde in Afrikatale bestaan nie. 'n Nuwe benadering, soos deur Barber geformuleer in haar studies wat op alledaagse Afrika-kultuur fokus, word gevolg. Daar word ook gebruik gemaak van Bakhtin (1981) en

Lefebvre (1947) se navorsing oor gewone mense en alledaagse lewenservaringe, 'n onderwerp wat telkens in Afrikatale-letterkunde voorkom. Sodanige benadering sal ons in staat stel om ou temas en tekste vanuit 'n nuwe perspektief te benader en terselfdertyd die verskyning van nuwe post-apartheid-temas in Afrikatale-letterkunde te identifiseer.

Introduction

It is now almost a century since Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo, one of the most avid mission-educated intelligentsia at the turn of the twentieth century articulated a need for a literary criticism for expressive works of art by Africans in South Africa. This call was to be followed by a clear-cut differentiation between literatures written in indigenous languages and in English language, and decades of the wax and wane of literary production and criticism, particularly in African-language writing. While both these parallel writing forms continued to draw lavishly from the oral past, writing about modern demands increasingly drew from contemporary currents, shifting the focus from the oral past to the fast-paced lifestyles of modernity. By and large, especially, the English-language literature became radically different from an Afrocentric vantage from which Dhlomo valorised and which he increasingly employed in his English-language theatrical work as evidence of a breakthrough to the aesthetic conundrum in African writing. During this period little was articulated regarding criticism of African-language written literature. Writers in this medium continued to draw from oral tradition and to experiment with genres from the English literary tradition for a wide range of expressive forms. Between the period of Dhlomo's call for African aesthetics and today, various versions of Eurocentric literary models were inappropriately employed in African-language literature. By the end of the last century, impassioned disparagements emerged, lambasting this literary tradition for verisimilitude, generating ubiquitous perceptions that African-language writing tradition is a failed enterprise. This bleak view risked trivialising and obliterating a rich, long-standing tradition of African-language literature which spanned a century in its written form and centuries of its spoken form.

The modalities of thought responsible for generating perceptions like these, operated on a plane that postulate English-language and African-language literatures as occupying two opposing poles. Whilst these literatures were subjected to this language divide, ironically they were categorised on the same side of the archaic/modern cultural spectrum, creating perceptions which were consciously played out by educated Africans, that writing was an exclusively elite cultural activity; the first generation of writers were dual-medium writers, and writing in either language was a matter of a conscious choice (Couzens 1985; Peterson 1997). The elitist nature of African writing and the position of educated Africans as the only cultural brokers virtually excluded all other forms of cultural production by

other people who were not necessarily erudite (Coplan 1985). On developing this debate further, Priebe (1978) elaborates that traditionalism as well was considered the other source of culture, as opposed to popular culture that existed in the spaces between traditionalism and elitism. This cultural practice fostered misperceptions that threw into sharp focus binary dichotomies between the elitist and traditional, the oral and literate, and the past and modern expressive forms. Barber (1997: 1-2) points out that this “binary paradigm obscured the cultural activities, procedures, and products of the majority of people in present-day Africa. There is a vast domain of cultural production which cannot be classified as either “‘traditional’ or ‘elite’, ‘oral’ or ‘literate’, as ‘indigenous’ or ‘Western’ in inspiration, because it straddles and dissolves these categories”. There have been numerous explorations into the cultural productivity of cultural players other than the elites in South Africa, but this feat has not been replayed for African writing (Coplan 1985; Kavanagh 1985; et al.), particularly for expressive forms in indigenous African languages.

Numerous problems are raised by this dialectic postulation of these literary traditions and the cultural practices such as adopted in the last century. Among the key ones relate to the creation of a cultural space as a site of clash of civilisations with African traditions and Westernisation occupying two mutually exclusive binary poles; a creation of perceptions that due to cultural collusion, cultural progress is advancing from traditional to modern ethos, as in an evolutionary sense; and in terms of literature, the creation of a parochial notion that perceived all modern written forms of literature by Africans as logical offshoots from oral literature, in an evolutionary progression. This perspective complicated later writings which did not necessarily or directly draw from oral genres, gradually creating a perception that oral literature was superseded by the modern, Westernised, elite forms. In this way of thinking the traditional is spatially and temporally frozen and fixated as a source of origination which is co-opted only to authenticate modern literary productions (Julian 1992) and which may be revisited during heightened calls for cultural nationalism (Achebe 1991). And lastly a skewed literary practice that focuses attention away from the intrinsic stylistics of African writing has been created – a literary practice that is polyglot, hybridised and creolised (Hannerz 1997) in nature, and not

wholly traditional, that is, purely oral, expressed in exclusively indigenous African languages, or images, and coming from or alluding to the pre-colonial ... it is not “elite” or “modern”, “Westernised” culture – in the sense of inhabiting a world formed by higher education, full of mastery of European languages and representational conventions, defined by its cultural proximity to the metropolitan centres, and addressed to a minority but “international” audience. It is rather defined by its occupation of the zone between the two poles.

(Barber 1997: 1)

Arguably, the conditions created for the development of African writing in the past hundred years, coupled with the inability of Eurocentric literary models to excavate the hermeneutic world, particularly of African-language poetics inherited from the oral and the modern worlds, underscore the expansive nature of challenges informing a myriad of issues that exist in current discourses about expressive forms in African languages. In view of the aesthetic crisis besieging, particularly, African-language writing in South Africa, my discussion proposes that African popular arts/culture (Barber 1987, 1997, 1999, 2000) be considered as a logical solution to these aesthetic debates. The basic tenet of African arts/culture is to align, for mutual exploration, the oral and written forms, and the elitist and popular genres into a relationship with each other, and locate and place the resultant emerging eclectic culture into its socio-historical context. The paradigm of popular arts/culture explores – in a wide range of cultural products – what matters or what is of interest to the people, irrespective of social hierarchies and predispositions. And it explores a range of discourses at the disposal of the producers/recipients, which is recreated to articulate these concerns. According to Hannerz (1987: 16), it considers artists, writers, and academics as engaged in a conversation between cultures; interacting with the international flow of meaning into national culture, either through establishing a counterculture, or by being critical, or by being self-appointed guardians of traditional cultures. African-language literature, right from its nascent years, was also engaged in a conversation with an international culture. Anglocentric and European civilisation in this literature was projected in elitist terms that persisted and made invisible “the loud and colourful outburst of creativity in music, oral lore, and the visual arts, emerging from the masses” (Fabian 1997: 19). But over time the kinds of discourses this literature engaged itself with further creolised, becoming more elaborate and pervasive. At this present juncture, this literary tradition has been shaped by these eclectic systems of meaning; it largely draws from contexts which they shape, and it is produced by writers that cut across the African social fabric. In profound ways African-language tradition evinces diversity, complexity and fluidity, and as Hannerz (1987) points out, this should be seen as invitation to look at systems of meaning which do not hide their connections with the facts of power and material life – an observation further attested to by Fabian (1997), who says that there is a need to make the vast and vigorous expressions of African experiences visible. Right from inception, African-language literature was intended to be consumed by local audiences, through discourses and images that were easily accessible to the people. This occurred despite hegemonic controls the missionaries and later in the case of South Africa, the Afrikaner government instituted as strategies for cultural gatekeeping.

An Overview of African-Language Literary Criticism

Perhaps the most fascinating critique of African-language literature is to be found towards the close of the last century, mainly from postcolonial criticism. Before this, studies in African-language criticism concentrated mainly on surveys. These surveys were initiated by missionaries with an intention of compiling an inventory of all the literatures published under their aegis. Valuable criticism of African-language literature (Swanepoel 1996) emerged much later into the last century, and collectively gave an overall view of both the missionary and apartheid literary production of vernacular fiction. This scholarship provided a critique of the hegemonic world views presented in the texts which usually comprised an extrapolation of Western lifestyle and African traditional lifestyle, and how the latter will either be imposed upon by or undermined in favour of the Western lifestyle.

Around the apartheid period, numerous African-language practitioners and scholars prepared and periodically reworked, without any amelioration of content, oversimplified translated versions of Formalist and Structuralist/New Criticism theories for the school market and the teacher training colleges or for budding writers to use as models. The modified versions of these theories eventually became the basic approach to written African-language literatures and have come to form a hegemonic bloc that completely excludes other approaches to African-language written literatures.

At the dawn of the post-apartheid period, African-language scholars and critics debated what written literatures in African languages should entail. Their observations regarding the matter varied greatly. A great proportion still lambasts African literature for its lack of relevance, commitment, and its silences about burning political issues (Chapman 1996). Others such as Kunene (1989), Canonici (1998) and Swanepoel (1999) predicted that the literature would engage issues that affected all South Africans. And some point out that as long as there is no significant change in the obstacles of the past, issues such as readership, aesthetics, publication processes, etc., transformation will be difficult to attain (Kunene 1989; Mtuzze 1994; Zulu 2000). More significantly, other critics point out that this literature is still entrapped in its old self-definition and that there would not be significant changes at all (Grobler 1995: 58). For this school of thought African-language literature is largely embroiled in colonial and apartheid mediocrity, hence it fails to depict the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa. Speaking on the general trend of South African national literature Vladislavic (quoted by Harlow & Attwell 2002: 182) notes that

it is as if writers are being pushed between two positions, because if you lose sight of apartheid, then people say you've forgotten the past, that you're part of the trend towards amnesia; on the other hand, if you go too deeply into apartheid, then they say you're holding onto the past and it is negative, you should be writing about the future.

(Vladislavic quoted by Harlow & Attwell 2000: 280)

The debates around which routes post-apartheid African-language literature should take in the South African context are inundated with contradictions as Vladislavic points out. But the greater contradiction lies in the fact that most of the critics have been exposed to postcolonial discursive practices, which generally operate outside the African-language literature domain. These observations raise the question whether postcolonial literary criticism might be appropriate to African-language literature. Postcolonial criticism is now an extensive field of scholarship which in the words of Ashcroft et al. (1989: 2) “covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day”. However, there have been several critiques of postcolonial criticism on the grounds that it is mainly theorised on the basis of Europhone literatures and hence overlooks many key features of African-language literatures. Barber, for example, says,

[P]ost-colonial discourses block a properly historical localized understanding of any scene of colonial and post-independence literary production in Africa. Instead it selects and overemphasizes one sliver of literary and cultural production ... and this is posed as representative of a whole culture or even a whole global “colonial experience”.

(Barber 1995: 3)

One feature of African-language literatures that is often misrecognised by postcolonial theorists is its apolitical nature; that it does not engage direct political topics of land dispossession, racial capitalism, racial repression, and exclusion, etc., as these affected Africans in South Africa. Given this characteristic, some critics have dismissed it as socially and politically inconsequential. However, this article challenges this notion by drawing on critics like Amuta (1989) and Mathonsi (2002), who argue for the broadening of the concept of the political to include apparently non-political issues in literature. The manifestations of commitment are varied and African-language writers should be seen as committed to the “expression of culture”, a tradition that has evolved with the folk-art tradition. The apparent lack of political content should not render the text non-committed.

Amuta and Mathonsi’s arguments strengthen my argument in justifying an alternative approach since a redefinition of social commitment will reposition focal points for analysis. Through the study of dominant trends and discourses in African-language fiction, a pattern of themes that writers are committed to raising are illuminated. These themes are often obliquely stated and emerge through carefully considered uses of a range of traditional art forms and contemporary mutually allusive heteroglossic dialogisms. And this latter aspect is precisely what popular arts/culture is concerned with.

Although this article exudes an impression that research in African popular arts/culture is a twenty-first-century aesthetic paradigm, studies in this field date back to the 1970s and 1980s. African popular arts/culture is a significant field of critical inquiry covering a diverse range of popular

genres such as urban culture, theatre, song, dance, traditional and popular poetry, music, films, popular stories, African-language popular writing, popular media, etc. Barber (1987: 23) states that “popular art can be taken to mean the large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change, and associated with the masses”. Popular arts/culture has since attracted excellent scholarship (Barber 1997: 2) and in the South African context, contributions to popular genres have since provided a rich socio-historical canvas of South African cultural economy (Coplan 1985, 1994; Kavanagh 1985; Gunner 1991; et al.). These studies explore a wide variety of popular genres of South Africa’s counterculture. Key to their significance is that they have been able to integrate the arts into a broader social history and have further illuminated the role of culture in an array of everyday struggles, an important aspect that is evident in studies of the same nature in other post-independence African states. The paradigm of popular arts/culture provides for the first time an integrated model to study holistically Africa’s cultural production as a summation of everyday culture and how people innovatively cope with these everyday lifescapes through compositions of conscious cultural expressions in mediums readily accessible to the people who consume them. Recently, significant inroads into the study of popular arts/culture in African-language literature have been made (Barber 1995, 1997, 2000, 2006; Furniss 1996; Newell 2000; Pype 2010; Mhlambi 2008). These studies have demonstrated that what is generally dismissed as escapism and fantasy (Mokgamatha 1996) in this literary form usually is a rendition of matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them.

What Is This “Popular” in African-Language Literature?

The litigious appellation of the notion “high culture and low/common/popular culture” has been poignantly addressed in Barber (1997), but one of the most problematic aspects of her evaluations and which might have bearing on this article’s lobby for the appropriation of this model to African-language literature relates to controversial views of what constitutes the “truly popular” and what is contaminated by hegemonic ideological infiltrations from above. Prevailing criticism regarding African-language literary tradition is of the view that it has been subjected to initially missionary, later apartheid and possibly now post-apartheid ideological control. De facto, this view is indisputable nonetheless; African-language literature came to the modern literary scene already evincing popular culture proclivities. In a true Janus-faced typography, it looked back to a historical past, and simultaneously looked forward, armed itself with a vast array of folk art and genres to explore intrigues, complexities, aspirations, topical/sensational contradictions of modern times. This it achieved through initially emitting magnetic

holds that appealed to the subaltern groups and later through being able to ride on technological advances in the communications media in a fluid manner, and which was capable of blurring social distinctions and deconstructing social boundaries.

Furthermore, in the African cultural scene, as Barber (1997: 2-3) demonstrates, the “high” in this culture does not necessarily exist. It is rather a colonial mainstream cultural term used to draw the African elite into colonial notions of mainstream culture; thus, it can never be interpreted in this context, in a sense of it being a prerogative of an ancient ruling class. In Africa, this term is fragmented, precarious, and ambivalent, espoused by a highly contradictory elite who have ties with the European powers, but nonetheless, are bound up with local populations by innumerable ties of kinship, language, community membership and patronage.

The “popular” in popular culture has been charged with false consciousness (Haynes 2000: 15), but as Fabian (1997: 19-20) disagrees, at this juncture of study into African culture there needs to be a broadening of horizons of critical inquiry.

We must stress that the emerging forms of expression, reflecting the life-like experiences and consciousness of the masses, deserve our fullest attention as evidence for cultural independence and creativity. From sterile fixations on the presumed disintegration of tradition and on the rare accomplishments of “assimilated” elites we must proceed to a fuller appreciation of the new mass cultures.

(Fabian 1997: 19-20)

In her work on Yoruba drama, Barber (2000: 7) has formulated a series of analytical approaches that are useful for African-language literature. Barber’s generative materialism, premised on a sociologically inclined model of literary approach to the arts, explores the economic, social and cultural levels of text production drawing on the dialectical and interrelated aspects that assist in defining or interpreting the ideological properties of the text. Barber has since developed this to create a set of literary tools to explain African everyday culture, focusing on the inner pulse or what she calls the meristemetic tip responsible for the continual evolvement of African popular culture. Speaking of Yoruba popular theatre, she describes it as a living, contemporary collectively improvised and continually emergent form (Barber 2000: 7). The observations she raises for Yoruba travelling theatre, the focus of her study, are also applicable to African-language literature. Modern African-language writing likewise evinces that internal dynamism that readily predisposes it to commentary on topical contemporary occurrences and happenings, drawing from the lived experiences of ordinary people in extremely familiar localities and using appropriate linguistic resources.

Also significant in Barber's model is her analysis of artistic products that whilst drawing from the popular, popular culture is able to edify readers/recipients through demonstration of moral messages flavoured by and couched in local interpretation. The fact that local cultural producers share the same world as their target audience assists in reflecting the close affinity that exists between the producer, the audience and the text. This inter-relationship in the society that she studies helps produce a living vibrancy in the production and interpretation of the texts. Thus she emphasises that "in Western Africa, then, people continually produce new forms in order to come to grips with the massive transformation of modernity" (Barber 2000: 5). Although international and transnational media images appeared to be at the forefront of social transformation in the Yoruba context, Barber notes

that people's overwhelming preoccupation was with social transformations that were perceived as locally rooted and were actually experienced on the ground It was these locally experienced transformations that set the terms in which images of other lives, other cultures were appropriated – in different ways at different historical moments. And it was these transformations which remained the mesmerizing focus of popular commentary, and which all the new popular genres of the twentieth century – the Yoruba novel, drama, neo-traditional poetry, visual art, popular music – were created to grapple with. In Western Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa and beyond, it was vernacular genres, representing local experiences that held people's attention.

(Barber 2000: 5)

Barber's observations are conspicuously apparent in African-language writing. Similar expressive modalities and extensive overlaps exist and the literary output seems to be premised on the regeneration and recycling of past themes, plot structures, lessons and styles of characterisation in the manner that Barber's concept of generative materialism explains Yoruba theatre. She points out that "real experience is narratized and circulates in the form of anecdotes while existing stories become the templates by which real experience is apprehended In this cycle, written texts may participate on the same footing as the anecdotes of experience. Many plays seem to have been an amalgam of hearsay, anecdote, folktale, and written fiction" (p. 133). In spite of this, Barber points out that with Yoruba theatre there is an inherent quest for innovation, exploring the unknown through representation that permuted the known (p. 9). This element of forging forward towards the unknown constitutes the growing point bringing in newness. She points out that "no rendition of a play or theme is wholly predictable, for though it will recycle much existing material it will also always exceed it in one way or another (p. 9). These issues are applicable to much of African-language literature. The revisiting of many themes in African-language fiction may be seen as recapitulation, but the newer versions,

established much later, always introduced something new that speaks to the topical, current and sensational in the society.

Barber's approach also considers "critical creative metalinguistic consciousness" such as proverbs and epithets. Hanks (1996: 193) views these paralinguistic aspects as at work even in the briefest and most mundane of everyday utterances. Not only are these inherently aesthetic as Croce ([1902]1992) points out, but is the consideration of these linguistic features central in a manner which Barber sees them as not only the seeds of all the great literary genres but also as their summation. This consideration is fundamental to the views raised by this discussion because these verbal formulations are mental archeological sites that have found ways of being repeatedly cited and of being relevantly applied in modern contemporary textual production. These metalinguistic features are encapsulated in a discourse of the axiom. Barber (2000: 267) views the proverbial sayings in a society as constantly acting as authoritative moral codes, and which can always be used to explain similar situations in different contexts. Messages or themes in African-language fictional discourses tend to be encoded in "axiomatic expressions". These proverbial injunctions constitute generations of folk wisdom from the traditional world, which is demonstrated to still be applicable in modern society. Moral dramatisations and narratives did not first appear with missionary evangelical propagation, but they have been the integral fibre of values and mores that defined the traditional world and its episteme.

The axiom in these narratives holds that absolute truths are "derived from their origin of actual events" (Barber 2000: 267). The recurrent application of these proverbs and sayings in numerous contexts and in different periods entrenches them with more authority (p. 267). They provide formulaic patterns about life experiences, which Finnegan (1998) calls "'templates' of life by which people structure their own experiences resulting in mutual reference so that the overall narrative lesson is said to be 'true' or it is 'how exactly life is'" (Finnegan 1998 quoted by Barber 2000: 267).

Furthermore, the repeated storylines observable in different types of media and in speech acts have been drawn from daily phenomena in order to forge new perspectives in contemporary lifestyles. Although African-language literatures are not an equivalent of the Yoruba travelling troupe, much of what constitutes its contextual production is also applicable to this literary tradition. Barber indicates that recapitulations in different periods and their transmutation into popular media like radio and television concretise local experiences. Eventually these will assume an authoritative perspective. These experiences hold lessons steeped in recurrent and other related experiences that have generally been read and interpreted in the same manner. Barber's premise in the study of Yoruba popular theatre stems from the observation that the stories that were staged mostly dealt with concrete, localised and familiar experiences (Barber 2000: 265). The experiences presented were not only familiar but were also "real", in which case the

stories were a collective and interactive improvisation by actors who draw extensively from their own reservoir of experience, personality and competence based on hearsay, daily metaphors and proverbial sayings, contemporary events, anecdotes of experience circulating in popular culture, and so forth (p. 266). Barber's analysis of the Yoruba popular culture is useful in explaining the recurrent morality lessons in African-language writing and other popular expressions. The rendering of familiar experiences solidifies modes of perception and the conclusion derived from other similar experiences.

This assessment of indigenous expression is further vouched for by Chapman (1996), who points out that an evaluation of South African indigenous literary expression in terms of realistic criteria is misleading. In a realistic reading, the oral "residue" which manifests itself in strong storylines, episodic plots, and copious repetitions, might not be recognised. This trend in thinking about indigenous literary expression is not entirely new. As early as in the 1960s Ramsaran made a case for "old mythologies" that propagated themselves anew as inevitable signs of continued life and growth of a cultural life which while it evolves it also preserves the vitality of the "old mythology". Barber's concretisation of the same observation in Yoruba popular plays illustrates this point as does her emphasis on the moral aspects of such plays – that they perform as responses to demands of modernity. When transferred to other contexts, like the African-language literary one, these moral aspects contribute to understanding the role orality plays in responding to the complexities that resulted from modernity. Furthermore, this insistent recurrence of folkloric material in new textual forms points to the sources of the thematic materials as real life experiences and folklore.

Granqvist's (1993: 55-58) summation of these characteristics is useful. His discussion regarding the connection between popular culture and orality is illuminating. He points out that, firstly, oral traditions, like popular literature, aim at enhancing group cohesion and identity, and that the lessons in both forms of literature contribute to people's endeavour to found an "authentic culture", thereby instituting cultural control over the individual members of the society. Secondly, social codes of behaviour are easily transmitted through a story, a proverb or any of the traditional performance elements. Thirdly, oral narratives are not "frozen" but are open paradigms that can be endlessly manipulated, transferred or orchestrated in new artistic creation. This is also substantiated by Furniss (1996) who emphasises the migration and overlapping of textual material between the oral and the written in the process of working and reworking of certain content. Barber's model further vouches for and is fundamental in explaining the intertextuality that is common in African-language literature. According to Kristeva (quoted in Newman 1995), every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text absorbs and transforms another text. Newman further

points out that intertextuality can be described as a repetition of a previously heard story of life predestined by the notions that shape our consciousness.

African Discourses as African-Language Thematic Frontiers

Intrinsic discourses of African-language fiction predispose this literary tradition to this paradigm of popular arts/culture in Africa. This literature, in a true Bakhtinian dialogic notion captured in the concept of heteroglossia, displays the many multilayered cultural heritages it has absorbed, and re-created as polyglot, creolising nested narratives (for illustrative purposes especially for African-language literature, see Mhlambi (2008)). These nested narratives in the form of proverbs, folk tales, songs, images, epithets, jokes or any real lifescapes, etc., are drawn from the traditional episteme, quotidian life and everyday culture. They constitute popular discourses, that is, African discourses, frequently reified to comment on contemporary life struggles with an aim to edify audiences/readers and have them apply these maxims in their daily life experiences. The didactic nature of these maxims emphasises the significance of traditional or hegemonic values to the point of being ultra-conservative. Yet it is this conservatism which allows for active extraversion (Barber 1997: 6). Modern and popular foreign influences or emerging social discourses are subjected to this highly selective prism and interpreted in concrete and familiar ways normatively imprinted with local flavours.

Thematically, popular arts/culture allows for an exploration of the prevalence – in literature and other art forms – of collective memories, widely shared perceptions, social hierarchies and relations, the social agency and self-consciousness of the majority of the people who fall outside the paradigm of the elite. Yet, at the same time, elitist tendencies in African art forms can be explored and contextualised within particular political and cultural economies through the application of this model. Throughout the three major political epochs of African-language literary production – the missionary, apartheid and post-apartheid – writers recast African life experiences through nationalistic reflections that invariably evoke past traditions and through recreations of African experiences as these are lived and comprehended by people, making these experiences concrete, familiar and localised. The interface between the initially elitist and later pseudo-elitist projections of African-language fiction writers and the actuality of life experiences and the popular discourses from which these are articulated in the narratives make for fascinating reading. Popular arts/culture as a model will provide meaningful interpretation of these contact zones. Since the “intellectual genealogy” of this theory draws from an interdisciplinary field consisting of (among others) social history, anthropology, Marxist literary

criticism and Birmingham-style cultural studies and literary theory, the model establishes after a long aesthetic hiatus, a fresh and new direction to studying a wide variety of popular forms and genres in African languages.

Conclusion

To summarise: the hundred years of African-language literary production by the mission-educated elite and conservatist section of the African society has introduced European literary stylistics and approaches that have proven, a century later, not to resonate with the African literary scene and the African experience as these Eurocentric practices had no intrinsic relation to African realities in South Africa. Instead this literary paradigm generated parochial perceptions that repeatedly confirmed generalisations that viewed African-language literature as inconsequential. These perceptions were further reconfirmed by postcolonial theories; a literary criticism that emerged almost seven or more decades after the first African-language literary texts were produced. Again, the narrow focus of postcolonial studies on colonial impact and colonial legacy in South Africa and elsewhere, and its literary practices of writing back to the empire in colonial languages, shifted attention from a vast range of artistic productions, produced by not necessarily the erudite. And yet judging by the thematic trajectories of this kind of work, they are genuine prismic refractions of African everyday culture and life experiences.

The model suggested in this discussion – Barber’s version of popular culture in Africa – seems to be a logical solution to the aesthetic conundrum experienced over the past hundred years of indigenous-language writing in South Africa in a number of ways: it problematises fallacious notions of high/low culture in African artistic production; it realigns the oral/written form into a relationship with each other; it acknowledges that writing is an eclectic mix which has in turn been dictated by its material culture; and lastly, the paradigm of popular culture allows for the exploration of a wide range of cultural productions, not only those of indigenous-language writing but also those across the African continent and the African diaspora, instantly establishing the possibility of conversations between cultures, and the observed outcomes which demonstrate that local productions are interacting with the international flow of meaning.

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