Blackness: faith, culture, ideology and discourse*

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Introduction

> More than this, even an artistically and emotionally educated man must be a man of good faith. He must have the courage to admit what he feels, as well as the flexibility to know what he feels. So Sainte-Beuve remains, to me, a great critic. A man like Macaulay, brilliant as he is, is unsatisfactory, because he is not honest. He is emotionally alive, but he juggles his feelings. (D.H. Lawrence)

What D.H. Lawrence describes as the `ugly imperialism of any absolute`[1] is the starting point of this paper. The question which animates Lawrence's submission in the epigraph above, revolves, I think, around philosophical attitudes and the quintessential limitations embedded in virtually every approach towards matters philosophical and mundane. Every critic approaches whatever critical object/subject before him/her from the perspective(s) of his/her own antecedents. [My] Blackness is the first among such objects/subjects which I intend to problematize in this paper. Since I can only speak about [my] blackness from the limited purview of my own antecedents, I intend to approach this object/subject with a readiness to admit what I feel as well as the flexibility to know what I feel. Since no human being can be said to be uneducated artistically and emotionally, I will also like to qualify my own approach to Lawrence's `artistically and emotionally educated man`. What manner of artistic or emotional education has Lawrence got in mind? Then what is good faith? While Lawrence is silent about the former, he provides us with a straightforward answer to the latter using the example of Macaulay - `brilliant...but unsatisfactory, because he is not honest`. Even though alive emotionally, because Macaulay, according to Lawrence, tends to juggle his facts/findings (dishonestly?) Lawrence is quick to label him as unsatisfactory. Peter Fuller (1985:60) lightens the atmosphere of this mounting contextualisation with the following notion of the subversive text:

> A joke has been going the rounds in theological circles for some time now. It goes like this. The Pope was told by the Cardinals that the remains of Jesus had been dug up in Palestine. There was no room for doubt: all the archaeologists, scholars and experts were

> agreed. Teaching about the resurrection, the lynch-pin of orthodox Christian faith, lay in ruins. The Pope sat with his head in his hand, pondering his position and that of the Church he headed. He decided it would be only decent - whether or not it would be Christian no longer seemed to matter - to let the separated brethren know. So he called up Paul Tillich, the leading Protestant theologian, and told him the sad news. There was a long silence at the end of the phone. Finally Tillich said: `So you mean to say he existed after all...´

The joke for many may have gone far enough, but it remains, as Fuller and the seemingly "transgressive"[2] communal imagination that produced it intended, aimed at reiterating quintessential paradigms demarcating the "Christ of Faith" from the "Jesus of History". Both paradigms remind us that we can only undervalue the importance of cultural, non-material factors in the shaping of history at our own peril.

Wole Soyinka's (1976) seminal work, and Colin Falck's (1994) controversial but equally illuminating study, reinforce the paradigms. United by their concern for the unique position of myth in the study and understanding of literary discourse, the latter's primary objective is straightforward. Colin Falck tackles the French oriented anti-metaphysical theory which has informed so much of contemporary academia within the specialised field of literary criticism - the Anglo-American (literary) post-structuralist movement. According to Falck, the post-structuralist movement has as its essence the quintessential desire "to reject, or to annihilate, the aesthetic or spiritual dimension of art - and of life - entirely, and thereby to reduce art or literature to something merely political"[3]. Again, the mere mention of `spiritual dimension´, and threatening annihilation may lead many to conclude that Falck's study would rise up in the defence of the Christian faith. But Falck is absolutely certain that the aesthetic/spiritual dimension of art has little to do with the Christian God. Thus, in the preface to the book Falck (1994:xiv) informs us that:

> Readers' and critics' responses to *Myth, Truth and Literature* are still reaching me from many directions, and it seems to me too early as yet to attempt any substantial revision of the book's main argument. My suspicion that theology is now an entirely sterile subject, on the other hand, has been strengthened by the absence of any sensible responses or reviews from that particular quarter. For the most part it seems to me that more religious sense has come out of New Guinea or the jungles of South America in recent decades than out of the combined lucubration of the world's churches.

But, Soyinka (1976) upholds a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores - a

total context within which the African world - like any other `world´ is unique. However, it is at those moments, in hermeneutics and epistemological pursuits, when complementarity is lost that Soyinka suspects an abandonment of what he calls `this simple route to a common humanity´. The pursuance of the alternative route of negation is, according to Soyinka, `for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the eternal subjugation of the black continent´. Soyinka's (1976:xii) venom for both the conscious and unwitting advocates of this `alter/native route´ deserves full recapitulation:

> There is nothing to choose ultimately between the colonial mentality of an Ajayi Crowther, West Africa's first black bishop, who grovelled before his white missionary superiors in a plea for patience and understanding of his `backward, heathen, brutish´ brothers, and the new black ideologues who are embarrassed by statements of self-apprehension by the new `ideologically backward´ African. Both suffer from externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation in the image of alien masters. Both are victims of the doctrine of self-negation, the first requirement for a transcendentalist (political or religious) fulfilment. Like his religious counterpart, the new ideologue has never stopped to consider whether or not the universal verities of his new doctrine are already contained in, or can be elicited from the world-view and social structures of his own people. The study of much contemporary African writing reveals that they can: this group of literature I have described as the literature of a secular social vision. It marks the beginning of a prescriptive validation of an African self-apprehension.

In translating the Bible from English to Yoruba, the translator, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, West Africa's first black bishop, found himself at various stages at the threshold of mythology, a task made more difficult by the fact that he had to translate myths from one culture into another. Bishop Crowther's task was not a simple one, as he had to find a Yoruba equivalent for every myth from the Christian "mythological" framework. Thus, in translating into Yoruba the biblical myth of Satan or devil he picked on Esu-Elegbara, the enigmatic Yoruba trickster/god of fate.[4] John Pemberton (1975:26) has attempted to set the record straight by reconstructing this age-old distortion:

> As the festival songs suggest that Eshu is one who deceives and harms, so too the oriki (praise names) and myths portray Eshu as the confuser of men, the troublemaker, the one who acts capriciously. So prevalent are these associations that Christian missionaries used `Eshu´ as a translation of the New Testament terms `devil´ and `Satan´. Now, even Eshu worshippers who speak a little English, as well as Yoruba Christians and Muslims, will refer to Eshu as `the devil´. It is an indefensible corruption of the tradition. Nevertheless, Eshu is a troublemaker. His own praise names attest to it.

In performing a Christian duty, Bishop Crowther and numerous Yoruba Christians after him, have consequently produced their own myth, have acted, to use the words of Roland Barthes, like "the journalist who starts with a concept and seeks a form for it."[5] However, the threat of complete annihilation which Crowther's translation poses to the `original´ myth of Esu is preserved in Barthes' (1972:129) theory by what he describes as `a false dilemma´:

> Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion. Placed before the dilemma which I mentioned a moment ago, myth finds a third way out. Threatened with disappearance if it yields to either of the first two types of focusing, it gets out of this tight spot thanks to a compromise - it is this dilemma. Entrusted with `glossing over´ an intentional concept, myth encounters nothing but betrayal in language, for language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it, or unmask it if it formulates it. The elaboration of a second-order semiological system will enable myth to escape this dilemma: driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will naturalise it.

The role which non-white Brazilians living in what Roger Bastide describes as a `a progressive big city´, have ascribed to the enigmatic deity represents yet another lucid example of this process of appropriation. Bastide's (1978:330) articulation of this dynamic process is significant:

> The dualism of good and evil thus has the effect of making the educated non-white Brazilians, living in a progressive big city and steadily rising on the social ladder, unwilling to have anything to do with the cult of Exu. To practice this cult would only justify the Whites' image of him as an inferior being with a propensity for evil. Eager to rise spiritually, he is of course obliged to give African tradition its due and allot a place for the Exus, but he de-Africanizes them, and Aryanizes them by means of Judeo-Christian thought. Inventing another false etymology, he derives the name of Exu from Exud, the rebel angel whom God struck down with lightening and hurled from the heights of heaven to the depths of Hell. This makes it easier for him to identify Exu with Lucifer. Yet this rejection of tradition arouses a kind of guilt. To identify Exu with Lucifer is to relegate a significant part of Africa to the realm of the diabolical, thus justifying European criticism of the black civilisation. We therefore find a second tendency in Umbanda: a desperate effort to save this god.

Bastide's articulation is another historical instance in which the signified has been turned into a red-herring or what Barthes describes as an alibi for the signifier's mythic imagination. Again, what is distorted is what is full, the meaning: the myth of Esu is

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deprived of its history and turned into mere gesture, through which `educated non-white Brazilians living in a progressive big city and steadily rising on the social ladder´, refuse to have anything to do with the `true´ myth of Esu. An integral part of this meticulous process of disavowal is what Bastide has subtly recognised as the de-Africanization of the deity and the imposition of an Aryan soul on him. It is important to note, however, that Bastide's own position is closest to that of the second reader of myth in our theoretical framework: like the mythologist, Bastide merely deciphers the myth by recognising a distortion that is inherent in his recapitulation. Our concern therefore is not to dwell on this distortion any more, but to focus on the mythical signifier as an irreducible whole, endowed with meaning and form; instead of a distortion, we receive an `ambiguous signification´. An integral part of this ambiguity is the question mark that must be placed on the Aryanization of the myth of Esu and how the dualism of good and evil not from an African, but from a Judeo-Christian perspective, can aid a `true´ understanding of the history of Esu's myth and its descent into transgression.

Again, if the reader does not see the history of appropriation inherent in the overtly domesticated deity, it is of little importance presenting it in the first instance, "and if he sees it, the myth is nothing more than a political proposition, honestly expressed. In one word, either the intention of the myth is too obscure to be efficacious, or it is too clear to be believed. In either case, where is the ambiguity?"[6]

This important question leads us to the third category of readers of myths in our theoretical framework. The reader at this level usually focuses on the mythical signifier as an irreducible whole, embodied with meaning and form and receives an `ambiguous signification´. The reader responds to all the minute components that make up the myth, to its very dynamics and becomes a reader of myths. At this level of reading, for example, Esu is no longer an instance or a symbol, and the deity is definitely far from being an alibi for the exploitative yearnings of non-white Brazilians living in `a progressive big city´: the deity is the very presence of this exploitation. Thus, while the first two types of focusing can be said to be `static´ or `analytical´ respectively:

> they destroy the myth, either by making its intention obvious, or by unmasking it: the former is cynical, the latter demystifying. The third type of focusing is dynamic, it consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal. If one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it responds to the interest of a definite society, in short to pass from semiology to ideology it is obviously at the level of the third type of focusing that one must place oneself: it is the reader of myths himself who must reveal their essen-

tial function. How does he receive this particular myth today?'

The reputation of Esu began its critical plunge into transgression from the moment Bishop Ajayi Crowther translated the deity as the biblical equivalent of Satan or devil, and there is no gainsaying in the fact that we are dealing here with a history of appropriation - an appropriation of power. What follows is a critical analysis of this history of appropriation and how it leads to a discussion of high and low discourses. Meanwhile, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986:4) have observed that:

> When we talk of high discourses - literature, philosophy, statecraft, the languages of the Church and the University - and contrast them to the low discourses of a peasantry, the urban poor, sub-cultures, marginals, the lumpen-proletariat, colonized peoples, we already have two `highs´ and two `lows´. History seen from above and history seen from below are irreducibly different and they consequently impose radically different perspectives on the question of hierarchy.

Thus, as Stallybrass and White demonstrate, while relating a general Western history of high and low discourses to the origin of modern thought and expression in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, the myth of Esu is obviously transgressive. The very ends built into its structure reveal it as such. A last image from African-American profane discourse can be used to illustrate the source of the creative energy from which "transgressive" black texts draw inspiration and the resultant power of their grotesque realism. If, to paraphrase Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1986), Esu's functional equivalent in African-American profane discourse is the Signifying Monkey, then "Tar Baby is as enigmatic and as compelling a figure from Afro-American mythic discourse as is that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey."

Barbara Christian (1985:71) observes Toni Morrison's adaptation of the enigmatic figure of Tar Baby in her fourth novel of that title to tell "a story that very simply embodies the continuing dilemma of Afro-Americans" from a feminist perspective. Enigmatic and compelling, Tar Baby is still as vivid as he was on the sugar plantations of the New World and provides an historical and contemporary conceptual framework through which a modern writer like Toni Morrison can examine issues such as class, racism and sexism, systems described by Christian as "societal and psychological...that have critically affected the lives of Afro-American women." But for a cyclical vision of a "universal" black world view, Tar Baby like Esu has functioned in Black expression from the perspective of the following representational approach articulated by Ralph Ellison(1964:147):

Let Tar Baby, that enigmatic figure from Negro folklore, stand for the world. He leans, black and gleaming, against the wall of life utterly noncommittal under our scrutiny, our questioning, starkly unmoving before our naive attempts at intimidation. Then we touch him playfully and before we say Sonny Liston! we find ourselves struck. Our playful investigation becomes a labor, a fearful struggle, an agony. Slowly we perceive that our task is to learn the proper way of freeing ourselves to develop, in other words, technique.

Integral aspects of the "technique" which black texts have had to develop over the past five decades include the language, concept and form of subversion. Ability to interpret critically and subvert all the mythical postulations of the "master's tropes" have been apprehended and signified upon to suit the varied cultural provenance of postcolonial writing, with whose complexities European theories could not adequately deal. The reason for this failure or inadequacy of European theories in this regard is, as Bill Ashcroft et al. testify, due to the fact that "European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of `the Universal´." Like Tar Baby, this body of texts still leans, `black and gleaming against the wall of life´, open to myriad of interpretations and it is the basic contention of this paper that a literary theory that will adequately account for their complexity cannot afford to be manichaean, linear or exclusively dialectical. The ever-growing complexity of these texts in different parts of the world testifies to their willingness to be read within a cyclical framework. Whether responding from the perspective of the apocalyptic vision of James Baldwin in the racially segregated America of *The Fire Next Time*, or the radical views of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, recording neocolonial oppression and betrayal of the hopes and aspirations of the masses in East Africa in texts like *Petals of Blood* and many others, or the complex issue of creolisation with which many West Indian writers have grappled, and one which Edgar Mittelholzer explores in its diversity in *Corentyne Thunder*; all possess a definable instinct, which is to contribute to a better humanity. But out of this universalism also emerges what could be described as an identity in difference.

Historically, the other issues that they examine include the creative articulation of a Haitian poet, Massillon Coicou, who wrote the following lines in the early 1960s - "Why then am I a Negro? Oh! Why am I black" - and the 1950 outburst of an Ivorian poet and novelist, Bernard Dadie - "Thank you, Lord, for **having made** me black".

Patterns of figuration in african and Black texts: the context of their social history

How `black´ is Figuration? Given the obvious political intent of so much of our literary tradition, is it not somewhat wistful to be concerned with the intricacies of the figure? The Afro-American tradition has been figurative from its beginning. How could it have survived otherwise? Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures.[8]

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a `standard´ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all `variants´ as impurities. Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetrated, and the medium through which conceptions of `truth´, `order´, and `reality´ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice.[9]

The sheer quantitative presence of black writing in our modern world defies what any critic can adequately account for in a single study. Thus, I have limited my investigations to the context of the social history of a selection of these texts, a context that links the evolution of the texts to their contact with Western cultures and why the whole question of history should constitute for these writers and their people, in the words of Stephen Dedalus, `a nightmare from which I am trying to wake´. To limit further the task of this cursory exploration, I have also rather arbitrarily divided the phenomenon of black writing into what I would like to describe as "old perspectives" and what Abdul JanMohammed describes as "the generation of realism".[10]

By old perspectives, I am speaking intrinsically of contradictory notions bound up in one era, mainly those of cultural self-assertion with occasional slips into the notion of cultural death-wish, when black was simply not beautiful, when, to use the words of Stephen Henderson, devilish thoughts and devilish acts were synonymous with blackness. The two notions can be said to run into one another and act, so to speak, as catalyst for an explosive encounter between holders of either of the two self-contradictory positions. To conceptualise further this inherent contradiction, Mercer Cook and Stephen Henderson observe that if this is the era when "the devil is black, sin is black, death is black, Cain is black, Grendel is black, Othello is black, Ergo Othello is the devil: the black man is the devil, the devil is the black man!", it is also the era when black writers knew that "to assert blackness...is to be `militant´, to be subversive, to be

revolutionary."[11]

This whole period, when blacks in the diaspora were rebelling against the idea of their forefathers being set free from the physical bondage of slavery, only to be simultaneously re-enslaved through their socio-political and economic powerlessness, also coincides with the period when their counterparts in the homeland, having just returned from the second world war, were living through the eye-opening effects which their experience produced. A merger of the two seemingly disparate events gave birth to the first set of iconoclastic black texts in poetry, drama and prose, most of which were indistinguishable from political pamphleteering. That the militancy of these black precursors has been undermined during the second era in `a search for realism' is merely a matter of history and one that demands a sympathetic understanding from a cyclical theorist.

The folk myth of `Soul´, often described as the American counterpart of the African Negritude, encapsulates the literary manifestation of the old perspective, on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus `Soul and Negritude´ inaugurate or proclaim the arrival of black expression in the domain of figurative language. Both explore the inner recesses of black mythic sensibility to assert their authentic black identity. If Soul, in the words of Lerone Bennett, "is a metaphorical evocation of Negro being as expressed in the Negro tradition"[12], Negritude distends its discourse, giving it the full authority of an historical understanding that looks back to the period of the historic contact between Europe and Africa. In the poem "Chaka" by Leopold Sedar Senghor, this historical understanding speaks the language of betrayal by an alien race welcomed by an unsuspecting, all trusting native:

> I did not hate the Pink Ears. We welcomed them as messengers of the gods
> With pleasant words and delicious drinks. They wanted merchandise. We gave them
> everything: ivory, honey, rainbow pelts, spices and gold, precious stones, parrots and
> monkeys. Shall I speak of their rusty presents, their tawdry beads? Yes, in coming to
> know their guns, I became a wind. Suffering became my lot, suffering of the breast and
> of the spirit.[13]

If the imagery and symbolism of this poem situates us in the domain of figurative language, the true manifestation of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. refers to in the first epigraph to this section, as black people having always been masters of the figurative, `saying one thing to mean another´, is expressed in the following poem entitled "Once Upon a Time," by Gabriel Okara. Although not a professed negritudinist, Okara's

works, at least the early ones, belong to the mainstream of the old perspective and he speaks in this particular poem of the social and political subterfuge that characterised the `cat and mouse´ relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Like Ralph Ellison's hero's grandfather in *Invisible Man*, the persona in Okara's poem has learnt and perfected how to `overcome and undermine them with yeses´, as s/he speaks calmly to his/her son or successor, who will soon be bedevilled with `a search for realism´:

> So I have learned many things, son,
> I have learned to wear many faces
> like dresses - homeface,
> officeface, streetface, hostface, cock-
> tailface, with all their conforming smiles
> like a fixed portrait smile
>
> And I have learned too
> to laugh with only my teeth
> and shake hands without my heart.
> I have also learned to say, "Goodbye,"
> when I mean "Goodriddance":
> To say "Glad to meet you"
> without being glad; and to say "it's been
> nice talking to you," after being bored.
>
> But believe me, son
> I want to be what I used to be
> when I was like you. I want
> to unlearn all these muting things.
> Most of all, I want to relearn
> how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
> shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs![14]

But the process of `relearning how to laugh´ is also one of the terrain of confrontation between these apostles of the old perspective and their realist successors. By `realism´ I am also trying to describe a neo-colonial situation: the referent's argument could be linked with the other issue raised in *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* in which the authors claimed to be concerned with mapping out "new foundations for an African modernity."[15]

In postulating its thesis of an authentic `African way´, the old order has dubbed laughter, dance, rhythm and liveliness as intrinsic African qualities which can be introduced

as spicy flavour to a `soulless´ technologically oriented civilisation created and controlled by Europe and America.[16] In critical realist[17] circles this is regarded as an acceptance of one of the most commonplace blasphemies of racism (Soyinka). Postcolonial writers and critics have viewed these precursive labels as a negation of the African/Black creative genius, not only in the fields of art and creative writing but perhaps more importantly, in science, technology and invention. Recognising that the problem of their predecessors is not a failure to diagnose properly the racial issues at stake, the realists have accorded these precursors praises for their diagnosis and rejected their prescription as self-debilitating. `The Vision of Negritude´, Soyinka (1976:126) asserts:

> should never be underestimated or belittled. What went wrong with it is contained in what I earlier expressed as the contrivance of a creative ideology and its falsified basis of identification with the social vision. The vision itself was that of restitution and re-engineering of a racial psyche, the establishment of a distinct human entity and the glorification of its long-suppressed attributes. (On an even longer-term basis, as universal alliance with the world's dispossessed)

Soyinka has stated elsewhere in *Myth, Literature and the African World* that when asked whether or not he was prepared to accept the necessity for a literary ideology, he found himself examining the problem `from within the consciousness of the artist in the process of creating´. His response was `a social vision, yes, but not a literary ideology´. The rest of this study focuses on the vexed issue of literary ideologies, supplying it with a well deserved historical synthesis, without losing sight of not just the ways but also the means through which the harassed colonial subject might feel the need to re-establish a distinct human entity/identity or even glorify his long-suppressed attributes.

In Africa, the pattern of historical synthesis is observable in the creative work the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah. However, the only work of Armah to bear the subtitle of `an historical novel´ is his fifth, *The Healers*. Armah concerns himself in his first two novels *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, with creative articulation of those stultifying factors impeding national growth or development of true nation states. The writer's task from *Why Are We So Blest?*, explaining as it does, the possible reasons for the failure of his three main protagonists, Solo, Modin, Dofu, and his girlfriend Aimee Reitsch, also provides, for discerning students of the crosscurrents of the African diaspora, an historical framework. This framework is, however, complete only when we move into the historical terrain of the later works, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. While Armah's works in general, as one of his critics

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observes, "provide an historical explanation for the present failure and connect current manifestation to an embracing world view...the pertinence of this to Armah can be seen when we recognise that his books have increasingly concerned themselves with questions which are ultimately historical in nature."[18]

Thus the `last´ in the series can be viewed as the starting point of the African historical saga as *The Healers* explains not only how but why, `a century ago, one of Africa's great empires, Ashanti fell´. This fall is orchestrated not only by the destructive presence of the white colonisers, but more importantly, by the rapacious greed of the leadership which led to disunity among kindred societies. But in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah speaks rather of the all-pervading, catastrophic effects of slavery, and we are as a consequence invited to contemplate, what Lemuel Johnson describes as "a multiform middle passage by the Oracular Okyeame voice with which Anoa opens the novel."[19] In Anoa's articulation, the rather philistine attitude of Africans to the all-pervading catastrophic reaches of slavery needs to be poignantly addressed. This she does in prophetic terms:

> Slavery - do you know what it is? Ah, you will know it. Two Thousand Seasons, a thousand going into it, a second thousand crawling maimed from it, will teach you everything about enslavement, the destruction of souls, the killing of bodies, the infusion of violence into every breath, every drop, every morsel of your sustaining air, your water, your food. Till you come again upon the way.[20]

The thesis of *Two Thousand Seasons* is based on the realisation that it is as a result of the loss of an egalitarian African way, simply called `the way´ in the novel, that the African is bound to experience enslavement, leading to a most traumatic `destruction of souls, and the killing of bodies´ until `the way´ is rediscovered. The importance of *Two Thousand Seasons* also lies in its creative articulation of the historical antecedent of contemporary African leaders, through the portrayal of the buffoon figures of Koranche and Kamuzu, and their insatiable love for "dishonest words...the food of rotten spirits" (p.171). Like their modern equivalents, Kamuzu and Koranche and their parasites in league with the white slave traders and colonialists reinforce the widely held belief that most of black Africa's heroes do not need to be wooed by western capitalists - they prostitute themselves and their people at real bargain prices.

There is an organic unity in the leaders that we find in *The Beautyful Ones* and their historical equivalents in *Two Thousand Seasons*. In the rather grim atmosphere towards

the end of *Two Thousand Seasons*, for example, King Koranche, urged by the protagonists of `the way´, is made to confess his greed and those of his parasites and, not the least, his despicable alliance with the white destroyers. Thus, "Koranche, the king died confessing crime he had sought to hide from our people." (p.171) So ridiculous is the nature of these confessions that they lead the omniscient narrator to observe that `laughable is the courage of kings and parasites, ludicrous indeed their puny bravery beside their greed's intensity.´ (p.181)

Also when, in *The Beautyful Ones*, the powerful party man and `Minister plenipotentiary, member of the Presidential Commission, Hero of Socialist Labour...His excellency, Joseph Koomson´, describes the antics he has to perform before he can acquire a fishing boat, like the protagonist of `the way´ in *Two Thousand Seasons*, the perceptive hero of the book, simply called the Man, was to ask "if anything was supposed to have changed after all, from the days of chiefs selling their people for the trinkets of Europe"[21].

Armah's works present a basic dilemma to criticism which only a vernacular theory of `the Other´ can adequately grasp. A parade of his characters will not be a parade of heroes, but a grotesque conglomeration of malformed or mutilated beings embodying in their nature symbolic binary opposition to the essentially `high´ discourse in literature, philosophy, statecraft, religion and culture, which have occluded them in their understanding of socio-cultural and political realities. The authorial ones that acquire Western education return home, not looking for roles as leaders but seeking to be reunited with an organic society as Baako testifies in *Fragments*. Those in traditional settings, Anoa and the protagonists of `the way´, Damfo, Densu and `the healers´ in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* respectively, present the same opposition to the ruling feudal elites.

At a comparative level of creative articulation of the discourse of the `low´, the dilemma of these heroes finds imaginative identification in their West Indian counterparts. The poetry and fiction of Claude Mckay can be used to illustrate the point further. In poems like "If We Must Die" and "In Bondage", Mckay seeks the soul of an organic society, just as in novels like *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo*, and *Banana Bottom* the issue of a sustaining community preoccupies the writer. In carnival fashion, the writer apprehends the traumatic impact of cultural dualism and displaces them into what Kenneth Ramchand describes as "symbolic final liberation and embrace of the folk." The constitutive elements of folk tradition or culture such as tea-meeting, picnic, market, harvest festival, pimento picking, house-parties, and ballad-making are celebrated and

offer expressive ways of setting these cultural traits in symbolic confrontation with faces full of high class anxiety, such as those of Pricilla Craig, Bita Plant's missionary mentor in *Banana Bottom*. Bita insists even after university education in England, on being united with the organic society, "dancing down the barrier between high breeding and common pleasure under her light stamping feet until she was one with the crowd."[22] Mrs. Craig on the other hand, is solely concerned about Bita's education and her paranoid belief that this should set her `high´ and above people like Hopping Dick, whom she regards as "a low peacock, who murders his h's and altogether speaks in such vile manner - and you an educated girl - highly educated." (p.20).

The various strands of appropriation and control of this low discourse as it confronts the mythic imagination of the `high´ is what is readily at work in these dialogised interface between centripetal and centrifugal forces. This pattern of control achieves creative realisation in *Tent of Miracles* by the Brazilian author, Jorge Amado. The pervasive theoretical framework of the book is perhaps better realised in terms of what Fredric Jameson describes in his article, "Post-modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", that "it was only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference could be measured or assessed."[23] This dominant cultural logic or dominant norm functions in *Tent of Miracles* through its carnivalesques parade of symbolic characters, the majority of whom reinforce what Jameson refers to as `genuine assessment of difference´. The novel's understanding of `difference´ as `otherness´ is profound and its genuineness is evident in the creative interrogation of the mythological framework through which the dominant cultural hegemony has imposed a discourse of occlusion on the society. The examination of this mythic perspective, however, leads to a complex interplay of signifying practices on the part of both the dominant and the subordinated.

The theoretical starting point of the novel is simple and it concerns how a `mulatto of style´, Master Pedro Archanjo, an easy going `runner´ at the medical school but one with resolute convictions about racism and a firm understanding of his `declaration of racial democracy´, becomes apotheosised with the arrival in Brazil of the North American scholar, James D. Levenson. Within a framework in which no one including Archanjo is spared the process of symbolic revision, the `high´ discourse that seeks to apotheosise him becomes the first target of this revision in ways that echo Derek Walcott's observation that the modern state is essentially `impatient with anything which it cannot trade´.

Amado's novel achieves what M.M. Bakhtin describes as the tendency of the novel to

"become dialogised, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, element of self-parody and finally the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy."[24] `The other gen-res´ of Bahktin's reference are those "genres in high literature (that is the literature of ruling social groups) harmoniously reinforcing each other to a significant extent". By inserting into its discourse the notion of indeterminacy and what Bahktin further refers to as `a certain semantic openendedness´, the postcolonial `text of blackness´ sets itself against the mythic imagination of that conglomeration of `genres of high literature´ and their erstwhile monopoly of a discourse of occlusion. What results from this interplay of semantic openendedness is a dialogic imagination in which self-parody achieves for the `low´ a true assessment of `the self´, mutilated and confined in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural or hegemonic norm. The clarity of vision which this theoretical framework achieves for `the low´ enables them to celebrate life in carniva-lesque propensity with the limited resources at their disposal. Thus:

> Pedro Archanjo was serious for a moment: distant, grave, almost solemn. Then sudden-ly his face was transformed as he burst into a loud, clear laugh, that infinitely free laugh-ter of his; he thought of Professor Argolo's face, those two leading lights of the medical school, those two know-it-alls who know nothing about life. "Our faces are metizo faces, and so are yours; our culture is metizo but yours is imported. Its nothing but powdered shit." Let them die of apoplexy. His laughter lit up the dawn and illuminated the city of Bahia.[25]

Archanjo's infectious and infinitely free laughter is an integral part of the spiritual free-dom of `the low´. Their understanding of religion, politics, culture and economics is bound up with flexible and reflexive frameworks that condense what Foucault has described in *The History of Sexuality* as "hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression", into a modern synthesis whereby repression, appropriation and control of these `open spaces´ become a dominant strategy of the `high´ in postulating a `proper´ image of `the self´. The farcical attitude of the `high´ symbolised and reinforced by their desire to transform the open spaces into the close confines of houses, is a method-ological attitude which, according to Foucault, has been protected by "a solemn his-torical and political guarantee."

Dismantling this `historical and political guarantee´ has been the spoken or unspoken concern of many texts of blackness in both colonial and postcolonial settings. Ostensi-bly, many have had to work within the framework of the **hegemonic** discourse, or more precisely what Bill Ashcroft et al. describe as the **framework of those** `who have attacked the imperialism of Western thought from **within´, such as** Foucault, Bau-

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drillard, Lyotard and Derrida. The notion of `discourse´ which in the Foucauldian sense could best be understood as a system of possibility of knowledge, becomes a primary starting point. Appropriation, legitimation, truth and power have all acquired problematic status and their application is displaced further into an understanding of European postmodernism as analogous to postcolonialism.[25] Jean Francois Lyotard's critique of the enterprise of Western science has also been used as a theoretical base for dismantling assumptions about language and textuality and `to stress the importance of ideological construction in social-textual relations´, as they find echoes in postcolonial texts. Ashcroft et al. (1989) also note that Lyotard's critique stresses narrative as alternative mode of knowledge to the scientific and questions the privileging of contemporary scientific ideas of `competence´ over customary knowledge´. Appiah (1991:23) concludes that:

> Lyotard is aware, as a result of these perceptions, that in oral societies where narratives dominate, ways of knowing are legitimized as a product of actual social relations and not valorized and reified as a separate `objective´ categories (as the western category of science is separated from those of ethics and politics, for example.)

The conclusion to be drawn from this theoretical springboard is that `truth´, `logic´, and `power´ are local and particular rather than abstract and universal. For, while science classifies the narrative dominated oral world as belonging to a different mentality, `savage, primitive, underdeveloped´ (a terrain from which we can construct the entire history of cultural imperialism from the dawn of Western civilisation, Ashcroft et al. also urge us to recognise the `special tenor´ of this discourse, especially how it is governed by the demand for legitimation.

Conclusion

> "Race" is not a thing. For, if we believe that races exist as things, as categories of being already "there," we cannot escape the danger of generalizing about observed differences between human beings as if these differences were consistent and determined, a priori.[27]

One critical opinion defines racism as "a type of behaviour which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself."[28] Todorov's emphasis on the `display of *contempt* or *aggressiveness*´, Gates contends, is an interpretation of `racism´ not supported by the general history of the domination and oppression of one

race by another. American history of racist benevolence, paternalism and sexual attraction, to paraphrase Gates, has very little or nothing to do with `contempt or aggressiveness.´

Racism could be more appropriately defined as the tendency to generalise about an individual's racial attributes such as the colour of his/her hair-eye-skin ad infinitum, and treat him or her accordingly. "Such generalisations are based upon a predetermined set of causes or effects thought to be shared by all members of a physically defined group who are also assumed to share certain `metaphysical´ characteristics."[29] Thus it is the effect of racism rather than its causes that Todorov's definition broaches. To neglect the `predetermined set of causes´ that nurture racism, such as generalization based upon essences perceived as biological, is to reinforce what Houston Baker refers to as the critical fallacy of the establishment at Yale among others, which constructed `an empowering myth of nonreferential analysis based on the absence of blackness, or of blackness as an absence.´[30] Such critical constructs could only `speak to life´ their counter-constructs, a purpose which the cultural nationalist phase of black writing serves only too well. When the inner conflict and tension occasioned by culture theorising which gives rise to the Self/Other syndrome or what Baker calls the Walcottian dilemma are absent, Baker observes in another essay entitled "Caliban's Triple Play," that "there may sound instead the gross polemics of a nationalism that militaristically asserts the superiority of Caliban. This is `protest´ with a vengeance."[31]

The theoretical starting point of this study concerns what Stallybrass and White describe as `the root of this discourse on God which western cultures have maintained for a long time.´ To deconstruct the history of this ontological framework, it is important for the critic to become a reader of myth as opposed to a mythologizer or those focusing on an empty signifier, both of whom either make the intention of the myth obvious by merely unmasking it, or destroy it altogether. What the reader must focus upon is the history of the myth which is very often embedded in its concept, and may even be independent of its language. For, through the concept, it is a whole new history that is implanted in the myth, as opposed to the empty nature of the form.

The following African-American folktale recorded in Alan Dundes' *Mother Wits from the Laughing Barrel* represents another instance in which the profane discourse of `the low´ bodies forth the cosmos, the social formation and language itself:

> Governor Wallace of Alabama died and went to heaven. After entering the pearly gates,

he walked up to the door of a splendid mansion and knocked. A voice inside exclaimed, "Who dat?" Wallace shook his head sadly and said, "Never mind, I'll go the other way."[32]

The dialogue of this tale is the power of the `low´ which exploits the `political uncon-scious´ of the `high´ and its erstwhile monopoly of the theoretical framework of `offi-cialdom´. The transgressive connotations implicit in this tale can only be grasped when one examines the general history of the dynamics of race relations in the United States. The identity of the Negro voice remains an enigma, a profane discourse of the `low´ which has frightening consequences for the `high´: "Some think it is God; others think it might be St. Peter. A few Whites assume it is a doorman or other menial."[33] There is little doubt that the tale can be subjected to a myriad of interpretations, but one thing is certainly clear, whether it is God, St. Peter or a doorman, the enigmatic Negro voice is charged with enough power to send Governor Wallace to hell; a feat which, as Dundes observes, cannot be achieved by centuries of Black power militancy. Ultimately, the interplay of linguistic subterfuge vis-à-vis the questions of sanctity and profanity is a matter of history seen from above and history seen from below which are irreducibly different and they consequently impose radically different perspectives on the question of hierarchy.

Notes

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1. Ironically enough Lawrence's famous defense of the novelistic genre is couched in absolutes, and in classifying Lawrence's essay according to its approach and orientation, David Lodge, has little doubt that the essay belongs, along with others of similar persuasion under the rubric "Prescriptive Criticism - Credos and Manifestoes". `I don't believe in any dazzling revelation, or in any supreme Word´, Lawrence wrote. `"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the Word of the Lord shall stand forever´. That's the kind of stuff we've drugged ourselves with. As a matter of fact, the grass withereth, but comes up all the greener for that reason, after the rains. The flower fadeth, and therefore the bud opens. But the Word of the Lord, being man uttered and a mere vibration on the ether, becomes staler and staler, more and more boring, till at last we turn a deaf ear and it ceases to exist, far more finally than any withered grass. Its grass that renews its youth like the eagle, not any Word", Lawrence concluded. (For detail see D.H. Lawrence, 1972).

2. Like "Madness", in socio-cultural and political terms, "Transgression" has a long history. In their book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White supply the necessary theoretical/historical synthesis which encapsulate the issue of transgression. The historical background that informs both Madness and Transgression is bound up with the whole discourse of the `ideal perfect being´ and that which is other than the norm, the `deformed/mutilated-self´. Foucault's study in *Madness and Civilization* supplies the historical viewpoint to how this was first worked out in European civilization/culture before spreading to people of other cultures. For details see Michel Foucault, (1978), and P. Stallybrass & A. White (1986).

3 See Falck (1994) p.xiv.

4. When I put the question of the translation of Esu as the Biblical equivalent of Satan

to a leading Africanist and multiculturalist, the following conversation ensued:

UB: And this is the function of Esu - to create a new order by challenging the old. The Yourba have always understood that routine is the death of creativity and that complacency is the death of a spiritually alert life. Therefore Esu systematically upsets our plans, provokes us with the unexpected and keeps us wide awake. Esu reminds us every minute of the day, that we cannot take anything for granted, that we have to live responsibly all the time and that we must work at our relationships with gods and men.

If you look at modern life in Europe, how our thinking is dominated and shaped by the media by advertising, commerce and politics I feel that we badly need Esu in the modern world: our youngsters often turn into zombies. The concentration span becomes shorter and shorter - we badly need the provocation of the trickster god.

FA: Well, my question is if Ifa, as we are often told, consists of the sacred texts of the Yoruba people as does the Bible for Christians, and Esu is the path to Ifa...could one say that the literal translation of Esu as the Biblical equivalent of Satan or devil is more than an accident? That the translation was in fact "meant" to sound the death-knell of this view of the world?

UB: I am convinced it was a deliberate attempt to discredit, to demonise Yoruba religion. The Church has a long history of that. They have done the same thing in Europe.

They have a real difficulty in grasping the complexity of Yoruba culture. In Christianity there is this rigid division of the world into good and evil.

For details see Femi Abodunrin (1996).

5. Roland Barthes (1972), p.128.

6. Roland Barthes (1972) p.129.

7. Roland Barthes, pp.128-9.

8. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, (1990) p.6.

9 Ashcroft, Tiffin & Griffiths (1989).

10. Abdul JanMohammed's articulation of this phase in the evolution of Black litera-

ture is characterised by what he describes as `the generation of realism´. This is the phase that is informed by what JanMohammed calls `a general understanding of the intellectual's predicament under colonialism´. This understanding functions within the framework of a basic paradox which JanMohammed describes further as the difficult choice which the writer has to make between his own culture, negated by the autocratic rule of the colonial government or acceptance of Western culture, which leaves the writer engulfed in a form of historical catalepsy. For detail see, Abdul R. JanMohammed, (1983).

11. For details see, Mercer Cook & Stephen Henderson (1969) pp. 65 & 88.

12. Cited in Cook & Henderson (1969), p.115.

13. See Leopold Sedar Senghor (1964) p.72.

14. Cited in Cook & Henderson (1969) pp.35-36.

15. The controversial attempt to formulate a new `African modernity´ by the troika, Bolekaja critics or neo-Tarzans as they are variously known, is itself inherently problematic. Their critical manifesto occupies the middle-ground in the criticism of African literature in particular, and black expression in general. The major claims of these critics when perceived against the background of their declared intention to serve as "outraged touts for the passenger lorries of African literature" become particularly energy-sapping if after 200 pages of critical antics they can come full circle to admit that their `new aesthetics´ welcomes after all, `contributions from other cultures´. This is a strange departure from the prevailing mood of the book which seems firmly rooted in its belief that African and black dignity depends sole-ly on an exclusive autonomy from the rest of the world. For detail see, Chinweizu et al. (1980).

16. From this Negritudian premise and the all-important position of Negritude as the first philosophical/literary movement that aspired to articulate the basic dilemma of blacks in a colonial context, we arrive at the problematic terrain of terms such as `truth´, `logic´and `power´. For Chinua Achebe, however, the position of his prede-cessors is nothing but problematic: "Where does the African writer come in all this?", Achebe asks: "Quite frankly he is confused. Sometimes - in a spasmodic seizure of confidence - he feels called upon to save Europe and the West by giving them Africa's peculiar gifts of healing, irrigating (in the word of Senghor) the

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Cartesian rationalism of Europe with black sensitivity through the gift of emotion. In his poem "Prayer to Masks", we are those children called to sacrifice their lives like the poor man his last garment." Achebe's answer to Senghor is a hesitant, "I am not so sure of things to be able to claim that the world may...wish to be saved by us even if we had the power to do so". For detail see, Chinua Achebe, (1975) pp.23-24.

17. Indeed, realism itself which can be divided further into socialist or critical categories can be foregrounded here. According to Enest Fisher, 'the characteristic attitude of most critical realists is that of an individual Romantic protest against bourgeois society'. Olu Obafemi's 1992 study *Nigerian Writers on the Nigerian Civil War* puts the case even more trenchantly: 'from Achebe to Soyinka, from Clark to Okigbo revolutionary charge has been perceived from the liberal-humanist perspective - protagonists striving to imbue society with messianism. This may well be explained by the very nature and spirit of critical realism, historically. Writers genuinely unable to come to grips with a suffocating social ambience around him, protesting with romantic zest and vigour against the system, but doing so within the individualist bracket, which contrasts with but does not radically uproot the system.'

For details see Ernest Fisher (1976), and Olu Obafemi (1992)

18. See Robert Fraser (1980).

19. See Lemuel Johnson (1980).

20. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, (London: Heinemann 1979). All page references to this edition.

21. Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, London: Heinemann, 1970, p.149. All page references to this edition.

22. Claude Mckay, *Banana Bottom*, (London: Bantam Press, 1953). All page references to this edition.

23. For details see Fredric Jameson. (1985).

24. See M.M. Bakhtin (1986).

25. Jorge Amado, *Tent of Miracles*, Barbara Shelby (trans), (London: Collins Harvill, 1989) p.154.

26. See Anthony Appiah's (1991) important insightful essay.

27. See Henry Louis Gates Jr, (1986).
28. Tzvetan Todorov cited in Gates (1986), p.204.

29. See Gates (1986) pp.204-5.

30. See, for example, G.W.F. Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature and Immanuel Kant's Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. About the latter, Henry Louis Gates observes that Kant never stopped "being a racist" or "stopped thinking there existed a natural, predetermined relation between `stupidity´ and `blackness´ (his terms) just because he wrote the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*". Similarly, Hegel also had few doubts in his mind that he was enriching the study of opposites while postulating the thesis that the world which exists is a tripartite one. The primary part of this world is Africa, which, according to Hegelian dialectics, corresponds "to compact metal or the lunar principle, and is stunned by the heat. Its humanity is sunk in stupor. It is the dull spirit which does not enter into consciousness". The middle ground in this one world manifested (in philosophical terms) as three, is Asia which exists without form and is therefore "unable to master its centre". The third part is, of course, Europe "which constitutes the rational region of the Earth's consciousness, and forms an equilibrium of rivers. Thus "among us (Europeans) instinct deters from it, if we can speak of instinct at all as appertaining to man. But with the Negro this is not the case, and the devouring of human flesh is altogether consonant with the general principles of the African race; to the sensual Negro, human flesh is but an object of sense...mere flesh. At the death of a king hundreds are killed and eaten, prisoners are butchered and their flesh sold in the markets; the victor is accustomed to eat the heart of his slain foe."

31. Houston Baker Jr, (1986) p.190.

32. See Alan Dundes ed (1973) p.620.
33. See Alan Dundes ed (1973) p.620.

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