Suture as the Seam Between Literatures

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Abstract

Ownership of art and, by implication, of literature as an art form cannot be attributed to a single individual as if he or she were living or writing alone in a vacuum. This is because culture has collective ownership. Thus a writer gives voice to a collective experience. Even when recording particular experiences of individuals as unique characters the author, as well as the literary characters, form part of a collective culture. The attempt of an individual who belongs to a minority group to derive a sense of identity which incorporates and reconciles his or her idiosyncratic vision of the world with the society around him or her, by bridging the split in the identity, is realized in literature by what Jacques Lacan calls "suture". While this issue of ambivalent identity is not resolved, the tension it creates gives rise to innovative art and literature. However the emphasis is usually on the contribution that the mainstream literature "bestows" upon the minority literature. This article highlights the enormous contribution that peripheral cultures and literatures have on the evolution, growth and vibrancy of the usually more settled and conservative, dominant, local mainstream literature.

Introduction

The collective ownership of culture presupposes a mutual, shared reference system—shaped constructs such as nationhood, brother- and sisterhood, and culture (Anderson 1983). Identity can be seen, not as a static fixed entity, but rather as a dynamic and flexible process, rich in complexity through the reciprocity of the individual and his or her environment (Jenkins 1996). The process of reconciliation, between individual identity and collective culture, even more complex

for a writer from a minority culture, involves what Jaques Lacan calls "suture". Suture, which literally means "stitching", is what helps connect the imaginary and the symbolic (Cohan and Shires 1988: 162). To date, most scholars recognise this as a site of transcultural identity formation, where ambiguous identity, fragmentation of identity and hybridity reside. I believe that this is the site of immense creativity.[1]

The Meeting Place

With global processes of migration, many people are transported—or transport themselves—and end up living in places which are different from the places of their birth, or what they consider as their homeland. This situation may create a coexistent order of loyalty between the here and now, and the nostalgic homeland. It juxtaposes the way of life as it is experienced in reality and the memories (real and construed) of the way of life in the homeland. When the language and culture of the present and past places differ, a process of change and adaptation takes place. Moacyr Scliar, one of the best-known Brazilian writers, proposes that the process of integration into a new society comprises three clear stages, or what he calls "moments". The first stage is the arrival in the new country. In this stage the immigrants struggle to adapt to the new world and their priority is survival. Then comes the second stage or what he terms second generation.[2] This generation speaks the local language and is accustomed to the new way of life; yet at home they experience the language and way of life as it used to be lived in the old land. This conflict gives rise to tension, and provides rich material for literature. According to Scliar, the third generation is so integrated into the society where they live that there is little conflict and tension to write about – thus the cycle is completed.

This schematic model of the process experienced by immigrants makes it easier to understand attempts to perceive and structure personal experience while there is distinct gap between, life as it should be and life as it is. However, I differ from Scliar in terms of the reaction of the first generation—or what I call the newcomers—to the world around them. While Scliar emphasizes the newcomers' struggle to survive, I believe that in many instances it is precisely this struggle and their need to come to terms with the schism between what they were used to in their homeland and what they are facing in the reality in the "new land" that triggers the artistic impulse. The act of creation helps them recreate their own personal reality, and restores a sense of being in control of their lives (Sherman 1987: 10). A rich body of literature, for example, was created by the Jewish immigrants who escaped the pogroms in Eastern Europe and came to South Africa – which had been depicted in their dreams as a safe haven. These dreams and expectations were shattered, however, when they realized that, while they might have been physically safe in the new land, yet since they did not

speak any of the local languages, they could not cross the social barrier and belong. Their keen observations of the foreign life around them, and their attempts to reconcile their expectations and their realities, gave rise to a wave of literary creation. These invaluable Hebrew, and Yiddish, literary works record their unique experience in the "new land", seen through the filters of concepts and values imported from the "old land". Their bittersweet depiction of the special peculiarities of the new land provides such valuable glimpses into a particular time and place that it counterbalances their linguistic shortcomings and, to some extent, even their deficiencies in literary talents.[3]

Individuals are not passive recipients of external socio-cultural forces, however, individual authors are not merely recorders of social change but are rather agents of "the collective" enacting the change (Cohen and Rapport 1995). Therefore, though there are attempts to construct an abstract model of shifts in the integration of immigrants into the host society, when we talk about cultural interaction one is never certain who impacts on whom and what impacts on what, and when it happens.

The Concept of Minority Literature

The meeting place between cultures can be conceptualised as a cultural bazaar, where people meet, present their merchandise—or glimpse, watch, scrutinise, examine merchandise and the people around. In the process they create a sense of community where the familiar and unfamiliar, trust and mistrust, mingle.[4] The principle of reciprocal cultural enrichment applies not only to an individual within his or her society but also to one culture within a variety of cultures or—more pertinently for this article—to any literature within multiple literatures in one location. The existence of multiple cultures in one location is usually a result of newcomers importing their old tradition with them into the new land. This setting usually implies that the local culture and literature is more established and therefore is seen as dominant or mainstream, while the newcomers' culture is seen as peripheral and their literature is labelled *minority literature*.[5] In this article these terms are not intended to designate either of these strands as "important" and "dominant", or as "Other", "peripheral" and "unimportant", respectively. The interaction between co-existing cultures and literatures, which are regarded as peers, is a healthy process—through exposure, comparison and a continuous to-and-fro emulation and appropriation, *both* cultures are enriched. The people who live between two or more cultures should be celebrated. Their hybrid identity (Bhabha 1990) should be celebrated, as it is the site of "cultural seepage". This article proposes that when this creativity is nurtured and promoted, it becomes the seam between the cultures. It has the potential to be the seam of a cultural technicolour dream coat. To this end one, should encourage both dominant and peripheral literatures and provide them with similar oppor-

tunities. Setting co-existing literatures in a hierarchical order of dominance and periphery is cultural reductionism.

The Concept of Hierarchy

The term *minority literature* implies setting one literature against another, i.e. a minor as opposed to a major or dominant literature. On what grounds do we differentiate between literatures? In this article, the term minority literature includes two streams: linguistic and cultural. Linguistically, the term includes literature which is written in a marginal language in any particular place, i.e. a language which is not official or is spoken by a minority in the land. Culturally, the term includes literature that reflects the existence, belief and outlook on life of groups other than the mainstream. The existence of two or more literatures side by side raises the question of the "space" assigned to each, as well as the nature of the relationship between them. Do they allow each other a space with clear boundaries, or do they infringe on each other's space, nibbling at each other's boundaries, blurring the differences, and leaving layers of influence? Are they seen to exist in mutuality while being as separate entities—or is one working from within the other and depending upon the other? What is the nature of the relationship between them: is it confrontational or cooperative; is it co-reliant or are there compromises? For example, are references to one group constructed through a simultaneously shared perception of the other group—mostly the dominant group—or as different and independent from the "Other" (Jenkins 1996)? The nature of the relation determines the underlying tone and, in many ways, the meta-narrative. If a writer of minority literature feels marginalized, persisting in writing this literature is an act of contestation. It is a defiant claim to legitimacy for both the language and the literature; it not only maintains the authenticity of the writer, but bestows authority upon him or her as well. Many writers of minority literature feel that their agency takes their literature out of a neglected periphery and turns it from single creations into an installation. Furthermore, a feeling of identity deprivation may turn the act of writing minority literature into an act of defiance which, in extreme circumstances, is a dangerous act, i.e. when political power renders it subversive. Indeed, relegating a literature to minority status may bestow upon it a certain political importance, but it clearly disadvantages the authors by depriving them of opportunities.

Countries who value their art and cultural heritage should invest in developing new creative forces—teaching and coaching new generations of creative people, giving them opportunities to display their work, placing it in the public sphere, making sure that it receives critical attention, and encouraging new work by setting competitions and offering prizes, etc. Ensuring the sustainability of the creative muse also requires the training of people in supporting fields. It is imperative to encourage the artisans as well as the artists—in the literary field this

means training editors, translators, printers and publishers, not only in the dominant mainstream but also in the peripheral strands. It is futile to discuss philosophical concepts relating to the importance of literature when one has to face pragmatic obstacles such as a shortage of funds, lack of encouragement from arts and culture bodies, uninterested readership[6], ineffective industry or even, in extreme cases, trivial but real problems of deprivation such as shortage of paper. In extreme cases this pitfall can be the result of an economic meltdown such as the one we are witnessing in the early 21st century in Zimbabwe; but more often than not, limited opportunities exist for minority literatures even in a country that offers better opportunities to the dominant culture and literature. This is an unacceptable situation and a short-sighted position driven by political rather than cultural motives.

The Ideal of Reciprocity: Literature as a Polysystem

The Polysystem Hypothesis—which grew out of the late Formalist concern with the dynamics that govern the emergence and decline of literary forms in both intra-and inter-cultural contacts—emphasises the importance of cultural reciprocity. It was advanced by Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov, as early as 1928[7], and sees culture as a "system of systems". The fundamental assumption that underlies this theory applies significantly to our discussion of the ideal of reciprocity and the importance of multiple strands of literature for the development, viability and vibrancy of all other strands. The essence of the Polysystem Theory is that language, and by implication also literature or any other form of creative art, is "a coherent whole in which all parts interact upon each other" (Erlich [1955] 1981: 160). This premise suggests that despite obvious differences all strands of literature, the more obviously dominant as well as the peripheral, are integral parts of the same complex system. However, reality proves that the various parts are perceived in a hierarchical way by consumers and, in most cases, by manipulators who gain from emphasising hierarchical order rather than promoting the importance of the whole. In his seminal paper *Polysystem Theory*, Itamar Even-Zohar suggests that there is a double, simultaneous movement of preservation and innovation. This movement is attributed to the centre and the periphery, respectively (1979: 296). In other words the viability and vibrancy of any body of literature depends to a great extent on the relation between the mainstream, central "dominant" strand and the "peripheral" strands.

The idea of a site of tension between the parts in the "system" resembles Jung's psychological theories (Feldman 1986: 11). Jung defines a well-balanced and healthy personality as one that grows out of conflicts and struggles between the conscious and the unconscious. If one wants to project this schema onto the state of culture, or more specifically, onto the state of literature in a particular place at a particular time, it is clear that a well-balanced and healthy literature

must grow from the tension between the "conscious" i.e. what is seen as the mainstream literature (the canonized high culture) and the "unconscious" (the peripheral, marginalised culture)—and the resolution of the conflict between them. The resolution of this tension brings about a complementary relationship, which Even-Zohar calls "symbiotic polysystem" (1978: 79–80). This symbiosis is the fertile ground from which a healthy and vibrant literature expands. Though such reciprocity is acknowledged by most scholars who study this field, the discussion tends to centre on the impact of the well-established, local, dominant, mainstream literature, rather than on the impact of the newcomers who write what is seen as minority literature. This article seeks to counterbalance this attitude by highlighting the important contribution of the "peripheral" to the "dominant".

Newcomers or people from "minority groups" often observe and record things differently since in many cases they are the products of pre-set different cultural values and a different outlook. When these observers are writers, they craft their texts in new ways, producing new models, coining new phrases and inventing new words.[8] They mix and match sounds of languages, linguistic formats and imageries.[9] We see this, for example, in the way that the migrant or "guest-workers" who came to Germany mastered the language. When they gained self-confidence and pride in their mixed and hybrid identity, they started to introduce into their German writing their own personal and linguistic style.[10]

Literary Model of the Reciprocal Co-Operation

As this article deals with literature I would like to exemplify my idea from the field of creative writing.[11] The following is a poem written by a "minority writer", not in her own mother tongue but rather in English in order to address the readership in the country of residence—South Africa, where English is the dominant language:

> You who live secure in your mother-tongue
> Consider this:
>
> The vagabonds who left their secure homes,
> roam the earth,
> rest their heads in many dwelling places.
> They are but visitors in your home,
> Never master the secret passages,
> the comforts of the short-cuts
> of your castles.

They may know how to get to the kitchen,
They may know how to get to the bath,
But small hidden nooks and frills,
and attics with memories of yore,
are out of their laborious reach.

Tired, tired they are.
Tired of playing translations,
Refitting their home's imprint
with the new home acquired.
Forever bumping into man-made articles
and language particles.

You who have always stayed put and secure,
Consider this:

These vagabonds sparkle your home
with gems from their childhood rhymes,
ingenuity of fabricated words,
flashing exotic brilliance,
on your solid hardened walls.

You who live secure in your mother-tongue,
Consider this:

Hospitality is: Welcoming strangers,
Trying to hear them,
Trying to understand what they mean.
(As)
You know not
When you will roam the earth.[12]

This poem illustrates the difficulties of newcomers in a land in which they feel inadequate. If we project it onto language and literature, it is clear that the newcomer is not privy to the subtleties of the established dominant culture. However, the poem highlights the rich fertilization process that takes place along the axis that connects the two literatures and cultures. As mentioned above, if one culture, language or literature is not exposed to others, it crystallizes, hardens and loses its vibrancy. The exposure to other forms of writings, other genres, other rhetorical means, other "musicalities" brought by the newcomers (the "Others") allows for dynamic renewal—or in poetic symbolism—provides new sparkle.

Linked Poetry[13] is a literary model which can serve as a simile for the co-existence and co-operation between languages and literature, promoting a variety of multiple voices that should enrich each other without distraction from any of them:

> Typically, a linked poem comprises thirty-six verses, which are composed at one sitting by three persons taking turns. Long verses of seventeen syllables alternate with short verses of fourteen syllables. (Kawamoto 2004: 8)

The initial verse is called Hokku, and when it stands as an independent autonomous poem it is called Haiku. In the linked poem this Haiku (Hokku) is followed by section B which is also an autonomous poem. Subsequently section B is followed by section C. Each of these sections should be a complete poem in its own right, semantically independent. It can be read and appreciated in isolation, but together they make new poetic sense, and they reach additional depth and particular beauty only in conjunction. When each of two adjacent sections is read together they constitute a literary unit. Thus verse B, in the middle, bears one meaning when read with section A, and another meaning when is read with verse C. The most attractive aspect of the linked poem is that although each section can be read by itself, by reading it in conjunction with neighbouring verses it gets a deeper, more interesting and richer meaning. Furthermore, when other sections are added to it, through its new association, any particular section suddenly gets a totally new meaning. Let me demonstrate linked poetry with an example compiled by Basho's school and cited by Koji Kawamato (current president of ICLA):[14]

> Verse A:
> Throughout the town
> above the welter of smelly things
> the summer moon.
>
> Verse B:
> how hot it is, how hot it is
> says a voice at every house gate
>
> Verse C:
> although the weeds
> have not been worked a second time
> the rice comes into ear.

Verse A describes a hot summer night when the visual "coolness" of the moon stands in contradiction to the hot and smelly bustle in the city. When Verse A is

read together with Verse B, however, it is one unit:

> Throughout the town
> above the welter of smelly things
> the summer moon.
> how hot it is, how hot it is
> says a voice at every house gate

This poetic unit creates a realistic depiction of the people who hang onto the gate to escape the unbearable heat. One can almost feel and smell the heavy heat in the town; but in a linked poem, verses B and C can be also read as a poetic unit and, indeed, the second poetic unit reads as follows:[15]

> how hot it is, how hot it is
> says a voice at every farm gate
> although the weeds
> have not been worked a second time
> the rice comes into ear.

Now the picture of the heat is completely overturned. The second poetic unit gives the heat a positive feel rather than the heavy heat of the town. In this poetic unit the farmers rejoice in the heat as it promises an abundant crop. One of the most striking aspects of linked poetry is the fact that the two poetic units should, in a way, play on each other, i.e. when one reads each unit by itself it gives a clear meaning, but when the two units are read together the old meaning dissipates and the whole poem gets a new meaning—a new face, a new understanding to each of them. And indeed, in this particular linked poem, when we read the first unit we have a heavy feeling of the heat in the smelly town; however, when reading the second poetic unit, we can see the heat as a wonderful thing for the farmers whose grain grows faster and will make them better off. One can argue that each of these poems could have been written and presented separately, and that it is not necessary to read them together. While each poem stands by itself with some poetic depth, only when read together do they activate additional possibilities, understanding, and much more beauty, by forcing us to go to and fro, each time placing emphasis on other sections and enhancing them. This example can be seen as a simile for the relationship between the literatures that represent various cultures in any particular place.[16] How I see the variety of literatures is that each (culturally representative) literature should be autonomous—rich and rewarding to its readers—yet they should exist in relation to each other. And in the same way that the various poetic units in linked poetry activate each other, give additional meaning, making each richer, so the various literatures should activate and enrich each other.

Conclusion: The Importance of Minority Literature for the Well-Being of Society

The Israeli author, Amos Oz, in his book *Oto Hayam*, describes a person as a Russian doll who is a bigger replica of his ancestors whom he carries within him; an image which is upheld by many immigrants and writers on the move (Baraheni 2005: 54). According to this image, wherever we travel, or settle, we carry within us not only our direct ancestors but also *their* cultural make-up and *their* view of the world. When people move from their place of birth and have to reconcile their inherited, ingrained identity with society around them, they constantly have to try to negotiate between the two. It is a site of tension—but resolving the tension brings about a healthy and well-balanced personality.[17] In literature the bridging of this split between the inherited and the new reality is done by what Lacan calls "suture" which, as explained above literally means "stitching". This is what helps bridge the imaginary and the symbolic.

This article has shown that the site of transcultural identity formation, where ambiguous identity, fragmentation of identity and hybridity reside, is a seam. And while the issue of ambivalent identity of minority groups cannot be conclusively resolved, the tension it creates gives rise to innovative art and literature which, in most cases, reflect the existential duality of the artists.[18] Niyi Osundare of Nigeria describes the importance of minority literature writers who are positioned at the seam between cultures and literatures, in the following words: "through giving voice to the existence in between, they serve as a bridge between cultures. They are witnesses, participant-observers and advocates of a truly human future" (Osundare 2005: 49). This resonates with T.S. Elliot's description of the fertilisation that takes place through the creative process when he said:

> No poet … has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone … I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (Cited in Feldman 1986:13)

This article shows that it is the authors who sit at the seam between cultures and literatures who connect them—stitching and joining them together into new innovative entity which is richer than any of the individual components from which it was derived. They are the catalysts of a healthy, well-balanced culture and literature, as they serve as witnesses, participant-observers and, creatively, they bring about a truly human future.

Notes

1 See Erhard Reckwitz 's article in this journal for an excellent discussion on the utility and power of suture. It is with gratitude that I acknowledge Erhard Reckwitz for directing me to Lacan's text, which is seminal to my studies of the meeting place between cultures and literatures.

2 The translation and discussion follows Nancy Rozenchan translation of Scliar's interview, and her discussion of minority literature in Brazil in this journal.

3 It also allows a unique opportunity to record subversive views on events, when censorship curtails them in the mainstream language. This is simply because the censors are usually not privy to minority languages and cannot ascertain that it is subversive text. See Veronica Belling's article in this journal and Reisenberger 2005a, 2005b.

4 One has to note that since the advent of Internet communication, the meeting between cultures can also occur in virtual reality rather in a physical place.

5 For a definition of mainstream literature see Ahrens (2005: xiii-xvi).

6 Sometimes lack of readership is due to other circumstances, which are not necessarily lack of interest. Chiwome (1996:51) illustrates this when he discusses the fact that books are out of reach to most people in Zimbabwe.

7 For a comprehensive bibliography of research in the theory and practice of the Polysystem Hypothesis, see Even-Zohar (1979:305-310).

8 See Brenda Cooper's article in this journal.

9 The French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, refers to this as "stammering" and hails it as the best kind of literature (1987:40).

10 See Hannelore van Ryneveld's article in this journal.

11 In addition to my academic career I am a published author.

12 *You who Live Secure in your Mother Tongue* by Azila Reisenberger.

13 This section of the article and my respect for a certain subtlety and the refined characteristics of Eastern literature was inspired by the literary activities of Earl Miner, the former president of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). Miner was a specialist in the Restoration Period in English Literature (his work was published after his death in 2004), yet he went out of his way to research, translate and promote Japanese poetry. His literary activities are typified by his parallel working on a monumental collection of three centuries of commentary on Milton's *Paradise Lost* and on a meticulous English translation of Haiku and linked poetry by the Japanese poet Basho and his school, preceded by an extensive introduction for the uninitiated in Japanese literature. His promotion of linked poetry made me more resolute in my resistance to a hegemonic understanding of literature, and in promoting a variety of multiple voices that should enrich each other without distraction from any of them.

14 ibid, 9.

15 With Basho's slight variation, exchanging the words "house gate" to "farm gate".

16 I chose this particular poetic form as most readers are usually exposed to Western literary styles and are not familiar with it – this exclusivity rather than inclusivity is

exactly the essence of this article.

17 The principle of negotiation required of a culture, peripheral due to a geographical move, applies also to the negotiation between minority groups, or a subculture and the mainstream, dominant culture.

18 The notion of "looking both ways" was the theme of the *Africa Remix* exhibition in London, in 2005. Many of the artists who currently live outside Africa said that their works evolve from and reflect their "stitching" together the various components of their identity, especially their existence at the seam between cultures (Malcomess 2006).

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