

Literature as an Empowerment of Identity

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In an increasingly multinational and multicultural world questions of assimilation and biculturalism have gained considerable attention. Women, in particular, are often the products of biculturalism as many, for various reasons, leave their roots and homelands to live elsewhere. The reasons are multiple, from the person living and working in another country, to the situation of the refugee, the person married abroad, the immigrant, or even those faced with a bicultural situation within their own country where interracial or interreligious marriages may cause tension. In addition women often have the task of raising children and a family in a culture to which they are not always assimilated, and sometimes do not understand. It is, therefore, in my opinion, a major issue for women today to learn how to cope with issues of cultural identity, and pass this knowledge on to other generations.

Cultural Identities

First I should like to pose a few questions as to the nature of women's cultural identity/ies, and the part literature can play in forming as well as creating an understanding of those identities. Women and men may have several identities simultaneously, both personal and cultural. Cultural identities often refer to feelings of belonging and are frequently plural in contemporary society, in particular as a result of geographical and social mobility. For example, many people in today's world live in more than one environment in the course of their lives, each adding new dimensions and cultures to their sense of self. I would thus define cultural identity as the result of a process whereby individuals or groups evaluate consciously or subconsciously their own situation in society, and attempt to establish a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence which enables them to accept their own place in life and society. It involves an acceptance of our difference from others whilst forming a new belonging.

In the battle against stereotyping, and if women are to be achievers, then role models are important. These role models can often be found in literature, as one of the functions of literature down through the ages has been to comment on society and social and political problems, and thus empower the individual, (earlier this was done in verse, later, and today mainly in the form of prose). Fiction functions thus as a tool for self-discovery. As the American film critic Trinh Minh-Ha so aptly points out

As a focal point of cultural consciousness and social change, writing weaves into language the complex relations of the subject caught between the problems of race and gender and the practice of literature as the very place where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific category. (1989, 6)

The search for our roots, for who we are, a dominant feature of late twentieth century society and its literature, must, however, always be in a dialogue - in the case of literature between the text and the reader. Literature, like other sites of knowledge becomes, as Gates points out, one of the "sites for contest and negotiation, self-fashioning and refashioning" (1993, 11). As a

site of negotiation literature can also function, through its analysis of different cultural identities, as a link to national heritage. The study of the expression of cultural identity/ies in literature can also enable us to reflect more deeply on what we actually mean by national heritage. National heritage is a complex term as it embodies diverse elements. Any definition would open to much debate, since this concept comprises traditions, buildings, sites of cultural importance to a group, and not least language. These elements may be purely national in the narrow sense of the word, but are also inextricably linked to ideas and norms of culture. An example from Norway could be the Hanseatic buildings on Bryggen in Bergen built for the Hanseatic peoples of the predominantly German Hansa League. These are on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List, but were built in a style not then characteristic among the peasant farmers, who formed the majority of the population which at that time was under Danish rule. Yet today Bryggen is considered an important part of the Norwegian national heritage.

Cultural Differences in Postcolonial Writing

Two major kinds of writing in the twentieth century deal with problems and issues of difference and culture: feminist and postcolonial literatures. In this paper I shall limit myself to some remarks and examples from postcolonial literatures where the link between cultural identity and national heritage, either one's own or that of another culture and national context, is most clearly debated. These narratives rechart the position of the individual, often presenting a reversal of stereotyping, and a merging of character and culture. This kind of writing is often defined as "writing back" to the hegemonic centre, as is indicated in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), the title of the book by Ashcroft et al, as well as of an article in *Time* in 1993. This article commented on the pre-dominance of writers from postcolonial societies who had won the Booker Prize over the past ten years or so, (and the trend has continued since). This literature, using language as the medium of expression, investigates the relation between history as context for an understanding of identity. Theories of postcolonialism and multiculturalism provide us with tools for interpretation, also in a global context. The titles of some books and articles on postcolonial theory and literatures illustrate the line of thought which has become dominant, and which focuses on questions of identity: Brydon and Tiffin's *Decolonising Fictions* (1993); Linda Hutcheon's article "Circling the Downspout of Empire" in Adam and Tiffin's, *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (1991); Tiffin and Lawson's *Describing Empire* (1994), and Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1992).

Literary discourse can be seen as a site where social forms of organisation engage with systems of signs in the production of texts, and thus it reproduces the meanings and values of a culture (Muecke 1992). Many of the narrative strategies employed in postcolonial literature spring out of and have their base in storytelling traditions. Texts are storied lives, and often the colonized nation's, or alternatively the minority culture's, mythological and cultural norms are presented against a backdrop of conventional attitudes.

The embracing nature of these narratives is the questioning of the place and value of coloniser and/or settler norms in contemporary society, whether these norms are imported through immigration as in settler countries, or imposed on from without by a colonizing power, or even by the globalization of economies. The literary analysis of identity is often done by the transposition of a character into a strange setting. As such literature is, therefore, particularly well suited as a basis for the study of cultural identities. One text where this becomes obvious is Bbarati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1991). In this fictional auto-biography, Mukherjee analyses the life of the protagonist, Jasmine, in India, where her marriage brings her into conflict with a rigid caste and gender discrimination system. After she emigrates to the US and remarries there, she finds that an equally problematic kind of racial discrimination not only becomes apparent, but also makes life in many ways equally difficult and complex for herself and her family. Finally, Jasmine comes to terms with the fact that she will always be different, and accepts that her independence as a woman is dependent on her understanding and appreciating her own cultural identity. Another, and probably better known book, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1989) has a similar function. With the subtitle *Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, the book takes us down a similar path to that in Mukherjee, but with a much stronger cultural background in China. It deals with Chinese-American experience in different generations as a way of portraying the group's identity, and exposing cultural colonization. Much contemporary literature in the US takes up similar themes, the marked increase in Native American authors bearing witness to this.

Repudiating Cultural Colonization

I will illustrate the repudiation of cultural colonization by referring to some texts from the English speaking world, more precisely Africa, Australia and New Zealand, though there is a wealth of similar literatures in French, Spanish, and other languages. What is significant in all these literatures is the combination of a Western literary tradition with other languages, cultures and identities to create a new literature. Contemporary Australian literature has many examples of this, where having shaken off the "cultural cringe," writers are "writing back" by experimenting with known, even canonical forms, with surprising results.

An excellent example of this is the Australian writer Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). Written in the form of a Victorian novel, the story uses absurdist narrative strategies not only in language but also in theme, such as building a glass church for use

in a hot climate! Likewise David Ireland, whose work ranges from the modernist/social realist novel *Burn* - the novelised version of his play *Image in the Clay* - to fable, almost Aesopian in form. *Archimedes and the Seagle* (1984) is a brilliant satire on the Australian peoples (the seagulls) as seen by a dog who, in his diary, compares them to the Seagle (albatross) who sails supreme and independent above the ocean. Independence of thought and action from Western and imported cultural traditions can be

seen as one of the themes of both texts which also discuss the position of those of mixed origin, whether cultural and ethnic. A classic example of writing back and repudiation of colonization in Australian literature is, of course, Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1990) where the protagonist battles with her family to come to an understanding of her Aborigine origins.

The analysis of cultural identity in Australian literature in Beverley Farmer's book *The Seal Woman* (1992) provides a different perspective. In Australia the book was hailed by women critics and feminists as a text about women and a woman's search for her true self, whereas to me it is an interesting study in biculturality. After the death of her Norwegian husband, Finn, the Danish protagonist, Dagmar, travels back to Australia where they first lived when he worked in the Antarctic, to house-sit for friends and to come to terms with her grief. It is a text which can be read at several different levels, first as a woman in search of herself after the loss of her husband, and to do so she returns to the place where they first met; secondly, as a study of what it means to belong to one specific country, an understanding of which only becomes apparent when the protagonist lives in an environment which is different from her native one. Taking the different versions of the seal woman legend, Eskimo, the Silkie, and others, Farmer portrays Dagmar as being like the seal woman, who stranded on land and deprived of her skin is always longing for a return to her real environment and culture - in the seal woman's case, the sea. Dagmar's attempts at assimilation into Australian culture and a relationship with an Australian man fail due to cultural differences rather than sexual ones. On a trip into the Nullabor desert she finally realizes that she does not belong in Australia and returns to her own home in Denmark. Farmer expresses this by describing Dagmar as writing the story of the Seal Woman legend for "min lille pige, Lin" - the daughter of her friend and lover, Martin. This event is a brilliant exposing of the complexity of cultural identities as Martin thinks she is calling Lin a "pig" when in fact the phrase is one of endearment and means "my dear little girl."

Problems of Cultural Interpretation

Language has always been empowering and the counter discourse of postcolonialism is no exception. The choice and use of language in a text expresses how people define themselves in relation to their environment. In an interesting article on the question of the difference between meaningfulness and intelligibility in texts Reed Way Dasenbrock (1987) asks whether the use of foreign words and phrases in a text otherwise in English hampers our understanding, or does it in fact turn us the Western, Anglo-American readers in particular into the "other" by a process of defamiliarization. Speakers of the dominant language are placed in the position of being the foreigner, of the one who does not necessarily understand everything, and thereby better able to comprehend what biculturality and difference means.

In its analysis of how power is constructed postcolonial literary counterdiscourse increasingly focuses on the language used in the text, aiming at making visible through different rhetorical strategies what During has called the "misrecognition" of a

text (1990, 72). These "misrecognitions" can be purely linguistic, but may also be thematic and culturally based, as shown in some of the examples in this paper. I have experienced this myself in the reading of Farmer's *The Seal Woman* and also the work of the New Zealand writer Yvonne du Fresne whose family is of Danish-Huguenot origin and who peppers her texts with Danish words without translation. To me as a Scandinavian these texts have a double meaning I would suggest they may not have to someone who knows no Scandinavian languages. Another example of this would be the use of the word "ghosts" in Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991). The Aborigines call the white men "ghosts," because they see their skin as transparent, as the veins show through.

A ghost female lay on a platform covered with the softest of skins. She was fair to behold. Stark white and luminescent was her skin beneath which, pulsing blue with health, Jangarnuttuk could see the richness of her blood. (15).

Can she be a real person?

Likewise Beverley Farmer in *The Seal Woman* makes fun of language when the Danish protagonist Dagmar tells the little boy Wayne that she comes from Denmark and Norway. He hoots with laughter.

'Norway!' the little one hooted, and looked up for the other's approval. 'What do you mean,' he scoffed, 'no where? You got to live *some* where.' (1992, 73)

On another occasion when speaking of the stretch of sea between Norway and Denmark known as the Kattegat, he thinks she is talking about kitekat - a brand name for a bar of chocolate! Frequently throughout the book there are discussions of language and meaning. Even her name, Dagmar causes problems of pronunciation, as does the naming of plants and animals. Constantly Dagmar is querying whether two concepts in different languages are really compatible, as well as highlighting the untranslatability of certain words because of cultural differences. Farmer makes Dagmar appear to have to find the linguist equivalent in her own language before being able to understand the new concepts she meets in Australia.

Our interpretation of the expression of cultural identities in a text evolves from the different ways in which we as readers interpret texts. A text's political or specific cultural message will vary according to the starting point of the reader and his/her experience of life. A good example of this is Keri Hulme's *the bone people* which won the Booker Prize in 1985. Interpretations vary from a book about child abuse, about the autistic child, to those about Kerewin's search for herself as a woman of mixed Maori and English blood. In this paper I will look on it as the analysis by the protagonist Kerewin of her roots which are of such mixed origin. A central symbol in the book, the tricephalous sculpture that she makes where the intertwining of the hair of Jo, Kerewin, and Simon is symbolic of the unity of her own cultural identities as she is both Irish (Simon) the white, Maori (Jo), and is herself is a New Zealander. A New Zealander of mixed racial origin can thus see the text as a way of coming to terms and thinking through who they are, and for the non-New Zealander it opens up an insight into the complexity of multicultural societies. The process Kerewin undergoes in trying to understand why she feels affinity to both Simon and Jo,

although she would prefer to remain her own isolated and self-contained self, can be seen as symbolic of the search for cultural identity.

There are many examples of this search in the writings of New Zealand authors, especially those of Maori origin, but also in recent books such as C.K. Stead's *The Singing Whakapapa* (1994). Literary discourse of this kind is, however, seldom conclusive, as New Zealand literature demonstrates. Books such as Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* (1996) pose questions about conditions for Maori which remain largely unanswered, or if answered are ambiguous. Patricia Grace, on the other hand, often attempts to answer the question she poses even though these answers may not be conclusive. In *Mutuwhenua* (1988) the young protagonist adopts many of the devices used by children of mixed or different racial origin, such as changing her name to a traditional English New Zealand name instead of her own Maori name, to make herself seem like the others. In the end however, despite marrying a Pakeha - white New Zealander - she returns with him to her own community. *Potiki* (1987) discusses the conflict of cultures caused by economic forces, and how the strength of the women not least ensures the survival and retention of the home grounds.

Sometimes Grace expresses the ambiguity of racial difference by relating storytelling and myth to contemporary scientific views, as at the end of the short story "The Sky People" where Grace narrates the Maori myth of the Earth and the Sky originally joined as one. Their children get tired of being enclosed and push their parents apart and thus earth and sky became separate. The story ends thus.

Neither she nor Sky realised at the time that their children could become their enemies, or that they themselves could become enslaved. They were indulgent parents inclined to put unacceptable behaviour down to teething problems, hyperactivity, high intelligence or precocity. (1994, 16)

It is interesting to note that these writers often show women as the strong bearers of cultural identities and those who attempt, often successfully, to stem the downward spiral of unemployment, alcohol, and self denigration which in our globalised world plagues so many indigenous peoples. Such texts have a social-political message which is never far below the surface. An African writer whose attack on neo-colonial attitudes forms a basic theme for much of her work is Ama Ata Aidoo. *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and *Changes* (1991) deal specifically with the woman's position and cultural identity in a neo-colonial and global world.

In the 1977 text Sissie taking part in tree-planting programme in Europe, discovers discrimination for the first time. She suddenly realises that she is black in a white country (Germany). Aidoo describes this humorously by turning the tables:

And it hit her. That all that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of the pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home. (1977, 12)

Throughout the text there are innumerable examples of the biting sarcasm Aidoo uses to bring home to her own people the falsity of thinking that Westerners are better, not least in the scenes in

London about students who dare not or will not return home to Africa. Aidoo describes these men as

knowing that if they were to keep on being something in their own eyes, then they could not tell the truth to their own selves or to anyone else.

...

So when they eventually went back home as 'been-tos,' the ghosts of the humans that they used to be, spoke of the wonders of being overseas, pretending their tongues craved for tasteless foods which they would have vomited to eat where they were prepared best. (1977, 89-90)

Her more recent book *Changes* (1991) can be interpreted at several levels, as about women and women's treatment in a patriarchal world, but also about confusion of identities. The text portrays the protagonist, Esi, product of Western education patterns as a character attempting to balance between the Western educated and capitalistic style of life and her own native traditions (including the two native traditions in Ghana) which cannot assimilate some of the Western ideals. This is also an underlying theme in the stories Aidoo has written since the 1970s, where she problematizes and critiques questions of biculturality which are a result of globalization, social mobility and the imposition of Western educational patterns. *Changes* highlights Esi's problems as a woman who wants independence, a career, and control over her own body, but is emotionally torn between tradition and modern life. Aidoo uses language as a weapon to make visible cultural difference. One of the significant episodes, and one which marks the start of Esi's move for independence is centred in questions of language and untranslatability. It occurs on the morning her husband rapes her, when afterwards Esi standing in the bathroom philosophizes over how to describe what has happened.

Marital rape. Suddenly she could see herself or some other woman sociologist presenting a paper on: 'The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment' to a packed audience of academics. Overwhelmingly male, of course, A few women. ... At the end of it, there is predictable hostile outrage. 'Yes, we told you, didn't we? What is burying us now are all these imported feminist ideas ...' 'And dear lady colleague, how would you describe "marital rape" in Akan?' 'Igbo? ... Yoruba?' 'Wolof? ... or Temne? 'Kikuyu? .. or Ki-Swahili?' ... She was caught in her own trap. (1991, 11-12)

This is only one of the many occasions in Aidoo's work where language, often very few words, plays a decisive role in the portrayal of character and the reader's response to the text.

Cultural Identity as Political Criticism

Some writings about cultural identity have an openly political context, particularly in writing from Africa and India. In *Devil on the Cross* (1982) Ngugi takes up questions of national identity, something which has concerned him throughout his writing career both in novels and non-fictional works. In this text he voices among other issues the search for a national cultural identity in music.

I begin the search all over again. I myself ask a question that I have posed many times: what can I do to compose truly national music for our Kenya. Music played by an orchestra made up of the instruments of all the nationalities that make up the Kenyan nation, music that we, the children of Kenya, can sing in one voice rooted in many voices - *harmony in polyphony*? (1987, 6, emphasis in the original)

Ngugi's prolific writings are a key to ways of empowering ourselves, and though he is writing of an African context, much

of what he states is equally applicable elsewhere in our globalized world. African women's writing has almost always had a political slant and been empowering, the concept of sisterhood and a sense of, or search for, belonging being central. In *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) Bessie Head weaves her story around refugees in Botswana, black or coloured, who are equally lost in the black world in which they live.

His reasons for leaving were simple: he could not marry and have children in a country where black men were called 'boy' and 'dog' and 'kaffir.' The continent of Africa was vast without end and he simply felt like moving out of part of it that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs. (1968, 16)

They are made to feel they do not belong anywhere, since a return to South Africa is impossible. Head's autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power* (1974), a study of mental illness caused, at least in part, by cultural incompatibility, portrays a woman's struggle to overcome this against patriarchal and tribal odds. Its focus is a psychological analysis of difference, what it means to be a South African coloured person in Botswana. Thematically Tsitsi Dangarembga's book about two girls growing up in Zimbabwe, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is closely related to the work of Ngugi, Aidoo and Head. She analyses bicultural influence and its harmful effects. The cousins, Tambudzai and Nyasha, are contrasted - the one only educated in Africa, albeit in the Western tradition, and struggling against cultural and tribal odds for her rights as a girl, and the other a product of colonial education, partly in Africa and partly in England. The climax is reached when in her attempt to resemble the "svelte, sensuous me" Nyasha develops anorexia, a disease unknown among the African girls (1988, 197).

However, Western feminist criticism of Dangarembga's novel with its emphasis on the psychological disorders of Nyasha or concentration on the patriarchal theme tends to overlook the cultural identity crises, and their political overtones, which are the dominant problem for both girls. One example is when, on their return from England, Nyasha and her brother have forgotten how to speak Shona, their native language, to the embarrassment of the rest of the family. Later in a conversation Nyasha attempts to explain to Tambudzai the hybrid situation in which she finds herself after their family's years in England and her schooling there.

... now they are stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it. ... They think we do it on purpose so it offends them. And I don't know what to do about it, Tambu, really I don't. I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there. (1994, 78)

The problem of assimilation which like hybridity is central to much postcolonial criticism is raised when Tambudzai gets a place at the Sacred Heart School, "a multiracial convent." Nyasha warns her of the cultural dangers of going there.

It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation. ... So they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself. (1994, 179-80)

At the end of the book Nyasha sums up her own situation in the following words: "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you" (1998, 201). How better can you express the confusion of identities! This political approach to literature in Africa can be dated back to Fanon's writings on Negritude in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a seminal work which attempted to deal with the issue of colonialism, and which suggested the answer as a return to being African. Later theoretical and literary discourse has proven the impossibility of turning the clock back, not least in the global world in which we find ourselves today. However, the work of Fanon, Aimée Césaire, Ngugi and Achebe are important as highlighting at an early stage the problems of cultural identity, some of them in fact written even before the final break-up of Empire, and should remind us that this is not just a 1980s and 90s problem in postcolonial theory and narrative.

Empowerment

When we question the values and norms of the accepted or dominant forces, be they patriarchal or racial, then we put ourselves in the position of being the judge and interrogator. By querying them we can more easily evaluate who we are ourselves, and take a standpoint. Critical theories of reader response in the twentieth century have made clear the many ways in which we as readers interpret a text, from that of identification with the protagonist or other characters in the text, the so-called "within the text reader," oscillating often to that of objective outsider and onlooker. Keri Hulme makes this distinction clear when she writes:

I know when you've finished a book and it is published it is no longer your property in a very large sense. It is the reader's property and however they read is their business and their right (but you still have a kind of caretaking feeling towards the characters). (1985, 34)

Some texts are empowering because they provide us with ideas as to how to master situations, as well as informing us of the nature of cultural reactions in different parts of our globalized world. It is at this level that reading empowers us, when we recognise that the characters and situations in a text are not unlike those we have experienced, and are able to use this knowledge to strengthen our own sense of identity, cultural or personal. As such literature should be an important element in courses on Gender, Development and Cultural Understanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that I am aware that in reading these texts in the manner I have chosen, other interpretations are ignored or put aside. My reason for doing so is to make visible the importance of overt and covert readings of texts, each providing an insight into aspects of our own cultural identities or the norms which we use to form our concept of other people's cultural identities. Only thus can we better understand others' difference. Much postcolonial literature has a specific approach to theme, in that it tries to fictionalize problems of "otherness," "place," and "difference," often based on personal experience. By reading and studying such texts we can help ourselves, and not least other women, and by being more aware of our place in the multicultural world of today, we become empowered.

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