

Literature in Colonial South Africa: A Contextual Overview

Santosh Sethy and Sambit Panigrahi
Ravenshaw University

Abstract

The history of the South African nation is marred with a complex and difficult to understand racial dynamics. It must be understood that South Africa has constantly been subject to colonial violence throughout its immensely complicated racial history. But during such racial conflicts, it cannot be undermined that an immense wealth of literature has emerged, both by Black and by White writers who have enriched the literary history of the nation. Amongst these writers of eminence, there are writers like J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Andre Brink who have registered in their writings the trials and tribulations of the South African people who had to undergo a lot of suffering due to the racial muddle that the colonial regime generated. In this context, this article is an attempt to outline the immensely rich literary heritage of the nation with specific reference to a few black and white writers who have their remarkable contributions for the growth of South African literature.

The history of British colonialism in South Africa has been prolonged and chequered. Africa in particular has perennially been delineated as a dark region by the Europeans who have always proclaimed themselves to be the self-styled torch-bearers of light and civilization. The colonial project has exclusively been an European discourse which has been invented and devised by them so that they can arbitrate and legitimize their own project of establishing colonies all across the globe including Africa. The colonial enterprise projects itself as a civilizing mission; but it is only a facade whereas the real purpose is to exploit the land of the colonized to the maximum. Wearing different garbs of traders, missionaries and civilizers, the westerners encroached into the land of the colonized and in the process, they occupied and mastered their territory with the progress of time. The colonial project in reality was not only to legitimize their clandestine project of exploitation, but also to boost their own economy by thriving on the cheap labour force that the colonized people provided them. The colonial oppression had various features and forms; it worked its way through the colonized land through the substitution and replacement of the colonized culture and education with their own in a way the oppression was both militaristic and non-violent through the propagation of the colonial cultural and educational systems through the colonized culture. In this process Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Malayan Archipelago and many other oriental parts of the globe became subject to colonial possession by many foreign colonies that includes the English, the French, the Dutch and other. And the nature of the colonial oppression was manifold: economic, cultural and educational. The very motif behind the colonial or the imperial expansion is very correctly captured by famous orientalist thinker Edward Said in the following lines:

Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others. (5)

African Literature is filled with many indigenous mythological superstructures, legendary folktales and many local oral narratives. And many of these indigenous stories and legends are based on supernatural forces which the indigenous tribal communities believed had a presence in their midst. The native Africans kept on believing that these forces governed their lives and activities to the extent that if they are not worshipped and their wrath is not placated, they would inflict great natural calamities onto themselves. Therefore, African literature primarily derived from their oral cultures and traditions is replete with a tremendous variety of local legends, myths and fantastic elements pertaining to the traditional belief systems of the tribal African population. These oral traditions that were later on imprinted in the form of written literature had a significant presence in the North and West African literatures that came heavily under the influence of the Arab literature which had an equally rich oral tradition. Later on the intrusion of colonial rule into the African land inscribed on

the African land and culture a different kind of experience in a scenario where the indigenous culture dominated and to an extent substituted the native African culture. The sense of cultural, displacement, cultural in-betweenness and cultural subversion attributed a traumatic experience onto the collective psyche of the native African people and that was also reflected in some of the prominent literary texts that followed. Even a few white writers also felt that the colonial administration is indulging in all kinds of exploitative activities towards the colonized people and hence, their writings also echoed the concerns about the white colonial culture being unjust towards the natives. So, the entire corpus of African literature is varied, conglomerate and multifaceted by containing various themes, issues and concerns inside itself that include local myths and legends, stories of exploitation, domination and also of resistance and revival from cultural oppression. So, the entire corpus of African literature provides the readers with a kaleidoscopic variety of experiences.

There had been different colonial groups who have come and settled in the South African land at different points of time in history. Amongst these settlers, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British people were there who came and settled in the land through different generations. The Portuguese were the first European group who settled in South Africa and they set their colony in South Africa in the Sixteenth Century. They were followed by the Dutch who were further followed by the British who established their business venture East India Company there. These settler communities either set up farms like the scanty number of the Dutch population called the Burghers or set up small ports like the English settlers did for the transportation of goods. Though these foreign settlers were confined initially to specific locations in the South African land, slowly they confronted each other when there was a conflict of interest in terms of their business ventures which gave rise to what can be called the “colonial conflicts of interest” (Holquist 29). But alongside, different colonial groups also had their territorial conflict with different indigenous ethnic and tribal communities including the Boers and the Xhosa communities. The inter-community conflicts reached its maximum height when the land witnessed the famous or infamous first Anglo-Boer war in 1880 where the indigenous Boer community defeated the British colonizing forces, which was again followed by the second Boer War where the British defeated the Boers and established their colonial supremacy over the land. It was a huge setback for the Afrikaners who were relegated to the doldrums of quietude and cultural stagnation after being overwhelmed by the British in War and they mostly became farmers and even landless labourers whereas the educated class consisted mostly of the British people. The long-cherished Afrikanism with its attendant ethno-cultural ethos and values was the worst sufferer in this defeat and power-wheel thereby shifted towards the British colonizing forces.

Slowly the British colonizers overpowered the Portuguese and the Dutch colonizers and established their monopoly as the only supreme colonizing power in South Africa as they did so also in the other parts of the globe. Because of their dominant presence in South Africa, they tried to impose their cultural and intellectual hierarchy over the indigenous communities by intending to substitute the indigenous cultures with their own—an attempt which nevertheless met a great amount of resistance for the indigenous community. As a result, we could witness an enforced cultural and even linguistic metamorphosis happening to the indigenous cultures which underwent radical transformation due to these foreign cultural influences on them.

In this scenario where there is an absolute cultural amalgamation, South African literature expressed itself through different languages that include many native South African dialects and of course, English. The cultural and linguistic difference between the colonizer and the colonized still existed through the fact that those who were English educated attained a higher status in the social sphere whereas the native speakers were usually farmers and restricted to their farming land and to their specific locality. But since English language and English culture was slowly getting assimilated to the land, so many British immigrants in this part of the world also started writing fiction in English such that fictional writing in English became a dominant mode of literary expression in this land. The extremely complicated history of the land along with its intercultural conflicts and problems usually became the theme of these writings. People belonging to different ethnic backgrounds, different classes and sects and people having different political affiliations were the worst sufferers of this conflictual political scenario and their pressing issues and concerns predominantly formed the crux of many of these writings.

The practice of writing in English was attempted by both the white and the black writers though the later emerged at a much later phase in the South African literary history; it emerged only in the Twentieth Century. There were British writers like Olive Schreiner and Douglas Blackburn who contributed significantly to South African literature by writing books like *Trooper Peter Halkett of Mashonaland* (1897) and *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp* (1886) respectively. The first mentioned book is an excellent treatise on South African rural life, before the so-called modernity set in whereas the second book is full of mythical and adventure stories in a scenario where these stories are mainly borrowed from the local legends and myths. Here the writer shows some awareness of the local culture with its mythical background.

As has been mentioned earlier, South Africa also witnessed the steady emergence of black writers in the Twentieth Century and these black writers were English educated. Amongst them, the most prominent name that comes to the fore is Solomon (Sol) Thekiso Plaatje who is widely credited for being the first black novelist from South Africa who is known for his novel *Mhudi* published in 1930. Amongst other notable black writers were Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali and Njabulo S Ndebele. Tlali's novel *Footprints in the Quag* (1989) was immensely critical of the racially exploitative attitude of the whites towards the native Africans in the colonial South Africa whereas Ndebele's novel *Fools and Other Stories* (1984) critiqued similar attitudes towards the blacks from the white people in an intensely racial and colonial South Africa. The mid Twentieth Century saw an immense profusion of black writers, poets and playwrights coming to the fore and these writers include Don Mattera, Gcina Mhlophe, Dr. Kopano Matlwa Mabaso, Es'kia Mphahlele, Lebo Mashile, Panashe Chigumadzi, HIE Dhlomo, B.W. Vilakazi and Herman Charles Bosman, Peter Abrahams (who of course was of mixed race), Athol Fugard, Alex La Guma, Breyten Breytenbach and Sipho Sepamla etc. Amongst the many works written by these writers, Mhlophe's *Have you seen Zandile* (1986) is a notable work that deals with the white/black racial problematic in an apartheid-ridden South Africa.

In conclusion, it must be stated explicitly that South African literature has a rich and long-cherished heritage. It contains a few white as well as a few black writers as well who have significantly enriched the literary history of the nation with their profuse and immense literary productions. Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee is one amongst such writers who have produced novels that specifically deal with the troubled socio-political scenario of the nation marred by a complex racial dynamics. Coetzee thus remains not only a writer of postcolonial South Africa but of the whole humanity for the significant humanist dimension that his works exude.

Works Cited

- Coetzee, J. M. *Age of Iron*. New York City: Random House, 1990.
 ---. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. Great Britain: Vintage, 1997.
 ---. *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007.
 ---. *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1999.
 ---. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Atwell. England: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Adey, David; Ridley Beeton, Michael Chapman & Ernest Pereira, compo *Companion to South African English Literature*. Johannesburg: Donker, 1986.
- Aldridge, A. Owen. "The Interplay of History and Literature." *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History and The Philosophy of History*. 11.3 (1982): 261-269.
- Armstrong, Nancy & Leonard Tennenhouse eds. *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London : Routledge, 1989.