

Discourses and Disciplines: African Literary Criticism, North Africa and the Politics of Exclusion

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Abstract

A disturbing canonical template of reading African literature as essentially 'black' and as an activity sited within the discursive geography of a 'sub-Saharan' space characterises a spurious and transcendentalist assumption of African literary criticism. By implication and in practice, writings of North African extraction are either marginalised or excluded within its disciplinary imaginary. This exclusionary device is (no) thanks to a persistent memory that *forgets* North Africa within a discursive complicity that tends to persecute it on linguistic and racial lines, nullifying it as 'Arab.' This paper interrogates this (mis)reading by asserting the historic, cultural and creative place of North Africa in African writing, identifying its seminal but often unacknowledged contributions to its development. It subsequently advocates a critical practice that has the tendency of memorising the plural history of the African evolution and continuity within its procedural outlook.

Key Words: African literary criticism, African literature, North Africa, Africa, Discourse(s), History.

Introduction: Knowledge and Discursive Cartographies

In his seminal book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Michel Foucault argues, among other things, that discourses operate within certain usually defined and self-reflexive epistemic geographies that install and mobilize systemic devices of inclusion and exclusion. By extension, beyond just being “a meaningful passage of spoken or written language; a passage of language that reflects the social, epistemological, and rhetorical practices of a group” (Joliffe 101), a discourse is a complex grid of power relations inscribed and propelled through the mechanism of the linguistic sign. He submits: ...instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse,’ I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a *regulated practice* that accounts for a certain number of statements (italics mine) (80).

From Foucault’s explication and expansion above, corroborated in a number of ways by critics such as Michel Pecheux, Sara Mills, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and a myriad of poststructuralist thinkers, every act of commentary (which includes African literary criticism) is necessarily ensconced in discourse and in what Fredric Jameson perceptively calls the ‘political unconscious’. This particularly explains why, within a discourse, there is the manifestation and metamorphosis of ‘disciplines,’ which thrive within propositional deployments that recognise ‘truths’ and ‘errors’ in relation to their temporal designs. ‘Errors,’ in this regard, are not necessarily ‘foreign bodies’ to a discipline; they rather manifest as the dominant proposition’s *other*. This otherness, however, has the potential of mutating into discursive prominence in time because disciplines “...constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules” (224). From the above, discursive truths are never always finite, but always under probation.

This paper engages the extant but regrettable attitude of dominant African literary criticism in continuing a critical near-silence on the literary efforts of North African extraction. I argue this exclusionary practice as symptomatic of a disciplinary allegiance to a concept of history and culture that aims at fixing what is ‘African’ about African literature to the neglect of the North African text. The paper argues the valid place of North Africa and its writing as African, identifying the signal statement of this region’s input to African writing. It goes on to suggest a better and more representational template of recognising African writing within a space that includes the total historical and textual experiences of the African cultural memory.

Africa in the Idiom of Representations

That Africa is a discourse, a supple and complex site of the politics of knowledge production, is not in doubt. Throughout history, 'Africa', as a colonialist signifier, had always been charged with semantic allocations assigned to privilege the several imperial intentions involved in naming it. Thus, just as in the imperial economy that informed what Edward Said insightfully identifies as the "Orientalization" of the Orient in his historic work, *Orientalism* (1978), Africa has always been a discursive space constructed by the grand narrative of imperial predetermination. This explains why efforts associated with ascertaining the myths of Africa's origin, whether colonialist or not, are trapped in the contradictions of conflicting assumptions. While some authorities, like Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, would support the view that the name 'Africa' had a Latinate origin that referred to the region around Carthage (447), others, like V. Y. Mudimbe, insist that "...Libya in ancient Greek geography designates the African continent" (1). Langston Hughes opines that Africa as a word "probably comes from the Latin *aprica* (sunny) or from the Greek *aphrike* (without cold)" (Agbo 21). Some equally compelling hypotheses around this intellectual maze have only helped in revealing how locating Africa as a spatial construct continually defies an essentialist standpoint of mapping its 'authentic beginning(s)'. Joshua Agbo, like a number of other researchers, advances an Egyptian etymology of 'Africa', suggesting that since *Afri* meant 'heat' and *ka* meant 'soul', Africa referred to where the soul is 'heat' (a place of origin) (21). Phoenician and Berber etymological routes to the origin of Africa also abound.

The arguable defining trajectory through which Africa began to be seriously contemplated, bringing to postcolonial focus the various ways by which it had been represented, was the European imperial project which began to estrange the continent in socio-political, economic, human, cultural and cartographic terms. This landmark point of colonialist determination was reached at the historic 'Scramble for Africa' by the European powers in the late nineteenth century, which was informed by the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. This Conference, among other things, redefined the ethnic, geographic, historic and cultural landscapes of many African peoples in arbitrary terms, a fact which, in contemporary times, has witnessed the incident of many bitter conflicts among a number of African communities. But of interest was the subsequent Orientalist re-mapping of North Africa as largely belonging to the 'Middle East' rather than Africa, because of its predominant Islamic cosmic leaning and Arabic socio-cultural predisposition. Under European colonialism, Arabism and the Islamic faith suffered spirited ideological and institutional antagonisms, and the historic cultural and trade relations that had been cemented between North Africa and Africa South of the Sahara, especially during the Trans-Saharan trade era, were frustrated.

Yusuf Fadl Hasan notes that even though Islam was allowed to be practiced by a cross-section of sub-Saharan and North African Muslims, Islamic influence was weakened through the official acknowledgement of the local customary law over Islamic law, the division of Muslim administrative units into petty political constructs and the stern restriction of communication (41). Eventually, there developed what observers began to refer to as “black Islam” because “it was diffused with black African practices and values’ in sub-Saharan Africa” (Hasan 41). This subsequently “led colonial authorities to distinguish between ‘black Africa’ and ‘Arab Africa’ ” (41).

The arguable ‘secondary partition’ of Africa, which was informed by the development elaborated above, and which was also the unfortunate foremother of the dominant African(ist) criticism representing African literature as wholly ‘black’ and reflective of Africa South of the Sahara, erected an unsettling signifier largely associating North Africa with the ‘Middle East’ rather than Africa. Despite Joseph Weatherby’s pursuit that “The European possessions in North Africa were considered part of greater colonial Africa” (2), this historian and Middle East scholar, like many others, insinuates that North Africa is either absent or marginal in the Western imagination of Africa today.

He points out that:

The U.S. State Department and the U.S. Department of Defense, through its agency the Central State Command (CENTCOM), have identified different areas as the Middle East. The State Department’s definition includes North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf States, and Arabia. They include Turkey in their European grouping. The Department of Defense omits all of North Africa except Egypt in their definition. They include the African states of the Red Sea, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, the eastern Mediterranean, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Because of other arrangements, Turkey, Israel, Syria, and India are not included in the CENTCOM list of Middle Eastern responsibilities. Other lists often refer to the Arab Core of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula as the true Middle East (2).

Ralph A. Austen sheds more light on the cartographic politics of depicting Africa, which has made the latter less of a reality than a discourse:

Africa is perhaps the most “mapped” of the world’s major regions...In its most basic cartographic representation, Africa is a well-defined geometric entity: a continent surrounded by natural bodies of water on all sides except for a small isthmus in the extreme northeast joining it to Western Asia...There is, however, a geographic convention of dividing Africa into Mediterranean and sub-Saharan zones, with the former treated as an extension of the Middle East (“Maghreb” the Arabic term for North Africa means “West”) while the latter is the “true” Africa.

Another division distinguishes tropical and temperate zones, with the latter category including not only the Maghreb but also South Africa, whose relative hospitality to European settlement is thus explained. Such distinctions are not politically acceptable in present-day Africa (the Organisation of African Unity includes States from all portions of the continent) but maps can help us decide whether they have any geographical and historical justification (1).

The result of the divisive reduction of Africa, and indeed, the *other* worlds of predominantly non-black and Arabised extractions (such as Turkey, though European) on the chess-game of imaginary geographies is the continuous intellectual encounter of the world by the *other* through the cognitive authorisation of the Centre. In the domain of pan-Africanism, Negritude and other counterdiscourses of Western imperialism coloured 'black' ironically endorsed the exclusion of North Africa on a spurious reading of pigmentation and the latter's largely Arabised cultural reality. This un/critical paradigm of inscribing Africa is particularly visible in dominant African literary criticism. In *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1974), O.R. Dathorne justifies why North Africa should be ignored in the contemplation of African literature by constructing the cultures of Africa South of the Sahara as its subtexts. Thus, for him, the basis for excluding North Africa lies partly, although not wholly, in "tribe"- in what I prefer to call the group concept. The group concept in the literature accounts for the fertile enclosures of culture and the artist's (in every sense of the word) specific responsibility to these' (x).

Virtually in line with Dathorne's thinking, Edgar Wright, in "Critical Procedures and the Evaluation of African Literature," selectively defines the African writer in the following:

For the purpose of this discussion I shall say within the limits that I have proposed elsewhere and confine the term to writers from the non-Arabic countries of the African continent, excluding those who are of European descent (6).

Wright's categorisation above transcends Dathorne's on the culturalist gaze by recognising writers of European descent whose kindred affinity with Africa is undeniable in the canon of African writers. While this is a salutary development, one wonders at the logic that would recognise an Afrikaner writer as African at the expense of writers like Naguib Mahfouz, Tayeb Salih, Nawal El-Saadawi, Assia Djebar, Driss Chraïbi, Leïla Abouleïla and Jamal Mahjoub, who would rather be described as 'Magrebian' because of their North African affiliation, despite the sanguine Africanness of their texts. One of Bernth Lindfors' pronouncements on African literature in *African Textualities* (1997) also attempts the approach of Wright that calls for the endorsement of the harmonious relationship between African and non-African cultural identities as African and therefore recognising the African identity of a South African text of Indian authorship in a volume that studies the 'Black literature' of Africa South of the Sahara!

Indeed, the categories of excluding North Africa had been well orchestrated through the colonial enterprise that ensured not only the racialised othering of Africa, but also the racialised balkanization of the continent with an especial Orientalist intention against its Arab(ised) elements. Dominant African literary criticism falls prey to this contraption in its struggle at negotiating the postcolonial identity of African literature with a temperament based on what Ali Mazrui identifies as an Africa-South-of-the-Sahara pan-Africanist synergy which goes contrary to the more productive trans-Saharan alternative (64-65).

For the purpose of this paper, and indeed, in the interest of an eclectic reflection of its literature, Africa is identified as a politico-cultural universe of multi-layered identities “not limited to the racial but also covers the totality of a diverse continent” (Ojaide 2). In this regard, “North African writers are African despite their Arab or Muslim affiliations” (2). And this reality, as shared by writers of Settler European extraction as South African Breyten Breytenbach and Nadine Gordimer, expands the horizon of African literature beyond a mere ‘Black’ nativist location.

African Literature and the Africa South of the Sahara

The predominant exclusion of North Africa from the annals of African literature in African literary criticism is to a great extent based on two major assumptions: that this region is not a part of ‘Black Africa’ and that its cosmic frame of reference is Arab-Islamic. The racial gap of this outlook should instinctively disturb reflective minds on the note that the name ‘Africa,’ ironically, originated in North Africa (as might have been noticed) to signify a group of people who were distinctively characterised by their dark pigmentation. A number of probing scholarship has challenged the side-lining of North Africa on the ‘blackness’ platform. Yusuf Fadl Hasan, for example, submits that “The original Hamitics (blacks) lived on the coasts of East and North Africa, and include the Somalis, some Eritreans, the Nubians, Ancient Egyptians and Berbers” (27). He goes on to observe that “their languages had some Arabic words, due to the cultural influence of the Arabs” (27). It is on record that, arguably more than the gruesome genocide unleashed against the native Indian population of North America by European settlers, the original North African Berbers, who were notably Black, experienced inhuman pogrom by Arab (Jihadist) invaders who caused their massive dispersal far beyond their homelands. Ovie Faraday, in a revealing essay, points out that:

The destruction of the native Northern Africa population began around 642 AD, when Arab invaders poured into Africa occupying areas known today as Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, where they physically eliminated most of the native Berber population. The Berbers that escaped death ran westwards and southwards towards the Sahara. In the 11th century, fresh Arab migrants of nomadic origin migrated into North Africa to displace and drive the remaining pastoral Berbers deeper into the Sahara (1).

The consolidation of North Africa by these Arab invaders required a politico-economic machinery which would both sustain their imperial presence and energize their Jihadist mission. This was achieved through the efflorescence of the trans-Saharan slave trade, in which many Black people from East and West Africa were impounded. This feature of the Jihad swept through the whole of North Africa and Africa South of the Sahara and became a way in which the Black subjects were inescapably Arabised both through the Arabic language, which was also the language of Islam, and through intermarriages. These marriages were mostly contrived between Arab lords and enslaved Black females. James Walvin argues that “From its earliest days, Islam was associated with slavery. The prophet Muhammad had owned slaves” (29). He maintains that “his teachings, in the form of the Koran, contain frequent references to slaves and slavery: specifying how masters should treat their slaves, and how they might enable slaves to free themselves” (29). In North Africa, the black identity became marginal and inscribed in absence, leading to an extant practice of Arab racism. This is particularly seen in the representation of blacks in the *Arabian Nights* and a number of classical writings of Arab extraction which draw Manichean binaries in depicting the constituted Arab Self and the Black African other. This also partly explains the enduring view by many North African subjects and institutions of belonging to a pan-Arab confederacy rather than to an African socio-ideological block.

The counterdiscursive representations of some North African writers of African heritage necessarily followed the protest tradition common to their counterparts in the larger Arab world. Kole Omotoso draws attention to the seemingly subversive statement of Mahmud al-Fayturi, a Sudanese poet who sees the use of Arabic as “a language of enslavement and continued subjugation of the Black Africans of Africa North of the Sahara” (17). This is a fairly contemporary echo of such protests that had been made by black writers of the Arab world as far back as the 7th century AD, among whom were Suhaym and Nusayb ibn Rabah, non-establishment poets that could be compared with caustic African American Black Arts writers like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Haki R. Madhubuti and Quincy Troupe. Nusayb ibn Rabah, who died in 726 AD, is credited with the following lines:

Blackness does not diminish me, as long as I have
this tongue and this stout heart.
Some are raised up by means of their lineage: the
verses of my poems are my lineage!
How much better a keen-minded, clear-spoken
black than a mute white! (cited in Walvin, 32).

Despite critical efforts made by scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop, Martin Bernal, Donald Redford, Thomas Hale, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ali Mazrui, Kole Omotoso, B.M. Ibitokun, and policy constructions made by political figures such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Sekou Toure of Guinea and Muammar Ghadafi of Libya to bridge the conceptual Gulf between North Africa and Africa South of the Sahara, predominant African literary criticism is still ideologically fixated on the Africa-South-of-the-Sahara 'blackness' gaze. This attitude has been quite rightly accused of anti-Arab racism, especially since its beginnings were considerably honed by Negritude, a Black-oriented movement which Samir R. Boutros refers to as "African chauvinism" (4), and which Ziad Bentahar marks out as contributing "to the marginalization of North Africans" (3). Bentahar further pursues that:

From the outset, Negritude was shaped by an idea of the black race. It was the Harlem Renaissance and black writers of the United States who initially influenced founders of Negritude, such as Senghor, Césaire, and Damas, providing them with a sense of awareness and recognition of a black racial identity that binds African and Caribbean people...The origin of African literature as the subject of an academic discipline was therefore construed initially along racial terms, with "blackness"...as a literary category (4).

Boutros and Bentahar's incisive comments notwithstanding, they fail to give a clue to why mainstream African literary criticism would uncritically excise the trans-Saharan extension of its Black racial affinity by denying the Black and African expressions of North African writings/writers. I argue that this gap was informed by the midwifery of what I call 'the Orientalist unconscious', a schema that was subtly influenced by the Manichaean colonialist narratives that drew the paradigms of Europe as Self and Africa as other, and that represented both in the binary oppositional terms of White and Black respectively, excluding Arabised North Africa from its terms of categorization. The 'black' of colonialist representation of Africa in European literature signified Africa South of the Sahara, and the constitutive othering of the African image in this informed the reaction of Black cultural nationalism which was championed by what is now popularly described as 'first generation' African writing. Among these include Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1953), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1968), and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975).

Some other influences that shaped the Black nationalist bite of first generation African literature included critical writings both of European leftist intellectual orientation and African American/Caribbean origin. They ranged from Marxist, existentialist and anthropological treatises in which names like Karl Marx, Engels, Jean Paul Sartre, Leo Probenius and Levy Bruhl sparked revolutionary sentiments 'made-in-Europe'.

The Black Diasporic content included the writings and/or activities of W.E.B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Elijah Mohammed, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Black apologists who became ideological templates for the course of Blackness and its difference from hegemonic White hold. The critical formulations of these thinkers and their representations of Blackness impacted on the Afrocentric consciousness of gestating African literature and criticism in the figure of an Africa South of the Sahara Black ideal which had been ruptured by European imperialism and which needed to be re-created. Added to these were the nationalist trail-blazing of figures like Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Dedan Kimathi, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Nnamdi Azikiwe. These developments had an influence on the subsequent revision of the literature curricula of a number of universities in Africa South of the Sahara with the conceptual mandate of inscribing the indigenous worldview as the African literary subtext. In this, there was an intellectual amnesia of the North African black content which had become muddled up with the idea of North Africa being Arab, courtesy of the age-long fore mothering of Western (white) definitions, categorizations and balkanizations.

The injection of dominant African literature with Afrocentric consciousness during its formative postcolonial beginnings was crucial in a number of ways. First, a part of the Afrocentric consciousness was a romanticization of perceived myths, values, philosophies and spiritualities of cultures originating in Africa South of the Sahara, and thus deemed to be representative of the African cosmic difference from the European. Second, since it was responding to a dominating (white) racial imperative, it was framed around a perception that tended to celebrate the Black other, and the cultural/spatial repositories of the latter were conceived to be lodged in Africa South of the Sahara. In most academic reflections of Afrocentric consciousness today, there is *always* an indebtedness to the figure of Blackness, and thus, a spatial relationship to Africa South of the Sahara. Third, an Afrocentric consciousness, conceived in this vein, has also been the rallying site of the dominant concepts of Pan Africanism, which unfortunately often exclude most of North Africa and its literatures.

The contribution of foreign publishing houses in the publication of African literary texts further reinforced the partition of North Africa and Africa South of the Sahara. Bentahar, for instance, demonstrates how the early espousal of Heinemann to English-language texts of Africa South of the Sahara significantly excluded serious consideration for North African writing. According to him, this was because of the “limited colonial presence of Britain in North Africa” (7) and the rather frustrated desire to realize a body of Commonwealth literature (basically produced in English), which was flowering on the sub-Saharan landscape. By extension, Heinemann, in its ‘African Writer’s Series,’ was signally allocating the site of Africanness in contrivances that marked the North out. As later demand for North African visibility became resonant, ‘Heinemann Arabic Authors Series’ came up as a label and intervention to embrace North African writers as different from their sub-Saharan counterparts.

The subtle colonialist charting of the routes of African literature and its criticism along lines separating the Northern content from that of Africa South of the Sahara also dwells to a great extent on the view that the former is vastly different from the latter due to its considered Arab-Islamic identity. This reading is equally faulty on a number of grounds. First, North Africa is a cultural melting-pot of different cultural leanings which include Arab, Tuareg, Berber and peoples of European and Asiatic stock who over centuries have become an African example of intense cross-cultural pollination. As regards Egypt, for example, *Africana*, a Black-heritage encyclopedia edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., informs that “Egyptians, Bedouins, and Berbers of Hamitic descent make up 99 percent of the population, while Greek, Nubian, Armenian, and other European groups (mostly Italian and French) make up the remaining 1 percent” (225). In Morocco, there is the enduring tradition of Gnawa musical artists, a set of religious Black brotherhoods of the descendants of enslaved West Africans whose beliefs and practices, according to Philip Schuyler, “represent a fusion of Islamic and West African ideas” (cited in Goodman, 37). In formal Gnawa engagements, there are the performances of animal-sacrifices, which announce “the occasion to both the human and djinn (spirit) communities within hearing range” (Goodman, 39-40). The songs that are sung are called “Bambara songs” (40). Herman Vulsteke further submits that Gnawa lyrics contain “Songhai, Sokole, Hausa and Fulbe languages” (cited in Goodman, 40). Though Morocco is known to be the resident headquarters of Gnawa, its spread extends to Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria. In this, we notice a thriving black trans-Saharan culture existing and celebrated in its unique terms in North Africa.

The assumption of the absolute ‘blackness’ of Africa South of the Sahara, upheld by mainstream African literary criticism, is also spurious if certain histo-cultural facts are taken with some objective seriousness. The dominant cultural outlook of the Hausa-Fulani people of Nigeria is significantly Arab-Islamic. Long before the Jihadist victories of Uthman Dan Fodio over a number of Northern Nigerian protectorates and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in the 19th century, the Islamic religion and Arabic culture had become embedded in the consciousness of the society and local subjects due to the Jihadist influence that swept to Africa South of the Sahara through North Africa in earlier centuries. In the development of indigenous creative literature, the use of *Ajami*, a type of Creole that originated in Arabic but embraced the Hausa language, was seminal. Ibrahim Yaro Yahaya emphasizes the contemporary functionality of *Ajami* in the fact that even Christians publish evangelical literature through this medium, “realising that the majority of Hausa people are literate in it” (13). The Arab-Islamic atmosphere is also palpable in a number of Francophone communities of Africa South of the Sahara such as in Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Niger and Mauritania. The range of Swahili as a linguistic product of African and Arabic cultural contacts in East Africa further complicates any reading that attempts to homogenize the African cultural experience. Thus, as Homi Bhabha reflects:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments and processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences (1).

Bhabha's challenge coheres with Keyan Tomaselli's proposal for an African space that can acknowledge Africa's multiple histories in the following:

In producing Africa...we need to engage global dynamics, theories and Studies, from the myriad African perspectives which exist and which have existed and changed across the continent as a whole. This needs to be in terms of specific histories, local gnoses and particular experiences. To claim a single Africa, a single experience and an autonomous culture and an intellectual heritage, or an autonomous form of African thought, is to miss the crucial significance of Africa as the origin of humankind, and to ignore the intellectual, cultural and social influences of mass migrations and interactions on the continent through the millennia. We therefore also risk ignoring the effects of travelling theories, and the re-articulation of these theories into different historical contexts and societies all over the world (26).

North African Contributions to African Literature

The contemporary tendency by a slim number of critics to include North Africa within the category of African literature has been born out of the quest to explore what possible 'treasures' might be hidden in North African writing, especially since this region's exclusion had been partly justified by the wrong view that its literatures were wholly in Arabic, and thus, inaccessible. With the growing revision of encountering Africa, influenced by the complexity of assigning such labels as 'home', 'place', 'identity' 'ethnicity' and 'nationality' in the face of the multicultural agency of globalization and late capitalism, North Africa is being cautiously acknowledged, though in many cases not in full-scale critical appraisals. It is therefore important to make a modest list of the latter's achievements in relation to the dynamism of African writing.

A notable input of North African writing is the creative negotiation of the three-world heritage of modern African writing (African, Arab and Western) as a statement of its counterdiscourse against the Eurocentric assumption of the latter's emergence. In this, it interrogates two basic ideas: the idea that African literature is a child of two-worlds (European and African, as commonly argued by the Orientalist tradition of predominant African literary criticism), and in line with the Arab part of its historical legacy, the Orientalist reduction of the Arab world. It is noteworthy that Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) creatively revises the colonialist depiction of travel as the coloniser's conquest-statement over the colonised by making Mustapha Sa'eed a figure of the reversal-process of this discourse.

In this novel, the sexual metaphors of the Occident being male and the Orient being female are turned around. Mustapha Sa'eed becomes the 'Oriental hegemon' during his studentship in England, hoodwinking, seducing and sexually violating the seven English females that become his victims. His room recalls the exotic aura of the colonialist depiction of the Orient, but here, it becomes the seven females' trap. The Arab essence is used as a cultural component of the hybridized North African cultural reality which, within the plot, melts into the ideologically African world-view. Sa'eed's intention is eventually revealed: "I'll liberate *Africa* with my penis" (emphasis mine) (120).

In an interview, Salih acquaints us with the authorial design of the settings' sexual connotations:

In Europe there is the idea of dominating us. That domination is associated with sex. Figuratively speaking, Europe raped Africa in a violent fashion. Mustapha Sa'id, the hero of the novel used it to react to that domination with an opposite reaction which had an element of revenge seeking. In his violent female conquests he wants to inflict on Europe the degradation which it had imposed upon his people. He wants to rape Europe in a metaphorical fashion (Berkley and Ahmed, 15-16).

Though Salih's sexualised imagery of Africa and Europe may be quite rightly queried on the ground that the female body continues to be represented in otherness, thus assigning the privilege of dominance (colonial or postcolonial) arbitrarily to patriarchy, *Season of Migration to the North* remains one of the most profound literary pronouncements on African decolonisation in African literature.

Another contribution of North Africa to African literature is the fact that it has been the main channel of Arab-Islamic cultural representations in several sub-Saharan (predominantly Francophone) writings, informing noteworthy themes and aesthetic experimentations focusing on protest, gender re-examinations and nationalism. There have also been seminal adaptations of the *Arabian Nights* (a pan-Oriental body of folktales) in a gamut of North African prose-narratives, enriching the imaginative vision of African writing. There are either direct or indirect echoes of this in sub-Saharan prose efforts. In the main, the *Nights* have been used to explore postcolonial travel sentiments such as in Salih's novel examined above and Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s (2003). It has also been exploited to make remarkable criticism of Islamic fundamentalism, political corruption and class/sex bigotry as in Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982). The naked patriarchy of the North African socio-cultural milieu, as demonstrated in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* (1985) and *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987), is also a case in point.

As regards the sub-Saharan prose-narrative universe, the *Nights* have been of indirect influence mainly through the novelistic tradition of Europe which is substantially indebted to it and which impacted on the modern African variety. Bernth Lindfors however sites a case of direct contact in identifying some of D.O. Fagunwa's works as related hypertextually to "certain episodes in the *Arabian Nights*" ('Form, Theme, and Style in the Narratives of D.O. Fagunwa', 12).

Conclusion

This essay is one of the moment's critical efforts involved in re-orientating the gaze of predominant African literary criticism towards a template of the total artistic, thematic, cultural and epistemological dynamics of the African historical and textual experience. I contend that African literature should be approached through a functional reading of its plural representations, which cut across the boundaries of race, class, gender and a mere fixation to the continent's Atlantic (post)modern evolution. It proposes the need to resurrect the trans-Saharan memory of African literary criticism as a way of realising a more persuasive and all-embracing statement on the continent's imaginative possibilities.

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