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A Question of Body: Study on Colonial; Post-Colonial Perspective

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Abstract: *This study examines the representation of corporeal difference as one of the fundamental ideologies on which the power dynamics of colonial and postcolonial policies are based. The analyses in this study are anchored on postcolonial theory concerning issues such as power, race, center/margin, and decolonization while the various notions of corporeality discussed here are informed by the works of theorists like Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel de Certe With textual examples from novels by authors such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi waThiong'o, the paper argues that the body is a pertinent starting point for reflection on subjectification given that (apart from its analogical efficiency) it represents the vital entity on which basic considerations of self and other are imagined and refracted in concrete political practices. African novel constitutes a central and critical locus in the debate on the decolonization of the mind and the deconstruction of epistemological grounds of difference. This is carried out through a variety of narrative structures, one of the most effective of which is the postcolonial dictatorship novel form. The textual inscription of the body underlines the consistent role of African literature as an artistic intervention in colonial and postcolonial political practices, thereby foregrounding human equality as an indispensable pre-condition for a democratic and egalitarian society.*

Keywords: African, body, power, subject, postcolonial, hegemony, subversion,

I. INTRODUCTION

The body is a key representational medium in art in general and in literature in particular. Its vitality and symbolic depth make it an efficient in-road into several concepts and practices in popular culture, cultural studies, anthropology, etc. Every form of knowledge strives to articulate itself as an internally coherent organism, a body. Far from being a metaphor, the body subtends our very thinking processes and intervenes in our conceptual and practical knowledge of the self in relation (as well as in opposition) to the other.

In this regard, the 19th-century German philosopher, Nietzsche emphatically affirms that even philosophy, a discipline that claims to be founded on immaterial reflection and pure logic, is indeed induced by "the symptoms of the body, of its success or failure, its fullness, power, and high-handedness in history, or of its frustrations, fatigues, impoverishments, its premonitions of the end, it will to an end" (2001). One of the recurrent metaphors through which power is imagined and narrated in postcolonial African literary texts is the body metaphor.

The body is a fundamental trope in the imagination of cultural, socio-economic, and political power. As a matter of distributing resources, political systems gauge the aggregate effect of policy choices on the various bodies within their polity based on tacit (and mostly unavowed) order of priority. The question of power relationship can thus be understood as the relationship between bodies, their strengths, and frailties; their contextual myths and stereotypes; their pleasures and pains; their honor and shame; their sustenance and diminution.

The Literature of the Colonized and Colonists

The literature of the colonized: Postcolonial theory is built in large part around the concept of otherness. There are however problems with or complexities to the concept of otherness, for instance: otherness includes doubleness, both identity, and difference, so that every other, every different than, and excluded by is dialectically created and includes the values and meaning of the colonizing culture even as it rejects its power to define; the western concept of the

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oriental is based, as Abdul Jan Mohamed argues, on the Manichean allegory (seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites): if the west is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine, evil. Simply to reverse this polarizing is to be complicit in its totalizing and identity-destroying power (all is reduced to a set of dichotomies, black or white, etc.); colonized peoples are highly diverse and in their traditions, and as beings in cultures they are both constructed and changing, so that while they may be 'other' from the colonizers, they are also different one from another and their pasts, and should not be totalized or essentialized -- through such concepts as a black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture and so forth. This totalization and essentialization is often a form of nostalgia that has its inspiration more in the thought of the colonizers than of the colonized, and it serves to give the colonizer a sense of the unity of his culture while mystifying that of others; as John Frow remarks, it is a making of a mythical One out of many... the colonized peoples will also be other than their pasts, which can be reclaimed but never reconstituted, and so must be revisited and realized in partial, fragmented ways. You can't go home again. Postcolonial theory is also built around the concept of resistance, of resistance as subversion, opposition, or mimicry -- but with the haunting problem that resistance always inscribes the resisted into the texture of the resisting: it is a two-edged sword. As well, the concept of resistance carries with it or can carry with its ideas about human freedom, liberty, identity, individuality, etc., which ideas may not have been held, or held in the same way, in the colonized culture's view of humankind. On a simple political/cultural level, there are problems with the fact that to produce literature that helps to reconstitute the identity of the colonized one may have to function in at the very least the means of production of the colonizers -- the writing, publishing, advertising, and production of books, for instance. These may well require a centralized economic and cultural system which is ultimately either a Western import or a hybrid form, uniting local conceptions with Western conceptions. The concept of producing national or cultural literature is in most cases a concept foreign to the traditions of the colonized peoples, who (a) had no literature as it is conceived in the Western traditions or no literature or writing at all, and/or b) did not see art as having the same function as constructing and defining cultural identity, and/or c) was, like the peoples of the West Indies, transported into a wholly different geographical/political/economic/cultural world. (India, a partial exception, had a long-established tradition of letters; on the other hand, it was a highly balkanized sub-continent with little if any common identity and with many divergent sub-cultures). It is always a changed, a reclaimed but hybrid identity, which is created or called forth by the colonizers' attempts to constitute and represent identity. (hybridity = mixing of cultures; ex. double consciousness – one goes to an American University and gets educated then returns to their native land only to find that he/she cannot identify with the culture anymore) The very concepts of nationality and identity may be difficult to conceive or convey in the cultural traditions of colonized peoples. There are complexities and perplexities around the difficulty of conceiving how a colonized country can reclaim or reconstitute its identity in a language that is now but was not its language, and genres which are now but were not the genres of the colonized. One result is that the literature may be written in the style of speech of the inhabitants of a particular colonized people or area, which language use does not read like Standard English, and in which literature the standard literary allusions and common metaphors and symbols may be inappropriate and/or may be replaced by allusions and tropes which are alien to British culture and usage. It can become very difficult for others to recognize or respect the work as literature (which concept may not itself have relevance -- see next point). There other are times when the violation of the aesthetic norms of Western literature is inevitable, as colonized writers search to encounter their culture's ancient yet transformed heritage, and as they attempt to deal with problems of social order and meaning so pressing that the normal aesthetic transformations of western high literature are not relevant, make no sense. The idea that good or high literature may be irrelevant and misplaced at a point in a culture's history, and therefore for a particular cultural usage not be good literature at all, is difficult for us who are raised in a culture which strong aesthetic ideals to accept. The development (development itself may be an entirely Western concept) of hybrid and reclaimed cultures in colonized countries is uneven, and disparate, and might defy those notions of order and common sense which may be central not only to Western thinking but to literary forms and traditions produced through western thought. The term 'hybrid' used above refers to the concept of hybridity, an important concept in post-colonial theory, referring to the integration (or, mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures ("integration" may be too orderly a word to represent the variety of stratagems, desperate or cunning or good-willed, by which people adapt themselves to the necessities and the opportunities of more or less oppressive or invasive cultural impositions, live into alien cultural patterns through their

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structures of understanding, thus producing something familiar but new). The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, and the cross-fertilization of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as oppressive. "Hybridity" is also a useful concept for helping to break down the false sense that colonized cultures -- or colonizing cultures for that matter -- are monolithic, or have essential, unchanging features. In addition to the post-colonial literature of the colonized, there exists as well the postcolonial literature of the colonizers. As people of British heritage moved into new landscapes, established new founding national myths, and struggled to define their national literature against the force and tradition of the British tradition, they, although of British or European heritage, ultimately encountered the originating traditions as Other, a tradition and writing to define oneself against (or, which amounts to the same thing, to equal or surpass). Every colony had an emerging literature that was an imitation of but differed from the central British tradition, which articulated in local terms the myths and experience of a new culture, and which expressed that new culture as, to an extent, divergent from and even opposed to the culture of the "home", or colonizing, nation. The colonizers largely inhabited countries that absorbed the peoples of some other heritages and cultures (through immigration, migration, the forced mingling of different local cultures, etc.), and in doing so often adapted to use the myths, symbols, and definitions of various traditions. In this way as well the literature of the hitherto colonizers become 'post-colonial'. (It is curiously the case that British literature itself has been colonized by colonial/postcolonial writers writing in Britain out of colonial experiences and a colonial past.) In this regard a salient difference between colonialist literature (literature written by colonizers, in the colonized country, on the model of the "home" country and often for the home country as an audience) and post-colonial literature, is that colonialist literature is an attempt to replicate, continue, equal, the original tradition, to write in accord with British standards; postcolonial literature is often (but not inevitably) self-consciously literature of otherness and resistance, and is written out of the specific local experience.

Liberal bodies on perilous ground

"To think with the ruins of empire" is thus to attend to the post-colony as it is lived in diverse and situated ways, and it is here that we might see a connection to the body coming back into view. This is not least because fiction writing is currently mobilizing imaginative bodily vocabularies precisely to give shape to the frequently intensely precarious experience of times and places shaped by actively ruinous forces. Particularly suggestive in this respect is Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad, a narrative set in the US-occupied Iraqi capital, amid those conditions that both Stoller and Lazarus identify with the undeniable contemporaneity of empire in the millennial present. Saadawi's narrative refers directly to Mary Shelley's nineteenth-century novel and follows the construction and animation of a similarly piecemeal body. This creature, referred to chiefly as Whetstone, is stitched together from human remains gathered from Baghdad's streets in the aftermath of explosions, which punctuate the narrative with grim regularity. Having escaped his creator – the junk dealer Hadi – the creature sets out to take revenge on those responsible for the deaths of the people from whom he is made. As the narrative goes on, however, his motives for killing become more convoluted, and also increasingly bound up with his desire to continue to exist. His drive to survive is supported by an apparent immunity to bullets, but it is hampered by the fact that his body parts die if their owners are not quickly avenged – and once avenged they die anyway. All of this means that, ultimately, he comes to murder indiscriminately, in his own words, simply "to keep going" (Saadawi. 259). As a result, an intense fear of him spreads. Nonetheless, the creature – who has a "big mouth like a gash right across the jaw … [a] horrible face … [and] stitches across the forehead and down the cheeks" (83) – is rendered a peculiarly ordinary presence in the narrative.

People in coffee shops spoke of seeing him during the day and vied to describe how horrible he looked. He sits with us in restaurants, goes into clothing shops, or gets on buses with us … He's everywhere and has an amazing speed, jumping from roof to roof and wall to wall in the middle of the night … No one knew who his next victim would be. (Saadawi 260)

It is possible to read the vision of the body offered in this novel through Boehmer's notion of figuration. The text itself appears aware of this potential and anticipates it. At one moment, bitterly ironic, the creature explicitly invokes a metaphorical relation between his physicality – "made up of … diverse … ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes" – and a unified postcolonial nation: "I'm the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks" (140). More powerfully, though, and as the everyday status of his deathly presence suggests, what's its name functions in the text to give form to the experience of

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what Stoller has called the postcolonial imperium? Indeed, this relationship is explicitly drawn. Speculation around the creature's potentially political origins is rife, and the last word in this respect – "it was the Americans who were behind this monster" (259) –indicates an imperial connection. The spectacular mundanity of his body violently (or ruinously) composed and recomposed across the text presents this unfolding imperialism from the perspective of lived reality: one in which precarity, disproportionately distributed across the postcolonial world, inheres in the fabric of the day-to-day as an omnipresent, unpredictable and immediate threat to body and life.

It is, notably, for readings sensitive to experience that Lazarus calls in his engagement with postcolonial studies as a critical field. Such an assessment shifts the emphasis away from questions around the possibility of representation, and instead focuses on "a phenomenological dimension" of literary narrative, foregrounding "the writer's ability to show us what it feels like to live on a given ground – to show us how a certain socio-natural order … is encountered, experienced, lived" (Lazarus 79, emphasis in original). As Saadawi's novel suggests with particular clarity, literary visions of the body acquire a peculiar valency where that "socio-natural order", that "given ground", is characterized by acute risk, and if this thought seems to rely on the directness or literality of the threat incarnated by the creature, then it should be noted that the same point might be made in respect of fictions that engage with realities where violence is often more insidious than it is in Saadawi's warzone. Articulating his phenomenological reassessment, Lazarus draws from Raymond Williams' account of "structures of feeling" of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (132) – and here again, we might return to Mbembe's conceptualization of the subject of race, the body of extraction: if what may be thought of as a postmodern conceptualization of the body in postcolonial writing directs us to the inscription of racial categories on living bodies, then from the perspective that Lazarus – pace Williams – offers, what is foregrounded is the experience of this inscribed category, which marks the body out in different ways as exploitable and expendable, concomitantly locating it in the position of "heightened risk" to which Mbembe refers.

Race and Reality

While its status as a "postcolonial" text may be ambivalent, Jordan Peele's politically charged Get Out (2017) is nonetheless illustrative in this respect as a film that engages with structural racism (also addressed by Daniel Hartley in his contribution here) in a plot to which the body is central. Get Out is a tongue-in-cheek but bitingly political mobilization of cinematic horror. The narrative follows Chris, a young black man, who is lured by his white girlfriend to the country estate where her family has, for generations (and in a way that invokes histories of slavery), gruesomely transplanted the brains of a wealthy white elite into the bodies of black people. Victims of this procedure remain present in their stolen bodies as inhabitants of what the text calls "the sunken place", and as the film invokes Du Boise's "double consciousness" (8) in this way, it also resonates with the critical lexicon of bodily horror deployed by Fanon as noted above, and also taken up by Mbembe, who's writing frequently returns to visceral images. The subject of race is "a carcass", for example, it is "what is left of the body once its flesh has been stripped" (39), emphasis in original). It is notable in this sense, too, that Mbembe takes an epigraph from Cesario's Discourse on Colonialism (1955): "These heads of men, these collections of ears … these Gothic invasions, this steaming blood … are not so easily disposed of" (quoted. in Mbembe 1). These latter lines summon gothic horror as a mode appropriate to the cataloging of colonial atrocities, and, in their own extravagantly violent vocabularies, Fanon and Mbembe articulate the violent experience of the racial inscriptions that license such atrocities under imperial conditions.

In Peele's text, the vivid threat of corporeal violation is bound up with all of these senses. The position of dramatic bodily vulnerability in which Chris finds himself both indexes the sense of objectification attendant on racial categorization, and it bears the historical imprints of racialized extraction and expendability, from enslavement to the systemic insecurities currently being brought to attention by campaigns such as Black Lives Matter. In Get Out, then, the body is positioned in such a way that it dramatizes the experience of race as a heightened state of lived precarity, which emerges in the millennial present as the cumulative effect of ongoing imperial ruination. And yet the role of the body in this text is also more complex. It is important, in this sense, that Get Out operates in a self-consciously speculative mode (addressed by Lizelle Bischoff in this collection as African science fiction), and engages specifically with the conventions of gothic horror. In their assessment of what – adapting Michael Lowy – they call gothic "unrealism" (Deckard et al. 83), the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) have noted that gothic fictions deal in "catachrestic" (96) narrative devices, the role of which is to interpret systemic and historically produced circumstances

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of radical unevenness to make these meaningful at the level of current social experience, and in contemporary fictions such as Peele's to mobilize this function critically to indict the forces underlying the production and distribution of insecurity (Deckard et al. 97).

From this perspective, it becomes salient that Peele's film registers the pervasive experience of "heightened risk" as a scene of spectacular violence, a strategy that is also discernible elsewhere in post-millennial, postcolonial fiction (Duncan 23). If this horrifying scenario is to be considered an interpretive endeavor, then the explanation it offers for the violent circumstances engaged by Get Out – namely that (US) society continues to be configured through racialized relations of extraction and expendability – depends on its effectiveness on corporeal materiality. The text's political strategy operates, in other words, by translating lived states of precarity into direct and immediate violence against the protagonist's body – and indeed Campest, drawing from Wreck in this collection, argues the "literary body" is peculiarly equipped to encode "they lived experience of subjects at the … semi-periphery". Chris's body in Peele's text thus concretizes and – importantly – renders critically tangible the corrosive effects of ruinous forces, which, accumulating gradually across the history of the present and operating at the level of structure and on a global scale, often evade the category of eventful violence as Rob Nixon, for example, has influentially described it.

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