

Introduction: creating new discourses from old

A rediscovered country offers itself as what it is,
 without closure or totality.

ABDELKEBIR KHATIBI, *Amour bilingue*¹

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You have always had this scrupulous reverence
 for the dignity of the other, whoever he may be.

ABDELLATIF LA ÂBI, who spent eight and
 a half years in a Moroccan prison for “crimes of opinion”²

This study examines postcolonial narratives of four major Muslim authors of fiction from diverse origins and backgrounds, who have elaborated counterdiscourses in European languages.³ It focuses on the problematics involved in developing such counterdiscourses while staying within the frame of the linguistic and cultural “systems” of the power structures within and under which these authors have written. While their narratives vary too greatly to suggest a single model of oppositional writing, the tendency and emphasis of their writings give evidence of a common aim – to refute totalizing, universalizing systems and reductive processes, in whatever society or form they may be found, which threaten to marginalize individual and minoritarian dissent, and to create a dominant cultural discourse that is univocal.⁴

My personal experience leads me to emphasize narratives by French-speaking writers from the Maghreb (North Africa), more particularly from Morocco (Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi) and Algeria (Assia Djebar). I have also chosen to study the writing of Salman Rushdie, who, while brought up in the Islamic tradition in the Middle East and writing in English, shares with his French-speaking counterparts knowledge and experience of Muslim beliefs and practices, and offers another model of the postcolonial writing of authors versed equally in European

culture and diverse cultures in countries where Islam is the primary system of faith.

The late Kateb Yacine, perhaps the foremost North African writer in French, speaks of the refusal of some postcolonial writers to become “domesticated,” that is, to submit unquestioningly to the structures of power that frame them in. It is just such writers and their diverse responses that interest me:

In our Arabic tradition, there are some poets who have refuted even the message of the Prophet. People believe them to be proud, but it is not true. It is a matter rather of a total confidence in the word as word and the refusal to become domesticated. There is the true poet. He is someone who does not claim to make of his word something that domesticates men and that teaches them to live, but on the contrary someone who brings them a freedom, a freedom often uncomfortable moreover. I believe that the true message of the poet lies in this. It is not the fact of saying to the people that you must do this or you must do that; it is precisely to break all frames that have been placed around them so that they might bound back.⁵

The “true poets” to whom Kateb refers hold in common an attempt to forge a non-totalizing, alternative discourse that achieves a freeing of difference and serves as a model for those (“the people”) who suffer the constraints of unforgiving social–cultural bonds. These “true poets” all live under threat of repression, as in the extreme cases of the many writers and intellectuals assassinated by unknown Algerian extremists,⁶ as well as in that of the death sentence (*fatwa*) handed down on Salman Rushdie. Nonetheless, it is an oversimplification to view the resistance of these postcolonial writers (“poets”) described by Kateb as signifying unqualified refutation of the “message of the Prophet,” for, far from all being set on rejecting Islam and Muhammad, most reject only the dictates imposed by Islamic extremists. Nor is it valid to see them as uncategorically rejecting the religious and social beliefs and practices of the Western cultures in which they have been schooled, for it is only the hegemonic tendencies of those cultures and their discourses, and the ideologically driven aspects of their languages, that they resist.

The writers I am about to study are, to varying degrees, believers in the Islamic (Sunni) faith system and, moreover, draw willingly and strongly upon Western culture, literature, and thought. But, in strikingly different ways, their writings refute or clash with certain of the strictures imposed in the name of the Word – of the Qur’ān, the Sunna or collections

of Traditions (sayings and stories) of Muhammad, and the manner in which Ijma', the consensus underlying Islamic practice and belief, is interpreted (particularly by the Shi'a branch of Islam) – as well as those strictures imposed in the name of the magisterial discourses of Western society. In sum, these are the strictures imposed by those commentators and lawgivers in Islam and in the West who have variously sought to control and even to deny the word (in small letters) to errant individuals and (Djebar argues) particularly women.

Though the generalizing of difference is something that a study of narratives emanating from diverse cultures cannot fully avoid, the last thing I wish to do is to put forth a monolithic concept of an imaginary creature called “*the postcolonial author.*” My more modest intention is rather to treat the question of *difference* in its manifold varieties, past and present, as they may be found in the specific postcolonial discourses I shall examine and the postcolonial critical commentary I shall call upon.

I have chosen to characterize the narratives I discuss and their authors as *postcolonial*. In recent years, many critics and commentators, sensitive to the hierarchical implications inhering in the term “Third World,” have sought other terms to refer to non-Western culture – such as “emergent” or “developing,” which conveniently ignore or slight the long and rich cultural and linguistic heritage preserved and handed down for centuries through indigenous languages and oral literatures.⁷

All such terms imply that the non-European world occupies a less advanced position on a scale of social development or that its development is incomplete – as emphasized by the participle ending of words such as *emerging* and *developing*, used by the Westerner to characterize them. Conversely, such terminology suggests that the Western cultures are at the apex or center of human and social development and thus represent what the non-Western cultures work towards. The same holds for the adjectives “Anglophone,” “Francophone,” “Hispanophone,” and “Lusophone,” used to identify countries outside the “mother” country, where European-derived languages are spoken. By their prefixes, these terms put a premium on the language and culture of the “mother” country: metropolitan England, France, Spain, or Portugal. They valorize the political and economic interests of the “mother” country and gloss over the significant cultural/linguistic differences existing between the non-metropolitan countries and the Metropole as well as between themselves.

Roland Barthes, in discussing official phraseology used to designate African countries, speaks of it as serving purposes other than those of

communication. “It is a language charged with bringing about a coincidence between norms and facts, and with giving to a cynical ‘real’ the certainty of a noble moral... a writing one could call cosmetic because it aims at covering up the facts with language noise, or... with the adequation of a linguistic sign” [“C’est un langage chargé d’opérer une coïncidence entre les normes et les faits, et de donner à un réel cynique la caution d’une morale noble... une écriture que l’on pourrait appeler cosmétique parce qu’elle vise à recouvrir les faits d’un bruit de langage, ou... du signe suffisant du langage”].⁸ Official phraseology in this context is a code without relationship to its content (or even to a contrary one), whose primary purpose is one of control and the legislation of social and linguistic behavior. A code of intimidation.

The term “postcolonial” is of very recent coinage. The word “colony” from the Latin *colonia* was used to denote “a public settlement of Roman citizens in a hostile or newly conquered country” (the *Oxford English Dictionary*). The word made its appearance in modern languages in fourteenth-century French. Its modern sense is observed in Latin and Italian writers of the sixteenth century. The word *colonie* was solidified in the French language in the seventeenth century to denote a territory dominated and administered by a foreign power. The connotation of economic exploitation came to the fore in the eighteenth century. The end of the nineteenth century, notably with Marxist criticism of the system of colonization, introduced into French the word *colonialisme* (1902) and *colonialiste* (1903). In 1960, the word *néo-colonialisme* appeared, preceded by words indicating the presumed end of the colonial system (*décolonisation*, 1952). The word “postcolonial” is of such recent origin that neither the OED nor the *Grand Robert* make mention of it.

Critics and commentators have tended to employ this term indiscriminately to denote non-Western cultures that have gained nominal independence, though the majority of these cultures, often administered by surrogate neo-colonialist regimes, remain under indirect control by the same political and economic forces that ruled under empire. Notably few former colonies, particularly in Africa, have wrested a true measure of independence from the West and its surrogates, as such critics as Jean Ziegler have continually argued with formidable statistical and documentary evidence.⁹

I shall use the term “postcolonial” only for those cultures that have attained a measure of self-autonomy or for narratives in which we observe a counterdiscourse expressive of an agonistic position consciously

undertaken against the controlling norms of dominant discourses, whether of European or non-European origin. It is not an anomaly, therefore, to find postcolonial narratives by writers on the order of Ben Jelloun from countries ruled by neocolonial despots such as Hassan II of Morocco. Indeed, one can make the case that different narratives by the same author may be characterized as postcolonial (for example, Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable*) and orientalist or non-postcolonial, that is, strongly submissive to the literary norms of Western culture (for example, Ben Jelloun's *Nuit sacrée*).

When I speak of a postcolonial author and her or his discourse, I do not intend to set in place a new organizing principle of discourse, or to impose anything like a fixed meaning or a unified "non-Western" outlook which, as Salman Rushdie reminds us in *The Jaguar Smile*, is simplistic.¹⁰ Nor do I seek to disinter the traditional notion of the author as a unifying factor of a discourse with reference to whom we can explain its genesis and coherence. On the contrary, I am mindful of the existence of a multiplicity of discourses by non-Western authors, more particularly a number of them that interact and bear resemblances to each other in their contestatory mode, in their condition(s) of possibility, but which are discontinuous and often conflictual if not contradictory.

Postcolonial theory in many of its formulations has tended, on the one hand, to elide cultural and national particularity between non-Western nations under the umbrella category "postcolonial." On the other hand, others of its formulations have tended to view ethnic and cultural groups as discrete entities characterized by a theoretical polarity existing between the so-termed West and the non-Western, the colonial and the postcolonial, etc. Urged on by a need to pronounce differences between adversarial contenders, postcolonial theory often overemphasizes disparities and fails to take into account the negotiation that has transpired between different countries and different cultures.

This situation provides a partial answer as to why I have chosen to study the narratives of the four authors I have mentioned. Far from having entered into a purely adversarial relation with colonial and neo-colonial entities, these authors have negotiated between them – between European culture and language and their own mother tongue(s), between Islamic teachings and their awareness of secular concerns that extend beyond or outside of the Qur'ān. The writings of these four authors exemplify in varied ways the exchange that usually transpires

between non-Western writers, the former colonial occupiers, and the present neo-colonialist or traditionalist forces in power.

While very much interested in the articulation of national, cultural, or ethnic particularity in the works of Muslim writers and thinkers, I am keenly interested as well in how they appropriate Western (Judeo-Christian) or Islamic beliefs and practices while elaborating a third, distanced position lying “elsewhere” – that is, between the hypothetical extremes of the “pure” hegemonistic power structures of Western and Islamic cultures, on the one hand, and a “pure” non-Western, non-Islamic oppositional mode, on the other. Both extremes are imaginary constructs in the case of the authors I study.

Nothing approaches “pure” in these contestatory or, more accurately, these give-and-take relationships. Paradoxically, the only “pure” category seems to be that of the mixed or *métissée*, as Khatibi and the Martinican author and critic Edouard Glissant call it – the bastardized, the culturally diluted. The term transcultural has been used to describe the dilution of one culture by another. Obversely, the prefix “post” of *postcolonial*, in suggesting a departure from or a step beyond, unfortunately scants the notion of transference between or interpenetration of cultures (colonial, Western, non-Western, neo-colonial, Islamic, popular Arabo-Berber culture, etc.).

I have often asked myself the question whether my own subject position, of someone schooled in the rational discourse of European–North American culture, can elude colonizing (im)positions. I believe it is possible in function of my studies in discourses of the Western other (the eristic thinkers of the classical age and their descendents), of the transculturation that my own thought and perceptions have undergone in the approximately seven years I have lived in non-Western cultures, as well as of the intellectual and cultural maturation of my thinking that has been influenced by contact with non-Western cultures. The *pensée métissée* (unraveling thought) underlying my own intellectual and emotional development has given me a sense of non-Western otherness, of that betweenness essential to a “feel” for the interchange between peoples and ideas of different cultures.

When I speak as I will of the important “freeing of difference” occurring in the discourses of various postcolonial thinkers and writers, that freeing must be understood as a composite difference that emerges from a mingling of various intellectual metals into a “new” substance that partakes of this/that, past/present, self/other. As Khatibi has written, no

pure beginning exists; all beginnings are but crossroads of previous beginnings, and those of others, *ad infinitum*. From the starting-point, however – the particular beginnings of the narratives I study, or the specific beginnings of the authors’ intellectual and emotional positioning – the beginnings we shall meet with may be thought of as preliminary steps in the conscious and intentioned production of meaning, as Edward Said has defined it.¹¹

The works I shall study do not represent original departures, but a combination or mixing (*métissage*) of preceding endeavors (of the author and of other authors, cultures, ideas, and positionings) and a new combination that speaks to the desires and convictions of the author and like-thinkers.

As I will argue throughout, the authors I study, far from attempting to bring about a simple poetics of reversal, a dialectical move to replace one system or frame of power by another, offer new and powerful dynamics of narrative engaged in an unending polymorphous and polyphonic mixing.

The question of language

Owing to the fact that the writers I have chosen to study set out to write their own cultural midground into existence through a language originating in a foreign culture, the problematics of that utilization are of paramount importance.

The Moroccan writer and activist, Abdellatif Laâbi, speaks of the use of a European-originated language in this way: “Provisionally making use of French as an instrument of communication, we are ever conscious of the danger into which we risk falling, which consists in utilizing that language as a means of cultural expression” [“Assumant provisoirement le français comme instrument de communication, nous sommes conscients en permanence, du danger dans lequel nous risquons de tomber et qui consiste à assumer cette langue en tant qu’instrument de culture”].¹²

Every language, as is implicit in the danger mentioned by Laâbi, carries with it an ideological register that directs the way the user formulates his or her thoughts and legislates the conditions of acceptable expression in accord with the specific requirements of that culture from which the language emanates.

A characteristic of language that offers an opening onto a solution, however, is its aleatory character, its unpredictability and proclivity to escape us owing to what Michel Foucault calls its “fearful materiality.”¹³

To master the aleatory character of language, institutionalized discourse has smoothed the rough edges of speech, sought to purge it, on the one hand, of the unexpected and, on the other, of any blatant apparition of the totalizing intent of institutions themselves. On the contrary, numerous postcolonial writers who, as the Argentinean author, Julio Cortázar, has described them, “work the limits,”¹⁴ have seized precisely on the potential of discourse for disruption, its dangerously exhilarating tendency to explode, by exposing its sharp edges, uncovering its asperities, introducing into it the unexpected and uncontrolled.

The semiotic enterprise is central to the tactics devised by the postcolonial writers we shall treat. Lucy Stone McNeece mentions two important features of Abdelkebir Khatibi’s unorthodox and idiosyncratic use of language: the fact that self-knowledge and knowledge of others derives from our relation to signs that function differentially and in various ways in diverse cultures; and that, however much we believe we use language to create meaning, language in fact inscribes meaning upon us.¹⁵

Tahar Ben Jelloun speaks of how “Each society possesses a screen on which appear the authorized signs. Everything lying outside these signs is condemned. For our society, the totality of these signs is a book” [“Chaque société a un écran où apparaissent les signes autorisés. Tout ce qui est en dehors de ces signes est condamné. Pour notre société l’ensemble de ces signes est un livre”].¹⁶ The book he refers to is the Qur’ān, which delimits what subjects and discursive forms are valid, but the same process of authorization (legitimation) operates in the fundamental authoritative texts of all societies (those in the Islamic sphere as well as those of Western societies, all of which govern by the authority of multiple texts). Islamic cultures, like Western cultures, differ markedly in terms of the texts and practices by which they govern.

Most English sources depict the Shari’a (the Islamic legal system) as deriving from four sources or principles at work in formulating Islamic legal practice: (1) the Qur’ān, from which has derived a body of doctrine as well as rituals, practical duties and laws, elaborated and mediated by (2) the Sunna (the way or example of the Prophet, based on “hadith” or the Traditions, the moral sayings and stories of Muhammad’s actions), (3) “analogy” (qiyas), and (4) Ijma’ (consensus, or the principle expressed by Muhammad that “My community will never agree in an error,” which holds that beliefs and practices historically held by the majority of Muslims is true).¹⁷

The interpretation that appears to be emerging very recently among

(Sunni) Muslim scholars is that there are rather two major sources of law (the first two: the Qur'ān and the Sunna), and that the second pair may provide modes of "interpretation" among certain communities at certain periods, but are by no means universally accepted, at least in the relative weight they are accorded in reaching decisions regarding the establishment and interpretation of the legal code. It is for that reason of course that there exist differing schools of law (madhahib),¹⁸

For just such reasons, the very diversity of cultural – social, juridical, and political – practices by which various Islamic cultures around the world govern makes it impossible to speak of Islam in monolithic terms, just as the reference to cultural practices subsumed under the rubric of the "West" covers a multitude of social, juridical, and political variations.

It is by the power of the sign that societies, despite their variations, process information so as to regulate and organize the manner in which individuals perceive and "know," the ways in which they interpret and map their environment prior to acting and as the basis for their actions.¹⁹ All societies arrogate the power of the sign to themselves through a system of collective mapping, a system of exclusion, limitation, and appropriation, to use Michel Foucault's terms, that imposes strategies to attenuate or assimilate all adversarial discourses. The function of discourse, as scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Terdiman have observed, derives less from a need to communicate than from a desire to promulgate through specific mechanisms of determination a system of representation that asserts and stabilizes the beliefs and values of the culture and seeks to control the meaning of that discourse.²⁰

The projects of the writers I shall look at operate in a diversity of ways to re seize control of the signs that the dominant linguistic and cultural systems have appropriated in order to restore a system of reference that speaks to their desires and the cultural specificity of their perceptions. Salman Rushdie urges the need to repossess the wells of language that have been poisoned by the "vocabularies of power."²¹

Translating a foreign language

In utilizing a language deriving from a Western culture as a lingua franca to articulate one's needs, perceptions, and desires – a language infused with the ideology of that culture that has been a major factor in the development of relations of power and dominance in the cultures it has invaded and colonized beyond the boundaries of Europe or North America –

postcolonial writers at first glance appear to be restricted to two choices: (1) accepting European linguistic hegemony through complete acquiescence to or ignorance of the ideological implications of that discourse or, (2) taking a position of overt opposition to it through radical exteriorization. The first choice is untenable for postcolonial writers seeking to articulate their difference from the master discourse, but the latter falls into a snare laid by the magisterial discourse itself, for the position of oppositional exteriority amplifies and reinforces the discourse of power by emphasizing its dominance. The two choices lead to assimilation and appropriation. Only a third choice would appear to avoid the pitfall: that of silence.

Is it possible, however, to conceptualize yet another modality offering a more effective field for contestation and change?

Certain writers from non-European cultures, availing themselves of the discourse of the European Other, of a foreign culture with its own means and modes, have developed diverse countertactics that reposition narrative discourse. They have devised ways to dismantle its ideological infrastructures that legislate the permissible conditions of truth, so as to rescaffold and reconfigure it, and to replace its absolute Truth that brooks no variations with countervailing local and specific “truths.”

They have succeeded in creating, as Khatibi describes it, with specific reference to Maghrebian writers utilizing a European language, a new space for their writing by radically inscribing themselves in the “interval” between identity and difference:

That interval is the scene of the text, what it puts into play. In Maghrebian literature, such an interval – when it becomes text and poem – imposes itself through its radical strangeness, that is, through writing that seeks its roots in another language, in an absolute outsideness.

[Cet intervalle est la scène du texte, son enjeu. Dans la littérature maghrébine, un tel intervalle – quand il devient texte et poème – s’impose par son étrangeté radicale, c’est-à-dire une écriture qui cherche ses racines dans une autre langue, dans un dehors absolu.]²²

In locating themselves in that space between identity and distance of which he speaks, Khatibi is referring, on the one hand, to the absolutistic Sameness or tendency towards similitude of the dominant language that works towards assimilation of all its speakers (of whatever language, of whatever culture) and, on the other, to their (the Maghrebian writers’)