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A Minor Genre for a Contested Literature: The Short Stories by Can Themba and Alex La Guma

The short-story genre has been often considered a minor genre – not only shorter, but of less cultural prestige and importance. The main claim in Shital Pravichandra’s seminal essay on short fiction within a world-literature frame, “Short Story and Peripheral Production” (2018), is critically to the point: “[d]espite its apparent ripeness for inclusion in our discussions of world literature, the short story typically is absent” (Pravichandra 2018: 197). In particular, apart from a very limited selection of internationally canonised short-story writers, the genre is often regarded merely as an author’s apprenticeship to the novel. While several critics have underlined the correspondence between the marginal quality of short fiction and its representation of liminal identities,¹ few scholars have focused on the fact that the “minority” status of the short-story form is directly linked to the genre’s own materiality: its brevity allows for different – swifter – conditions of production and circulation than the ones required by the novel, which accounts for the fact that the short-story genre has been thriving in the postcolonial context.

These issues are magnified in South African literary culture, where the colonial and post-colonial conditions are inextricably intertwined with questions of ethnicity more than in other countries, and where short fiction occupies a prominent status in the country’s literary canon. Thus, the state of the art in the South African short story seems to fall back on trite centre-periphery models and apartheid-era racial binaries, as short-story writer and literary critic Zoë Wicomb rightly remarks:

In South African culture, the hierarchical relationship between the short story and the novel is seen to be reproduced in terms of black and white writers of fiction: the white giants with their linguistic and cultural capital write novels, while black writers produce short fiction. Which neatly links with the widely favoured theory that the short story is the natural postcolonial form to succeed a black tradition of oral story-telling. (Wicomb 2001: 157)

Echoing Pravichandra, Wicomb dissects the prominence of the short-story form in South Africa, especially among black writers, by considering the local publishing venues and the material conditions of writing, at the same time positing a direct link between the valorization of length and metropolitan publishing conventions (Wicomb 2001: 159). The short stories written by black South

¹ Frank O’ Connor renowned monograph *The Lonely Voice* (1962) on the short-story form as a minor yet subversive genre has inaugurated this critical perspective. For a more recent discussion, see the volume *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing* (2014) edited by Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergman.

African authors, therefore, fall into the category of the minor due to the conflation of heterogeneous yet intertwined factors: i) the marginal status of the short-story genre in a world-literature discourse; ii) the peripheral position of South Africa literature, even if written in English, in the “world republic of letters” (Casanova 2004); iii) the liminal position of black writers in South Africa, particularly during apartheid (1948-1994).

Starting from these considerations, my paper aims to discuss the black South African short story in English in a world-literature perspective, with particular focus on the decade of the Fifties, by looking at two short stories, “Passionate Stranger” and “Etude”, written by South African-born writers Can Themba (1924-1967) and Alex La Guma (1924-1985), respectively. At the same time, my paper seeks to explore the role of South African periodicals and magazines as the only outlets for the circulation of short stories by black writers in 1950s South Africa, in particular the popular magazine *Drum* and the political periodical *New Age*. The category of the minor also applies to these local publishing venues, especially if compared to prestigious international magazines abiding by metropolitan publishing conventions, such as the *New Yorker*, where the short fiction by the two writers’ more celebrated fellow countrywoman Nadine Gordimer appeared. Ultimately, a close reading of the selected short stories also aims to problematise the idea of a contested, or minor, literariness applied to these texts, written from a politically pressured culture.

Before analysing the selected stories in detail, I would like to discuss briefly the role of the English-language black press in apartheid South Africa and to investigate the substantial proliferation of short stories by black writers in the same period, two interrelated phenomena. The diffusion of the black press was instrumental in promoting both the socio-political and cultural development of South Africa, since newspapers adopted a double strategy acting as “catalyst” in fostering new reading habits on the one hand, and becoming the “forum” for the publication of writings by black intellectuals on the other hand (Peterson 2006: 239). Indeed, the only outlets for publication available to them in the twentieth century were newspapers and magazines. Literature promoted by journalistic publications consisted mainly of poetry and short stories, which were favoured for obvious reasons of space. Moreover, the material conditions of production and circulation of short fiction in newspapers proved to be particularly apt for writers and readers living under an oppressive regime like South Africa’s, allowing for a rapid production and circulation of literary knowledge (Wicomb 2001: 164). Perhaps more importantly, the newspapers’ preoccupation with social critique and their documentary impulse are often reflected in both the style and theme of the short stories published in magazines, which results in a cross-pollination between the discourses of journalism and short fiction.

There were three different kinds of periodicals publishing literature in South Africa in the Fifties: literary, political, and mass-audience magazines (Ehmeir 1995: 114). Even though the second

half of the twentieth century in South Africa was marked by the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948, the segregative legislation did not stop (yet) the eruption of literary activity in the following years, as testified by the boom of new little magazines and newspapers, some of them politically inflected: *Drum*, *New Age*, *Africa South*, *The Classic*, to name a few (see Ehmeir 1995). Each of them published short fiction through short-story competitions and promoted its own literary standard, which often clashed with the established, mainly Western, idea of literariness (McDonald 1980: 118-119). The writing of short stories in this decade, therefore, depended on these conflicting trajectories.

Can Themba (1924-1967) and Alex La Guma (1924-1985), classified by South Africa's racist legislation as "native" and "coloured" respectively, both began their artistic careers contributing to local South African magazines as journalists *and* creative writers. Their short stories, indeed, began circulating first and foremost through periodicals. In the course of twenty years, from 1956 to 1976, Alex La Guma published 15 of his 18 short stories in South African and international – yet "peripheral" – periodicals: the South African *Drum*, *Fighting Talk*, *New Age*, *Africa South*, the Nigerian *Black Orpheus*, the US *Negro Digest*, the Afro-Asian *Lotus*, and the Brazilian *Cadernos Brasileiros*. He later collected only some of them in two anthologies. Consequently, La Guma's short fiction is scattered across various outlets and, as a result, it has been relatively overlooked by critical studies. Much more attention has been devoted to his five novels. Can Themba's short fiction has met a similar fate. Composed between 1953 and 1964, his literary output circulated only through local periodicals in his lifetime – *Drum*, *Africa South*, *The Classic*, and *The New African* – and it has been collected in three anthologies only posthumously.

The monthly *Drum* is without any doubt the most iconic South African mass publication. Targeting a black middle-class, urban male readership, it epitomised life in the South African townships in the second half of the twentieth century, providing a "social barometer" of the decade (Chapman [1989] 2001: 187). Together with love and detective stories, popular columns on jazz and American movies, the Johannesburg-based magazine also published serious investigative journalism and fiction by South African and international authors who were later to enter the canon or who had already established their fame. This notwithstanding, the short fiction published in *Drum* has often been considered "minor", less "literary", due to the magazine's popular format and genres. Can Themba started his writing career by contributing five short stories / romances to *Drum*. Stylistically very similar, they are all related by an omniscient narrator in the past tense in a polished standard English diction. The early *Drum* stories by Themba thus differ greatly from his later and more explicitly political short fiction.

Themba's first short story published in *Drum*, "Passionate Stranger" (1953), narrates the encounter between Reginald Tshayi, a Johannesburg high-school teacher, and Ellen, the daughter of

a traditional man living in a rural village. Following the clichés of the romance genre, the two fall in love at first sight, and the dialogue between Reginald and Ellen is characterised by a stereotypical love diction: “Love is on the wing, and whether I will it or no, I must join its flight. Whether I will it or no, I must love you” (Themba 1985: 41). Ellen’s father, however, opposes the union, because he has already discussed his daughter’s “bride-price” with a man of the village (Themba 1985: 45). The cliché of romance, therefore, is used by Themba to enact the clash between tradition and modernity, particularly pregnant in 1950s South Africa during the increasing urbanisation of the country. The phrase “bride-price” is textual evidence of Themba’s refusal to speak African languages, for “bride-price” is the literal English translation of the Xhosa and Zulu word “lobola” – Themba characterised himself as “detrribalised” and unable to speak any African languages. Themba’s stance as a modern urban author, therefore, is reflected also in the linguistic choices in his short stories, which discard apartheid’s characterisation of black South African citizens as “tribal” subjects. Surprisingly, it is the female figure, at first presented by the narrator in stereotypical terms as “the most beautiful creature with a tray of tea-things” (40), who asserts her own agency and defies her father’s imposition in front of the village chief, ending the narrative with a speech reminiscent of Desdemona’s monologue in the first act of *Othello* (Mahala 2017: 38). The female figures in Themba’s *Drum* romances “unseat patriarchal power in its traditional forms”, producing a “femininity out of control” (Samuelson 2008: 68). Themba’s early short stories, therefore, are emblematic of the blurred line between popular melodrama and high-quality writing that characterised *Drum* and defined its notion of the “literary”.

In her ground-breaking volume *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, Stephanie Newell underlines the relationship of form to content in African local publishing venues such as *Drum*: popular African fiction, often considered “minor”, is mostly to be found in the format of “small texts” such as the short story (Newell 2002: 4). Themba’s “Passionate Stranger” embodies many of the features of African popular literature listed by Newell: it aims to generate debate amongst readers on moral and behavioural issues using recognisable plots and character types (*idem*: 5), it conveys urban aspirations (*idem*: 6), and rural vis-à-vis urban moralities are symbolised through female characters (Ellen) (*idem*: 7). The literary standard promoted by *Drum* and epitomised by Themba’s short story, therefore, deviates from metropolitan literary norms and has been consequently deemed as “minor”. As we have seen, however, “Passionate Stranger” reinscribes the Western genre of the romance / short story and saturates it with “new local meanings” (*idem*: 4) by endowing the black female figure with agency in the clash between tradition and modernity in 1950s South Africa. The category of the minor thus loses the negative connotation of “marginal” and takes on experimental overtones.

“The bulk of the stories of [...] Alex La Guma, Can Themba, [...] and others” (Ndebele 1986: 145) occupies a minor space in South African literature also because of South African critic and writer

Njabulo Ndebele's well-known argument against "spectacular" and protest literature in South Africa, voiced in his essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1986). Ndebele defines these works of art as "the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness", which tends to "devalue" interiority and "ordinary" lives (Ndebele 1986: 150, 156). Since then, the accomplishments in short-story writing of both Can Themba and Alex La Guma have been placed under scrutiny for their supposed lack of literariness – because of their "spectacular" quality, in Themba's popular romances, or because of their "dramatic politicization" as far as La Guma is concerned (Ndebele 1986: 145).

Indeed, La Guma was deeply active in the liberation struggle against apartheid – he experienced house arrest, banning, and an assassination attempt – and his short fiction minutely represents the socio-political situation of the "coloured" community in South Africa. His short story "Etude" was published in 1957 in the explicitly leftist *New Age*, the South African Communist Party mouthpiece, as the winning entry to the magazine's short-story competition. The narrative revolves around three criminals in a pub who are planning a robbery. Drawn by the music, one of them, Harry, enters the opposite building and exchanges a few words with the young woman playing Chopin's *Nocturne* at the piano. The story ends with an ironic twist: after the robbery, Harry is identified by a watchman because he whistles the *Nocturne* during the identity parade, as he had done during the robbery.

The omniscient narrator often dwells on the degraded qualities of the setting, possibly a slum, which starkly contrasts with the beauty of music: "[d]rab and haunted-looking people sat in doorways looking like scarred saints among the ruins of abandoned churches, half listening, gossiping idly, while the pinched children shot at each other with wooden guns from behind overflowing dustbins in the dusk" (La Guma [1957] 1963: 113). While the narrator never mentions the skin colour of his characters, it can be assumed from the setting and the slang used in dialogues that the three criminals are part of Cape Town's "coloured" community. The story thus implicitly protests against socio-political conditions that force a part of South Africa's population to live in a degraded world. La Guma's use of realism, his claim to authenticity, and the deterministic message of the story's ending definitely suit the editorial line of *New Age* and its definition of literature. Yet, when the short story was reprinted in an anthology in 1963 as "Nocturne", the final part on the robbery and Harry's arrest was cut, thus leaving the narrative much more open-ended, reducing its socio-political import, and making it more "literary" in a Western perspective – unsurprisingly, the anthology was published in London.

Somehow unexpectedly, similar objections on literariness were raised even to the short fiction of Nadine Gordimer, undoubtedly South Africa's most famous short-story writer, who started a regular contribution of short stories to the prestigious *New Yorker* in 1951. It is precisely the *New*

Yorker, in the person of its fiction editor Roger Angell, who rejected three of Gordimer's stories in the Fifties and early Sixties on the grounds of their lack of literariness (McDonald 2009: 117). In particular, the narrative "Not for Publication", which describes a young black boy's education under the tutelage of white liberal benefactors, was rejected by Angell because of an alleged flaw in characterisation: Gordimer's characters in "Not for Publication" are not portrayed as individuals, but rather as "representatives of a group", "figures in a sociological report" (Roberts 2005: 272). The *New Yorker* thus deemed three of Gordimer's stories "too political", similarly to the critiques by Ndebele towards black fiction of the same period. Angell expresses a "common trope in liberal humanist critiques of literature written from politically pressured" cultures such as 1950s South Africa (Twidle 2018: 100), which thus acquire a "minor" status. In her essay "Living in the Interregnum", Gordimer remarks that in the Fifties foreign reviewers started to add "courageous" as a criterion for literary value in South Africa ([1982] 1988: 273). In fact, the bulk of short fiction Gordimer published with the *New Yorker* in the Fifties can be rarely considered "socio-political" when compared to the narratives she published in other venues. Hence, while black South African short fiction in English boomed in local magazines, often imbibing the political struggle carried out by South African periodicals, in the same period the short stories by Nadine Gordimer, a white writer, experienced great success in a prestigious American magazine that abided by metropolitan publishing conventions and refused so-called "committed literature".

The short stories by Can Themba and Alex La Guma, to conclude, ascribe to the category of the minor because of their either popular (the romance genre) or political traits (the realistic representation of one of South Africa's oppressed communities), which depend on no small part on the editorial lines and literary standards of the local publishing outlets: the popular *Drum* and the left-wing *New Age*. As we have seen, both "Passionate Stranger" and "Etude" represent imaginatively through the short-story medium key issues of coeval South Africa – the urbanisation of a growing number of Africans and the degraded life in the "coloured" slums of Cape Town. In turn, print magazines in 1950s South Africa such as the two discussed here, much less renowned than the prestigious *New Yorker*, did play a pivotal role in shaping the literary canon of South Africa. Hence, the category of the minor – applied to genres, publishing outlets, countries, authors – in a non-Western context is often a very productive one, significantly deviating from its normative connotation of "marginal":

[t]here are some regions where the short story is more culturally necessary than other genres. If the short story has been overlooked in world literature scholarship, this seems to be a symptom mostly of the expectations around what properly constitutes literature. [...] these expectations and assumptions are invariably defined in the metropole. (Pravichandra 2018: 202)

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