

Lesley Beake's "Song of Be": Postcolonial Problematics

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THE NOTION OF postcolonialism has now been so fully developed as an academic discipline and critical theory that it seems to be thriving even under the ongoing self-interrogation rife at the moment. Such recent volumes as *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (edited by Francis Barker et al.) and *ARIEL*'s January 1995 issue "Postcolonialism and its Discontents" all develop critiques of postcolonialism as a monolithic academic project. I take Anne McClintock's critique as central to this fragmentation or individuation of the "postcolonial perspective":

I am not convinced that one of the most important emerging areas of intellectual and political enquiry is best served by enscribing history as a single issue. . . . Historically voided categories such as "the other," "the signifier," "the signified," "the subject," "the phallus," "the post-colonial," while having academic clout and professional marketability, run the risk of telescoping crucial geopolitical distinctions into invisibility. (255)

In light of this, I consider Lesley Beake's young adult novel *Song of Be* as postcolonial literature but attempt also to highlight a number of elements in the work which resist such easy categorization.

Published in South Africa and Namibia in 1991 and in the USA in 1993, the novel focuses on the life story of an adolescent Ju/'hoan girl (a group referred to by outsiders as the !Kung Bushmen,¹ one of several groups of so-called "San" people of the Kalahari Desert) experiencing both personal and political decolonization at the time of Namibian independence. Thus the tale attracts an easy allegiance as "postcolonial," but it also resists reductive categorization, enunciating the unique local perspectives of its setting with a hopeful vigour, problematizing any

postmodern associations with an untroubled romanticism yet refusing an easy closure. Further clouding any innocent "post-colonial" status is that the author of *Song of Be* is a creolized Westerner, Lesley Beake, a Scotswoman who has lived in various regions of southern Africa for 20 years. Beake has become a strong voice in South African children's and young adult fiction, winning the Sir Percy Fitzpatrick Award twice and the Young Africa Award once for powerful works centring on contemporary conditions in South Africa and the wider region of southern Africa. Beake has lived in Namibia, and an extended visit to the Kalahari at the time of Namibian independence inspired this volume, which was recognized in the USA as an ALA Most Notable Book for Young Adults in 1993.²

A further complication arises simply because the novel deals so centrally with themes and ideas typical of Western young adult fiction: the emergence of the central character from the family-dominated colonization of childhood to an independent state of operation and choice. Perry Nodelman and Jacqueline Rose have developed the analogy between colonial status and childhood and suggested that adolescence is thus a form of postcolonial being. However, the analogy remains only that—similarity, not identity. Whether a central theme of maturation reinforces or undermines the novel's postcolonial perspective remains an unanswered question.

I Postcolonial Thematics

Song of Be attracts postcolonial categorization most powerfully in its setting and plot. Indeed, emergence from political and emotional colonial status is the central theme of the work. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back*, define postcolonial literature as work which "focuses on that relationship which has provided the most important creative and psychological impetus" (24), and clearly *Song of Be* slips into this net. As a Ju/'hoan, Be spends her childhood at the bottom of the geopolitical food chain of colonial Africa. She and her people have been oppressed by more dominant ethnic groups in Namibia, itself a colony of South Africa. Be is a member of a multiply-colonized culture which maintained its hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the

Kalahari Desert of South Africa for as much as 40,000 years until the 1960s. Colonized first in the seventeenth century by Europeans appropriating their traditional hunting grounds, the Ju/'hoan have survived a twentieth-century history which progressively removed all land rights from them and finally confined them to reservations living on the dole of the government of South West Africa, itself driven by the South African policy of apartheid. Under these conditions of internal colonization the Ju/'hoan suffered severe cultural dislocation; malnutrition, alcoholism, and violence soared.³ In the 1970s, however, groups began quietly to defy the land seizures and reestablish bush communities in places where there was permanent water, modifying the traditional lifestyle to accommodate farming and cattle-keeping in addition to hunting and gathering (Biesele 1-19). Be is situated in the generation which grew up on these first bush settlements, in her case at /Aotcha, two generations removed from one of the longest-maintained cultural styles. For Be, the pure hunter-gatherer mode which sustained her people for many centuries is within living memory but distanced. She is a post-hunter-gatherer, and she becomes in the course of the story a postcolonial.

Set in 1991, the story situates itself around the UN-supervised transition to independence and democracy in Namibia. Indeed, the plot of the story turns on the fact that Be, suffering guilt, loneliness, and alienation and seeking comfort in a return to her *n!ore* (her family's traditional place) of /Aotcha, arrives there to find no one in the village. Crushed and alone, she attempts suicide. This unique day, she learns later, was the day when the entire village had gone to attend a meeting over indigenous land rights with the Namibian president, a kind of event thinkable only in postcolonial Namibia.

The results of her colonial status are clear from the first line of the book—"I have just killed myself" (3)—through the fragmented recollections which float through her mind as she waits to die, to the final, tentative, precarious suggestions of survival. Having stabbed herself with one of the slow-acting poisoned arrows traditionally used by her hunter-gatherer culture for game animals, Be lies under a baobab tree waiting for death

and recalling her life. She remembers fondly her early years in a Ju/'hoan bush community, then her abrupt journey with her mother to a Boer farm where Aia joins Be's grandfather working for "Kleinbaas" (the little boss); she recalls the dawning perception of her late girlhood that she is surrounded by secrets, and she relives in retrospect the emotional horrors she faces as she learns the histories of her grandfather, her father, even her mother (land seizures, displacement, forced labour, sexual exploitation of women of colour, alcoholism, family disintegration, and near-total cultural annihilation) as their lives reflect the treatment of Bushmen in the twentieth century. She feels shocked and betrayed as she learns the story of her grandfather, Dam, kidnapped into forced labour as a young man, unable to return to Ju/'hoan culture as an adult because it had changed beyond recognition as people driven out of the bush moved to the reservation town of Tsumkwe. He ultimately chooses a life as a needed and useful worker on the Boer farm. She learns, in fragments, her mother's story, and comes to recognize the emotional imperatives of her mother's life that caused her to flee her culture and deprive Be of Ju/'hoan community. Born in the reservation town of Tsumkwe, and married there, Be's mother tells her how she faced the disintegration of her marriage under the stress of life when her husband was killed in a drunken fight over another woman. Be learns of her mother's decision to join the pioneering group at /Aotcha, where Be spends her early childhood. But she learns also of her mother's fear of a second disastrous love and her decision to flee /Aotcha rather than become involved with another Ju/'hoan man. "Love, Be, that is the problem. It twists us so that we are not the same after it has come—and we can never be the same after it is gone" (74).

Wondering how long it will take her to die, Be recounts her education and her struggles with the othered representations of Bushmen she finds in the books. She recounts her growing tie to the farmer's wife Min and her discovery that Min is mentally ill. In a narrative interwoven of fragmentary recollections, interspersed with her observations of herself as she grows weaker and weaker, she wonders if she really wants to die. She recalls Khu, the young, educated Bushman student with whom she fell in love

when he came to the farm to find her family and register them to vote in the upcoming elections. Finally, Be recounts the climactic events on the farm when Kleinbaas realizes that Be has given an interview about her life on the farm to a visiting journalist covering the progress of the UN-sponsored elections, when she realizes that her mother is sexually involved with Kleinbaas, and when Min (supposedly under Be's care) wanders away from the house and is killed in a fall. Alienated from her mother, feeling responsible for Min's death, and seeking her own childhood, Be sets out walking alone back to /Aotcha, her *n!ore*, enduring days of desert journey when she has to eat, sleep, and think as a Bushman. She recalls her arrival in /Aotcha only to find—amazingly—that the village is deserted. Alone, exhausted, and deprived of the community support she sought, Be picks up an arrow point she finds drying by the fire, wanders into the bush, and stabs herself.

If her narrative ended here, we would have a clearly colonial tale of extinction and defeat, but it does not. Her lonely suicide attempt has taken place in part because when at a time of crisis she returned to her village, no one was there. Be has not recognized that she arrived on a day unique in the modern history of her people, a day when every villager has been bussed to Tsumkwe to meet with the newly-elected president of independent Namibia and present to him their carefully-crafted document on land rights for indigenous peoples. As the people return, Be is tracked, found, and resuscitated. Khu has been waiting for her and brings her back to the threshold of life with water, declarations of his love, reassurance that the arrow was not poisoned (the Ju/'hoansi would never leave such a dangerous thing lying around where children could find it), and with hope for her people's future in a new postcolonial political order. The final words of the novel are: "I thought maybe I could open my eyes again" (94).

Thus *Song of Be* falls under Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's definition of postcolonial discourse on several counts: the colonial experience, regarded in retrospect, forms much of the core of the novel, as well as the sense of renewed hope which "hints at the vision of a more liberated and positive future" (24). As Be

emerges from the silences and suppressed guesses of her childhood into full knowledge of her family's experience (and in it the experience of her people), she emerges, too, into adolescent independence. She separates herself from those she lives with and goes in pursuit of her goal—an identity as a Ju/'hoan. This emotionally charged postcolonial status for her emerges at the same time that her people emerge into full understanding and use of their politically postcolonial position. Indeed, the parallel is inescapable; it provides the central thematic material of the novel. Similarly, as she narrowly survives death from dehydration and exposure to be promised a loving relationship with Khu—and a community and an identity—so her people have narrowly survived the cultural death of the reservation life to be promised hope and a voice in a democratic state.

Even the narratological strategies of the novel lend themselves to postcolonial interpretation. Homi Bhabha has argued in "Postcolonial Criticism" that the postcolonial perspective attempts to enunciate itself from "a hybrid location of cultural value" marked by many of the same features which distinguish postmodern theory: "aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive closure, the threat to agency, the status of intentionality, the challenge to 'totalizing' concepts, to name but a few" (439). Many of these issues surface in *Song of Be*. The narrative structure is largely retrospective and highly fragmented, as the text is at first divided into italicized passages of Be's present observations as she lies in the bush waiting to die and non-italicized passages of memory and reflection: "*I wish . . . I wish I could die now before I have to remember the next bit. It wasn't my fault! It really wasn't all my fault—but some of it was*" (54). Such passages frame and connect her more straightforward recollections. Khu "came one afternoon when we had just finished with the cattle in the shed and I was on my way back to the house to see if Min needed any vegetables brought from the garden" (54). Yet even this strategy breaks down as events remembered and events real reach a crisis. When Be reaches the point in her death vigil of saying to herself, "*It must come. Death must come soon*" (70), she also reaches the retelling of Min's death. Here she suddenly switches into recollections pointed up by italics:

I remember . . . I remember emptiness. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Aia was gone. Nobody knew where. She had taken a few things and just vanished into the dark. Grandfather coughed more but he was all right. All right, I think.

There was a funeral and the people came all the way from Gobabis village, although none had come before while I had been there. The man came from the church, too, and prayed while Kleinbaas and Grandfather and Moses lowered the coffin into the small, dry, grave. (79)

In her semi-consciousness at the end of the book, her present observations take on the quality of hallucinations:

My eyes hurt in the bright light but I thought I saw someone moving toward me across the pan. . . . After a while I thought it was Aia, although I knew that was impossible. Her shape wavered and shook in the hot shimmering air. I think I called out to her, but the shape disappeared and left behind only the tears on my cheeks. (49)

As these passages illustrate, too, Be is surrounded by doubts, uncertainties, questions of significance, "aporia, ambivalence, and indeterminacy" to be sure. Is her mother there? Is her grandfather "all right"? Is Be at fault in Min's death? Does she remember, or not?

Finally, the ending of the novel is at best a hope of a resolution rather than a resolution itself. After water, reassurance of love, promise of better times to come for her people, and a last plea from Khu assuring her that the arrow tip was not poisoned, the book ends with the line: "I thought that maybe I could open my eyes again" (94). Be seems only contingently and problematically alive. What is more, Beake places the short poem which served as epilogue again as a postlogue.

*The smoke in the flames
of the fires of Bushmanland.
The honey-gold of the grass
and the wind singing through.
The scent of sweetness on the air
and the soft, gray dust
—before our footsteps were blown out.*

Here is indeterminacy indeed. Perhaps her footsteps are blown out. If aporia and indeterminacy do postcolonialism make, *Song of Be* is clearly postcolonial.

II Postcolonial Problematics

In spite of the obvious and easy identification of the novel, however, we do a disservice to ignore several of the book's distinctive features that resist, perhaps negate, its postcolonial perspective. There is the unqualified romanticism of the plot, but more complex is the book's adolescent persona and the driving analogy of childhood/colonialism. And there is the uniqueness and atypicality of the cultural setting, which defy easy linkages to colonial transitions in other times, places, and cultures.

Although the central character lives in shades of doubt and confusion about many elements of her life—and we likewise suffer uncertainty about her outcome—one element of her emotional world is clear and certain: the love relationship with her suitor Khu. Indeed, she describes him in terms that have their cultural equivalents in many Western young adult novels; and the course of their relationship follows well-trodden tracks. Here is our first introduction to him:

Khu was like the taste of cool water. Khu was like the scent of the first rain on the veld, like the shape of the sun when it has just appeared over the edge of the world, smooth and round and handsome.

I loved him. (54)

Though Be's similes are appropriate to her culture, the romantic relationship seems remarkably direct and untroubled. In some parts of the book, the language could have been lifted from any American young adult novel. "And my heart, which had been doing ordinary things, just like me, stopped beating for a moment, and when it started again . . . it was his" (54). Khu speaks to Be as the voice of the future of her people. He, like she, partakes of a hybrid culture—each is hunter-gatherer, literate, and politically aware. But just as their love relationship is direct and untroubled, so Khu seems to believe in a democratic future which will be similarly untroubled.

Our elder people, our old men and women, and some of the young ones, too. They speak and the people listen and now they are ready to register and to vote and then we too will have a voice in this new nation that will be Namibia! (58)

His full declaration of love to Be, as he attempts to resuscitate her, is interwoven with simple romantic avowals and what seem to be equally simple predictions of a bright political future.

Oh, Be! What times there are ahead for us! The best of times. For too long now we have been speaking as people who do not believe in themselves. Who do not have their own n!ore and their own right to be there and to raise their voice to be heard. . . .

Oh, Be, isn't it wonderful that we Ju/'hoan are at least being heard and our words are going even to the high places of our land, and the President of all Namibia came with his wife and his advisers to see for himself? Yes, Be. He came himself and this was the first time such a thing has happened although it will not be the last. (92-93)

No postmodern aporia is evident here, not even the postcolonial angst of those who have had to fight for what they have.

The effect of naive optimism is, in fact, precisely the note sounded by so many Western teen romances. Thus we must come eventually to question whether *Song of Be* is more distinctively a postcolonial work or a young adult work and whether there may not be generic tensions between the two identities. The chief locus of the contradiction is one I have raised before: the postcolonial theme in the novel is expressed in microcosm (Be's life) and macrocosm (the cultural history of the Ju/'hoan). Only the macrocosmic expression is concerned with what we would consider political postcolonialism. The emotional microcosm deals with an analogical form of "postcolonialism" in the childhood oppression of Be by her mother and society and her adolescent emergence into awareness and independent judgment and action. Although the power of the analogy is considerable and persuasive, and its plot structure in this novel is highly successful, it remains open to question whether analogical postcolonialism is central to the concerns of postcolonial thought itself. I suspect that it is not. Perhaps the analogy is more suggestive and enlightening to those in young adult literature than to those concerned with the "postcolonial project" (Bhabha 439).

I wish to raise one final counterargument. Many postcolonial critics stress the importance of not overgeneralizing "the" postcolonial condition. McClintock, for instance, urges theorists to distinguish between "a variety of forms of global domination"

(257) (colonization, internal colonization, and imperial colonization) and similarly to distinguish different forms of decolonization. Bhabha, too, insists on respect for the particularities of each cultural and political situation (441). In this context, the particular colonial history of the Ju/'hoan and their attitudes and actions leading up to the Namibian independence are atypical and unique, not centrally postcolonial. There are many elements which contribute to this uniqueness. I shall enumerate only a few: the very small numbers of the Ju/'hoan as a group in the Namibian nation; their extremely remote home areas which kept them relatively uninvolved in the decolonization itself; the relatively peaceful and open governmental transition to independence under UN supervision; the lack of a well-developed indigenous resistance prior to independence; and finally, the long-documented tradition of group involvement and consensual decision-making among the Ju/'hoan. In brief, the Ju/'hoan have always governed themselves internally via participatory democracy practiced in small groups. Upon this cultural history may rest their optimism about the serviceability of democracy in a larger nation. In short, we have in the Ju/'hoan a culture which did not fight back against colonial status, which prefers to maintain its distance from other cultures, and which did not so much "win" its independence, as witness it from the sidelines. How generically "postcolonial" is such a situation?

Of course, the issue of categorization must deconstruct itself in the helter-skelter of variation and similarity. *Song of Be* succeeds because of its peculiar hybrid quirks—a protagonist who is simultaneously a hunter-gatherer and a postmodern critic of the ethnographic gaze, a narrative form that is part retrospective self-analysis and part romance novel, and a cultural setting which recognizes and values the past yet embraces a changed future with great optimism. Victor Li, in "Towards Articulation: Postcolonial Theory and Demotic Resistance," celebrates precisely such impure cultural hybrids as vehicles of change (169). If he is correct, *Song of Be* may be most truly postcolonial in its transculturation of the hunter-gatherer past into the postmodern present.

NOTES

- ¹ The slashes and exclamation points in Ju/'hoan words indicate various click sounds.
- ² I am grateful to Megan Biesele, former director of the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation, for some fifteen years of ongoing conversations about Ju/'hoan culture and for familiarizing me with the work of Lesley Beake prior to its US publication.
- ³ The notion of internal colonization is enunciated by Anne McClintock in "The Angel of Progress": "Internal colonization occurs where the dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony" (257).

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