

The Poetics of Alterity Narrative Mediation of Postcolonial Identity Constructions¹

Even though postcolonial concepts are rather context-sensitive within literary studies, there are still many attempts to link text-immanent and formal-oriented narrative concepts to the dominant thematic, contextual and ideology-critical paradigms of postcolonial studies.

At first, according to Paul Michael Lützeler, postcolonial literary criticism focused mainly on texts that were written by authors either from formal colonial lands or from one of the states of the Third World. These authors emphasized their own existential experiences in their texts that consisted of stories on the coexistence of different civilizations and the overall experience of cultural hybridity (Lützeler 2000, 99).

The scope of postcolonial theory has expanded greatly since then. Every historically relevant text of the world literature (first and foremost), that thematizes colonialism (be it oppositional or affirmative) and that had been written with an intention of it being a postcolonial project, has been analyzed from a postcolonial perspective. Newer tendencies, such as the reading of the literary works of minorities and foreigners from a postcolonial perspective, which results in an interesting fusion of multicultural and postcolonial discourses, are also trending now (Lützeler 2000, 99).

A common feature of all these different types of postcolonial literary criticism would be therefore their focus on the literary presentation of intercultural encounters. Hannes Schweiger, who also tries to come to a conclusion regarding this topic, lists the following common features:

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Firstly, the migrant-experience is an essential experience, since on the one hand boundaries will be crossed, and on the other hand new and different kinds of boundaries will be made, and eventually previous ones will be re-made. Secondly, the problematization of identity in light of the migrant-experience also has to be mentioned. Thirdly, the questioning of concepts such as nation and culture and the questioning of an essentialist attribution of identities are also relevant features. Fourthly, one can read about the performative nature of identity, culture, and nation not just in the texts of Bhabha but also in the works of migrants. Fifthly, power structures and relations between minorities and the great mass are often in the center of attention. And sixthly, just to end this still expandable list of features, a potential position between cultures has been referenced in the so-called third space. But, on the other hand, the burden associated with it and the problems regarding it remain clear in the interspaces. (Schweiger 2005, 217)²

Schweiger, however, still relativizes the productivity of these concepts when he states that the general view on these texts is way too narrow, these works are simple objects of theoretical discourses and therefore different analytical approaches are nearly impossible in this regard (Schweiger 2005, 225).

Oliver Lubrich looks at the various concepts of postcolonial studies—discourse-analytical works (Said, Pratt, Zantop), binary schematizations (Todorov, Greenblatt), and deconstructive theories (Bhabha)—in his essay “What’s the role of literary texts in postcolonial discourses?” regarding the handling of literary works, too. He makes it clear that postcolonial theory, even if it tends towards any specific literary work, does the same to literature, what literature does to postcolonial theory: simplifying modeling of alterity based on fixed aspects (Lubrich 2005, 16). Postcolonial theory could fix this deficit if it developed its own reading-technique, which could acknowledge the complexity of colonial and postcolonial experiences and of literature, where they appear.

Features of postcolonial literature are often said to be the same as postmodern ones.³ Both prefer a fragmentary aesthetic, both embody forms of marginality and ambiguity, both play with strategies on how to avoid either-or phrases, and both are interested in all kinds of form of imitation, parody, and reflection (Duclot-Clement 2005, 237). But how does this aesthetic manifest in a specific literary text? The so far most detailed and from the perspective of literary study most relevant answer to this question

2 All German quotes are translated from the German original.

3 I.A. Lützeler 2000, *Räume der literarischen Postmoderne*, and Duclot-Clement, Nathalie 2005 and Pusztai, Gábor 2007.

can be found in the academic work of Birk and Neumann (2002) that focuses on the relationship between selected concepts of postcolonial theories and categories of narrative theory and demonstrates how well a primarily text-immanent narrative theory with structural origin goes along with a primarily thematic-textual postcolonial concept. There weren't many instances when literary description methods had been used in postcolonial analyses, even though models of narrative theory are perfect for precise descriptions; like how could one narratively and textually express thematic and ideological processes of identification: "There is one thing that postcolonial debates have given to narrative theory, and that is called precision. A more precise structuring of its doctrines would be beneficial to postcolonial literary theory" (Fludernik 1999, 96). Even Roy Sommer argues that the link between concepts of cultural theory and descriptive models of analytical categories of narratology would require more attention, since "literary texts tend toward a more narrative representation, rather than toward expository approaches if the problem of identity is in the center of attention" (Sommer 2001, 18). At this point, it also has to be analyzed how narrative techniques are expressed from a semantic point of view when a multi- and transcultural perspective is present and one has to ask whether genre conventions would be modified by the literature of migration. If one reads postcolonial literature as the embodiment of anti-imperialist discourses and tries to put the already established (European) concepts of literature, culture, history, ethics, identity, etc. up against individual models, then an analytical view on the forms of individual and cultural identities, of reception and construction methods regarding alterity should be one of the main goals of postcolonial critical literature. The analysis of transcultural hybridity and its implicit assessment in literary texts would also be required in this case (Birk and Neumann 2002, 118), especially because it could be explained, how sociocultural categories correlate with formal and narrative analytical categories.

Narratology focuses on the process of how constructions of identity and alterity are produced in literary texts and therefore it makes it possible to describe their intercultural potential effects, too. Narrative techniques as artistic means of expression can, however, neither be fully catalogued nor is it possible to truly determine some of their specific functions, as Nünning/Nünning (2000) have also stated in their study.⁴ The following

⁴ According to Ansgar Nünning in the case of multiperspectivity there is no "one-to-one correlation between forms and functions, when there is a 'form-to-function mapping or function-to-form mapping', but there are rather different tasks depending on the given

criteria therefore do not represent a complete list of intercultural narrative techniques. However, on the basis of specific categories of narrative analysis that make it possible for key concepts of postcolonial theory such as identity, alterity, and hybridity to appear in literary texts, it becomes possible to show the exemplary interrelation between representation procedures and textual potential effects in light of the upcoming text analysis. With that there are most, although not all analytical categories covered, that let constructions of identity and alterity to be explained in the upcoming analysis: “Every kind of narrative process could be relevant from an intercultural point of view, if they are properly semanticized” (Sommer 2001, 71).

In the first place, some categories focus on spatial representations due to the fact that the literary representation of space is often semanticized. In this regard, it seems to be clear that the interrelation between postcolonial literary theory and concepts of narrative theory—especially in the case of English postcolonial literature (Birk and Neumann 2002, 135)—result in topographical literature (Gaál-Szabó 2011). From an abundance of literary spaces, it reflects on the fact—following Salman Rushdie—that the division of the world into isolated physical, cultural, and political units is incorrect and it is instead a product of social constructions and imaginary geographies (Bachmann-Medick 1998, 31).

Analytical approaches focus not just on the selection, interrelation, and structure of narrative spaces, but also spatial oppositions and references. For a narrative mediation of identity and alterity are, first and foremost, the phenomena of transgression and its constructions the most relevant focal points in a postcolonial context, since these could be relevant from a semantical perspective in both social and political as well as philosophical sense (Birk and Neumann 2002, 135). The main question would be therefore the role of borders in literary texts, whether they are represented as rigid or as permeable in texts and whether transgression would be possible from a cultural point of view, or at the very least desirable? Whether different spaces such as homeland and exile would appear in contrast with each other and last but not least, what roles do in-between spaces (*Zwischen-Räume*) play in these texts?

To answer these questions, some of the upcoming text analyses will constantly focus on the narrative representation of diaspora and migratory displacement⁵ (Lubrich 2005, 16). It serves the purpose of providing a clear

historical context and on the complexity of interrelations within literary texts” (2000, 31).

5 Lubrich talks here about the “poetics of displacement.”

picture regarding the relationship between the lack of belonging and the problems of identity since the spatial “in-between” always affects identity in some way. Many types of literary spaces are reduced to dynamic models of space in the literature of migration, which usually focus on the narrative representation of movements—from the periphery towards the center, from east to west, etc. For this reason, there could be many possible figurations present, like the metaphorical presence of an island with its specific open borders or an imaginary duplication of the exterior and the interior. Border areas play a significant role in literary texts and they also often indicate crisis or upcoming upheavals. Border-crossers are located in the in-between space, in some kind of a “placelessness,” while they are also part of a migration situation: “The hybrid individual is a subject who is constantly trapped in the process of transfer and who could also be interpreted as a person, whose homeland is on a threshold, a border-crosser in-between the many differences” (Fludernik 1999, 107). Mary Louise Pratt talks about the phenomenon of “anti-conquest” in her book “Imperial Eyes” (1992): her narrative attitude is characterized by a non-authoritarian style in contrast to the all-knowing (Eurocentric) “pose” and intellectual appropriation, which results in a narrator who is not always a subjective 1st person constantly in the foreground and who does not necessarily possess a superior knowledge of all the things that would happen. The colonial point of view, according to Pratt, is such an author-perspective that can see through anything and that knows without a doubt how to judge any kind of happenings. Literary texts of migration deconstruct this kind of colonial view and switch to a postcolonial perspective instead. This means that authors dare to express their uncertainties and irritations, they also dare to talk about the limit of their experiences and they do not want to have a dominant attitude in their texts anymore. Pratt described this pose as a common narrative attitude, which is also in a way “measurable” in literary texts since it always tries to have a specific impact on them. For example, an auctorial narrative attitude is more befitting for an imperial-colonial pose than a 1st person narrative attitude. Based on this observation it is possible to determine the implicit ideological message of a given literary text by analyzing its perspective-structure and by the analysis of the contrast-correspondence relation between different narrative perspectives. With an open perspective-structure and with a multicultural narrative attitude it is possible to avoid polarizing models of alterity and this could fairly be one of the main characteristics of postcolonial and emigrational discourses. Sommer (2001) emphasizes the importance of character-perspectives in his analytical text too:

The analysis of perspective-structures or with other words the result of all contrast-correspondence relations behind each narrative perspective [. . .], hints at the social and ethnical structure of the fictional world and at the significance of individual and collective representations, too: who is represented and how? Which positions are favored and which ones are marginalized? Does the text privilege stereotypical assumptions within a multicultural society or does it prefer subversive viewpoints? (Sommer 2001, 69)

The narrative concept of multiperspectivity with its multitude of quantitative and qualitative analysis categories is especially capable to answer all these questions. From a transcultural point of view, four aspects are especially important in this regard: selection, relation, hierarchy, and functionalism.

Not just perspective structures but also the analysis of narrative mediation is capable to determine the embedded concepts of identity and alterity within a fictional work. Sommer argues that the narrator who is called a “personalized center of orientation” (Nünning 1989, 122), makes not only coherence within a fictional world, but also makes the “cultural integration of the characters” (Nünning 1989, 109) clear and creates different judgmental contexts based on their actions and attitudes. The assessment criteria will be expressed by the explicit statements of the narrator, such as critical-ironical comments concerning some characters, general statements, and an appellative attitude—like talking to the readers—, which are all there to influence the extent of sympathy (Sommer 2001, 70).

Characters are also not ideology-free. Many of the relevant analytical questions of narrative texts are focusing on the process of how characters are created, like for example on their “dynamic or static nature, on their multidimensional or one-sided portrayal” (Birk and Neumann 2002, 129). Based on their portrayal comes the question that whether transcultural interactions are possible for these characters and if so, are they favored or rather not? Brigit Wagner (2003) states that characters in postcolonial texts are often portrayed as mixed and uprooted.

Time structure also plays an important role in the narrative mediation of identity and alterity. The analysis of the chronological order of events, the arrangement and organization of plot elements are fairly relevant in a migrational context since they help with the interpretation and description of memories within narrative representations: “The presence of the past can be highlighted both on cultural and individual levels in the fictional present of literary texts. Based on this factor it can be determined how much it influences the identity of the characters and how it shapes identity itself”

(Birk and Neumann 2002, 140). Narratives focusing on migration represent memories in a very specific way; they also greatly constitute individual and (national-) cultural anti-fictions and they can also lead to canon-revisions in some cases, too.

According to Birk and Neumann, based on the time-structure of postcolonial fiction there is another aspect regarding the narrative mediation of identity and alterity that has to be looked at and that is called the cultural specificity of time perception. Its importance comes from the fact that the chronological perception of time (2002, 141) is not dominant in every culture. Cyclicity affects not just the “how” of narrative mediation but also the thematic and textual level of recollections. In other words, it can therefore deconstruct narrative chronology and can make past and present differentiations obsolete.

The category of duplication plays an important role in the poetics of migration as well. It mostly affects categories of time, space, and characters. The duplication of time and space is often present in postcolonial-migrational fiction: the blending of different spaces always results in the so-called “mixed-spaces” that show either the interconnection between present and past or the inevitable return of the past into the present. Two or multiple personalities and doppelgänger also appear as paradigmatic in postcolonial literature, reminding us of the Freudian concept of “uncanniness.” The category of duplication comes up also on the level of rhetorical characters: they represent an emotional ambivalence, an uncanny oscillation between different positions and duplications, while these characters are all aiming for a deconstruction of fixations, stabilities, and transparent self-identity. The interplay of diverse mental conditions such as ambivalence, duplication, and an unsettling split in personality, which all happen because of the lack of a home, family, and homeland is a common feature of transcultural literature.

According to Iain Chambers “language is primarily not a tool for communication; it is first and foremost a cultural construct, that lets one constitute its true identity and one’s true self” (Chambers 1996, 28). Cultural hybridity is present even on the level of language. It lets cultural indecisiveness (both on the level of character dialogues and of the narrator) to be expressed and eventually to be intensified so that it makes the environment feel irritated because of its homogeneity and simplicity. According to Bhabha, the heresy of immigrants lies especially in this kind of “indetermination of diasporic identity” (Bhabha 1994, 225). It is a language characterized by heteroglossia and by blending, which lets hybrid identities to be expressed.

Fictions of transcultural literature are often multilingual and English, as the main language of globalization, is often one of its many components. According to Birk and Neumann the importance of orality, or with other words the oral narrative tradition is also clearly present in postcolonial-migrational fictions:

In contrast to written representations, this one is characterized by a loose time-structure and by a plot that focuses on repeats, digressions, and flashbacks. Based on these characteristics, one can easily integrate elements of oral tradition into it and can implicitly highlight its importance regarding the constitution of postcolonial cultural identities. (2002, 143)

Many fictions of postcolonial literature are also characterized by a revisionist reversal of standard language and its variants, while the use of regional and dialectal forms of English represents a kind of negative stigmatization of cultural alterity in a colonial novel (*ibid*).

Literary mimicry is an often-used strategy in postcolonial and migrational fiction to critically rebel against identity-defining mechanisms. The mimicry of colonial structures purposefully tries to unmask these procedures, while racist clichés are cited with a hint of irony or with clear parodic intent. Mimicry consists of both limitations and limitlessness regarding boundaries, which make the mixed nature of identities visible. It is a character that stands for an incomplete, partly split, or impeded adjustment. (Berger 1999, 183)

According to Kaja Silverman (1996), mimicry is a pose, an active act of identification that—regarding social requirements from a mimetic perspective—bounds its subjects (differently). With that, she implies the ability to act, not the freedom of choice. In practice, mimicry is not necessarily resilient. What is central to Silverman's argumentation is the demand for a dissociation regarding cultural ideals and norms that would be able to take the form of interceptive identifications. Fiction—a (literary) product—reflects on the theatrical nature of cultural identity and Silverman calls this as one of the requirements of mimetic subversions, while she is also making the dominant norms visible. The parodic pose of mimicry deconstructs all the fundamental boundaries while pretending to accept any limitation.

The use of stereotypes, both its forms of auto and hetero stereotype, is one of the important discursive strategies of colonial discourses; they are present in postcolonial fiction, even if they are there just for the sake of

its own deconstruction. As Bhabha has mentioned it, a stereotype is an “impossible object” (Bhabha 2000, 200), since its articulation would be (potentially) crossed by the gaze of the other. Sommer implies at the fact that ideals, pictures, and mental constructions, that are part of discourses focusing on foreignness, manifest (Rigginns 1997, 1) often in a stereotyping and pejorative “*rhetoric of othering*” (Sommer 2001, 25).

With the so-called “blurring of genres” (Geertz 1983) that refers to the blurring of boundaries within literary texts and theories—by which postcolonial discourses are also characterized—the favored essayistic form would be emphasized on. It is characterized by critique and openness, by a search for truth, and by hostility towards any kind of dogmas, while it also prefers questions instead of answers. Sommer’s thesis (2001) on modifications of genre conventions confirms this as well regarding transcultural literature.

Jacques Derrida elaborates on his own French-Jewish-Algerian roots in his essay *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, highlighting his complex relationship to the French language, which is not just his “mother tongue” but also a language of colonialism and antisemitism. Due to these facts, he cannot call it his own. “Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne” (Derrida 1996, 13). The “postcolonial” situation of franco-maghrebian Jews, who couldn’t have a national, cultural, and verbal identity, represents an allegory for deconstruction. Derrida deconstructs the concept of identity from an etymological point of view by a “*chaîne sémantique*” that cannot make a difference between peculiarity and foreignness, “qui travaille au corps l’hospitalité autant que l’hostilité—hostis, hospes, hosti-pet, posis, despotes, potere, potis sum, possum, pote est, potest, pot sedere, possidere, compos, etc.” (Derrida 1996, 32). Deconstruction inspired by postcolonialism follows the same path as postcolonialism inspired by deconstruction: “Une identité n’est jamais donnée” (Derrida 1996, 53). The theory-fusion of poststructuralism, postcolonialism and gender studies, that has been viewed as eclectic, unsystematic and rhetorically abstract, seems to be very promising. If (post)colonial discourse was hybrid, if it could be deconstructed and was principally ambivalent, then there has to be a method of narrative analysis that has no discourse analytical reductions and no binary schematizations and that doesn’t produce dialectical contradictions but rather focuses on ambiguity, which would not be changed and which would be described where it really is: in the readings.

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