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Article

Combined and Uneven Comparisons. Rethinking the Fields of African and Postcolonial Literary Studies within the Debate on World-Literature. Notes for New Comparatist Avenues

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ABSTRACT

The project “Combined and Uneven Comparisons. Rethinking the fields of African and Postcolonial literary studies within the debate on world-literature”, funded by The São Paulo Research Foundation, FAPESP, grant number 2020/07836-0, is situated in the fields of African literary studies and postcolonial literary theory, to be addressed as two fields characterized by a significant proximity and in growing affirmation within Brazilian and global academic and critical contexts. Proposing a mapping of critical paradigms produced within the field of postcolonial studies, with particular focus on the recent developments that characterize the debate on world-literature, this project analyses a corpus of established contemporary African writers, with the aim to consolidate a new theoretical category that corresponds to the notion of (semi-) peripheral African novel. The main hypothesis is to tackle this new theoretical category as a paradigmatic literary form in order to set the basis of a new theoretical approach and also for the establishment of a possibly original field of study, identified as Comparative African

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Literatures. Outlining the research that will be developed within the project and the state of the art from which its main objectives have been defined, the aim of this article is to draw some new comparatist avenues and critical possibilities within the fields of postcolonial and African literary studies.

Keywords: *Comparative African literatures, Postcolonial theory, World-literature, (semi-)peripheral novel, World-literary system.*

The research developed within the project “Indian Ocean Aesthetics. *Transnational Imaginative Geographies* in visual and written narratives from the African continent”¹ pointed to a number of significant critical and methodological outcomes within the fields of African Literatures, Postcolonial Theory and Indian Ocean Studies,² amongst which it is worth highlighting the methodological and theoretical potentialities of critical paradigms and models of analysis based on the articulation between the studies on African literatures (cf. Portuguese/French/English-speaking African contexts, among others) and the so-called *area studies* (cf. Indian Ocean studies; African studies), that offers a productive (re)configuration of literary studies in light of the transformations and debates guiding the Humanities at a global level. The results achieved within the project constitute a starting point for the research proposal I am currently developing³ and that will be outlined in this article.

The ongoing research is structured around the following critical axes. On the one hand, the study of the disciplinary relation between literary studies and *area studies* that aims for the creation of literary cartographies based on *transnational* and *heterolinguistic* criteria that are indispensable for (re)configuring canonical literary systems and models of analysis premised on *linguistic, systemic* (work, author, reader) and *national* (national literature) *paradigms*, to be understood as concepts and theoretical frameworks founded on a chronologically and ontologically outdated notion of literature. On the other hand, the analysis of the relation between African Literatures and Postcolonial Theory is to be addressed as two fields characterized by a significant proximity and in growing affirmation within Brazilian academic and critical contexts. Since these fields have been deeply transformed by phenomena of conceptual and methodological instability – which has come to be defined as *postcolonial exotic* and *crisis* or *death of the discipline* –⁴, it is fundamental to tackle the processes of aesthetic and conceptual commodification of these literatures as well as of postcolonial critical frameworks. Taking into account these problems, central to contemporary literary studies

¹ The project was developed from May 2017 to November 2019 at the University of Campinas, UNICAMP, and financed by The São Paulo Research Foundation, FAPESP, grant number: 2016/26098-5.

² See, at this respect, Brugioni (2019, 2021); Leite and Brugioni (2021).

³ *Combined and Uneven Comparisons. Rethinking the fields of African and Postcolonial literary studies within the debate on world-literature* funded by The São Paulo Research Foundation, FAPESP, grant number: 2020/07836-0; details of the project are available at Biblioteca Virtual Fapesp: <https://bv.fapesp.br/pt/auxilios/107548/comparativismos-combinados-e-desiguais-repensar-o-campo-dos-estudos-literarios-africanos-e-pos-colon/>

⁴ See Huggan (2001); Spivak (2003); WREC (2015) and Young (2012).

within diverse academic and intellectual geographies, the project “*Combined and Uneven Comparisons. Rethinking the fields of African and Postcolonial literary studies within the debate on world-literature*” addresses a heterogeneous theoretical and literary corpus encompassing theorisations and literary works from diverse contexts and periods, with the objective of establishing counterpoints between writings and authors that are usually studied and systematised from the point of view of their national and/or linguistic identities. Therefore, the project’s main objective is to point towards a comparativism that correspond to distinct modes of *seeing* and *imagining the World* (SAID, 1993; MORETTI, 2013) indispensable for renewing the critical potentialities of comparative studies (SPIVAK, 2003; WREC, 2015) and of humanistic criticism itself (SAID, 2007). Considering the recent developments of the theoretical and conceptual debates on world-literature in its systemic dimension formulated by Franco Moretti (2013) and, subsequently, deepened and further developed by the Warwick Research Collective (WREC, 2015, 2020), the project aims for a rethinking of critical paradigms that guide African and postcolonial literary studies in the Brazilian context in counterpoint with international debates, mapping its transformations given the challenges faced by the study of literature, and the Humanities in general, both inside and outside Brazil today.

The problems previously stated, which conceptually guide this research, constitute fundamental questions for the development of a reflection that calls for some of the most recent critical debates within the Humanities, with the aim of achieving the following objectives: the consolidation of a new field of study or disciplinary area – at least within the Brazilian academic context – identified as *Comparative African Literatures*, based on the perspective of a disciplinary context that articulates the paradigms of *area studies* (African studies, Indian Ocean studies, Atlantic studies, among others) with the most recent studies’ developments on comparative literature and world-literature (MORETTI, 2013; WREC, 2015, 2020); and the *systematization of the postcolonial critical debate* in its relation to decolonial studies (cf. *Estudios Descoloniales*), cultural and feminist studies, and materialist critique, to be understood as overlapping and, simultaneously, divergent perspectives, especially with regard to recent critical debates and conceptual developments within literary studies. Hence, the research that the ongoing project aims to propose is structured across two distinct and simultaneously complementary movements and approaches.

On the one hand, concerning African literary studies, novels from distinct geographical contexts and periods will be analysed, observing how these literary forms can be studied and systematised from transnational and heterolinguistic critical perspectives that aim to consolidate the field of *Comparative African Literatures*, to be understood as a possibly original and innovative one within the Humanities (APTER, 2006, 2013; MORETTI, 2013; SPIVAK, 2003; WREC, 2015, 2020).

Consequently, *Comparative African Literatures* will be seen as a disciplinary practice premised on conceptual and theoretical assumptions capable of facing the African literary text, quoting Spivak (2003, p. 8-9) as an “active cultural media”, rather than “an object of cultural studies” thought and conceived from the point of view of the “metropolitan ignorance” regarding its material and contextual conditions of production and meanings. Within the context of this theoretical and methodological perspective, the project seeks to propose the existence of a *literary form* that corresponds to the category of *(semi-)peripheral African novel*. This conceptual and theoretical hypothesis is developed in dialogue with debates and reflections that guide the field of comparative literature and which understand the novel’s literary genre as an emblematic and privileged form of social *registration* (SAID, 1993) within the modern world-economic system (JAMESON, 2002; MORETTI, 2013; WREC, 2015). The testing of this hypothesis rests on the analysis of literary works written by different authors, amongst whom it is worth highlighting the following novelists: Abdourahman A. Waberi, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Ananda Devi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, João Paulo Borges Coelho, J.M. Coetzee, M.G. Vassanji, Nadine Gordimer and Nuruddin Farah. This corpus can hardly be studied through national and/or linguistic perspectives, pointing to some of the issues and problems that haunt the theoretical frameworks of African and comparative literary studies, especially when it comes to the debate on world(-)literature. Addressing the notion of *(semi-)peripheral African novel* as a theoretical and conceptual category for the constitution of the field of *Comparative African Literatures*, the research seeks to establish a corpus that constitutes a starting point for (re)thinking African literatures according to the theoretical discussion proposed by the Warwick Research Collective; in other words, tackling world-literature as the register of the “combined and uneven” conditions that regulate human, political and social relations within the modern capitalist world-system.⁵ Within this perspective, the main hypothesis can be resumed as follow: *(semi-)peripheral African novel* is paradigmatically characterized by the *aesthetic of unevenness*, pointing to a number of critical possibilities in order to (re)address and assess literary registration of race, gender and class inequality within what can be defined as *the postcolonial environment* (MUKHERJEE, 2010).

⁵ For a discussion of the theoretical possibilities of the concept of world-literature advanced by WREC within the field of the Portuguese-speaking literatures, see Paulo de Medeiros, “11 1/2 Teses sobre o conceito de Literatura-Mundial” (MEDEIROS, 2019).

Postcolonial and Decolonial (mis)understandings

The research aims to propose a mapping of the postcolonial theory – its meanings and conceptual and methodological unfoldings – within different critical and institutional contexts, in order to identify a *postcolonial critical lexicon*. The objective is to question and (re)configure what Benita Parry (2012) has defined as the limits of postcolonial critique, that is, the politically disarmed conceptual frameworks and theoretical formulations haunted by the phenomena of the exotic and alterity and, thus, incapable of dealing with literary forms whose aesthetic

modalities distance themselves from “a postcolonial literary canon” (PARRY, 2012, 2015). Consequently, the work of critical and conceptual revision developed in the project will, necessarily, have to address what, according to Neil Lazarus (2011a), *the postcolonial doesn't say*, as well as the relations between postcolonial theory and decolonial studies. The aim is to establish critical, conceptual and methodological tensions, affiliations and contradictions between critical gestures and fields of theoretical reflection that are frequently observed as contiguous (at least in Brazilian academic contexts), but which are in fact situated in distinct, if not incompatible, conceptual and epistemological dimensions. The research is, therefore, developed around a number of crucial concepts within the context of postcolonial and decolonial theorization, such as: *modernity, hybridity, resistance and opposition, peripheral and semi-peripheral, worldly, global and planetary*. In this case, also, the counterpoint with theorizations surrounding the debate on world(-)literature is imperative, offering a conceptual mapping that seeks to establish and observe the entanglement between contiguous theoretical territories that are fundamental for the definition of the critical tools that configure the field of literary studies today.

The so-called postcolonial studies gained their fame firstly in the Euro-American academies – especially North-American, Australian and British – in the 1990s and present themselves as a vast and diverse theoretical corpus promoted by intellectuals and scholars situated in different disciplinary areas within the context of Humanities. After its *affirmation, crisis and death*, the postcolonial perspective faces today moments and processes of relevant conceptual and methodological instability. It is, however, in this phase of instability that the postcolonial critique finds a substantial affirmation within the Brazilian academy. Regarding this matter, it is important to underscore that the postcolonial critique arrives in a rather early and incisive form in the Brazilian academy, as soon as the mid/the late-90s, for instance, with the translation of important essays by scholars and intellectuals, such as Stuart Hall, Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri C. Spivak, Ranajit Guha, amongst other, as well as with the participation of some of these scholars in important academic and institutional events in Brazil, such as the Conferences of the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature, ABRALIC. This phenomenon, however, ends up not being able to determine the consolidation of an institutional or disciplinary dimension of its own. Unlike the North-American or British academies, where postcolonial studies were institutionalized through the creation of chairs and graduation programs, journals and editorial collections, in the Brazilian context, the postcolonial holds virtually no space within the academic institution.⁶ Additionally, after this early moment of affirmation – indeed, almost concomitant with the institutional consolidation of this area in the academies of the Global North –, postcolonial studies in Brazil, nowadays, face a stage of clear ambiguity and instability determined, in

⁶Here I refer to the institutional absence, without implying that there are no postcolonial debates or intellectuals moving on the critical and conceptual field of the postcolonial studies in Brazil.

⁷ See the reflections proposed by Francisco Ortega and Marcos Natali in "Postcolonialism and postcolonial writing in Latin America" (ORTEGA; NATALI, 2012) and by Alfredo Cesar Melo in "Por um comparativismo do pobre: notas para um programa de estudos" (MELO, 2013).

⁸ See, Neil Lazarus, "The battle over Said" in Lazarus, Neil. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011b.

⁹ See, Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Original quote: "sempre apostando em fazer de um humanismo verdadeiramente universal – contra seu entendimento etnocentricamente particularista – dos paradoxos e inconsistências teóricas que leram em sua obra, elementos centrais de seu pensamento."

the first place, by a quasi-total institutional absence and, simultaneously, by an evident conceptual and methodological ambivalence, suggested by the very instability of meaning of the term postcolonial/postcoloniality. In other words, the question that necessarily arises here and which this project seeks to answer is: what does it mean postcolonial in Brazil today?⁷

In this regard, it must be stressed that, today, the postcolonial, in a global perspective, does not appear to be as a steady theoretical framework or as a disciplinary field in the bourdieusian sense, but rather as an interpretive gesture, a critical perspective, a lens. Here, the paradigmatic example is certainly the critical work of Edward W. Said (1935-2003), a politically engaged intellectual and literary critic that never situated himself within postcolonial studies in a disciplinary sense, being, however, the critic usually considered the founder of the so-called postcolonial critique. Author of a vast and paramount essayistic oeuvre, the work of E. W. Said has been the subject of profound and substantial scrutiny by intellectuals that, despite inscribing themselves within a (post-)colonial reflection, challenge the apparent disengagement of his work with the capitalist world-system (AHMAD, 2002; LAZARUS, 2011a, b; WREC, 2015). In the Brazilian context, Said's work has been frequently associated with that of scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak, offering an idea of critical proximity between intellectuals and their theoretical productions that are, in fact, situated in distinct, if not incompatible, conceptual and methodological perspectives. Emblematic, in this sense, is the fact that E. W. Said's *Orientalism* is usually regarded as the inaugural work in the field of postcolonial studies, defining a disciplinary demarcation from which Said will openly distance himself, especially with regard to post-theoretical, anti-nationalists and multiculturalists trends of post-colonial studies. A paradox that, as Neil Lazarus (2011b) noted,⁸ has been very well analyzed by Timothy Brennan, who, when reflecting on *Orientalism*, identifies an emblematic paradox that characterizes this publication and its contents.⁹ In fact, according to Brennan (2006), when observing the critical reception of this important essay, a clear and repeated ambivalence – if not an evident contradiction – stands out between the book that Edward W. Said wrote and the book that his post-theoretical interlocutors – that is, so to speak, his postcolonial audience – read and appropriated; therefore, *Orientalism* is certainly Said's most-read book, Brennan states, but it is also "the most misread" (BRENNAN, 2006). As Manuela Ribeiro Sanches (2014) points out, there were numerous criticisms addressed to *Orientalism* and to Said himself – some mostly conceptual and methodological, others mainly political –, underlining the multiple contradictions from which Said will never give up "always betting on making a truly universal humanism – against ethnocentric and particularistic understandings – and assuming theoretical paradoxes and inconsistencies, present in his work, as central elements of his thought" (SANCHES, 2014, p. 248, my translation).¹⁰ On this, it is important to clarify, as stated by Neil

Lazarus (2011b), that the theoretical premises from which Edward W. Said moves – and develops his politics of interpretation – are significantly different and distant from his postcolonial colleagues, thus underlining the error – which occurs with some frequency in Brazilian academia, but not only – that a supposed postcolonial theory could be metonymically summarized through the triad (Edward W.) Said, (Gayatri C.) Spivak and (Homi K.) Bhabha. A mistake that would hardly occur when defining affiliations and affinities within German or French critical theory or even structuralist or deconstructionist theorizations and that, in this way, reveals the still persistent fragility of what can be defined as postcolonial critical genealogy. As Sanches (2014) skilfully summarizes, the understandings that support the postcolonial critical perspective proposed by Said are configured as a politics of interpretation or, better, *a continuous and insistent displacement of perspective*, formulated and developed from *peripheral geographies* and *peripheral literary works*, that is, literary, aesthetic and intellectual traditions that are inscribed in *overseas geographical and cultural territories* and which must be studied on an equal footing with the most established literary and cultural canons:

¹¹ Original quote:
“A perspectiva pós-colonial recusa não só a equidistância – fundadora menos da igualdade do que das hierarquias – mas também a rigidez das fronteiras, sabendo do respectivo carácter precário e contingente habitando ambos os lados, retrazendo estes limites. Assumir tal perspectiva implica tomar em consideração o cânone mas compondo-o a outras vozes, outras histórias, outros contextos. É por isso que esta deslocalização se afigura mais decisiva mais complexa de que qualquer mestiçagem decorrente dos diálogos ou conflitos entre estudos literários e estudos culturais, pese embora a importância decisiva deste intercâmbio. É neste sentido que se pode encontrar uma relação de relevância entre Said e os estudos pós-coloniais, nos casos em que eles propõe uma efectiva deslocação dos consensos herdados também em termos epistemológicos e das consequências para as divisões disciplinares e disciplinadoras dos saberes ocidentais e orientais.”

The postcolonial perspective refuses not only equidistance – the founder less of equality than of hierarchies – but also the rigidity of borders, knowing their precarious and contingent character inhabiting both sides, retracing these limits. Assuming such a perspective implies taking into account the canon but composing it to other voices, other stories, other contexts. That is why this relocation appears to be more decisively, more complex, than any miscegenation resulting from dialogues or conflicts between literary studies and cultural studies, despite the decisive importance of this exchange.

It is in this sense that a relationship of relevance can be found between Said and postcolonial studies, in the cases in which the postcolonial perspective proposes an effective displacement of the inherited consensus also in epistemological terms and of the consequences for the disciplinary – and disciplinarian – divisions of Western and Eastern knowledge. (SANCHES, 2014, p. 354, my translation).¹¹

In this sense, the *postcolonial perspective*, citing again Sanches, “corresponds less to a new area, the postcolonial studies, than to an alternative way of rethinking any disciplinary field” (SANCHES, 2014, p. 356).¹² Therefore, the importance of recognizing and privileging postcolonial interpretive gestures and not so much specific disciplinary perspectives, as well as postcolonial literatures or authors, but themes, discourses and problematizations that mobilize issues related to colonization, imperialism and *the struggle over geography* from which no one is completely outside (SAID, 1993).

Over the last few years, there has been a growing affirmation, not only in the Brazilian academy, of the so-called decolonial studies – *Estudios Descoloniales* –, a Latin-American derivation of the postcolonial theorization that also finds itself being rather contested in diverse South-

¹² Original quote:
“A perspectiva pós-colonial corresponde menos a uma nova área, os estudos pós-coloniais, de que a uma forma alternativa de repensar qualquer campo disciplinar.”

¹³ See the summary proposed by Gurinder K. Bhabra: "Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues", published in the journal *Postcolonial Studies* (BHAMBRA, 2014).

American contexts, especially within Spanish-speaking countries.¹³ On this regard, it is interesting to observe how decolonial studies have been gaining spaces and increasingly vast audiences, inside and outside the academic sphere, as they constitute themselves as critical frameworks grounded in geo- and body-politics, and, on the other hand, promote a disjunction – *delinking* – of the supposed colonial matrix of modernity and knowledge. In this sense, as Walter Mignolo states, "the task of decolonial thought is to unveil the rhetoric and promises of modernity, showing its dark side, advocating and building global futures that aspire to the completion of life rather than encouraging individual success in the detriment of many and the planet" (MIGNOLO, 2011, p. 122). Similarly to what happened at the emergence of postcolonial studies, having as its protagonists intellectuals coming from diverse intellectual traditions and critical geographies that occupy hegemonic centers of knowledge, the Latin-American derivation of postcolonial studies, the decolonial turn – *el giro descolonial* –, takes a route of its own, also motivated by North-American hegemonic centers – Duke University, for instance –, and promoted by Argentinean comparatist Walter Mignolo. After this division, several and diverse theoretical discussions between postcolonial and decolonial intellectuals have emerged, yielding debates, at times, extremely productive and, at others, resulting from academic rivalries that had little or nothing to contribute for the advancement of knowledge itself. Furthermore, the use of these terms – postcolonial and decolonial –, in the Brazilian academic and critical fields, constitutes a scenario where both are (mistakenly) used as synonyms, pointing to ambiguities and theoretical vacillations that this research project aims, even if partially, to clarify and systematize.

In general, what emerges as a central aspect and that this project intends to address is the intrinsically ambiguous and productively contradictory nature of the postcolonial debate, setting this theoretical reflection within the context of a healthy and necessary antidote for what may be defined as a theoretical – but also political – *commodification*, that is, the ideological understandings that underlie the so-called identity politics, or the increasingly frequent cultural ethnocentrisms and/or essentialisms that spans across literary studies and critical theory. Furthermore, in a wider perspective, the unfolding of postcolonial studies is multiple and distinct, and the meta-critical reflection that takes place, to this day, in the context of the postcolonial debate constitutes the most symptomatic element of its theoretical strength and, above all, of its evident relevance (BRUGIONI, 2019; YOUNG, 2012). Thus, as Robert C. Young states, the fact that postcolonial theory is today so vehemently questioned, disturbing so much and so many people, in diverse geographical and academic contexts and spheres of political and intellectual debate, constitutes the unquestionable sign of its pertinence and permanence (YOUNG, 2012).

The African novel as a (semi-)peripheral literary form

Regarding the scholarship on African literatures, especially in Brazilian academic contexts, the national and linguistic theorizations appear as the most frequent and consolidated theoretical frameworks. On this specific aspect, the dimensions of *rupture* and *continuity* with what we might call the *colonial literary paradigm* are central, putting forward a clear contiguity between postcolonial and/or decolonial studies, critique on African literatures and theorizations on the formation of Brazilian literature [*formação*]. Deriving from this assumption is the centrality of the critical axes that constitute the reflection proposed by Brazilian intellectuals such as Antonio Candido, Roberto Schwarz (1990) and Silviano Santiago (2004): in short, a dialectical dimension dominated by conceptual constellations, such as order/disorder, local/universal, colonial/national, indigenous/foreign, tradition/modernity, used to reflect on the processes of formation of literary writings within African nation-states. Additionally, with regard to the interpretive community of the Portuguese-speaking African literatures, the set of reflections corresponding to the literary formation – the fundamental and unbreakable circuit *book-author-reader* – is also the one that finds its most productive application. However, it is important to unequivocally recognize the importance of the formulation proposed, for instance, by Antonio Candido, on the one hand, for the establishment of the fundamental singularization process of African literatures in Portuguese and, on the other hand, for the elaboration of literary historiographical periodizations. In this regard, it is worth noting what Jessica Falconi (2021) says in her article “Beyond the Nation? Other ‘declinations’ of Portuguese-speaking African literatures”:

Candido’s appeal for the “peculiar treatment” to be reserved for each literature, “because of its specific problems or the relationship it maintains with others” (Cândido 2000: 9), as well as the model of analysis of the “formation” of Literature and the national literary “system” were object of reception and appropriation in the studies of African literatures in Portuguese, configuring themselves as relevant theoretical supports for the “declination” of the national paradigm. In fact, when approaching some appropriations of the concept of Candido, Anita Moraes points to the relationship between the concept of the national literary system and the specificities of the literatures that emerged in colonial contexts (Moraes 2010: 72). The distinction operated by Candido between the notion of system as a series “of works linked by common denominators”, intimately connected by the construction of national consciousness, and that of an “author-work-public triangle” is functional, in the reinterpretation proposed by Moraes to identify two distinct axes of analysis that have come to characterize the appropriations of the concept: an axis constituted by the “inter-nal elements”, that is, “shared language, themes and images” and an axis formed by the “external elements”, read themselves, the producers, the receivers, the transmitting mechanism and literary continuity (Cândido 2000: 23; Moraes 2010: 66). (FALCONI, 2021, p. 21-22, my translation)¹⁴

¹⁴ Original quote: “O apelo de Cândido para o «tratamento peculiar» a ser reservado a cada literatura, «em virtude dos seus problemas específicos ou da relação que mantém com outras» (Cândido 2000: 9), bem como o modelo de análise da «formação» da literatura e do «sistema» literário nacional foram objeto de receção e apropriação nos estudos de literaturas africanas de língua portuguesa, configurando-se como suportes teóricos relevantes para a «declinação» do paradigma nacional. De facto, ao abordar algumas apropriações do conceito de Cândido, Anita Moraes aponta para a relação entre o conceito de sistema literário nacional e as especificidades das literaturas surgidas em contextos coloniais (Moraes 2010: 72). A distinção operada por Cândido, entre a noção de sistema enquanto série «de obras ligadas por denominadores comuns», intimamente conectadas pela construção da consciência nacional, e aquela de um «triângulo autor-obra-público» é funcional, na releitura proposta por Moraes, para se identificarem dois distintos eixos de análise que têm vindo a caracterizar as apropriações do conceito: um eixo constituído pelos «elementos internos», isto é, «língua, temas e imagens partilhados» e um eixo formado pelos «elementos externos», leia-se, os produtores, os recetores, o mecanismo transmissor e a continuidade literária (Cândido 2000: 23; Moraes 2010: 66).”.

It is, therefore, a fundamental critical palimpsest, whose reverberations – diversified in conceptual and operational terms – in the field of African Portuguese-speaking literary studies – yesterday and today – are configured as fundamental steps for the consolidation of this field of research, as well as in view of the fundamental process of *singularization* of these literatures and their respective field of critical and aesthetic reflection. In this regard, Falconi also notes:

In particular, with regard to Brazil, it is indeed worth remembering that a more autonomous approach to African literature, detached from Portuguese literature studies, was built on the theoretical and disciplinary articulations of African Studies and Comparative literary studies, instituting a critical space marked by multiple borders and trajectories, which Laura Padilha defined as “an in-between place where different correlations of force began to articulate” (Padilha 2002: 331). In this paradigm, the linguistic bond, inherited by the history of colonization and colonialism, has worked as a tool for the construction of what Benja-min Abdala Jr defined as “comparatism of solidarity”, also extending to other geo-cultural areas, such as the “Ibero-Afro-American” space (Abdala Jr. 2003: 127). (FALCONI, 2021, p. 31, my translation).¹⁵

¹⁵ Original quote: “Em particular, no que se refere ao Brasil, cabe de facto lembrar que uma abordagem mais autónoma das literaturas africanas, isto é, des- vinculada dos estudos de literatura portuguesa, se foi construindo nas ar- ticulações teóricas e disciplinares dos Estudos Africanos e dos Estudos de Literatura Comparada, instituindo-se um espaço crítico marcado por múltiplas fronteiras e trajetórias, o que Laura Padilha definiu como «um entrelugar onde diferentes correlações de força começavam a articular- -se» (Padilha 2002: 331). Neste paradigma, o laço linguístico, herdado pela história da colonização e do colonialismo, tem funcionado como fer- ramenta de construção do que Abdala Jr definiu de «comparatismo da solidariedade», alargando-se também a outras áreas geoculturais, tais como a área «ibero-afro-americana» (Abdala Jr 2003: 127).”.

For that reason, this project aims to examine some of the critical and methodological hypotheses that emerge as substantial changes in the field of African literatures, and which inevitably lead to a rethinking of the dynamics and relations that characterize literature in these contexts, pointing, simultaneously, to a set of transformations of the paradigms guiding this field of study, namely: national literature, formation [*formação*] and the literary system/linguistic identity. In other words, what it is possible to attest today in the disciplinary field of the Portuguese-speaking African literatures – or Sub-Saharan African literatures, in general – is an inevitable urgency for redefining and reorienting the critical paradigms that underlie this field of knowledge. A change essentially suggested by the characteristics detected in these literatures as well as by the forms in which contemporary African writing *registers* the material conditions of life and, therefore, its questions and answers. In this regard, we might think particularly to the significance held until today by the observation of these literatures through the perspective of national literary systems, an approach that appears to be more determined by the need of addressing the nation as a liberating moment from colonialism and, therefore, to reiterate the affirmation of a literary nation than by the observation of the modalities through which literature registers the social, past and present. Furthermore, contemporary African literary forms can only be partially seen as a strategy of resistance and opposition to colonial domination, due to the accumulation of socio-historical transformations determined by the multi-parties system, armed and civil post-independence conflicts, the changes set by international financial capital and, more broadly, by the penetration of the neoliberal capitalist system in the socio-economic contexts of the African continent. On this, as WREC states:

Certainly there appears to be a developing consensus that the literary studies field is going to have to reinvent itself in the years just ahead – not only because, subject to irresistible heteronomous pressures, it is being given no choice, but also because what ‘literary studies’ is taken to be, to mean and to represent – as well as *where* and *how*, and *by whom* and *to what ends* – have (again) become burning questions to academics in the field. (WREC, 2015, p. 4).

The examples of literary works that point to the possibility of revision of critical interpretations and reading frameworks inscribed within literary studies could be numerous. Regarding the corpus of this project, however, it is worth highlighting the case of J. M. Coetzee, Nobel Prize laureate in 2003, whose literary work occupies a singular position within South-African national literature as well as in the context of the critical debates that ground contemporary African literatures and postcolonial theory. Or even the case of a contemporary Mozambican author João Paulo Borges Coelho who, despite having an already vast literary oeuvre, remains quite unknown in and outside Mozambique. A late writer - publishing his first novel in 2003 - who, for many reasons, presents a literary project that uncomfortably fits into the aesthetics and periodization that informs Mozambican literature for drawing on his work a profoundly specific space-time environment – *individual and residual* (BRUGIONI; GROSSEGESSE; MEDEIROS, 2020) – with the preoccupation of setting the territory he literarily inhabits on a political and aesthetic dimension that goes beyond the so-called national boundaries, inside and outside the African continent. In short, for the authors that will be studied in this project, the (political and literary) nation is worth more for what it silences than for the possibilities of enunciation it offers, pointing to a substantial revision of both the critical paradigms that guide the field of African literary studies, and the conceptual constellations of postcolonial theory. Similar situations characterize the work of the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah, or the Mauritian author Ananda Devi, or the writer – of difficult placement in geographical and/or national categories – M.G. Vassanji. It derives from the observation of these writings a national that, as Roberto Schwarz (1989) wrote, is manifested by its “*subtraction*”, compelling to rethink a range of critical paradigms that usually define the very field of African literary studies, at least within Portuguese-speaking academic contexts. A revision that seems to point to less ideological and more materialistic critical lines of thought, having as its horizon the non-binary, non-ethnocentric or non-essentialist dynamisms of the cultural and the literary. Hence, literary works that distance themselves from the corollaries of national literature and point to (new) critical possibilities that are still underdeveloped within the field of African literary studies, and, therefore, underlining new postcolonial comparative perspectives grounded on multi/translinguistic and transnational approaches capable of reassessing the social and cultural relations within and beyond the nation and, above all, capable of reconfiguring the relation between the

colonial and the post-colonial, the traditional and the modern, the nation and the world, incorporating the transformations happening across literary studies over the last two decades, such as:

the ongoing subordination of culture generally to the laws of the market, the apparently declining significance, relatively speaking, of literature itself as a cultural form, and the steady assault on the autonomy of the humanities – and indeed of the university itself in its historical guise as, for better and worse, an ivory tower, a ‘world apart’ – by government, business and media regimes, all bent in their various ways on incorporation, control and instrumentally defined regulation. (WREC, 2015, p. 15).

Consequently, the aim is to move forward from the idea of literature as a national allegory (JAMESON, 1986), which represents an established and largely applied critical framework within the field of Portuguese-speaking literary studies, particularly with regard to African literatures. Therefore, the purpose is to observe national literatures from a *distant reading* (MORETTI, 2013), reorienting the relation between literary forms, political spaces and social transformations, and tackling materiality and subjectivity as fundamental paradigm in order to (re)address the political dimension of contemporary literary writing.

Toward new comparative avenues, so what?

Recognizing the existence of literary writings that can only artificially be observed through the lens of their national and/linguistic identity and to which the dimension of allegory no longer applies, it is possible to draw diverse interpretive itineraries capable of surpassing the linguistic systematizations that shape the field of African literatures today. Hence, the possibility of thinking of African literatures from the point of view of *themes* and *problems* that are formulated, conceived and eventually answered with national as well as foreign materials, in other words, where the relation between European form (the novel, for instance) and local materials (the notorious and ambiguous *tradition*) is relevant not so much because of its dialectic relation, but for the variation that this “formal conciliation” is capable of producing (JAMESON, 1993; MORETTI, 2013). In fact, as Franco Moretti (2013, p. 57) states in the famous “Conjectures”: “foreign form, local material – and local form”, or rather “foreign plot; local characters; and then, local narrative voice: and it’s precisely in this third dimension that these novels seem to be most unstable – most uneasy”.

Therefore, what the consolidation of the field of Comparative African Literatures sets forth is the possibility of thinking more productively about the relation between the literary and the social, form and transformation, subject and interest, through a comparative gesture that derives from the methodology and the theory grounding, for instance, *area studies* (SPIVAK, 2003) and the studies on the modern world-

system (WALLERSTEIN, 2004). In addition, it seems that the comparative perspective becomes fundamental for returning some epistemological meaning to what has become the buzzword of postcolonial and literary studies: the oft-proclaimed “decolonization of knowledge”. In this regard, any possibility of decolonization of the literary in the diverse contexts inscribed in the African continent does not lie on the mere substitution of the foreign for the national, of the imported for the autochthonous, of written literature for oral literature, of white for black, of man for woman, but rather on the interrogation of the “structures of attitude and reference” (SAID, 1993) that lay at the foundation of knowledge. The debate that characterizes Comparative Literature, especially in relation to two primordial moments – the emergence of *world literature* (with or without a hyphen) and the so-called *death of a discipline* (SPIVAK, 2003) – seems an extremely productive starting point to think about the challenges faced by the study of African literatures today. In other words, the goal is to rethink the vocabulary and the very critical grammar that grounds these fields of study.

Similarly to what happened in the 2000s in Comparative literary studies and world(-)literature, the question then would be: what does it mean to study and think (about) African literatures today? Bearing in mind the transformations registered by the modern African novel ever since its moment of affirmation – taking as a strategic starting point the publication of *Things fall apart* (ACHEBE, 1958) –, what conceptual revisions and critical reorientations become necessary for thinking and reading these writings? These are the questions faced by this project, with the conviction that – as Franco Moretti (2013, p. 61) once said: “the universe is the same, the literatures are the same, we just look at them from a different viewpoint; and you become a comparatist for a very simple reason: *because you are convinced that that viewpoint is better*”

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RESUMO

Comparativismos combinados e desiguais. Repensar o campo dos estudos literários africanos e pós-coloniais à luz do debate sobre literatura-mundial. Notas para novos caminhos comparatistas

O projeto de pesquisa “Comparativismos Combinados e Desiguais. Repensar o campo dos estudos literários africanos e pós-coloniais à luz do debate sobre literatura-mundial”, financiado pela Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (2020/07836-0), se situa no campo dos estudos literários sobre romances africanos contemporâneos e da teoria literária pós-colonial, a serem entendidos como campos de estudos contíguos e em crescente afirmação no contexto acadêmico brasileiro e global. Com base num mapeamento dos paradigmas críticos produzidos no âmbito dos estudos pós-coloniais com particular enfoque nos recentes desdobramentos que pautam o debate sobre literatura-mundial, o projeto se debruça sobre um corpus de autores africanos contemporâneos consagrados com vista à consolidação de uma categoria crítica inédita correspondente à noção de romance africano (semi-)periférico, a ser entendida como forma literária paradigmática para o estabelecimento de um novo campo de estudo que corresponde à definição de Literaturas Africanas Comparadas. Ilustrando a pesquisa que será desenvolvida no projeto, o escopo deste artigo é definir novos caminhos comparatistas e possibilidades críticas no âmbito do campo dos estudos literários africanos e pós-coloniais.

Palavras-chave: *Literaturas africanas comparadas, Teoria pós-colonial, Literatura-Mundial, Romance (semi-)periférico, Sistema literário-mundial.*

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