

## Delineating A Postcolonial Critical Approach To Biblical Interpretation

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### **Abstract**

The concept of postcolonial critical hermeneutic is a theoretical, literary, and multi-faceted stance that is understood differently in various disciplines. In Nigeria there are few critical approaches linked to postcolonial critical hermeneutics—including African cultural, decolonization, or inculturation hermeneutics. Generally, and in scholarly circles postcolonial critical hermeneutic is understood as one which interprets texts in a corrective, dialogic, and liberated manner using African lenses. In this article an attempt is made to delineate the parameters for understanding and applying postcolonial critical hermeneutics to exegesis, translation, or interpretation in general. It underscores the serious challenges posed to Biblical studies by uncritical and conventional readings which this article seeks to address.

**Key words:** *Biblical hermeneutics, holism, inter-cultural dialogue, postcolonial critical hermeneutics.*

### **I. Introduction**

In this article a distinction is made between firstly, post-colonial as a spatial and political concept, and secondly, postcolonial (i.e. without the hyphen) as a theoretical critical stance.

methodological tool for a corrective, dialogic and liberated interpretation of texts using African lenses. By the 1990's when

postcolonial critical hermeneutics began to emerge as a scholarly approach to Biblical interpretation, it meant so much though with an inadequately theorised conceptualisation. The actual origin of postcolonial hermeneutics as a theoretical, critical stance is still a subject of debate. However, most scholars underscore the groundbreaking work by Edward Said (1935-2003 C.E.) in the early nineties as being the catalyst for contemporary scholarly engagement with this approach<sup>1</sup>.

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1993:156f) points at the inexorable link between texts and the culture as well as the political environment, that is the context in which they are shaped, and adds that interpretations are injurious if they do not take this into consideration. Meanwhile, in Asia and Africa the whole concept of “liberation hermeneutics” was being attracted to what has been described as “extra-biblical Postcolonial studies”. By this term is meant the fusion of historical Biblical criticism with a postcolonial approach to interpretations (Moore and Segovia 2005:5-6). In 1996 a volume of a scholarly journal *Semeia*, edited by L.Donaldson was published which focused on the theme “Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading”. As apt as the title is, it quickly caught the fancy of Biblical scholars and resulted in the launching of a series in 1997 entitled *The Bible and postcolonialism* by Sheffield Academic press with its first volume, *The Postcolonial Bible*, already underway and scheduled for publication the following year in 1998. Thus began a postcolonial approach which dominated various seminal discussions in Biblical studies. Today

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postcolonial critical hermeneutics is still a methodology preferred by Biblical scholars as can be seen presently.

## 2. Problem and Presupposition

The postcolonial methodology as a theoretical, critical stance which engages textual interpretation in a corrective, dialogic, and liberative hermeneutic is further expounded in this article to further clarify what a postcolonial approach to Biblical criticism should be. In doing so, we give our kudos to African Biblical scholars like Justin S. Ukpong (2001) who underscored the difficulty of an academic reading of the Bible by African scholars most of whom had received Western type hermeneutical trainings. As he so aptly put it “African scholars must learn to re-read the Bible using African lenses”. Instructively, Ukpong was bringing his inculturation theology to bear on critical reading of the Bible “with African eyes” – the same goal envisaged by postcolonial critical hermeneutics.

Since the late nineties lots of important publications have been dedicated to the pursuit of the same objective of reading the Bible with African eyes. These include the *African Journal of Biblical Studies* – an annual publication of the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS) edited by its Chairman emeritus Samuel O. Abogunrin (2005), and *Journal of Inculturation Theology* – a bi-annual journal of the Catholic Seminary of West Africa based in the oil-rich city of Port Harcourt! Rather than broadening postcolonial contemplation to cover a wider scope of minimal depth, these publications made a better option imperative namely, one which uses postcolonial criticism, a decolonization approach, or an inculturated reading as a tool for exploring Biblical studies in depth (Abogunrin 2005:248-279; Moore and Segovia 2005:2-3; Ukpong 2001:11-28).

A methodology in which the tools of exegetical enquiry goes deeper and deeper to the roots of the Biblical text is now, with these new approaches, replacing one in which shallow scholarly energy was exerted in an uncritical reading of the Biblical text. The prevailing trend is to strive to establish common grounds of resonance between African culture and ancient Biblical world (Dube 2001). On the other

hand, there is a re-reading of the Biblical text using African worldviews and cultural insights (Adamo 2005). These in many ways is akin to what postcolonial critical hermeneutics is all about in upholding African values and world-views in the re-reading of the ancient texts. It is remarkable to note that various efforts have been made at a delineation of postcolonial critical hermeneutics. In Nigerian circles such a delineation is expressed in “inculturation hermeneutics”<sup>2</sup>, in “decolonisation hermeneutics”<sup>3</sup> and in “African cultural hermeneutics.”<sup>4</sup> These various approaches uses a hermeneutics in consonance with African post-colonial perspectives in both academic and popular re-reading of the Biblical texts.

A delineation of the boundaries of postcolonial critical hemeneutics as a descriptive and exegetical study, not only of the texts themselves but also of the contexts in which such texts were shaped and “grown” becomes imperative and crucial in an ongoing quest for a meaning based Biblical exegesis. The purpose of this article is to further strengthen already existing delineations and to discuss the indices for a proactive postcolonial critical hermeneutics resonating with African worldviews and concepts of God.

### **3. Methodological Resources**

Since the inception of postcolonialism as a literary tool for critical textual analysis, its counterpart the postcolonial critical hermeneutics has followed the writings of scholars of African, Asian and Near Eastern origin. They include Musa W. Dube (2000), Justin S. Ukpong (2001), Jeremy Punt (2002), and Samuel Abogunrin (2005), Leela Ghandi (1998), R.S. Sugirtharajah (2001), S.D Moore (2005), F.F. Sergovia (2005), Edward Said (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994), Georg Gugelberger (1995) to name a few. In all three sides of the continental divide, these Biblical scholars have used postcolonialism as a perspective in decolonising Biblical texts and traditions previously used to serve colonial ends in the Near East, Asia, Latin America, Nigeria, and Southern Africa.

A delineation of what a postcolonial critical approach to Biblical hermeneutics means to us, is to be seen in the various views represented by these scholars some of whose ideas are pertinent to this discussion. Mention has already been made of E. Said whose writings stimulated both liberation and postcolonial studies. Borrowing a leaf from that process, Georg Gugelberger (1995:581-84) defined the postcolonial critical approach as a “slow, painful and highly complex literary means of fighting one’s way into European made history”.

In other words, postcolonial criticism dialogues with previous Western hermeneutics in ways that addresses the negative self-image imposed on hitherto subject people through lopsided and uncritical readings. The literary nature of postcolonial criticism demands what Gugelberger (2002) describes as a “literary project” which is both dialogical and corrective. Moreover, the postcolonial method of appropriating the Biblical text is to be done in a hermeneutics that is “dialogical and corrective in mode”, a point widely noted (Segovia 2005:27)<sup>5</sup>. A delineation given by Sugirtharajah (2002:13)<sup>6</sup> captures the major links in this dialogical process. It is one which is both interrogative and recuperative:

Postcolonial hermeneutics signifies a reactive resistance discourse of the colonised who critically interrogate dominant knowledge systems in order to recover the past from Western slander and misinformation of the colonial period, and who continue to interrogate neo-colonising tendencies....

The emphases by Sugirtharajah on inter-systemic dialogue and correction of the adverse effects of imperial epistemology is noteworthy

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and resonates with what Gugelberger had said earlier. It is an important point which Sugirtharajah notes here with respect to the dialogue between systems or contexts. As Perdue (2005:285) has observed, there is no epistemology undetermined by systemic or contextual values. Yet an identification of this systemic or contextual values requires more than passive reflection. It demands an active postcolonial literary project which detects the mental slavery to which people in the “margins” are subjected in order to stimulate, as Edward Said had stated, a vital process of proactive postcolonial reflections (Said 1993:42).

An identification of post-colonialism in the centre - margins phenomenon has been identified by a leading African scholar, Musa Dube. She points out imperial tendencies like exploitation, militarism and the production of legitimising texts. Her definition of a postcolonial approach is one which:

takes into consideration the global experience of imperialism: that is how the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century imperial powers constructed or constructs their subjects and themselves to justify colonialism and imperialism, and how narratives are instrumental to this process (Dube 1992:121).

From her perspective it is important to direct the postcolonial approach to address the ways in which the Bible has been used to justify the colonial enterprise along with its economic, social, political and cultural bifurcations into coloniser – colonised; master – servant; expert – novice; rich – poor; foreign - local etc. Evidently, colonialism which thrived in nineteenth and parts of twentieth century Africa, had also trailed the path of Christian missionaries and had been the basis of a hermeneutics of the Biblical texts which literally bolstered the colonial enterprise (Dube 1992:121-122). Conversely, therefore, a postcolonial critical hermeneutics will be confronting such imperial tendencies as neo-colonial exploitation, militarism and its legitimising texts.

Whereas neo-colonial exploitation is an economic process of impoverishment of hitherto subject people by former colonists, militarism results in the attempt to sustain the colonial / neo-colonial structure through force and violence, just as texts are propagandist tools of legitimacy (Dube 2006:178f). Therefore, the important role which a postcolonial discourse can play in both inter-textual and inter-contextual dialogue with texts and systems of such an ideologically skewed and globalised context could not be overemphasised.

Musa Dube (2006:178f) further identifies a rather panoramic synergy of a re-emergence of imperialism in a neo-colonial guise of “globalisation”. She identifies with the struggle to conceptualise these imperialistic and camouflaged phenomena of globalisation. Having identified the champions of globalisation as the USA, Japan and Europe, she insists that the onus of decolonised reading of texts (emanating from those centers) is now laid squarely on the shoulders of scholars in the two-thirds world. The postcolonial approach must treat texts from these centers of globalisation as suspect as a step in sustaining the intellectual freedom proffered by a novel postcolonial critical approach to hermeneutics.

Three other scholars who have approached the issue of a postcolonial critical hermeneutic as basic to a re-reading of the Bible in Africa are Justin S. Ukpong (2001), Jeremy Punt (2002), and Samuel Abogunrin (2005). Writing from their respective cultural contexts – the two Nigerians and one South African – they underscored the need of evolving a postcolonial interpretation of not only the Biblical texts in particular, but of religion in general (Perdue 2005:293). This is done by creating an encounter between the Biblical text and Africa’s religious context, using a hermeneutics that ignores historical theology and focuses on postcolonial criticism. This is what Ukpong (2001:35) has described as:

A hermeneutic of appropriation which, in the case of Africa, is concerned to make a specifically African contribution to Biblical interpretation and actualise the creative power of the Bible in African society.

On his part, Punt opines that the relevance of postcolonial criticism in Biblical studies lies in its fluidity and novelty, capable of grappling

with the post-colonial realities of identity, hybridity and mimesis. Such subtle impacts would of necessity evoke requirements such as has been depicted in Punt (2006:70) as:

It requires value-judgments and ethical considerations, evaluation and critique... and furthermore has to deal with the relevancy question more directly than many traditional ...hermeneutical paradigms and methodologies ever do.

Apparently there is a way in which colonial reading has impacted on the self-identity of “marginal” peoples and invoked on them a “curse” of oppression and domination. The same is true of the other realities of hybridity and mimesis which mark the identity crisis of hitherto subject peoples (Ahiamadu 2011:287). I have therefore consciously emphasized a postcolonial critical optic which is both objective and descriptive, but certainly not prescriptive. In summarising my postcolonial critical optic below, this is the point the reader must watch out for. These are the same delineations of a postcolonial critical hermeneutics which can be read as the obverse of some of the negatives effects of a traditional and uncritical reading of the Biblical text.

#### **4. Delineating A Postcolonial Critical Hermeneutics**

A summary of the distinctive of my postcolonial critical hermeneutics most suited to a close-reading of Biblical texts in the light of what has been said so far can be given thus:

Firstly, it is representative. This means that the text can be given prominence in a way that is universally valid by using a more culturally inclusive and gender neutral language with Africa and Nigeria in particular as the context of both our inter-textual and inter-contextual



dialogue (Bhabha 1994:175-76; Moore and Segovia 2005:67). This representation is to make for a holistic approach to creation and salvation, settlement patterns in ancient Israel, land tenure, monarchism, prophetic movement, the exile and post-exilic narratives, poems and prophecies to name a few.

Secondly, it appropriates texts on both a practical and a theoretical level. On a practical level it examines the semantics and syntax of specific morphemes, words and phrases within the sentence structure of a text in an exegetically meaningful way, in order to apply this to hermeneutics in general. Using an exegesis that is informed by postcolonial hermeneutics, the sense of a text is unveiled and its meaning interpreted in a way that requires an inter-textual or inter-cultural dialogue as the case might be. In trying to establish what the text of the Bible has to say in their original context using semantics and syntactical structures, our goal is to achieve an interpretation that speaks to our audience in today's words from a perspective that is African and authentic (O'Collins and Farrugia 2000:84-85).

Thirdly, it re-interprets texts in an objective and descriptive way. This means that it is not therefore prescriptive. In order to be objective, it traces common elements at the cultural, literary and textual levels in order to critically analyse them. Such analysis is capable of eliminating the bifurcation of humans, religions and cultures which makes the imposition of alien values and domination possible.

Fourthly, it is a hermeneutics of trust, and not one of suspicion. It imputes no ulterior motives to the Biblical authors, but searches to find out what ideological leanings motivated their rendition of a text. At present the emphasis is on returning “to African moral values in the light of the demoralising effects which Western culture has had on such values” (Abogunrin 2005:7).

## **5. Indices for a Postcolonial Critical Hermeneutics**

With this background of a postcolonial critical hermeneutics in mind, and in order for this methodological optic to be done in a trans-cultural and trans-religious manner, I now proceed to discuss four inter-related indices for delineating a viable and proactive postcolonial critical hermeneutics. Its far-reaching implication for Biblical exegesis, interpretation and translation cannot be over-emphasized. The indices include: *holism*, *inter-contextuality*, *inter-textuality*, and *transcendence* in that order (cf. Moore and Sergovia 2005:97).

### **5.1 Holism**

The postcolonial critical optic posits a holistic view of the Biblical text. The question is this: can the Biblical text for instance subscribe to a postcolonial re-reading? From our earlier preliminary considerations the answer is “yes”. Moreover, in subscribing to a postcolonial hermeneutics, the Old Testament for instance, should not be seen as history as commonly understood today. It does describe past events but not exactly the way they are. For instance, the earth is not flat but

round, and the sun does not rise but shines steadily on a revolving earth (Uchem 2001:174-177). So the creation story is not a myth, at least not in a historical-philosophical definition of myth, which to the layman would be referring to primeval fables or tales that has no bearing to reality. This layman's understanding usually carries the day in any mention of the word "myth", and obscures its relevance or use in a "technical" sense to postcolonial exegesis of Genesis. In my own opinion the Bible may contain some mythical figures, but is not in itself a mythical book!

Therefore, we subscribe to the view expressed by Hamilton (1990:57, 70-71) that "the Old Testament (Genesis in particular) is the understanding of God possessed by God's people individual or groups advanced with the passing of time." It is an oral tradition which had been passed on from one generation to another across several millennia until it finally was written down and latter canonised. To the extent of its canonicity, at least in Judeo-Christian circles can it be said to subscribe to a postcolonial critical hermeneutic. The Biblical text describes creation and a salvation history that is a holistic reality, and one in which all constituent parts fit together. It does not warrant the human / nature dichotomy extant in Western philosophy and theology. The sacredness of life endorsed in Genesis 1-11 encapsulated in the creation narratives, are similar to the narrative sources by which African traditions – be it Akan, Bini, Igbo, Yoruba, Ogba or Ekpeye – develop an "eco-theology" of creation that regards its elements as sacred – particularly the people and land (Oduyoye 1998:33-51)<sup>7</sup>.

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Taking Genesis for instance, and the creation story in particular will show the encouragement to present day ecologists who believe that the earth has been delivered into the hand of humans as a sacred trust because of this close identification of *homo sapiens* with Deity right from creation. Therefore humans can perpetuate in a natural or God-given way, an order of which humans have been given the capacity to learn and improve upon.

## **5.2 Inter-contextual dialogue**

There is a way in which colonial reading has impacted on the self-identity of “marginal” peoples and invoked on them a “curse” of oppression and domination. Such an ongoing process paves the way for continued dialogue with not only the text and other disciplines, but also with the context in which the text has been shaped and the context of interpretation (Dube 2002:65). That is what inter-contextual dialogue means with implications for our postcolonial critical hermeneutics that are enormous (Dube 2002:65). There are ways in which the context of a developing society like Nigeria, with a missionary history that is dating from about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, provides a heuristic in-culturative basis for further sounding the interpretation of the Biblical context (Ukpong 2004:76). In this regard the resonance of African traditions with those in Biblical cultures becomes very helpful in an inter-contextual expounding of the Scriptures.

It makes it possible to highlight the salient message of the Biblical text from as it were the “margins” (Sugirtharajah 2001:61-62). With its century-long experience of missionary Christianity, beginning from

1842 - 1960, (Falk 1993: 357) Nigeria and indeed Africa is still engrossed with the impact of a colonial hermeneutics that reverberates into a post-colonial era (Adamo 2005:3). Consequently, there has emerged a motley of ordinary and scholarly re-reading of texts, both in the church and in the academy with a persistent effort at decolonisation of Biblical interpretation in Africa, which in Nigeria is spearheaded by African Independent Churches along with their counterparts within the academy.<sup>8</sup> It challenges traditional Western interpretations of Biblical text and necessitates a re-reading of such texts in the light of an inter-contextual dialogue between the ancient Biblical world and contemporary African cultural contexts.

### **5.3 Inter-textual Dialogue**

In applying a postcolonial critical hermeneutics to the Biblical text, the principle of inter-textual dialogue is also of primary importance (Dube 2002:57ff). By its inter-textual and interdisciplinary nature, the principle of inter-textuality questions the problems in the text and in the disciplines as the case may be and deals with such problems in a way that brings the voice of comparable texts to the core of the discourse (Gugelberger 1995:582). This is true of both Old and New Testament (Ahiamadu 2012:18-19). No text is to be read in isolation. In other words, the way we re-read the Biblical text for instance should be to establish the authority of a text based on what is said in parallel or comparable text. Moreover, it means that we employ the principle of

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inter-textual dialogue which interrogates both the explicit and implicit meaning of a text based on the authority of parallel texts. The principle of intertextuality implies that implicit meanings for instance can only be unravelled on the authority of comparable texts; otherwise meanings that are implicit are allowed to remain so (Wendland 2004:192), and that meanings that are explicit are allowed to remain so to avoid the interpretive problem of *eisegesis* (or reading meaning into a text).

#### **5.4 Transcendence**

In African concepts of God and creation, there is a transcendental concept of Divine role in an earth that is already fully formed and which is well established. Ukpong's project of reading the Bible with lay people, proves this point (Ukpong 2001:582-594).

First, the readings proved that Africans think of God in transcendental terms, and they attempt to read the Bible in this way, even when confronted by motley of human problems. Under such circumstances it is believed that humans are linked to transcendence or to God's power and that this is because humans are the crowning effort of God's creative power. It is a power which expends itself transcendently in what has become "the image and likeness" of God (Ukpong 2001:582-594).

Secondly, humans are not only connected to transcendence, but are capable of engaging consciously in constant dialogue with their Creator (Psa.8: 4-5, 6-9). Being in communion with their Maker who is spiritual, would of necessity entail that at least humans could have been

made in an image of Deity that transcends their physical features and which resonates with the Spirit of their Maker (Beisner 1997:178). As so aptly depicted in Fretheim words (2005:39) “As God breathes God’s own breath of life into the nostrils of a human being (Gen.2: 7), something of the divine self comes to reside in the human – and in an ongoing way”.

The principle of transcendence helps literary scholars in reading the Bible’s unique and universal message in such a way as fills that which is lacking in indigenous concepts of God. Transcendentalism frees our mind into a creativity of speech and action which attempts to apprehend the character and cosmos of Deity as understood in both the ancient Biblical and contemporary African world (Perdue 2005:327). The principle of transcendentalism helps us to understand that, unlike what obtains in other religions where revelation is static and not dynamic, Christianity and especially Biblical interpretation is not and cannot be a finished product. There is an ongoing process of interpretation of Biblical texts in both the church and academy, which influence and in turn is influenced by ever changing socio-economic and transcendental circumstances.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article has attempted to use postcolonial critical hermeneutics to address the problem of an inadequately theorised conceptual tool for Biblical analysis. We are indeed grateful to the Jewish scholar Edward Said (1935-2003 C.E.) whose book on *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) provided the impetus for postcolonial literary approach to hermeneutics in general and to Biblical studies in

particular. Under the auspices of the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies and the Catholic Institute of West Africa, such important journals as *Nigerian Journal of Biblical Studies* and the *Journal of Inculturation Theology* have respectively served to mirror the need for a postcolonial, decolonization or inculturation theologies in Africa not only to dialogue with texts from Western circles but also to re-read the Biblical text critically using African lenses.

Many scholars have used the postcolonial critical approach as a corrective, critical, dialogic and liberating tool for re-reading the Biblical text in particular. This article attempts to foster this process through a proactive delineation of the parameters for a postcolonial critical optic. It is hoped that using a postcolonial critical hermeneutics would help exegetes, interpreters and translators re-read the Biblical text in both the ecclesia and academia in ways that rid the text of erstwhile colonial and traditional interpretations which leave people of the two-thirds world bastardized, brutalized and marginalized. In restoring confidence in the Biblical text and exonerating it from distorted and jaundiced hermeneutics within the church and academia in today's global village, a delineation of the boundaries of postcolonial critical hermeneutics based on the indices of *holism*, *inter-contextuality*, *inter-textuality* and *transcendence* is here described as being helpful to Biblical exegetes in particular and literary scholars in general.

### **End-notes and References**

<sup>1</sup> See Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism* New York: Knopf (1993). In this groundbreaking treatise Said wrote that texts cannot be abstracted from their contexts without doing violence to their content and



meaning. Perdue, L. G. *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology – After the collapse of History*. Minneapolis: Fortress (2005), p.289-291 gives an incisive highlight of Said’s role in postcolonial critical discourse.

2. J.S. Ukpong (2001) underscored the difficulty of academic reading by African scholars most of whom has received Western type hermeneutical trainings.

3. Abogunrin, S.O. (2005) in a series of articles edited by him, stressed the purpose of decolonisation as related to the life situation in Africa along with a “pulse” for her societal problems.

4. Uchem, R.N. (2001) in her doctoral dissertation argued for an African cultural hermeneutics, that uses story-telling and proverb citing modes of conversation.

5. Sergovia, F.F. *Decolonizing Biblical Studies – A view from the margins*. Maryknoll: Orbis

6. We will skip Ghandi, L. for the moment because of the general ambiguity surrounding the definition of postcolonial, especially with respect to Biblical interpretation. In the opinion of Sugirtharajah (2001:245) such ambiguity has nothing to do with individual post-colonial attitude.

7. Oduyoye’s book *The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men* seem to follow a pattern of a postcolonial discourse, albeit unwittingly. See Sugirtharajah, R.S. *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon press (2002), p.13

8. See Perdue, L.G. *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology - After the Collapse of History* Minneapolis: Fortress press (2005), p.285

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