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PALIMPSEST IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN NOVELS

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Abstract:
Critics have often discussed African novels on postcolonialism as subversive and counter-discursive to European representations of Africa with limited attention paid on the layers of inscriptions relating to pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa embedded in these texts. This study uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to explore the layers of writings ranging from the pre-colonial culture, the colonial textual depictions of Africa and the postcolonial response and re-portrayal of Africa within selected African novels. It argues that these novels encourage Africa to reflect on its pre-colonial and colonial past with the intention of learning from its mistakes, the positive aspects of its culture and the colonial experiences, and forging a future based on hindsight rather than continually blaming colonialism for its development maladies. To achieve this, palimpsest in this paper becomes a self-reflective metaphor for understanding the effects of colonialism, the complicities of Africa in the colonial enterprise and the need to forge a future that transcends the colonial experiences. While the palimpsest provides a means of understanding the past, the 'metaphors of transformation' by Hall provides the impetus for progress.

Keywords: palimpsest; postcolonialism; African novels; *Arrow of God*; *The Interpreters*

Disgrace; metaphors of transformation

> *"Where will it end? Like most of our leaders, he creates a problem, then creates another problem to deal with the first one – on and on, endlessly fertile, always creatively spiraling to greater chaos …."* (Okri, 1990, p. 49)

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1. Introduction

It will not be farfetched to say that colonial legacy, with its aftermath of post-prefixed words, shapes the history of the modern world. In an age replete with words such as postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-communism as markers of historic and literary epochs, postcolonialism becomes invested with myriads of meaning that it has become a continuously evolving and all-embracing field of contestation among scholars. Postcolonialism has extended its focus from the 'classical' colonial politics to politics of occupation as in the Asia-Eurozone, minority cultures, Natives/Aborigines' literature exemplified in Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and hegemonic global issues. Its focus, simply stated, has shifted from 'addressing imperial control to neo-colonialism' (Sethi, 2011, p. 5). Most lately, postcolonial studies have geographically expanded to embrace even some European countries, like Ireland or even the Baltic states (Kelertas, 2006). While scholars struggle to keep abreast of the changes taking place in the postcolonial field, previously colonised Africa is trying to traverse the layers of writings associated with its centuries of subjugation under European colonial cloak. This article reads some novels from Africa as a palimpsest within postcolonial discourse. This is by no means an exhaustive study; rather, it is a foray into reading African postcolonial novels under the lens of the palimpsest.

2. Palimpsest: an overview

Palimpsest originates from a Greek root word that means 'scrapped again', and it generally refers to a manuscript or parchment 'that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely scraped off or erased and often legible' (*American Heritage Dictionary,* 2011). Dillion (2007) divides these textual overlays into the pheno-text and geno-text, where the geno-text refers to the writing endangered by the pheno-text; however, the pheno-text cannot erase traces of the geno-text. Palimpsest also refers to '… an area that has extensive evidence of or layers showing activity or use' (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2011); hence, the archeologist views the palimpsest as the accumulated repetitions of designs or sites reinforced over time (Lucas, 2005).

Palimpsest, within the last few centuries, has been used metaphorically in literary and theoretical discourse. According to McDonaugh, palimpsests in the *History of Rome* (1836) by Matthew Arnold and *Aurora Leigh* (1836) written by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning were used as metaphors for 'the human psyche and for history' (1987, p. 208). In relation to history, the palimpsest is depicted as being contradictory, '… a mode that retains and both erases the past, … disrupts a sense of temporality; and the kind of history facilitated by its retentive function is at once restorative and violating' (McDonaugh, 1987, p. 214). As history,

palimpsest discloses and conceals creating a befuddlement in the understanding of events. According to Lucas (2005), the past becomes inseparable from the present, in the context of the palimpsest.

Furthermore, De Quincey, in one of the earliest mentions of the palimpsest, refers it to the human brain where '[e]verlasting layers of ideas, images' and 'feelings' fall upon the brain until '[e]ach succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished' (2015). The palimpsest, like the brain, retains all that traverses through it, retaining a kind of memory that cannot be completely erased. Freud alludes to the palimpsest as a memory in his idea of 'The Mystic Writing Pad' (1959). Likewise, in poststructuralism, the idea of intertextuality where texts emerge within the confines of other texts signifies the palimpsest. The description of intertextuality as the 'deconstructionist survival of an early text in the current one in a way that we can hear echoes and see traces of the earlier texts in the current narrative' (Mwangi, 2009, p. 137) is analogous to the palimpsest. According to Dillion (2007), the palimpsest preserves the distinctiveness of each text while exposing the contaminative influences of every text on others. The inability of a particular text to silence the voices of previous texts renders a textual structure that privileges heterogeneity and diversity. In other words, the palimpsest creates an avenue for diversification and acceptance, disallowing homogeneity. Similarly, Baudrillard's (1996) discussion of modern culture as heaps of layers of images forming a mediated experience until the supposed original is lost, only showing through glimpses, evidences the palimpsest. Having identified briefly how scholars have used the palimpsest in theory to refer to deposits of history likewise subsequent records of events, to memory, and to intertextual references between texts, future studies cannot overlook the centrality of palimpsest to postcolonial discourse.

2.1 Postcolonial palimpsest

Glasgow and Fletcher (2005) define postcolonial palimpsest as a 'cultural overlay and control of a discourse in addition to military and/or political takeover'. To Mwangi (2009), the palimpsest refers to the 'reinscription and excavation of colonial texts overwritten by colonial discourse' (p. 137) while Martin Carter, in his poem, "Listening to the Land" (1951) alludes to postcolonial palimpsest when the personae heard the whispers of silenced tongues indicating the silent presence of colonial violence. Postcolonial palimpsest refers to inscriptions over earlier colonial texts, images, names, and meanings of places, which constructed the colonised as empty and nameless lands ready to receive the colonisers' inscriptions (Carter, 1987). The colonisers portrayed the meanings, names, and culture imposed on the colonised as privileged and superior to the earlier cultures of the colonised. As palimpsest, postcolonial discourse in Africa would have myriads of reinscriptions

involving Africa's colonial relationship with Europe because of decades that colonialism took to out-run its course inclusive of the earlier relationships of slave dealing.

Furthermore, the idea of colonisation is still re-surfacing in globalisation studies; hence, its topicality is incontestable. Therefore, the palimpsest can be used in many ways within postcolonial discourse. However, in this paper, the metaphor of the palimpsest reads the African[i] novels, hypothetically, as being self-perceptive and reflexive by not only 'writing back' to Europe but to Africa. This paper considers this aspect pertinent especially as many postcolonial studies referring to the palimpsest in Africa are primarily concerned with subversive and counter-discursive tendencies towards Europe as the coloniser. For instance, in the area of language, Zabus (1991) uses the notion of palimpsest to convey the alterity of colonial languages in their inability to represent the indigenous cultures of the colonised. Linguistic hybridity, therefore, becomes 'counter hegemonic' (Alarcon, 1997, p. 189). Colonial languages are 'indigenised' and the palimpsest presaged as 'the major icon of cross-cultural syncreticity and linguistic metissage in non-western literature and criticism' (Zabus, 1991, p. 10). Additionally, post-colonial palimpsest as a subversion indicates how the colonised or oppressed manipulates the rules of the dominant Western colonial societies in pursuance of disrupting the dominant Western order (de Certeau, 1984). However, this study intends to go off on a tangent while still respecting the subversive and counter-discursive postcolonial discourse.

3. Study Aim

This study attempts to read Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964), Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), and Soyinka's *The Interpreters (*1965) besides citations from other African novels as layers of inscriptions inviting Africa to revisit its pre-colonial and colonial past. The aim is that such a reflection will allow Africa to perceive its complicity in the colonial enterprise despite the decades of subjugation that accrued from colonialism, and therefore help in fostering a more endearing present since Africa can never replicate its past. With this aim in view, this study limits itself to novels from part of the English colonised West Africa and one from South Africa. Despite the limited texts used in this study, the colonial experiences of various parts of Africa were similar; hence, the metaphor of the palimpsest pervades the various parts of colonised Africa. The choice of texts hinges mostly on the decision to use the definition of postcolonial literature(s) as 'that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship …' and 'sets out … to resist the colonialist perspectives' (Boehmer, 2005). The selected texts offer a critical examination of the colonial enterprise in Africa by providing a lens quite different from the earlier representations of Africa by the colonialist. Of note is the existence of perceived cultural differences between the coloniser and the colonised with the

coloniser identifying itself as generally superior to the colonised. The postcolonial writers seek to explore experiences that highlight this perceived superiority with the aim of undermining discourses that support colonialism. The inclusion of Coetzee's *Disgrace* in this study highlights, to a greater degree, the ambivalence of racial gradation in cultural discourses, and plays a central role in this essay's interests in the postcolonial palimpsest.

3.1 Metaphors of Transformation

It is imperative to reiterate the two functions of what Stuart Hall terms 'metaphors of transformation' because of their correlation with palimpsest in postcolonial discourse. The first function is that the metaphors 'allow us to imagine what it would be like when prevailing cultural values are challenged and transformed, the old social hierarchies are overthrown, old standards and norms disappear or are consumed in the "festival of revolution", and new meanings and values, social and cultural configurations, begin to appear' (Hall, 1996, p. 286). The second function is the possession of 'analytic value' with which the 'metaphors of transformation' '… provide ways of thinking about the relation between the social and symbolic domains in the process of transformation' (Hall, 1996, p. 286). Concurring with the functions of these metaphors is the definition of the postcolonial by Ashcroft as the capability and 'the range of strategies' through which the once colonised 'enables acts of transformation' (2001, p. 17), which constantly challenge the processes of the colonial powers.

These strategies include the writings of the formally colonised through which their identities overridden with layers of colonial inscriptions could be recovered. Accordingly, Said (1994) posits that the imagination has the power to liberate the colonised lands from colonially imposed restrictions. These writers engage their imaginations for transformations to emerge. In the light of postcolonial discourse, 'metaphors of transformation' could be seen as palimpsests because of their abilities to transform existing norms, social orders, and as well, provide the means of thinking critically and expansively about the social and symbolic relationship of postcolonial writings. Transformation does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it requires a base for the formation of 'new meanings and values, social and cultural configurations' (Hall, 1996), which evidences the transformation. Postcolonial literature(s) initiates the base for the formation of the 'new meanings and values' that the 'metaphors of transformation' harbour.

3.2 Representations of Africa through European lenses

In postcolonial discourse, palimpsest captures the histories of the colonised that have been over-written or erased to authenticate the colonial exploits and/or experiences. Colonial or empire experience was as much textual as a military exercise; texts in the forms of diaries,

travel narratives, reports, memoirs, edits, administrative records and various other forms of writing, some of which later culminated in novels, were used to legitimate the colonial enterprise. Prior to colonisation, most African societies had no written system, yet their lands and allegiance to European powers were settled through the 'strange' form of writing where '…texts, … literature, underpinned efforts to interpret other lands – offering home audiences a way of thinking about exploration, Western conquest, national valour', and 'new colonial acquisitions' (Boehmer, 2005, p. 15). Arguably, to overwrite the underlying colonial texts of subjugation and acquisition written by the colonial powers, writers from colonised nations employed textual means.

The relationship between Africa and Europe predates the colonial era, hence, the inscription of colonial Africa as strange people with barbaric customs started earlier during the slave trade. Accordingly, Lindfor writes: '[t]hroughout Europe native Africans were stereotyped as brutish, dimwitted, naive, emotional, undisciplined, uncultured—in short, children of nature who needed to be civilized and domesticated' (2001, p. 54). To authenticate this view of Africans, Ludewig Ferdinand Romer, one of the staff of Danish Company stationed in West Africa at the peak of the slave trade, published a book[ii] ten years after he had left Ghana, West Africa, mostly based on memory and notes.

Particularly interesting in the book is the Introduction that a Bishop Pontoppidan[iii] wrote establishing Romer's credibility to his readership, and creating a picture of the Africans Romer had to deal with. On the credibility of Romer, Pontoppidan writes: '… this good man, who is now one of our most esteemed and excellent citizens', however, for the locals and their lands, he associates with all that is unruly. The heathen natives, according to Pontoppidan, bewilder honourable Europeans like Romer with their 'disorder', 'insecurity,' and 'coarse barbarism' which '… renewed that great truth that heathenism is indeed far more miserable than the absolutely worst degree of Christianity …' (Romer, 2000). The Introduction sets the stage for Romer's portrait of the people whose religious and cultural affairs he describes as 'peculiar, queer' and their religious dances characterised by 'particularly ridiculous gestures'. He describes the people who worked in the early hours of the morning and the late afternoons in order to escape the heat of the midday as people who ' … have nothing to do but to sleep during the day and gather together at moonlight …' (Romer, 2000, p. 68), reinforcing the representation of Africans as lazy. Sarcastically, he describes a war between two kings fighting over supremacy at a time when Europe was still battling with the effects of the War of the Spanish Succession [1702-1713] and the Great Nordic War [1700-1709] (Winsnes, 2001). This attitude of disparaging the cultural lives of others signifies racial prejudice because '[r]ace, from its historical antecedents has been articulated as the difference between "our own kind" and the people of other cultures' and '[o]ften, a central emphasis is placed on physical appearance in defining the 'Other' …'

(Appiah, 1995, p. 274). For instance, Romer describes the bound slaves who tried to loosen their bonds with their teeth as having 'wild nature, a physiognomy like a wild tiger, and with comparable teeth in their mouths' (2000, p. 21). Enslaving the Africans was a justified means of saving Africans from themselves as indicated in: 'the slave-trade was providential by giving the slaves the opportunity of converting to Christianity, thus saving them from the horrors of their lives in Africa; all the while providing sugar and profits' (Winsnes, 2001, p. 51) to the Europeans. Yet, the Europeans rarely noted the benefits accruing them in the provisions of sugar, profits, and free labour. Related tales like Romer's exotified Africa and laid the foundation script for later colonial discourse.

Despite the emancipation of Africa from slavery, the impressions about the land and people were deeply entrenched in European minds to be easily deleted. Commenting on the stereotypical picture of Africans, Stepan notes:

> *"a fundamental question about the history of racism in the first half of the nineteenth century is why it was that, just as the battle against slavery was being won by abolitionists, the war against racism in European thought was being lost. The Negro was legally freed by the Emancipation Act of 1833, but in the British mind he was still mentally, morally and physically a slave."* (1982, p. 1).

The Africans needed help with their 'brutish, dimwitted, naïve, emotional, undisciplined' and 'uncultured' nature through 'civilization'. Hypothetically, while the British government was overseeing its commercial enterprise, it was also administering beneficial services to Africans by providing them with gainful employment, raising their standard of living and refining their primitive lifestyles. Lindfors, agreeably, opines that '[t[he paternalistic relationship between colonizer and colonized was thus perceived as a necessary symbiosis that was morally correct' (2001, p. 54). Stories that embellish the racial superiority of Europeans to Africans were documented in texts like Hammond and Jablow's *The Africa that never was* (1970), and scientific papers were published to provide 'objective' proof to that effect.

These colonial writings, even when anti-Empire, effaced the earlier cultures of Africa as a means of keeping the distance between the 'Self' and the 'Other'; of retaining the 'color-coded distinctions that marked significant gradations in varieties of mankind' (Lindfors, 2001, p. 55). However, the inescapability of change would not allow such superficially marked differences to endure. Cultural changes are as inevitable as the palimpsest, which cannot be disposed. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, '[t]he concept of the palimpsest is a useful way of understanding the developing complexity of culture, as previous 'inscriptions' are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present

consciousness' (1998, p. 176). Colonialism imposed Western values as in education, governance, and religious practices on 'traditional African cultures without effacing the practices of the local populations' (Mwangi, 2009, p. 138), despite the nonhomogenic nature of colonial experiences in Africa. Apartheid was practiced in South Africa, the French and the British practiced indirect rule[iv], with the French practice being more assimilative than the rulership through the natives by the British. Despite the different forms of colonial subjugation, the cultural erasing and re-inscription is a unique experience of 'classic' colonial societies. The postcolonial writers embraced the subsequent stages of inscribing upon the colonialists' representations of Africa. They began to over-write the long-lasting patterns and deletion of land, colonised bodies, and colonised minds. Their writing attempts to revoke some of the colonial inscriptions concurrent with invigorating the pre-colonial past confirming '…the dynamic, contestatory and dialogic nature of linguistic, geographic, and cultural space as it emerges in postcolonial experience' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998, p. 176). The postcolonial writings, as palimpsest, construct a present based on the past, both colonial and pre-colonial, with the possibility of creating a future devoid of the shackles of the past. Having presented an overview of the writings at the base of the palimpsest, the next stage examines some literary texts written in response to the colonial inscriptions. Notably, these written texts are reflexive; they contradictorily seek to simulate and dissimulate the texts written underneath while exposing the complicity of Africa in the colonial bequest.

3.3 Palimpsest in African postcolonial novels: a foray

The residual effect from the colonial contact can never be completely erased. For one, African written literature is rooted in the education acquired from the West. Simulating the literate form adapted from Western cultures, Achebe's *Arrow of God* depicts a society that 'has to deal with transitional situations, the impact upon traditional society of the forces of inevitable change' (Jervis, 1971, p. 31), and this 'inevitable change' is caused by colonialism. However, this change is not primarily due to colonialism. The African society in question is already rife with internal conspiracies in the forms of religious beliefs and practices, the political and social institutions and structures. Despite the usual representations of the African culture as reprehensible, it is sophisticated and structured well enough to work for Africans as Achebe stated: 'African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; … their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty … they had dignity' (1973, p. 8). Furthermore, Obiechina notes that Africa has never been 'a haven of peace, a state of egalitarian self-satisfaction, idyllic bliss and self-reasonableness is a utopian myth as falsifying as the opposite view which sees it as a state of chronic anarchy, a bloody battle-field in which the weak and the helpless were

trodden down by the strong' (1975, p. 205). African culture has the intricacies evident in every other culture.

Arrow of God, Achebe's third novel, presents a society whose destruction is orchestrated in the earlier two novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Colonialism started to fill the gap created by some of the inhuman practices of the society, which some members of the society began to question prior to the arrival of Westerners. *Arrow of God* provides an opportunity for the people of Umuaro to test the relevance of their god, *Ulu,* and its chief priest, *Ezeulu*, during the yam harvest season[v]. Ezeulu refuses to proclaim the onset of the harvest in the guise that Ulu has not sanctioned the harvest. Arguably, the time he spent incarcerated by Winterbottom, the colonial administrator, for not heeding earlier to his summons and refusing the office of the warrant chief led to his inability to finish the ritual yam, which traditionally should be exhausted before the new harvest. However, in a community with underlying tensions such as the fight for supremacy between Ezeulu (priest to Umuaro's central god, Ulu) and Ezeidemili (the priest to Umuaro's god of wealth), the voice of the people should not have been taking for granted because 'no man, however great is greater than his people' (*AOG*[vi], p.230). The Umuaro people, faced with the options of the rain ruining their yams and their family starving as indicated in: 'shall we then sit down and watch our harvest ruined and our children and wives die of hunger?' (*AOG*, p.207), decide to have a stake in their democratic right. (Umuaro is a society that believes in the freedom of expression, hence Nwaka's success in convincing the people to go to war against Okperi - a neighbouring village - even when Ezeulu advised otherwise, and they accord respect only to deserving individuals who have proved their worth as credible and forthright citizens. The persuasive ability of Nwaka swayed the people to disobey their chief priest). Christianity steps in by providing the option of the people dedicating their harvest to the Christian God and moving forward to eat new yam rather than waiting until Ulu speaks to his chief priest. Ulu failed to unleash his anger on the people who rejected him and accepted the Christians' option. Bypassing Ulu, primarily, reiterates the people's belief that a god could be discarded if it loses its usefulness and a new one created in its place. Similarly, culture is learned; a new culture overwrites the old and acquired one; however, the palimpsest ensures the old is not completely obliterated.

Christianity, military force, as well as the new administrative and judicial system, further undermined Umuaro, a society already at the brink of change before interference from the Europeans. The use of indirect rule by the British seemed to be completely against the people's way of life. While Umuaro society recognises truthfulness, hard work and outspokenness as some of the qualities that would earn a person respect in the community, the colonial District Commissioner appoints warrant chiefs among inconsequential people who are not recognised by the community. A case in point is the appointment of James Ikedi

as the warrant chief of Okperi based on his only quality of being 'among the very first people to receive missionary education in these parts' (*AOG*, p.57). Ikedi began a reign of terror being aware of his inadequacies in his community, and the support of the colonial officers. He 'set up an illegal court and a private prison. He took any woman who caught his fancy without paying the customary bride-price, … organized a vast system of mass extortion' and later forced his people 'to make him an *obi* or king' (*AOG*, p. 57) among people who abhorred kings. Depicted here is a palimpsest representation of a people with a cultured though flawed ways of life whose cultural, religious and social lives were thoroughly revised by colonialism.

The text attempts to over-write the colonial portrait of a dimwitted and uncultured people with a vision of 'an apocalypse: the old Africa with all its beauty and power is crumbling under the simultaneous pressures of white imperialism from without, and self-destructive forces from within' (Brown, 1979, p. 134). This the text does in order 'to establish where the rain began to beat' Africans because a 'people losing sight of origins are dead' (Armah, 1979, p. xiv). Here, the palimpsest becomes a means of remembering the past, a remembrance to help the people create a niche for progress based on the assessment of the past. Africa needs to respond to her colonial past as Ezeulu might have rhetorised that if Africans as the colonised had found the white man sitting squarely in their house, how were they to drive him away? For Africa to create an endearing present, the underlying colonial and pre-colonial pasts need reappraisal. Pre-colonial and colonial histories, as palimpsests, are the underlying materials for a postcolonial present. However, the altercation rests on whether Africa benefitted from the bequest of the past in fostering a contemporary Africa. Subsequent sections will clarify this aspect of the palimpsest layer.

The Interpreters (1965) by Soyinka presents a group of three Western-educated young Africans who return to a socio-politically and culturally chaotic, corrupt and unstable society. The corrupt practices that James Ikedi of *Arrow of God* exemplified are perfected in the characters of Chief Winsala and Sir Derin in *The Interpreters* who were asking Sagoe, one of the interpreters, for a bribe of fifty pounds to get the job he was interviewed for. The pre-colonial values of social responsibility and character-worthiness expected of leaders have been eroded that when Sir Derin dies worthy praises were sung at his funeral: 'his life our inspiration, his idealism our hopes, the survival of his spirit in our midst the hope for a future Nigeria, for moral irridentism (sic) and national rejuvenescence' (*TI*, 1965, p. 113). The public automatically transformed his corrupt lifestyle at death that he became a lifestyle for the nation to emulate. What an irony! Dr. Lumoye and Professor Oguazor, supposedly elitist members of the society, are as corrupt and immoral as the rest of the society. Dr. Lumoye disparages a girl whom he asks for a sexual favour in exchange for carrying out an abortion on her. The three Western-educated elites finally join in the corrupt practices adopted as

underlying national values while they portray a superficial pretentiousness of moral uprightness to viewers.

The socio-cultural and political milieu depicted in *The Interpreters* is stagnated due to the supposedly expected models of the society turning into 'big thieves in government' (Nwahunanya, 2003, p. 237). Instead of using the Western education to help the people overcome their primitiveness, the affluent and educated members of the society use education as a shortcut to better living standard, power and wealth without any prick of conscience for the values of the people they corrupt and erode. Such men at the top brass of the society in *The Voice* (Okara, 1964) walk with 'blind feet' as they have no definite direction, and they put 'black paint' over white paint, like the palimpsest, however, in this case, their intention is to distort reality. Anyone who expresses concern in the palimpsest notes that the African societies are layering on their previous values is cautioned to '…forget everything good [he] ever learned …' (Armah, 1979, p. 119).

The African novels cited already in this paper engage in one way or the other with capturing Africa's textual response to colonialism. Yet, it is implicitly clear that their modus operandi is not limited to counter-discursive responses to colonial texts. This paper still perceives the underlying voice indicting African colonial experiences as part of the precursor of the malaise of African societies. These texts repudiate colonialism/imperialism without romanticizing pre-colonial Africa as a site of perfection (Olaniyan, 1995), thereby aligning with the objective of this paper that the African novels on postcolonialism are as self-reflexive as - counter-discursive. These novels trace the layers of inscriptions that helped form the textual identities of contemporary Africa and force the continent to reappraise itself and move on a tangent that would foster development. Even a malnourished child outgrows the stages of malnourishment and regains lost ground once the necessary nutrients are administered. The subsequent section delves into the novel, *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 1999) as a culmination of the palimpsest in this paper.

The inclusion of *Disgrace* in this study is peculiarly interesting because of its authorial positioning. The previous novels cited in this study had their settings in West Africa whose colonial experiences differ somewhat from that of the South African setting of *Disgrace,* and the writers could directly trace their origin to Africa. However, in *Disgrace*, the homodiegetic narrator, Professor David Lurie, like Coetzee may be considered as centrally and rightfully occupying Bhabha's 'third space' and 'hybridity' as a white South African whose origin stems from the contact between the Dutch settlers, other Europeans and Africans. Hybridity as a postcolonial palimpsest metaphor comes loaded with an offensive past of 'the concomitant experience of self-division, dislocation or alienation experienced by the colonized' (Bohata, 2009, p. 129). Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised,

challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity (1994). Hybridity, in postcolonial discourse, is positioned as the antidote to essentialism, or 'the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity' (Fuss, 1991, p. xi). Bhabha's hybridity is the liminal or in-between space where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs, a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1996), which is an interruptive, interrogative and enunciative ambivalent site of no fixity or unity (Bhabha, 1994). *Disgrace* seems to exist in an in-between space exotifying the challenges of coexisting with the previously considered inferiors and the superiors in a previously colonised society.

In the free discourse style of the text, the reader is informed that professor Lurie is 'more out of place than ever' (*Disgrace*, p. 4) in his teaching position at the Communication department. He has to re-negotiate his position as the professor whose students 'look through' when he speaks, 'forget his name' and whose 'indifference gall him more than he will admit' (p.4). Lurie finds himself in a space where his previous identity as a descendant of the white ruling class in the apartheid government was no longer in force. He is just a lecturer but finds it not easy to deal with the changes because 'his temperament is fixed, set' (p.2). The previous experience of subjugating the Blacks is indelibly fixed in his mentality and cannot be easily dislodged by the overthrow of apartheid.

Professor Lurie and Lucy -his daughter- see themselves displaced in the only country they know as their home, their affiliations with relatives in Europe notwithstanding. The sexual exploits of Lurie with women young enough to be his daughters, which can be read as his attempt to reclaim the power and lost glory of the past, later run him into a disgrace when he sexually exploits one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. His disgrace gets to the climax when three Blacks rape Lucy while they lock Lurie in a room. It seems as if his sexual manipulation of Melanie '"[b]ecause a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it"'(p.16) becomes the principle directing the rape of his daughter, however, at a more horrifying level. At this catastrophic point of history attempting to repeat itself, though in a more complex and opposite view of the rape of Africa; in the current case, Africans rape their fellow Africans, skin colour notwithstanding, Lurie resorts to earlier palimpsest inscriptions:

> *"[H]e speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him in the darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment?. Nothing he can see."* (*Disgrace*, p. 95).

Mission work has only left hatred and distrust. Neither French nor Italian could come to the aid of Lucy who suffers for something not directly related to her. Lucy is brutally raped, her dogs shot with her gun and Lurie's hair set ablaze, and one of the rapists a relation to her Black neighbour, Petrus. These rapists feel it their duty to level up colonial scores by brutally attacking one of theirs. If only they could read the layers of writing on top of the apartheid regime! Because of their inability to read history in the present, they felt that they could expiate crimes of the past through the suffering meted out to Lucy in the present. This text calls Africans to reflect on the meanings they make out of colonial history. History can never be re-written but the future can be re-modeled to accentuate the positive from the past while the negative is repudiated. Claude G. Bowers, a nineteenth-century historian and politician speaking about the United States and the Spanish War states: 'history is the torch that is meant to illuminate the past, to guard us against the repetition of our mistakes of other days. We cannot join in the rewriting of history to make it conform to our comfort and convenience' (Bowers, n.d). History does not mean to comfort the present; it means to irk the present that the present does not repeat the failures of the past.

4. Final Remarks

The colonial writings intend Africa to be viewed as a backward continent whose salvation ensues from being subjugated under the rule of Europe. This homogeneous and stereotypical representation did not create an opportunity for Africa to be anything other than what the Europeans imagined it. They created the Africa they wrote about when they re-named African lands, scrambled to redistribute the lands among one another, and attempted to erase African culture by writing off the culture as repulsive. Colonialism attempted to destroy the essence of Africa, stripping Africa of its belief and value system. Africa began to breed a people of strange customs and values. A people like the Ikedis' of *Arrow of God* and the three interpreters of *The Interpreters* who trampled on the rights of others and made money and affluence their god; A breed that seemed to have forgotten its origin and would blame every other person but itself. Postcolonial African literature stepped in to overwrite the various layers of identities ascribed to Africa by calling up the previous writings with the intent of charting a path for Africa built on a solid foundation of knowledge. Like the palimpsest, these writings are a conglomeration of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial writings on Africa. The writings call Africa to accept its belonging to what Chakrabarty calls 'a negative universal history' (2009, p. 222), which it is irrevocably part of, However, rather than dwelling on this past, the postcolonial literature admonishes Africa to move beyond the static and dormant past to a vibrant future built on understanding. The postcolonial palimpsest writings, with the constitutive ambivalent nature of the palimpsest,

invite a questioning and a revision of what is presently considered Africa. The literature impels a reconsideration and replacement of the perceived past with the positive aspects of the new links and networks, habits and newly acquired cultures.

This brief study took the stance of reading African postcolonial texts as a palimpsest. The selected literary texts replicate the idea that African texts are more of writing back to Africa with the intent to examine how Africa contributed to its predicament. Furthermore, the novels offer a corrective re-reading of the past with the aim of advocating for a preoccupation with creating a present and a future that enunciate the positive. The novels are neither blind to the malaise within African societies nor blind to the negative impacts of colonialism. Rather, they advocate for Africans to rewrite the layers of hatred and mistrust they carried over from the past, having identified their complicity in whatever might have occurred in their colonial experiences. As stated earlier, this study is a foray and cited merely a few postcolonial novels from a marginal section of Africa. A more detailed study involving novels from various parts of colonised Africa would add to the limited extant knowledge of the palimpsest in postcolonial African texts. Forthwith, this essay closes with a recall of Hall's 'metaphors of transformation'. It is high time Africa had a transformation of all that it has been holding close to its heart; it is high time Africa built new standards and forms, formed new meanings and values that accentuate the positive and moved to the next level of development to become a progressive part of the world community. With the symbolic overtures of African literature, a transformation that would take Africa to its next level would be possible.

Notes

[i] The term 'African novel' was once a highly debatable issue in postcolonial discourse. This essay uses the terms to refer to novels written by writers from Africa with Africa as their setting, and in this essay, particularly Western and Southern Africa.

[ii] Romer, L.F. 1760. *Tilforladelig Efterretning om Kysten Guinea* [A Reliable Account about the Guinea Coast]. Published in Copenhagen.

[iii] Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764), a Lutheran minister, who, besides holding a number of important posts, such as Bishop of Bergen and Chancellor of the University of Copenhagen, also wrote treatises and books on subjects varying from theology to history and natural science.

[iv] Indirect rule is a system of governance used by the British and the French to govern their colonies in Africa and Asia through the appointment of local leaders. This is because: '[t]he condition of a protected dependency is more acceptable to the half civilised races, and more suitable for them than direct dominion. It is cheaper, simpler, less wounding to their self-esteem, gives them more career as public officials, and spares of unnecessary contact with white men' (Roberts, 1999, p. 529). Roberts provides his 'purported' reasons for the choice of indirect rule by the Africans who could barely understand why the 'white men' descended on them.

[v] Yam is a tuber crop that is particularly cultivated and valued in West Africa. The Igbo tradition invites the performance of certain religious rituals by the chief priest to announce the onset of harvest without which no one is permitted to harvest or taste the new yam.

[vi] Citations from (*AOG*) *Arrow of God* and other texts will be subsequently abbreviated

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