

## LITERATURE, IDENTITY, IMPERIALISM: FABULOUS MONSTERS IN THE CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT:**

This text presents some reflections on certain aspects of literature teaching at the present time, contesting the reductive orthodoxies of politically-charged reading procedures and the leading assumptions of identity politics. By reference to a number of literary works of culturally diverse origins, accompanied by a commentary on their complex engagement with a range of related questions, an attempt is made to claim for literature a more ample field, of greater psychological and social resonance, than such analyses as those favoured by the ‘cultural studies’ movement generally allow. The text was written originally to be delivered as a talk leading to debate, and remains inscribed with many of the markers of oral discourse.

**KEYWORDS:** Authority. Identity. Literature. Representation.

Not so long ago I was involved in an academic event here in Brazil concerning the teaching of literature in English. At a certain point early in the proceedings something took place which was quite trivial perhaps, but struck me at the time as rather strange; disconcerting, in fact. Soon after we had introduced ourselves one of my colleagues asked me in all sincerity if I had ever heard of Derek Walcott. This, I suppose, is rather like asking a teacher of literature in Portuguese if he or she has ever heard of José Saramago, both being eminent contemporaries in their respective languages, winners of the Nobel Prize and so on. I wondered – and I continue to wonder – ‘where the guy was coming from’ when he asked me this. Perhaps he just wanted to confirm that he wasn’t dealing with a complete ignoramus – well, it’s possible, indeed. Perhaps – and this unfortunately in my experience is, again, quite possible – he had become so habituated to mentioning quite famous names in class and receiving mostly blank stares in return that he has come to consider as normal a certain general level of ignorance in this field: a plausible explanation, as I say (unfortunately). Or perhaps – and this is a highly sensitive explanation that has only struck me quite recently, and may very well be untrue – perhaps he assessed me very rapidly as a white middle-aged middle-class European male and subconsciously assumed my cultural

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antennae may not stretch so far. ‘Why would an Englishman – a white Englishman, that is - be aware of the writings of a black Caribbean?’ (So to speak.) Is it possible?

In this particular case I wouldn’t go so far, perhaps. In the end I think maybe it was just a thoughtless – nervous - question with no real weight behind it. But then, very much this was asked of me some time ago, at the end of a short course I gave on the question of language in Anglophone African writing. It came, I think, provoked by the post-colonialist, anti-colonialist perspective assumed by the course as a whole, with all the attendant baggage of that. ‘What was it that first made you, as an Englishman, interested in African literature?’ one of the students asked. The implications of the question are multiple, clearly, and I remember I had some trouble answering. I could not honestly say that I came to Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and others because of a personal political stance – anti-imperialism, say (the most obvious assumption in this case), with their books providing the witness-statements. Nor could I say that my interest derived from a personal commitment to anti-racism, or multiculturalism, or any other praiseworthy political-pedagogical project. In the end I could only say that I had always been a reader, that I read books from various parts of the world, Africa included, and that good writing (whatever that is!) gives me great pleasure, no matter where it comes from or what might be the ethnic or cultural makeup of the author. It was a personal question, after all. But I had to wonder if I came out sounding - to the person who asked the question – shockingly naive, lacking in professional (theoretical) rigour. Pleasure, as a literary value, has long lost its hold in the academy, I think.

And yet – I read for pleasure. That’s the truth<sup>1</sup>. What’s more, almost all of my best students do, too. Somehow, amid all the distractions and difficulties of everyday life, they find the time, and they find the means. They buy books, borrow books, pass them around. They discuss them with each other, and they write about them on blogs, sometimes astonishingly well. And these students write well for me too, when it comes to certain forms of assessment. The best readers in my classes, almost without fail, are also the best writers. And one of the things they communicate, always, is pleasure; and one of the things they rarely seem to have too much time for is a socio-

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<sup>1</sup> I’m not talking here about the pleasure of the text as identified or discussed by Barthes (although I like his notion of ‘writerly’ and ‘readerly’ texts, a useful distinction I think); and yet at the same time it’s not something as simple as the pleasure, for instance, of discovering ‘what happens next’ in a story, or of the reader’s identification with the protagonist, say.

logical-political analysis of the texts they read. There's a concomitant observation I could make here too. In critical-theoretical writing that emphasises questions of identity and ideology, I find little evidence of a real liking (let alone a passion) for literature.

The other day at home in Salvador (Brazil...) I found myself reading (in English translation) a novel by a Chilean writer composed mostly, I think, in Barcelona, Spain, concerning a series of murders of women in northern Mexico<sup>2</sup>. The main character at that point in the book was a black north-American journalist (the main characters in the first part of the book – just to mention it – are literary critics, by the way, one from France, one from Spain, one from Italy and one from England; and the book's principal character is a novelist – a German)... At the same time as I was reading this, through an internet connection to the BBC in London, England I was listening to a concert given in Morocco by nobody less than our friend from Salvador, Brazil, Carlinhos Brown. *This* is the world that many (perhaps most) of us really live in these days, a world of multiple overlapping cultural and linguistic content. It seems to me a pernicious myth to suppose that each of us occupies a little private corner, some kind of unchallenging comfort-zone determined by our own particular place on the map of so-called 'identity politics'.

The most devastating ending to any novel I know (perhaps) is that of Chinua Achebe's first great contribution to world literature, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Let me remind you of how it goes –

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (ACHEBE, 1958. 1992, p. 179)

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<sup>2</sup> 2666 by Roberto Bolaño.

Anyone who has read the book will be struck by the powerful irony of this – that an ignorant English official should appropriate to himself the scene we have just witnessed, to incorporate into a clearly ignorant and partial representation of what at the time would have been recent history. Through Achebe's art, we know a great deal more than the Commissioner ever could. But this is not just a matter of political, cultural knowledge – *Things Fall Apart* is a novel (an exceptionally good novel), and as such, offers a rich, nuanced view of human reality. The Commissioner sees Okwonkwo, the novel's protagonist driven to suicide, just as a troublemaker – the reader knows him in his particularity and plenitude.

Some critics call *Things Fall Apart* a tragedy. I would not quarrel with that. But by saying so does it mean that we are appropriating Achebe's work to a European literary perspective, based on inappropriate classical models – conceptually colonizing it, that is? (It may be asked, who do I mean by 'we' here? – Good question.) Again – can the Novel, as a form, be anything other than a product and representative of Eurocentric bourgeois ideology? Can it really serve the anti-imperialist cause? My own sense is that the Novel as a form is sufficiently flexible and capacious to serve more or less any cause, but that the best of novels will always be anti-doctrinaire, anti-dogmatic – precisely because of its humanist, Enlightenment roots.

Achebe's English Commissioner may stand, I think, for a particular notion in literary discussion: that only those who really *know*, from the inside, may be trusted. We are talking about authors; and not just authors like him perhaps (state functionaries), but authors of imaginative literature. (Readers also are implicated.) One source for the discussion is another famous work of Achebe, his critique of Joseph Conrad's modernist tale (and – dare I say it – cultural touchstone), *Heart of Darkness* (1902)<sup>3</sup>. Conrad emerges badly from the analysis, as little more than a dupe of imperialist and racist ideology; indeed, as an active representative of both; this, despite the fact that his text engages skeptically (to say the least) with the European imperialist project that underpins the narrative. The Africans in the text, rarely present at all, are dehumanized, says Achebe – only Europeans are dignified with personality. The book, finally, is tried, and found guilty. It is a powerful reading, with the charisma of real authority; after all, it comes from a great novelist, who is also an African – who are we to disagree? How can

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<sup>3</sup> 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' (first published in *Massachusetts Review* 18, 1977.)

someone from elsewhere ‘read’ (we might say) - or write about - another culture (or beg to differ with its most respected representatives)?<sup>4</sup>

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie staked her claim to a kind of filial relationship with Achebe in the very first words of her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) which kicks off with an unmistakable allusion: ‘Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion...’ (ADICHIE, 2003, p. 3) Then in her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), a book centred on the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70, Adichie tackled the subject of intellectual (and imaginative?) authority just raised<sup>5</sup>. Throughout the work, at lengthy intervals, are interposed numbered sequences (eight, in all) from a text entitled ‘The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died’. The larger, enclosing narrative is shaped in such a way as to lead any first-time reader to suppose that this is a text written at some point in the future by one of the main characters, the Englishman Richard (a broadly sympathetic Englishman this, with a commitment to local culture, in contrast to Achebe’s District Commissioner). Only in the novel’s final line is it revealed that the author of these intercalated sections is in fact the former houseboy Ugwu. The subaltern thus is permitted a voice, the new history will come from inside; what’s more, the outsider (Richard) desists from his own writing project: cultural sensitivity all around. It’s an ending that – at the level of feeling, or emotional investment – satisfies the demands of the narrative perfectly. But one might ask how dramatically plausible it is – whether it is only a politically ‘correct’ ending (with the fully pejorative weight of that rather dismal phrase, reluctantly). Then again, if its heart is in the right place, as suggested: does this really matter?

There’s a short story by the same author that returns to this question with (arguably) more clarity. ‘The Headstrong Historian’ - first published in

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<sup>4</sup> There is a characteristically subtle reply to Achebe’s critique in a piece by Edward Said - ‘Conrad was both an imperialist and an anti-imperialist,’ he writes. ‘To the extent that we can see Conrad both criticizing and reproducing the imperial ideology of his time, to that extent we can characterize our own attitudes: the projection, or the refusal, of the wish to dominate, the capacity to damn or the energy to comprehend and engage other societies, traditions, histories.’ (‘Through Gringo Eyes: With Conrad in Latin America’ in *Reflections on Exile and other Essays*, 2000.)

<sup>5</sup> The notion of ‘authority’ in relation to writing (authorship) and language is a highly interesting one, with complex historical, philosophical and cultural divergences as between, for example, the English and French traditions. For an interesting discussion on this, see the essay ‘Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes’ by Clara Claiborne Park in *Theory’s Empire* (Patai, Corral, 2005).

*The New Yorker* in 2008<sup>6</sup> - derives directly from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, imaginatively extending its reach down through the generations into our own times. (As an example of intertextuality, it can hardly be beaten.) For present purposes, we can say that the main character is Afamefuna ('My Name Will Not Be Lost'), or Grace. The first is the name given to her by her mother; the second, the name by which she is baptized (her Christian name). She is the granddaughter of the widow of Obierika – possibly the same man who was Okwonkwo's closest friend in *Things Fall Apart*. From her elders (principally her grandmother) she hears accounts of her people's past, authentic local lore, that is - while at school she studies a book with a chapter called 'The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria' written 'by an administrator from Warwickshire who had lived among them for seven years' (ADICHIE, 2009, p. 215). (Compare this, obviously, with the book anticipated by Achebe's Commissioner.) Then, as Grace, she attends university, switching from chemistry to history after hearing of an 'eminent [...] chocolate-skinned Nigerian, educated in London, distinguished expert on the history of the British Empire, [who] had resigned in disgust when the West African Examinations Council began talking of adding African history to the curriculum, because he was appalled that African history would even be considered a subject.' (ADICHIE, 2009, p. 216) (This, around 1950; a telling reference.) Finally, quite a bit later, she writes her own book, *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*, and – through a legal process in the capital, Lagos – reclaims her original name, Afamefuna.

All of this of course – the assertion of selfhood, of identity (at both the personal and national levels) - is part of the ongoing process of decolonization. To a large extent, that political topic and its personal ramifications is what the story is about. But let me go back a little, to the question of *who*, legitimately (with authority), in a literary context, may speak.

I was quite surprised at the facility with which a group of students once answered, when I put it to them – in the context of Achebe's critique of Conrad – that only Africans are able to write authoritatively, *in fiction*, of Africa. Everybody agreed. What troubled me (what continues to trouble me) about this was the conviction that ideology runs so deep! And since ideology nowadays includes all of so-called identity politics it implies that men may not (cannot, indeed) write of women, nor whites of blacks, nor straights of gays, with authority and insight. (I deliberately put the historically dominant

<sup>6</sup> Included in the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009)

first in the paring, there.) A specialist in theories of ‘otherness’, or alterity, recently declared to me how it is hardly possible to find a black character in fiction that is not a racist caricature. I did not suppose he meant in fiction by black authors – he meant in fiction by whites. I have heard well-read women friends declare that no male writer has ever created a convincing female character; it is simply – naturally – beyond them, apparently. It has even been suggested that men are constitutionally unable to assess the merit of works by women! I wonder – do we agree about this, and what are the implications (for literature – for culture)?

The old advice to apprentice writers (novelists) – ‘*Stick to what you know!*’ – becomes not just sound technical advice, but a kind of political-aesthetic imperative. Something essential could be lost in this. Just consider, for example - how diminished would be the fictional universes of Melville, of Twain, of Faulkner, deprived of the presence of their non-white characters? And are those characters merely racial (racist) stereotypes, in fact? Are authors bound always to reproduce naively the social norms of their place and times (including in these cases the attitudes behind slavery and segregation)? Would Joyce have been well-advised not to attempt Molly Bloom (from the inside, as it were) in the last pages of *Ulysses*? Is it only male readers who find her convincing? And what about Anthony Burgess’s vast and erudite novel on the evil twentieth-century, *Earthly Powers* (1980)? Was it a fatal mistake for the heterosexual author to make the narrator a flamboyant homosexual? ‘It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me,’ the book begins (BURGESS, 1980, p. 7). Is that the voice of a stereotype, or an interesting individual?<sup>7</sup>

It seems to me axiomatic that novels deal with individuals in relation to their social worlds. The ones that matter – the novels we go back to again and again – feature fathomless individuals, forever challenging our fixed notions of who and what they are, and (perhaps) why we should care. There may be novels populated by stereotypes. There are! But these are not the characters (or novels) that matter in the end – unless they represent to us a useful notion for extra-literary debate (Uncle Tom, for instance, in the civil rights debates of the 1960s). And the books that they appear in (at least, as

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly for the current discussion, in 1971 Burgess published the novel *M/F*, in which, as he explains in the second volume of his autobiography, *You’re Had Your Time* (1990) ‘at the end [...] we discover that most of the characters are black; we have naturally, following the Western fictional tradition, assumed them to be white.’ (BURGESS, 1990, p. 209-10) In contrast to *Male/Female*, he declares, *Black/White* is not ‘a valid opposition’.

central characters) rarely make the canon, unless (dare I say?) as so-called ‘popular classics’ – *Gone With the Wind*, perhaps, or the Tarzan books...

In fact it may be really in the popular classics that most of these dubious stereotypes get established (or confirmed, let’s say). The ‘Black Mammy’ figure for example, in Margaret Mitchell’s book – how does she compare with Faulkner’s Dilsey (in *The Sound and the Fury*)? And Stowe’s compliant Uncle Tom, with Melville’s militant rebel Babo (in *Benito Cereno*)? It seems to me that the figures that get invented are down to the particular author’s particular sensibility, the quality of their responsiveness to their times let’s say, and not simply to his or her race or social identity.

I do realize – perhaps I should say outright – that I’m going against some powerful present-day orthodoxies (critical, theoretical orthodoxies) in much of what I’m claiming here. But I really feel that some of this needs to be said. At times it feels like reading and writing about literature, and teaching it, has become a kind of quasi-legalistic procedure, wherein the books (and by association, their authors) are tried for their supposed socio-political attitudes. Shakespeare’s Shylock is an evil-minded Jewish money-lender, an anti-Semitic travesty; Othello strangles his wife, he’s a racist caricature of the violent black man; *The Taming of the Shrew* even in its title shows that the author was a misogynist... So much for world’s so-called greatest dramatist; we really don’t need to read him, we already know what *he’s* about! Jane Austen on the other hand writes in favour of women, even though she’s a conservative, so we let her off... I’m satirizing to make a point, I know – but it’s really not too far off the truth.

It’s all so reductive, it seems to me. And we risk losing so much by it. Of course we *are* – every one of us - formed within a particular socio-political context (an ideology, if you like). I don’t deny it. We do have our particular set of markers, as to who we are – in terms of gender, race and class, etc. And in the social world these things matter, as we all know. But I think the world of literature is different. (‘The world of literature’ – somehow that already seems some kind of limp phrase from a lost humanist past, doesn’t it?) I think that literature, at its best, contains and comprehends political thought, and offers something larger and more valuable. This goes right against the grain of ‘Theory’ – Frederic Jameson, say, or before him, Raymond Williams. But everybody knows – do they not? - that they are not simply a function – an outcome, in all respects predictable - of their social, political identity. People are surprising, unpredictable, resourceful, perverse;



circumstances, infinitely variable. Literature is interested in this, and interested finally, perhaps, in what draws us together.

I would like to mention two or three novels that I've read recently, that I think have contributed something to the discussion here. Firstly, James Baldwin's scintillating account of a disastrous homosexual passion, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Baldwin, a black American living in Paris, his narrator a *white* American (in Paris) in love with an Italian... Secondly, John Berger's *From A to X* (2008), a novel composed almost exclusively of letters written by a *woman* to her lover – she, an activist and he a prisoner in some north-African or middle-eastern country (or anywhere in the world where the poor and their communities are under attack); Berger, an Englishman, living in the French Pyrenees... Thirdly, a recent best-seller well-reviewed by the critics, *Netherland*, by the Irish-born Joseph O'Neill (also 2008) – a novel largely set in a New York haunted the attacks of 2001, its narrator a Dutchman now living in London, its ambiguous main character a charismatic black Caribbean gangster... The world is not so simple perhaps as we still tend, unreflectively, to think!

'English literature'; 'American literature'... In the past these terms, for most people, made sense. They meant the literature produced in England (or at least, in Britain), and in the United States, when those places were deemed to have a 'common culture'. (It can be argued that that idea of a common culture was never more than a fiction convenient to the dominant segments of society, of course.) But now that Britain and the US define themselves as multicultural, the notion of a monocultural literature no longer holds. This, I suppose, is a commonplace. But I wonder too whether the notion of identity – in relation to communities of shared interests – may not also be to some extent questionable. We reject (rightly, in my opinion) essentialisms as reductive. Might not 'identity politics' be just another form of essentialism – under the rubric of 'resistance'? And might not this lead to some dubious assumptions in relation to literature, sometimes?

There is a very fine satirical novel by a black American writer who is still not all that well-known outside the US, I think – Percival Everett. *Era-sure* (2001) is narrated by a writer of fiction (Thelonius 'Monk' Ellison) who often finds himself and his work characterized as 'not *black* enough'...

One night at a party in New York [...] a tall, thin, rather ugly book agent told me that I could sell many books if I'd forget about writing retellings of Euripedes and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life. [...] The hard, *gritty* truth of the matter is that I hardly ever think about race.

Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is. (EVERETT, 2003, p. 4)

There comes a point when Monk decides to write (under a pseudonym) a parody of a certain kind of best-seller, the black 'ghetto' novel - a genre (to his mind) confirming all kinds of stereotypes concerning 'real' black life in the United States: that is, life 'on the street' amongst gangsters, hipsters, prostitutes and so on. (I can confirm the popularity of these books among young black readers, by the way, having worked for a while in the London book trade.) To Monk's surprise and dismay, of course, the parodic character of his own book fails to register, and it becomes a great commercial success; then, his dilemma, whether - and eventually, how - to promote the book (and make money) without destroying his more arcane 'genuine' authorial identity. It's a comedy, of course - but with serious intent as regards black identity (I don't know whether to put the phrase in inverted commas or not), and literary representation (and authorship).

Back in the nineteenth century George Eliot wrote of fiction's capacity to extend our 'sympathies' by giving imaginative access to worlds (and lives) other than our own. The writer, in her view, had a responsibility to represent individuals and their social milieu in all their complexity and inter-relatedness...

We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness. ... Art is the nearest thing to life: it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen beyond the bounds of our personal lot. ... The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies.<sup>8</sup>

Later, D. H. Lawrence - in characteristically idiosyncratic style - emphasised the Novel as 'the one bright book of life'...

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Natural History of German Life' - *Westminster Review* article, 1856, quoted in LODGE, 1973, p. 15

Philosophy, religion, science, they are all of them busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium [...] They all of them, all the time, want to nail us on to some tree or other.

But the novel, no. The novel is the highest form of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered [...] If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.

Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality.<sup>9</sup>

These are anti-didactic positions, absolutely – anti-ideological, I would say. Yet I wonder if, to some readers (or listeners) they may not smack of a self-satisfied European bourgeois sensibility. If so, in Lawrence's case particularly, it would be a striking change of fortune. We should remember that modern (as opposed to classical) literature entered the university curriculum originally as a basis for moral reflection – moral education in the widest sense, consistent with the position of both Eliot and Lawrence here. But now, when the term 'moral' is so suspect (whose morality, to whose benefit?)..?

What justifies the teaching of literature, when its immediate use-value is so questionable? Increasingly, the academy is asked to confirm the value of its disciplines along instrumental lines. Perhaps this in part explains the emphasis, in recent times, on the sociological approach to literature. If it can be made to serve the 'socially transformative' function of education central to current thinking, by helping to form responsible citizens aware of the ways in which ideology warps and limits human freedom, then it may be intellectually justifiable (theoretically, as much from the right as from the left). I have no quarrel with this – only with the tendency towards certain kinds of reductiveness, that seek in literary texts only the baldest political contours. This, I think, is to make literature subservient to less inclusive – narrower – forms of intellectual apprehension (in line with what Lawrence said in the comments just quoted).

There is a video that can be downloaded from YouTube, featuring Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. 'When I was growing up,' she says, 'I read a lot of Russian books and - I got it... I didn't always understand what the little details were but the emotion of it [...] is something that I think is universal...

<sup>9</sup> 'Morality and the Novel', 1925 in BEAL, 1956, p. 110.

It cuts across gender and class and race lines and you get it...'<sup>10</sup> The notion of universality in theory-inflected literary discourse has long been out of favour, as reflecting only the values of white European males, historically imposed. Well, if so, then it suits me pretty well – at least, on the face of it. But how come Adichie uses the term so favourably, in this case? Is she a dupe of the racist, imperialist hegemony? I don't think so. Her 'little details' here refers to the political, social, historical, cultural specificity of the Russian texts she is alluding to – the details all (realist) literature builds on, to make a plausible story. But within that context, serious writers create complex, believable characters; and the reason they interest us, over generations, and across the lines of gender, class and race, as Adichie says, is because certain aspects of our reality *are* 'universal', indeed.

Everybody is born into a family, or something like it. We all pass through infancy and childhood and adolescence and so on; we fall in love, at least once or twice; we know happiness and misery and exultation and despair; the emotional palette is almost infinite, and not restricted to particular cultural identities, I think. We all know illness, and what it is to lose loved ones; we all face our own individual extinction in the end; we choose our forms of solace... The experiences we share, in fact, are manifold. Literature is interested in this, and able to approach it all in ways that enrich our individual lives beyond the possibility of any other form of art, in my view. The emphasis on 'identity', on what separates us into inward-looking communities of special interests based on gender or race, or class or nationality, does little, I think, to overcome these differences. In the end, we are all different, all 'minorities of one', if we choose to think so. Language implies communication however; and in literature, communication can be at its most expressive, the sense of a human community at its strongest. The pleasure it may give is both fundamental, I think, and at the same time perhaps – only a fabulous bonus.

#### LITERATURA, IDENTIDADE, IMPERIALISMO: MONSTROS FABULOSOS NA SALA DE AULA

##### RESUMO:

Este texto apresenta algumas reflexões sobre certos aspectos do ensino da literatura nos tempos atuais, contestando as ortodoxias redutivas dos procedimentos de leitura politicamente carregados e as presunções principais da política de identidade. Em referência a um conjunto de obras literárias de origens culturalmente diversas, acompanhado por um comentário sobre o engajamento complexo dessas obras com uma série de questões relacionadas, tenta reivindicar para a literatura um campo mais amplo, de maior ressonância psicológica e social, do que geralmente

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNXS8Zv0TKk>

permitem as análises favorecidas pelo movimento dos “estudos culturais”. O texto foi composto para ser proferido na forma de uma palestra, fomentando a discussão. Por isso, nota-se nele, ainda, a inscrição de muitos marcadores do discurso oral.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Autoridade. Identidade. Literatura. Representação.

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