

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICAN STUDIES: A REVIEW.

by

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Such a monograph compels admiration and a certain amount of awe. Yet it is because of its achievements that it compels a few questions be posed to it with regard to the making of South African modernity. With **Rereading The Imperial Romance**, Laura Chrisman has written a brilliant monograph on South African literary history, or to be more precise, that moment across the nineteenth-century when it was under British imperial domination. The monograph impresses with its theoretical sophistication, ideological certitudes, historical awareness, political combativeness and its quests to open new epistemological territories. In its objective of seeking to re-map this particular political and cultural geography of literary history, breaking down imaginative boundaries, shifting them when necessary in order to construct new ones, the monograph canvasses all kinds of theoretical constructs from Marxism through postmodernism to postcolonial studies. In its quest, **Rereading The Imperial Romance** does not hesitate for a moment in butting heads with Fredric Jameson, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Nadine Gordimer, Paul Gilroy, Mazisi Kunene, Gayatri C. Spivak and quite a few other prominent intellectuals, writers and critics. I do not know whether my reaction should wow or whew!

Written from a Marxist perspective, the monograph undertakes a theoretical and political analysis of the literary genre of the imperial romance as it realized and represented in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), *She* (1886), *Nada the Lily* (1892), in Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) and in Solom T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930). Laura Chrisman does not make clear whether the concept of the genre of the imperial romance is similar to Georg Lukacs concept of the historical novel, which according to his book came into being with Walter Scott during Napoleonic era when the masses of ordinary people participated in the making of history. What she makes clear is that literary scholars and literary historians who study this particular segment of literary history have not taken seriously enough the literary genre of the imperial romance as an ideology of form (a Jamesonian construct that Chrisman does not utilize) that articulates and/or misrepresents the central ideological and political forces of British imperialism in Southern Africa, particularly in Zululand and Shonaland, in the late nineteenth-century.

Laura Chrisman undertakes an extraordinary analysis of how and in what form for each of the writers the concept of the literary genre of the imperial romance is an instrument for representing all sorts of conflictive and incompatible

ideological systems: with H. Rider Haggard it is in support of the British imperialism of Rhodes, not in a vulgar way mind you, but through complex and complicated obfuscations; with Olive Schreiner it is with the intent of constructing a liberal ideology; and with Solomon T. Plaatje it is with the aim of forging African nationalism and pan-Africanism with the objective of resisting British imperialism. Chrisman dazzles with her theoretical mosaics that show how each writer constructs a symbolic system for or against British imperialism in relation to their particular ideology. The level of historical contextualization she places each writer is amazing. Although she may pretend not to have heard the intoxicating slogan, it was Fredric Jameson who after all wrote: "Always historicize." In a way, given 1994, **Rereading The Imperial Romance** is a farewell salutation to the hegemony of British Universities' intellectual perspectives on South African matters or in 'South African Studies'. From the 1960s to the 1980s, in the academic field, British Marxism had the audacity to disguise itself as South African Marxism, under the pretext of collective effort against apartheid. The give away was its concern with structures and processes rather than with the subjectivities of Africans and of other oppressed South Africans.

Now to specifically contentious South African matters and hence fascinating. Laura Chrisman sneers at Nadine Gordimer for thinking Olive Schreiner's **Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland** a very bad novel or novella. Equally, Chrisman endlessly whips Mazisi Kunene with a sjambok for criticizing Solomon T. Plaatje for including a particular episode in **Mhudi** which he felt was inorganic to the structure of the novel. In other words, there is the danger of ideological over-determination in Laura Chrisman's analysis of literary matters: an ideologically correct artistic work must necessarily be good artistically. She does not seem to think it possible that an ideologically 'good' work of art could be artistically bad. Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno had choice words against Georg Lukacs on this matter, despite their worshipping **History and Class Consciousness** (see: Slavoj Zizek's "Postface" to Lukacs' recently found **Defense of History and Class Consciousness [ Chvostismus und Dialektik ]**). By having **Nada the Lily** translated into English, and writing a warm introductory essay to it, I think it is a strong indication that John Dube preferred it to **Mhudi** as a novel. To say that Dube was politically reactionary or conservative, which he was, or to say that this merely reflected the conflicts within the ANC since his removal as President of the organization in 1917, would be not be wholly convincing. There is the whole matter of the organicity of the literariness of the novel as a satisfy of desires and pleasures, despite its glaring misrepresentations of Zulu history, which Chrisman acutely pinpoints, that should not be easily dismissed.

Another issue to pose here is to what extent the outstanding younger intellectuals

than John Dube of the New African Movement, such as H. I. E. Dhlomo, Jordan Ngubane and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, in their remarkable essays on Shaka, were able to avoid being influenced by **Nada the Lily**. Mazisi Kunene was objecting to the unsatisfying structure of the novel, rather to its perspective, which is that of the woman character Mhudi. After all Mazisi Kunene's epic **The Anthem of the Decades** is dedicated to all the African women; then there is the issue that the other epic **Shaka Zulu The Great** has female characters of greater conceptual and psychological complexity than any to be found in **Mhudi**. I keep on and on Mazisi Kunene for this particular reason: he is arguably the greatest poet produced by Africa in the twentieth-century. It was not for nothing that J. M. Coetzee and Andre Brink, in their book, over a decade ago, called Mazisi Kunene the major South African poet. Concerning Nadine Gordimer, her relationship to Olive Schreiner may be complicated by her known, but very mystifying, historical hostility to feminism.

There is remarkable change of direction in **Rereading The Imperial Romance** that is not fully explored, since it was not the intention of the monograph to do so immediately. This is the shift that led me to observe earlier that the text is perhaps an adieu to the British perspectives' hegemony in 'South African Studies'. When Laura Chrisman situates Solomon T. Plaatje in relation to H. Rider Haggard and Olive Schreiner, justified given the nature of the subject, she still subscribes to the paradigm of the violent entrance of British modernity into South African history. The victory of African nationalism in 1994 has made this paradigm an issue marginally relevant to the pressing issues of contemporary South Africa. The monograph takes cognizance of a newly emergent paradigm in 'South African Studies', the making of South African modernity by New African intellectuals in the context of the New African Movement through the political practices of African nationalism and the cultural practices of New Africanism. The principal architects here are H. I. E. Dhlomo, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Nadine Gordimer, Thelma Gutsche, rather than John Tengo Jabavu, John Dube, Solomon T. Plaatje, Abdullah Abdurahman. Laura Chrisman makes recognition of this new paradigm when she places Solomon T. Plaatje, in relation to other New African intellectuals such as Silas Modiri Molema, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Allan Kirkland Soga, Charlotte Manye Maxeke and others, under the auspices of African nationalism. By no means is this ideology not profoundly unproblematic. She points a semaphore from South Africa pointing to these intellectuals in West Africa: James Africanus Horton, J. E. Casely Hayford, Adelaide Casely Hayford, Edward Wilmot Blyden. This a very enlightening direction to point, given the central preoccupations of South Africa today, rather than to the British isles.

The making of New African modernity in South Africa across the twentieth-century should be at the center of 'South African Studies'. Inevitably, it will be

apparent and discovered that without the influence New Negro modernity in United States , the New African modernity was not possible. The New African modernity in South Africa is profoundly connected and related to other New African modernities on the African continent. Further still, the construction of New African modernities on the continent should be seen historically in relation to the black modernities in Latin America (Hispanic America, Brazil and the Caribbean ). Back in South Africa : the new paradigm will necessitate an the contentious relation between Marxism and African nationalism in the context of the making of New African modernity.

In pointing in these directions, or attempting to point towards them, therein lies one of the relevances of Laura Chrisman's **Rereading The Imperial Romance** .

Book: Rereading The Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje  
by Laura Chrisman  
(Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2000).