

Portrayal of Hybridity in Selected Novels of Azouz Begag

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Abstract

*Hybridity and identity have been recurring features of postcolonial literature, including the works of Azouz Begag. Existing studies on Begag's novels have focused mainly on racism, the experiences of migrants and generational gaps, with little attention paid to the representation of hybridity and identity crisis. This study is, therefore, designed to examine the depiction of hybridity and identity crisis in selected novels of Azouz Begag, with a view to determining the categories of hybridity and manifestations of identity crisis. This paper has adopted the French *Explication de texte*, which allows a close and thorough analysis of the selected novels used in this study. The postcolonial theory concept of hybridity is used as the theoretical framework. The portrayal of hybridity in the selected novels of the author is carried out as categorised by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998:118) in order to highlight its effect on the formation of identity of the characters in the novels.*

Keywords: Azouz Begag, hybridity, identity, postcolonialism

1. Introduction

In a world that has become more nomadic than it used to be, the movement of people as well as cultures has become the order of the day. With globalisation, regionalisation and the reduction of the world into small communities, many cultures have been mixed together and this has led to the questioning of the identity of persons in a global world. This paper looks into the hybridity of these cultures in selected novels of Azouz Begag and how the offspring of migrants struggle to ascertain who they are. The selected novels are *Le Gone de Chaâba* (translated as *Shantytown Kid*) (1986), *Zenzela* (1997b) and *Dis Oualla* (1997a).

This paper adopts the postcolonial theory concept of hybridity and how it affects the identity of Arab/Muslim migrants and their offspring as they manoeuvre between their host culture and that of their home community. Hybridity can be traced far back to the era of the Roman Empire, even though it was not termed thus. Acheraïou (2011:87) attests to it when he opines that both hybridity and *métissage* (miscegenation) are not new inventions. It has been a key feature of civilisations since time immemorial. He added that hybridity was common among Romans, Greeks and other early civilisations.

Most civilisations, from the Sumerians through to the Egyptians and Greeks, developed and thrived through the incorporation of foreign ideas, philosophies and technologies. In a sense, these ancient societies widely practised hybridity and produced, to varying degrees, hybridised cultures. However, they were obviously not as self-consciously aware of this process of hybridization as we are today.

The Romans, upon conquering a new territory, would introduce their culture to the conquered people. In turn, some of the cultures of the new territory which they found to be unique and desirable were imbibed by them. Moreover, at the end of such conquests, women were taken by some of the soldiers as booty. In this process, some became pregnant and gave birth to children. In his article titled *Race mixture in the Roman Empire*, Tenney (1916:689-690) acknowledges that a majority of Rome's senators and knights were children of slaves and the pure Romans comprised of a "Surprisingly small proportion ... Ninety-percent had Oriental blood in their veins." To further buttress his point, he quoted Seneca as a proof of the immigration of people from around the globe into Rome.

“Of this crowd the greater parts have no country; from their own free towns and colonies in a word, from the whole globe, they are congregated. Some are brought by ambition, some by the call of public duty or by reason of some mission, others by luxury which seeks a harbor rich and commodious for vices, others by the eager pursuit of liberal studies, others by show etc. (693-694).”

McWilliams, in her article “Hybridity in Herodotus” published in *Political Research Quarterly*, considers Herodotus as one of the great ancient theorists of hybridity. She posits that hybridity is the dominant theme in Herodotus’ book *The History*. According to her, Herodotus describes “... a globe that is overwhelmed by motion- the motion of people and cultures as they overlap and intersect through time (McWilliams 2013: 745).” She adds that Herodotus showed his Greek audience the fact that this “interconnectedness” will destabilise every existing conventional notion of culture and politics. He therefore enjoined them “... to embrace the hybrid.”

Laplantine and Nouss (1997:8) in their essay titled “*Le métissage: un exposé pour comprendre, un essai pour reflechir*” take racial mixing back to the history of the Mediterranean. According to them, the history is made from thousands of years of migration in the form of invasions, massacres and exchange which has led to the transformation of the people.

Ashcroft *et al.* (1998:183) describe hybridity as the “... creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. They posit that hybridity occurs during the conscious moments of colonialism and later when migration of people from one part of the world to another became the order of the modern world. Ashcroft *et al.* (1998:118) asserts that hybridisation occurs in many forms and it varies on linguistic, cultural, political, racial and other grounds. Though there are many definitions of the concept of hybridity by many scholars, it still remains a disputed concept in postcolonialism.

Hybridity, in the context of colonialism, refers to the blending and mixing of different cultural, social and political elements as a result of interactions between colonisers and the colonised. While it may be viewed as a form of cultural exchange, some argue that it can also serve as a means of suppression by colonial powers.

Colonialists often employed strategies to assert dominance and one such strategy was the promotion of hybridity. This involved encouraging the merging of elements from the colonisers with those of the colonised, creating a hybrid culture. On the surface, this may seem like a harmonious exchange, but it can mask a deeper power dynamic. The imposition of hybridity could be a way for colonial powers to maintain control by shaping the narrative and controlling the cultural landscape. It allows them to influence and redefine aspects of the colonised culture to align more closely with their own interests. This manipulation of cultural hybridity can serve as a tool for suppressing the authentic expressions of the colonised people.

Furthermore, the emphasis on hybridity might overshadow the colonial violence and exploitation that underlie such interactions. It can divert attention from the systemic inequalities and power imbalances inherent in the colonial relationship. In this way, hybridity can act as a form of cultural imperialism, obscuring the oppressive structures that sustain colonial rule. It is essential to examine critically instances of hybridity within the colonial text, recognizing that what may appear as a harmonious blending of cultures can also be a subtle form of erasure and domination. The nuanced exploration of these dynamics is crucial for understanding the complexities of colonial history and its lasting impact on societies.

2. A Biography of Azouz Begag

Azouz Begag is a French writer and politician of Algerian descent. Born on August 5th, 1957, in Lyon, France, Begag has had a diverse and notable career. He earned a doctorate in economics and became a professor at the University of Lyon. His academic background and research focused on issues related to

immigration, ethnicity and discrimination. He is renowned for his literary contributions, with works that often explore themes of identity, immigration and the challenges faced by minorities in French society. One such notable book is *Le Gone de Chaâba* an autobiographical novel published in 1986. Begag's political career and advocacy have played a significant role in highlighting the importance of diversity and inclusion in French society. While he may not be as widely known on the global stage, his contributions have left a lasting impact on discussions surrounding immigration, diversity and social justice in France.

3. Portrayal of Hybridity in Selected Novels of Azouz Begag

The postcolonial perspective in considering hybridity emphasizes the agency and creativity of formerly colonised people in adapting and reconfiguring their cultural heritage. It challenges the notion of a fixed, pure identity, instead of highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identities. From this viewpoint, hybridity is seen as a source of strength and resilience, a way for the colonised individuals and communities to assert their agency and resist dominant structures. Ashcroft *et al.* (1998:118), meanwhile, assert that hybridisation occurs in many forms and it involves a number of different dimensions. This categorization is what this paper uses to look at hybridity in the novels selected. In the paper, all translations are by the author.

3.1. Racial Hybridity

In *Le gone du Chaâba*, the protagonist Azouz decides to make an impression in a class which he thinks is a French affair. The teacher was giving a class in morals and it was only French students who were partaking. This was as a result of the fact that these students live in a society where morals are being taught from home while the Arab Students in the class cannot participate as a result of living in Shanty towns with people lacking education. He decides to move from the Arab he is, into being French.

J'ai honte de mon ignorance. Depuis quelques mois, j'ai décidé de changer de peau. Je n'aime pas être avec les pauvres, les faibles de la classe. Je veux être dans les premières places du classement comme les Français. (1986:58)

I am ashamed of my ignorance. After some few months, I have decided to change my skin. I do not like being with the poor, the weak students of the class. I want to be ranked amongst the best in class, like the French.

His participation and good performance in school attracts great resentment from his Arab compatriots such as Hacène, Moussaoui, Nasser and two other Algerians in his class. He is told by Moussaoui that he has lost his Arabness because he wines and dines with Jean-Marc, a French classmate. This situation further degenerates into an accusation of the teacher being a racist. In order to prove that he is an Arab, Azouz is encouraged not to work hard in class, so as to be ranked amongst the poor students of the class like his Arab brothers.

The protagonist's ambition for academic excellence and the reaction of his Arab cousins in the class creates an inner conflict within him. He pauses and reflects on the accusation and later decides to consider himself an Arab: "Je suis un Arabe et je peux le prouver: j'ai le bout coupé comme eux, depuis trois mois maintenant. C'est déjà pas facile de devenir arabe ... (1986:103)." "I am an Arab and I can prove it: I am circumcised like them, since three months now. It is not easy to become an Arab." His inner reflection leads us to a flashback into the day of his circumcision, a day he describes as "Le jour le plus long." "The longest day."

Unlike the reaction racial hybridity raises in *Le gone de Chaâba* among the friends of Azouz, it is celebrated and applauded in *Dis Oualla*. Luis is one of the friends of the protagonist and is described as a character

born in different places. He is a combination of almost all the races in the world. Begag describes him aptly through a metaphor in the following lines:

Luis était né avec un pied en Espagne, un autre en Italie, un autre en Yougoslavie, un autre en Istanbul. Le plus gentil garçon du monde, mais qui de venait féroce si on touchait à quelque partie sensible de son cœur, comme sa mère par exemple (1997a:7)

Luis was born with a foot in Spain, another one in Italy, another one in Yugoslavia, another one in Istanbul. The kindest boy in the world, but who will become ferocious if you touch some sensitive part of his heart, like his mother for example.

Dis Oualla encourages racial hybridity and this is shown how the protagonist's friends respect his judgement. Whenever they are having an argument, he is always called upon to decide whose opinion is superior.

3.2. Linguistic Hybridity

Begag, as a result of his Maghrebian origin, finds himself torn between two languages; the Arabic which is his mother tongue and French which is the language of his host community. Like any other migrant, there is bound to be interference of one language in the other. Amosu (1995:130) avers that:

L'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère entraîne l'apparition, chez l'apprenant, d'éléments et d'habitudes de sa langue maternelle. Cela conditionne sa façon de refléter les particularités linguistiques dans la pratique de la nouvelle langue. L'interférence, puisqu'il s'agit bien. De cela, se manifeste à plusieurs niveaux et, le plus souvent, à l'insu du sujet parlant. (130)

The learning of a foreign language drags along the appearance, on the learner, elements and habits of his/her maternal language. This conditions his/her ways of reflecting linguistic particularities in the practicing of the new language. Interference, since that's what it is, manifests in many levels and mostly, without the knowledge of the speaker.

Begag presents interference through the protagonist Azouz in *Le gone de Chaâba*. Azouz is a victim of the Arabisation policy which was introduced in the 1960s in Morocco and Algeria. This policy was implemented to encourage the use of Arabic and the suppression of French as a medium of instruction. This policy was handicapped by the fact that Arabic vocabulary had not been thoroughly developed as many Arabic words would be needed to translate a word from French. Moreover, Algeria has a complex linguistic situation. The official languages are Modern Standard Arabic and Tamazight as stipulated by the constitution of 1963 and 2015 respectively. Modern Standard Arabic is the standardised Arabic used in writing, while Tamazight is an indigenous dialect in North Africa. In 2002, Berber was recognised as a national language. The protagonist in a class where the topic is hygiene spontaneously speaks about hygiene in Arabic forgetting that he is in a school where French is the language of instruction. This interference of Arabic into French is as a result of the protagonist's weakness in French. In order to revolt against the French system of education, he introduces Arabic words such as *Une kaissa* which means *Un gant de toilette* in French, *un chritte – un gant de crin* and so forth.

Through the characters of the protagonist's parents, Bouzid (the father) and Messaouda (the mother), Begag represents the first generation of migrants who were illiterate but wanted a better future for their offspring. Bouzid displays a total hatred for the French system and, with a constant reminder of this at the back of his mind, he plans a great return home. Begag uses French words with his native Sétif accent, which is a total revolt against the imposition of French language in Algeria. Such words include: *Aboué*: Papa (father), *djnoun*, the plural of *Djen*): demons or evil spirits, *Emma*: mother, *mektoub*: destiny, *mrabta*: a female

herbalist, *salam oua rlikoum*: greetings, *la boulica*: the Police, *la tilifiziou*: the television, *le sabone d'Marseille*: le savon de Marseille, *la bart'mâ*: (l'appartement, *lizbour*: le Sport, *l'alcoufe*: l'alcôve, *le filou*: le vélo, *Au koussaria* au commissariat, *l'bomba*: la pompe, *d'litriziti*: l'électricité. Messaouda has always displayed her hatred for the French language and has always been comfortable in her native Arabic:

Aujourd’hui, le laitier ne vient plus au chaâba. Il n’a plus de clients. Ma mère a oublié son français et, d’ailleurs, elle n’aime pas parler français, ni avec la Louise ni avec personne (1986:141).

Today, the milk supplier is no longer coming to the chaâba. There are no customers. My mother has forgotten her French, and moreover she hates speaking French with Louise or any other person.

Zenzela means earthquake in Arabic and Azouz Begag uses it as the title of second novel. In *Zenzela*, Begag presents Farid the protagonist who is a complete hybrid and Yemma who is the mother of the protagonist. Yemma like Messaouda in *Le gone de Chaâba* share the same characteristics. She wants to speak French the way she understands it and does not want anybody correcting her. The incident in a bus whereby she was asking for a seat leads to serious confrontation between her and her son, Farid.

Une blace, z’il veau pli. Le chauffeur a tiqué ...-Une quoi? a grimacé le chauffeur. -Une place, j’ai corrigé par derrière. Yemma s’est tournée vers moi, furieuse, les lèvres pincées, prêtes à mordre. Elle s’est mise à me parler en arabe. Combien de fois dois-je te dire que je ne veux pas que tu traduisnes pour moi. Je suis adulte, non (1997b:64)?

A seat, please. The driver winced ...-A what? grimaced the driver. -A seat, I corrected from behind. Yemma turned towards me, furious, lips pinched, ready to bite. She started talking to me in Arabic. How many times have I told you not to translate for me. Am I not an adult?

Begag also introduces the character of M. Vincenti, another immigrant. From his name, he is definitely an Italian who migrated to France. M. Vincenti’s Italian is reflected in his French. M. Vicenti shares emotion with Farid, another immigrant like himself as a result of the earthquake which had hit Algeria. This fraternal emotion is peculiar with immigrants who find themselves in a foreign community. He expresses his hatred for members of the host community who dare to meddle in the affairs of immigrants, for example the case of Patrick and Jesus when he was talking to Farid in the elevator. M. Vincenti had this urge to strike Patrick with his walking stick.

Begag presents *Zenzela* as an interaction between Algeria and France. This relationship is shown in the setting of the novel, which revolves around Lyon, Setif and El-Asnam. As a result of this, the language of the novel portrays linguistic hybridity; that is a combination of Arabic words while speaking French. Words like *Inch’Allah*, *Astarfighullah*, *Alhamdoullah*, *Khobz ed’dar*, *Bism’illah Il rahman Il Rahim! Bism’illah Il rahman Il Rahim*, *djellaba* and others abound all through the novel.

Dis Oualla presents a group of young people and their different views of life and dreams of the future. As is peculiar to Begag’s novel, the title is a word used in Arabic. It is one used when a person wants to attest to the authenticity of the information s/he is providing. It is like swearing by the name of Allah. The novel also has words like *Oualla*’, ’*Oualla*, “*sur la mecque*” and ‘*mektoub*’ from the Arabic word *maktub* or *mektub* meaning what is written or predestined, which expresses fatalism.

3.3. Literary Hybridity

African literature has always been influenced by European literature. The west, during colonialism, brought the language and their literary genres which they insisted were the best. Before this period, the literature of Africa was oral literature which was passed from generation to generation by the griots (itinerant story-

tellers) in the form of myths, proverbs, songs and short stories. Modern African literature was born in the educational systems of colonialism with European models rather than the existing African traditions. Sanusi (2016:29) posits that African oral literature crystallised as a result of European conquest to take the forms of prose, theatre and poetry. The three selected novels of Azouz Begag are no exception to the European genres and forms. Further, he writes in a European language except for his introduction of Arabic words and phrases to re-emphasise his roots.

3.4. Cultural Hybridity

Migration has led to a mixture of cultures. Migrants who find themselves in a new community are forced to adapt to their new environment. At this point of adaptation, traditional values are fused with that of the host community, thereby creating an all-new culture.

In *Le gone du Chaâba*, cultural hybridity is highlighted through the character of Zidouma (Saïd's wife). Zidouma represents the modern Maghrebian woman, who will stand up against the men and fight for her rights. Unlike in a traditional African setting, she insults Bouzid and even wants to get into a fight with him. This is seen in the dialogue between the two characters and it is a total violation of Arabic as well as African traditions.

Rentre chez toi, femme! Ces histoires ne te regardent pas! -Non, je ne rentre pas chez moi, je suis libre. -Rentre dans ton trou, t'ai-je dit, ou bien je vais te faire rentrer!-J'ai dit non. Frappe-moi! Allez! Frappe-moi! Sur ces mots, mon père se jeta sur elle sans retenue, l'agrippa par les cheveux pour la trainer dans sa hutte. Les voisins sortirent, affolés par les cris, les pleurs des enfants. Trois hommes ceinturèrent mon père. - Elle veut devenir un homme, maintenant cette sale. Ecoutez-la, elle m'insulte. Lâchez-moi, je vais l'égorger, je vais boire son sang. Zidouma, possédée par le diable, jurait de plus belle, maudissait, nous brûlait vifs sur un bûcher (1986:126).

Go to your house, woman! This issue does not concern you! - No, I am not going to my house I am free. – Go into your hole, I have told you, or else I will make you! – I said no. Beat me! Go on! Beat me! With these words, my father fell on her without restraint, held her by the hair to pull into her hut. The neighbours came out, panicked by the shouts, the cries of children. Three men encircled my father. - She wants to become a man now, this dirt. Listen to her, she is insulting me. Leave me and I will cut her throat, I will drink her blood. Zidouma, possessed by the devil, insulted him more, cursed, she was burning us alive on a woodshed.

Furthermore, Begag portrays Zidouma as having imbibed the French mode of dressing. Juxtaposing her with Mme Bouchaoui “... *dans son binouar qu'elle n'a pas voulu troquer contre une jupe indigene* (134)” “... in her Algerian robe which she has refused to replace with an indigenous skirt (author's translation)” and Messaouda (Azouz's mother), Begag presents an all new Zidouma who anyone would mistake for an autochthonous person if not for her Arabic roundness. The character of Zidouma presents an emancipated Maghrebian woman.

Ma mère n'a pas réalisé que nous ne sommes plus chez nous, au chaâba. Elle se tient là, à l'aise dans son binouar au beau milieu de la rue. Zidouma, elle, arbore une jupe plissée dernier cri, des talons aiguilles. Si sa rondeur n'avait pas été si prononcée, on aurait pu la confondre avec une autochtone... (1986:170)

My mother had not realized that we were no longer at the shanties. She stood there, comfortably in her gown in the middle of the street. Zidouma, it was she, wore the latest-style pleated skirt, with high-heeled shoes. If her curves were not too pronounced, one would mistake her for an autochthonous person.

In addition, Azouz the hybrid is ashamed of his Algerian mode of dressing. Being an offspring of an Algerian immigrant and having spent most of his time with French classmates, he is ashamed of the dressing of his mother in her usual *binouar* “... *tombant jusqu’aux chevilles, les cheveux cachés dans un foulard vert*” “... falling down to the ankle, her hair hidden in a green scarf.”

Je t’ai fait honte, hein? J’ai dit: -Ça va pas, non! Mais qu’est-ce que tu racontes. - Je n’aime pas quand tu cries comme ça. Regarde, tout le monde nous regarde. -Pourquoi tu dis que j’ai honte de toi? - Parce que je ne ressemble pas à une française, et puis mon binouar (1986:185).

I have embarrassed you, have I? What is the matter! What are you saying? – I don’t like it when you shout like this. See, everyone is looking at us. - Why are you saying I am ashamed of you? - Because I don’t look like a French, and then my gown.

Azouz despises his cultural background and even tells his classmates that he is a Jew. This causes those friends to wonder how he could be a Jew and bear the name of an Arab.

Zenzela presents Farid the protagonist who is lost in his native culture, As has been the case of many first-generation migrants, his father brings his children back home in order to show them their roots. It is culturally accepted to kiss the hand of a person as a sign of respect. This cultural value is despised by Farid who feels uncomfortable doing so in public. The passage below shows his disdain of his local culture.

Sid Ahmed a marché avec nous jusqu’à l’arrêt du 37. Sous l’Abribus, il s’est penché pour une accolade et il a offert sa main à Yemma, elle l’a saisie et elle l’a baissé respectueusement. Je n’ai pas aimé du tout. Lorsque je serais à mon tour marabout premier échelon, je mettrai fin à cette pratique humiliante. Surtout à l’arrêt des bus, en terre gauloise. De quoi avions-nous l’air, avec nos us féodaux (1997b:62-63)!

Sid Ahmed walked with us to bus stop 37. Under the bus shade, he bent for an accolade and offered his hand to Yemma, she held it and kissed it respectfully. I did not like it at all. When I become a marabout [Muslim chaplain] of the first grade, I will put an end to such humiliating practice. Especially at the bus stop, on French soil. What do we look like, with our feudal customs.

By not kissing the hand of Sid Ahmed, Farid portrays himself as a hybrid who identifies with the French cultural values rather than the values of his native Algeria. Furthermore, Begag highlights cultural hybridity in El Asnam, a town in Algeria. Unlike in the previous case whereby hybridity is displayed by an Algerian based in France, this case is presented by Algerians at home. Cultural hybridity is shown through the music. At a wedding ceremony in El Asnam, the music of Elton John is being played by local musicians. It would have been more apt and imaginable to view an oriental wedding ceremony with all the Maghrebian pomp and fair.

Il y avait fête au village, un mariage. Au milieu d’une petite place, monté sur une estrade, un groupe de musiciens jouait un air d’Elton John que je connaissais, Good Bye Yellow Brick Road. Les graves de la guitare basse martelaient la nuit à des kilomètres à la ronde. J’avais été agréablement surpris d’entendre si loin de l’Europe Elton John et je me disais qu’entre Lyon et Sétif, finalement, la portée n’était grande et l’écart culturel pas si rédhibitoire entre Anna et moi (1997b:65-66).

There was a celebration in the village, a marriage. In the middle of a small place, on a platform, a group of musicians were playing a song by Elton John which I knew, Good Bye Yellow Brick Road. The bass guitar could be heard kilometres away. I was pleasantly surprised to hear Elton John so far away from Europe and I told myself that the gap between Lyon and Sétif was not that wide and the cultural space between me and Anna was not that insurmountable.

The protagonist is taken aback to hear Elton John's music at home. This rekindles his hope of marrying Anna (his French heartthrob). Since the cultural gap between Europe and Algeria is no longer too wide, it would not be an issue with his parents accepting Anna as a daughter-in-law.

3.5. Religious Hybridity

Religious hybridity deals with the interaction of different belief systems with the traditional or local religion of a particular group of people. *Zenzela* is the only novel in the selected novels to discuss religious hybridity. Begag commences the novel with a visit to a Marabata or "... *version feminine du marabout* (10)" (a feminine herbalist). She foresees the kidnapping of Farid's junior brother, Nabil and informs the family. This eventually leads to his rescue by Farid.

La magicienne a levé les yeux sur moi, des yeux rouge vif, luisants sous l'effet de la fatigue ou de la moiteur de l'atmosphère. Et aussitôt, elle a baissé la tête. Elle avait enregistré mes traits dans sa boule de cristal. Cela lui suffisait pour annoncer ses quatre vérités sur mon destin (1997b:10-11).

The magician raised his eyes to me, two red bright eyes, shining under the effects of tiredness or the moisture in the atmosphere. And suddenly, she lowered her head. She had recorded my features in her crystal ball. This was enough to announce the four truths of my destiny.

The visit to the herbalist shows the interrelationship that exists between Islam in Algeria and traditional religion in Sétif.

4. Conclusion

Azouz Begag's selected novels offer a profound exploration of hybridity and identity. Through his storytelling, he invites readers to reflect on the complexities of cultural fusion, the fluidity of identity and the ongoing challenges faced by postcolonial societies. His narratives speak to the ongoing struggles faced by the descendants of colonised communities, highlighting the inequalities and racism that is still prevalent in contemporary French society and other parts of the world. One of such cases is that of Azouz Begag, who was maltreated in the United States despite the fact that he was carrying a French diplomatic passport. Begag's works serve as a significant contribution to the literary landscape and act as a call for social justice in the struggle to dismantle the power structures that perpetuate postcolonial hierarchies.

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