

# 31. World Literary Studies and East African Anglophone Literature

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In an article from 2008, Peter Kalliney uses the fate of East African author Moyez Vassanji's novel *The Gunny Sack* to address a question he sees as long overdue in postcolonial literary scholarship: the relation between what he calls globalisation theory and postcolonial theory. A central point in his argument concerns the circulation of literature. Vassanji's complex and narratively intricate story of migration and dispossession, Kalliney argues, becomes attractive to scholars of postcolonial literature because it combines an aesthetic value – complexity – with what is ostensibly a political value – the novel's theme of subordination and marginalisation. These values exist, Kalliney suggests, in tension. The fact that the novel is read and discussed at all in northern academic circles is proof of its circulation, indeed its literary success, in metropolitan centres where the relevant institutions grant it recognition. On the other hand, success is anathema to the novel's political value, which depends instead on it being as marginalised as the individuals and communities it represents. To Kalliney, the failure in much postcolonial study to recognise the relation between literary theme and/or narrative form and the fate of the book object undermines its relevance, and in the article, he turns to globalisation theory to flesh out a literary studies approach which combines attention to the literary text with analysis of the

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mechanisms that enable, or prevent, the circulation of, and access to, literature.<sup>1</sup>

Kalliney's critical intervention is an instance of what Sarah Brouillette has subsequently called a "material turn" within postcolonial literary studies – a turn Brouillette herself helped realising – that addresses precisely the status, the circulation, and the material conditions of postcolonial literature.<sup>2</sup> Despite this recent direction, it is arguably world literature studies which, over the last decades, has most successfully established itself as a research and teaching discipline that brings globalisation theory into literary study through analyses of the development and history, the circulation, the transformation and the recognition of literature on a global scale.<sup>3</sup>

Because of its theoretical ambitions, its comparative global scope, and its European origins as a conceptual framework, world literary studies continuously risk being too abstract to be useful, or, which amounts to the same thing, ignoring historical and cultural particularities and contexts which shape literary cultures. Historical and cultural nuance, of course, are central values to postcolonial studies (if not always given due attention<sup>4</sup>). In a manner akin to Kalliney's approach above, this chapter discusses some of the challenges that face the scholar who approaches African literature from the sociological world literary studies perspective of Pascale Casanova. It draws throughout on postcolonial theory – and occasionally on book chain and book history studies – to

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kalliney, "East African Literature and the Politics of Global Reading", *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 1 (2008): 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Brouillette, "Postcolonial Print Cultures", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 1 (2013): 3.

<sup>3</sup> David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova are household names but the field is too wide to summarise here. One point of entry is the introduction to *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, ed. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York: rouledge, 2015), 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Lazarus, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–19, argues precisely that postcolonial literary studies has detached itself from specific political and historical specificities and shrunk the canon of texts to a minimum.

highlight central aspects of her theorisation that need questioning from an East African perspective or elaboration to be applicable. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the marketing of Ugandan author Doreen Baingana's short story collection, *Tropical Fish*, which is intended to give concrete example of the points made.

In Casanova's highly influential model of the international space of literature – “the world republic of letters” – nations are locked into competition and struggle for literary superiority. The space that results from the relations between nations is structured in centre and periphery where certain languages, locations, and therefore literatures, dominate others. The internationally dominant centre (or centres, such as regional ones), establishes what counts as literary value at each historical point in time and becomes the model of literature which the dominated literary nations receive, emulate, revolutionise, or rebel against. Such revolutionising occurred, in Casanova's account, in the turn to popular national-language literature in nineteenth-century Europe, where German intellectuals and writers, drawing on the philosophical ideas developed by Herder and others, began arguing the value of a distinct national literature. It happened again in the postcolonial era in which newly independent countries “moved to assert linguistic and literary claims of the their own”.<sup>5</sup>

The struggle between nations mirrors the struggles that take place in the national arenas. Every author, Casanova writes, “is situated once according to the position he or she occupies in a national space, and then once again according to the place that this occupies within the world space”.<sup>6</sup> Authors enter the literary field through publication and compete for literary capital by being recognised by critics, prize juries and other institutions.

In this international literary space, exchange between the national literary fields happens through translation, through importation of ideas, and through the movement of writers, all of which may serve different ends. Translations may be a means for

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<sup>5</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 78–80.

<sup>6</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 81.

a nation to confirm a position of dominance, such as the “belles infidèles” translations of the French 17<sup>th</sup> century, or they may be attempts to “catch up” with dominant nations from a position of subordination by accumulating literary capital.<sup>7</sup> As a rule, however, dominant languages and nations are less open to influences from the other nations through translation, as measured, for instance, by the proportion of translations of foreign works to the publication total in a country.<sup>8</sup> For the individual writer, translation and/or publication abroad are additional ways of furthering the literary career, just as the adoption of a more central language, such as English, or the relocation to a literary metropolis, like Paris, are potential roads to literary fame.

Although the idea is not developed extensively, it is clear that in Casanova’s world literature model, translators and travelling or migrant writers are important. Whatever their own motives, they perform the vital role of enriching literary fields by introducing new literary ideas and by sending home new impulses from the new host culture. The traffic may run from the older and more venerable national field to the younger, from the younger to the older (less common), or combine the two. Thus, in Casanova’s description, Paul Valéry’s French translation of *Ulysses* helped establishing James Joyce as an important modern writer capable of revitalising an old and prestigious literary culture. As a consequence, he became a central author in Irish literary culture as well. In similar fashion, Gertrude Stein’s residence in Paris not only advanced her literary career but also contributed importantly to American literary culture, which at the time was comparatively undeveloped.<sup>9</sup> Nathan Suhr-Sytsma provides a Nigerian example of this process by analysing how writers connected to Ibadan University in the 1950s fashioned new idioms for an emerging

<sup>7</sup> Casanova, *La Langue Mondiale* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 77–95.

<sup>8</sup> Heilbron, “Translation as a Cultural World System”, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 8, no. 1 (2000): 12–15. See the contributions by Tenggar, Lindqvist, Hedberg, Schwartz, and Edfeldt in the current section for discussions of various cases of translations between central and peripheral languages, or from one periphery to another.

<sup>9</sup> Casanova, “Literature as a World”, *New Left Review* 31 (2005): 86–87

Nigerian literary culture by transforming British metropolitan modernism in ways that also made them attractive to publishers in London.<sup>10</sup>

The central advantage of a model of world literary space like Casanova's lies in its comparative international perspective. Its occasionally sweeping arguments have, however, attracted criticism. One of the critics is Christopher Prendergast who turns against what he sees as Casanova's exaggerated dependence on the notions of *nation* and *struggle*. This single focus, he claims, preclude other, potentially more valuable, units and dimensions of analysis, such as region, class and gender, and other possible relations, like negotiation or collaboration. The result is loss of theoretical precision and historical nuance. Prendergast illustrates his point through historical example: French authors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century used Shakespeare not simply as model to emulate, but as a means to combat the dominant aesthetic of Racine – that is they enlisted the English playwright in a domestic aesthetic struggle rather than for competition with another nation.<sup>11</sup>

Peter Kalliney's study of the literary group around the BBC *Caribbean Voices* radio programme is a *de facto* elaboration of Prendergast's second point of criticism. What Kalliney demonstrates is that Caribbean and British authors simultaneously helped and competed with one another, and that the new impulses feeding into British literary culture in the 1950s from the West Indies in and outside of Britain became means in a literary struggle against the aesthetic of the dominating realism.<sup>12</sup>

Prendergast's response to Casanova, and Kalliney's analysis of Caribbean-British author relations both point to aspects of East African literary culture that must be addressed for a world literature studies comparative model to be relevant: the role of the national literary field, the role of language, and the nature of the

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<sup>10</sup> Suhr-Sytsma, "Ibadan Modernism: Poetry and the Literary Present in Mid-Century Nigeria", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 1 (2013): 44–45

<sup>11</sup> Prendergast, "Negotiating World Literature", *New Left Review* 8 (2001): 109–11.

<sup>12</sup> Kalliney, *The Commonwealth of Letters*, 118–19.

feedback or transfer between literary fields. All three of them are conceptual and empirical at once.

First, in contrast to the European or American literary fields which Casanova discusses, East African literary fields are not divided into a pole of small-scale literary fiction – in which book production strives towards value defined as literary quality – and a pole of large-scale popular fiction – where book production is governed primarily by an economic logic in which value equals sales.<sup>13</sup> Rather, from the colonial period into the present, literary markets have been dominated by the publishing of educational books.<sup>14</sup> Foreign aid organisations and intergovernmental organisations with publication interests or literary support strategies have also impacted heavily on book production and book trade.<sup>15</sup> As a result, markets have been less autonomous, hybrid arenas in which literature for education has constituted the only profitable market – but a market in which money can be made through the publication of quality literature. During the late colonial and early post-colonial period foreign publishers found this “dual economy”, as Caroline Davis calls it, very lucrative. The publishing of Wole Soyinka by Oxford University Press, one of Davis’ examples, illustrates this clearly. The publisher exploited the characteristic to market Soyinka as a serious African writer in Britain, a labelling that added to the cultural prestige of the publisher. In Nigeria, he became a commercially successful author due to his inclusion in school reading lists and curricula.<sup>16</sup> The situation has not changed significantly, and

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<sup>13</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, “The Sociology of Translation: A New Research Domain”, in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (Chichester, UK: Wiley 2014), 88.

<sup>14</sup> Bgoya, “Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day”, *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 2 (2013): 22.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Brouillette, “UNESCO and the Book in the Developing World”, *Representations* 127 (2014): 27.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Davis, “Publishing Wole Soyinka: Oxford University Press and the Creation of ‘Africa’s Own William Shakespeare’”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 4 (2012): 346.

international publishers remain the central actors in the East African literary landscape.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, English remains one of the national languages in East Africa and is the medium of instruction in school above the lower forms. The situation, according to some critics, significantly hampers the establishment of broad reading publics that can support a commercially viable trade in sophisticated books in *any* language used in the region.<sup>18</sup> It also means, however, that individual authors may choose to write in a language which, if not their first, is deeply familiar and at the same time a central language globally (an option that may appear as much an opportunity as a necessity in the absence of established routes to a literary career at home). The consequence is that the passage to literary fame may look very different from European or American authors who are usually established first in the national literary field and subsequently on the world stage through translation and/or foreign publication, processes which depend on recognition by additional literary institutions.

Thirdly, the cultural feedback loops need examination and empirical elaboration with respect to East African anglophone writing. Postcolonial literary studies have from its inception been concerned with questions of canon and literary influence. More recently, it has turned its attention to audiences. Sarah Brouillette has demonstrated that readers of anglophone postcolonial fiction that are found in former colonising nations are generally made up of immigrants from the same countries as the authors whose fiction they read, or readers – in university courses, for instance – with relatively deep knowledge of the places they read about. At the same time, postcolonial authors are frequently published and marketed as spokespersons of sorts for a country, or a culture. Authors, acutely aware of these strategies strain against them,

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<sup>17</sup> Bgoya notes that the “traditional” publishing model in which commercially successful books may support the publishing of narrower titles is counteracted by the presence of international publishers whose operations effectively prevent smaller national or local ventures. “Publishing in Africa”, 22. See, however, Doreen Strauhs’ discussion of the role of literary non-governmental organisations, for a complementary view. Strauhs, “African Literary NGOs”, e.g. 11–41.

<sup>18</sup> Bgoya, “Publishing in Africa”, 22.

with the result that their texts are often marked by a certain anxiety around representativeness.<sup>19</sup>

Against the background of the general points made about the characteristics of literary fields in East Africa, and the challenges they pose to a world literature perspective, I want now to turn to Doreen Baingana and her collection of short stories, *Tropical Fish*, to illustrate how some of the issues introduced play out in one particular case.

Baingana's short story collection, which is her literary debut, recounts the life of three sisters of the same wealthy Ugandan family (at one point they own a Mercedes-Benz) in Entebbe. Romances and sexual discoveries are central to the story and are narrated as part of explorations of identity that move between the liberatory and the destructive. The tentative and adventurous lives the sisters try out are also connected to deep feelings of disorientation and self-doubt, and in one instance events take a sinister turn. Christine, the central character, in one short story compares herself to the tropical fish her then-boyfriend, a white Englishman, exports to Britain. In a following short story, she struggles and fails to be at home in Los Angeles where she settles with her new American boyfriend in a destructive relationship, before she returns to Uganda. Her sister Rosa, equally explorative, ends up dying from AIDS, while Patti, her second sibling, becomes a new-born Christian. The stories' historical and political background is the period after Idi Amin's rule in Uganda.

Even a short description like this brings home the central themes of cultural identity and belonging that the stories develop. The summary also makes clear that the text's demographic setting – a middle class and “modern” Ugandan family with the ability to travel – makes it very different from Vassanji's novel. The anxiety that Brouillette charts in her analyses, however, is readily observable in Baingana's text. In a preface to the stories, Baingana writes that her text should not be read as “stories of African womanhood” but be regarded as “examples, fantasies”.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 26–44.

<sup>20</sup> Doreen Baingana, “Preface to the Harlem Moon Edition”, *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2005), n.p.

A brief look at the publication history and the packaging of Baingana's literary work will shed further light on the place Baingana and her short stories occupy in the "world republic of letters". In a very concrete manner, her text speaks to the American literary market. She has chosen to write in English, and several of the stories from the collection have been published in literary magazines in the USA. Some of them are smaller, like *Glimmer Train*, based in Portland, and others have high reputation, like *Callaloo*, placed at A&T University in Texas. The collection was published by the US publisher Harlem Moon in 2005 – now an imprint of Penguin Random House, one of the world's largest publishers with a tradition of publishing quality literature as well as popular fiction.<sup>21</sup>

The book's cover reinforces the impression that its intended audience is primarily American. Book covers play important roles in the marketing of literature.<sup>22</sup> The paperback cover features an image of a female face, a colour photograph centred on a black woman's mouth in which a yellow flower is placed. The cover is striped horizontally in bright colours, and printed on top of them are excerpts from reviews, praise from author colleagues, and mentions of literary prizes. On the front page is a quotation from a review by *Vanity Fair* magazine which links Baingana's writing to Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali, Indian-American and Bangladeshi-British authors respectively, by stating that these writers have in common an interest in "the modern, messy, intimate politics of home life" rather than "the history and politics of the homeland". Taken together,

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<sup>21</sup> Penguin Random House, accessed 20 May 2017, [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com).

<sup>22</sup> Gérard Genette, *Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Genette divides the *paratext* – that is, texts outside the literary text proper, into *peritext* – the texts and images immediately surrounding the literary text, such as covers and forewords, and the *epitext* – more distant texts like interviews. Different publishers may aim for different readerships on separate markets, by varying the cover of books, just as new editions may signal a new audience. For an example, see Andrew van der Vlies' discussion of the different covers of Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* in *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

these elements of the *peritext* – the cover, the blurb, the excerpts – illustrate how the publisher creates an intended audience for the text. The image creates an arresting contrast between colours, but more importantly, draws attention to aestheticisation, to beauty, sensualism and sex that are central elements in the stories. It also uses sensualism (and sex) as a device to capture the attention of the potential book buyer. The excerpt from *Vanity Fair*, placed centrally on the front page, performs several significant tasks at once. In his reading of the cover of *The Gunny Sack*, Kalliney comments on a quotation which states that the novel is “Africa’s *Midnight Children*”. The comparison serves as marker of recognition, highlights a (post-)modernist and literary aesthetic shared by the two authors, and simultaneously emphasises the novel’s difference and continental belonging – *Africa’s Midnight’s Children*.<sup>23</sup> The *Vanity Fair* quotation is similarly multi-layered. It bestows popular (rather than elite) recognition upon Baingana’s text; it places it in the company of other, and more established, authors who span the popular-quality divide and are well read in the USA and Britain; and it furnishes a global-but-particular communal identity for the text and the author in addition to the local belonging signalled by the subtitle’s geographical marker “Entebbe”.

Baingana’s text testifies to the anxiety around representativity Brouillette discusses, and the marketing of her book, as signalled by the *peritexts*, seemingly displays the publisher’s efforts to direct it to an American audience. Baingana, however, is far from an estranged migrant writer. On the contrary, she is a literary activist of sorts who divides her time between the USA and Uganda. She is associated with Uganda women writers’ organisation, FEMRITE and has been on the juries of several African literary prizes. She has written a column for a Ugandan women’s magazine, taught creative writing in Kenya, and contributed to the South African literary magazine *Chimurenga*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kalliney, “East African Literature and the Politics of Global Reading”, 13–16

<sup>24</sup> FEMRITE. Femrite.org. Pilgrimages collaboration between Chimurenga and Kwani? Magazines, accessed 20 May 2017, <https://www.pilgrimages.org.za/pilgrimages/doreen-baingana/>.

Her option to write in English does not exclude her from the national literary market, nor does it necessarily make her fiction more exclusive than it would have been in other languages. It does not follow from this, however, that her short story collection is readily available in Ugandan bookshops, though research would have to establish that. Lastly, Baingana, in very concrete ways acts as a point of contact and feedback between the literary fields she belongs to and contributes to the literary culture of Uganda.

This chapter has identified some of the challenges that research into East African literature need to address when approaching it from a world literature perspective. More precisely, it has argued that central concepts used by scholars like Pascale Casanova need calibration before they are applicable in East African contexts. The brief discussion of the marketing and writing activities of Ugandan author Doreen Baingana has illustrated, further, the need for discussion of feedback loops and cultural transfers to be empirically based.

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