

Research Project

Opening Up Worlds: Rethinking Anglophone World Literatures and Female Authorship Within The Global Literary Market

Abstract:

The working title of my PhD dissertation is *Opening Up Worlds: Rethinking Anglophone World Literatures and Female Authorship Within The Global Literary Market*. The thesis focuses on a re-evaluation of postcolonial literatures as world literatures, extending the definition to contemporary Anglophone novels that fit within the category of migrant fiction set in the North Atlantic. I argue that the narratives of authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, NoViolet Bulawayo and Akwaeke Emezi, despite being examples of a certain type of postcolonial literature that is marketed for Western metropolitan audiences, still have the capacity of opening up new worlds. The dissertation focuses on the ways in which these novels actualise a process of re-worlding, creating new spaces of representation against dominant socio-cultural discourses.

Description of planned research:

The theses of this project consider the limitations of the label of postcolonial literature for contemporary Anglophone literary works born out of the globalisation of today's world. Recent novels that fall within such definition show transcultural characteristics, both on a stylistic and thematic level, that call for a new perspective of analysis more adequate to the inherent complexities of contemporary Anglophone literatures. In particular, I have selected four African novels — *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Ghana Must Go* (2013) by Taiye Selasi, *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo and *Freshwater* (2018) by Akwaeke Emezi — that have been celebrated within the global literary market as instances of

postcolonial literature characterised by a cosmopolitan turn due to their migrant narratives. The intent of this research is to analyse how these narratives are going beyond traditional theoretical frameworks, changing today's globalised literary market by translating the notion of postcolonial literatures to that of Anglophone world literatures (Helgesson, Neumann and Rippl 2020) through a process of literary re-worlding.

Anglophone literatures that deal with migrant narratives so far have been the subject of investigation of postcolonial literary theory that has often focused on a critical study based on either a writing back paradigm (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989) or a contrapuntal reading analysis (Said 1993), both of which consider postcolonial literatures as subversive and counter-discursive practices embedded in anti-imperial and anti-colonial politics. Furthermore, Anglophone narratives have been at the core of theories of world literature that have pushed for an inclusion within the literary canon of those literatures always considered as marginal, an incorporation actualised through the creation of either a circulation model (Damrosch 2003) or a reconfiguration of the literary space based on a centre/periphery axis (Casanova 1999/2005; Moretti 2000).

However, both these frameworks – postcolonial literary theory and notions of world literature – have been criticised because they impose already existing hierarchical structures of power within the literary field. On the one hand, postcolonialism focuses on the political, binary opposition between former colonies and Western metropolises, limiting not only the scope of literary theories but also the corpus of works taken into consideration (Gikandi 2011; Lazarus 2011); on the other hand, the circulation and the centre/periphery models upon which world literature is based, and whose main interest regards the ways texts circulate within the literary space, reiterate dominant discourses reducing the linguistic and cultural potential of literature, which as a result is considered as a mere commercial commodity of exchange (Apter 2013; Mufti 2016).

In order to avoid falling back into these blind spots and offer a new perspective through which analyse contemporary Anglophone novels, my research will go beyond both literary frameworks by building the theoretical chapter on the recent

notions of world-making activities of literature. In particular, I will consider theories related to the formation of literary worlds as suggested by Eric Hayot in *On Literary Worlds* (2012), as well as further developments on the normative power of literature and its influences on the socio-cultural and political structures of today's world as theorised by Pheng Cheah in *What Is a World?* (2016).

These approaches go beyond the canonical conceptualisation of the world limited to its physical entity, i.e., only considering the world in geo-spatial terms according to cartographies that find their origins in imperial dominations. Such an idea overlooks what Pheng Cheah defines the “ethicopolitical horizon” or normative power of literature, that is, the inherent capacity of a literary work of changing the existing world by opening up alternative spaces of representation (Cheah 2016). I believe that notions that refer to the world-making activities of literature are relevant to contextualise contemporary Anglophone literatures from a different perspective, one that considers the socio-cultural implications of the selected novels on the portrayal of migrant identities.

These theories on literary worlds focus on the characterisation of the world's normativity in temporal terms as an ongoing and dynamic process of becoming, which enables the actualisation of a process of literary re-worlding that challenges the hierarchal structures of power of the existing world. As preparatory steps, therefore, I will analyse the meaning of “world” with reference to literary theory in order to understand the concept of worlding within literature. What makes literature a world-making activity? What does it mean to create a world within a literary work and how does that affect the existing world, especially in today's globalised society? Also, why contemporary Anglophone world literatures (and not postcolonial literatures) seem to be best suited to enable these processes of worlding? In this sense, I will consider the selected novels according to specific characteristics they all have, such as the movement of cultural self-return, some of the authors' linguistic choices and the characters' *Bildung* that becomes a process of socio-cultural unlearning through which subjects considered postcolonial “can emerge and transform the existing world” and, at the same time, the so-called postcolonial literatures develop their “force of worlding and world literature in the normative sense” (Cheah 2016: 218).

The final purpose of this research is to investigate how contemporary Anglophone world literatures are redefining the global literary scene through a re-evaluation of literature's normative powers and the representation of new migrant, fluid identities.

References:

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