

Rethinking African Literature as World Literature

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Abstract

The World Literature corpus has always been seen as synonymous with the literatures of Western European, North American and Russia. This misconception has its root in Goethe's conceptualization of the corpus as "European literature"—such that the literatures from the rest of the world are referred to not as world literature texts. This article therefore challenges that status quo. The World Literature in its present form is defined. It is revealed that emphasis is given to literatures that have cross borders. Using selected African literature texts, African literature is validated as part of the world literature corpus. The article argues that African literature has crossed borders and engages themes that share similar values with other literatures produced in all other continents of the world. The paper reveals that since most cultures of the world have similar features and that the world is indeed a global village, African literature therefore forms an integral part of the corpus of World literature.

Keywords: World Literature, African Literature, Goethe, Human Experience

Introduction

The term World Literature itself was coined by the German writer named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827. For a very long time, what Goethe meant by the term World literature became the focus of many researchers in the field of Comparative Literature and this has given rise to two schools of thought. While the proponents of the first school of thought suggest that by such coinage Goethe's major focus was the literatures produced in Europe and not the entire world, the proponents of the second school is of the view that by such coinage Goethe referred to literatures of the entire world or a body of different national literatures coming together to form one global entity. In his article entitled "The Goethe Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature", Birus (2000:2), an exponent of the first school, while trying to give a proper answer to the question "what is world literature?" notes that to say that world literature is the literature of "the entire world seems trivial". He maintains that Goethe had actually equated world literature to European literature, when he (Goethe) said "'European i.e., world literature' '*europaische, d.h., Weltliteratur*'; as reads the heading of a late outline of Goethe's Werke. Sophien-Ausgabe". Birus (2000:3) quotes Goethe's assertion to further support his claim thus:

If we have dared to proclaim a European literature, indeed a universal world literature, then we have hardly done so simply to point out that different nations acknowledge each other and their respective creations, for in this sense it has existed for a long time and continues more or less to flourish.

For this reason, Birus argues that the term World Literature should not be taken at face value because Goethe's concept of world literature is not the replacement of the totality of world national literatures as most scholars now see it. Another important proponent of the first school of thought, Horst Steinmetz, is also of the view that Goethe's concept of world literature cannot be identified either with the sum total of all literatures of the world or with the canon of sets of *chef-d'oeuvre-s* [masterpieces]. Kraus (qtd in Abdu 2017: 10), another proponent of the first school of thought, describes the world literature as European-focused. According to him, the literature gives European literatures the opportunity to rise above all literatures and to become super-literatures, "with its masterpieces towering above every normal horizon. World literature thus turns into a great pandemonium in which Cervantes and Rabelais, Dante and Voltaire nod to each other". While discussing the divergent interpretations that have followed Goethe's concept of world literature in recent times, Horst Steinmetz explains that Goethe might have conceived of world literature as European literature because the world literature corpus was still developing and was not systematic enough.

As one of the exponents of the second school, Wellek (1955: 22) provides a different account of Goethe's perception of the concept of world literature. He posits that by coining the term, Goethe argues for a historical evolutionary scheme where world national literatures will fuse and then melt into one great literature (22). Hassan (2000:39) has also maintained that by coining the term, Goethe envisions a future world state. Hassan explains Goethe's intention as the opportunity to "open dialogue between nations" thus:

In this dialogue, each nation would be represented by its major writers, whose works would continue to reflect each nation's *Volksgeist* [spiritual essence] while achieving, as a result of the increased cross-cultural understanding fostered by reading foreign literatures, such breadth of vision as to express the universality of human experience. In that sense, world literature was for Goethe an opportunity, not for the imposition of cultural hegemony by one nation over others, but rather for greater understanding of one's neighbors and of oneself that would foster harmony and lead to reducing conflict.

The belief in Goethe's unified world literature is also evident in Marx and Engels's reflection on the corpus as the offshoot of the final phase of the evolution of capitalism in their 1848 *Communist Manifesto* – thus: "The intellectual product of single nations will become common property. National one-sidedness and narrowness will become increasingly impossible and from the many national and regional literatures a world literature will emerge." Despite the advancement of the views of the proponents of the second school of thought, the views of the proponents of the first school of thought seem to be having their ways as it concerns the world literature discourse. This is evident in the fact that more and more world literature anthologies as well as important world literature discourses tend to feature Western European, North American and Russian literatures as the official literatures for the corpus. As the literatures of the Western Europe, North America and Russia dominate the world literature corpus, it has received more and more condemnations from scholars who are the proponents of the second

school of thought. For instance, according to T.S. Eliot, the world literature has created an avenue for the imposition of European culture on non-Europeans (qtd in Abdul,10).

Recently the corpus is beginning to respond to the need to develop the world literature corpus that will fill the gap created by the awareness of individual nations' diversities and identities as well as their literary cum linguistic unequal representations. This has led to the attempt to properly define the literature in order to mark it for cross-cultural understanding and world harmony. Among the world literature scholars whose contributions have further defined and charted the corpus along the path of literary transformation, Damrosch's articles have not only established tenets for the corpus, they have given the corpus a new platform to thrive. Through these articles as well as the articles of others on the corpus, it is revealed that the world literature corpus is an opportunity to bring together different national writers' cultural perceptions to human experience in order to harvest their world views for a clearer understanding of the world. The literatures do not necessarily have to be masterpieces in the right sense of the word; they are literatures that are good enough to represent an individual, nation, region, or even continent.

This is the more reason the world literature corpus thrives on ellipsis. By ellipsis, it is meant that instead of discussing all the national literatures that have crossed borders at the same time, a few writers' works are selected for discussion. Like Damrosch, other scholars have also contributed articles that suggest way a forward for the corpus. Among these scholars is Durisin (1984, pp. 80-81) whose work entitled *Theory of Literary Comparatistics* proposes discourses of world literature that adheres to the following approaches: (1) the discussion of the literature of the entire world. Hence the discourse should see the history of world literature as the "ensemble of the histories of individual national literatures alongside each other"; (2) the discourse of world literature should select the best created individual national literatures. Hence it should come up with "a kind of synthesizing views of what has been created" and (3) the discourse should represent World literature as the product of "all the individual literatures". With these and many more approaches outlined as some of the tenets of the world literature corpus, it is not out of place to discuss African literature in alignment with other literatures of the world under a world literature discourse.

If the Oriental and the African literatures are the periphery of the World literature corpus then what is World literature? Damrosch (2016:498), one of the leading scholars in the corpus, has described it as a literature without "borders and boundaries of many sorts-geographic, generic and temporal". He explains that the literature operates at multi-dimensional space and in relation to four levels of reference: "the global, the regional, the national and the individual". Galik (2000:2) also notes that the literature is "determined by historical period and geographical/cultural locus"—that is, it begins in the nineteenth century with Western Europe and in the present time it includes the world. Hence, he says the literature is "a part of global inter-literariness". It transgresses its inter-literariness between different national literatures as well as inter-literary communities. It also bridges the literary continents with "myriads of interconnected literary facts of the whole world" (p.5). In his book entitled *What is World Literature* (2003), Damrosch offers a much more in-depth and interesting view of what the literature should be. He explains that a work of literature changes when it crosses border from its nation of origin into an international space. On the international space the literature ceases

to be a national literature and assumes the status of world literature. This is prevalent as globalization takes the centre-stage in the world and makes it easier for individual works of literature to cross borders. He posits further that once the national literature crosses border from one country into another it develops different meanings and then is looked at from inter-literary perspectives. This implies that world literature pertains to the totality of the world national and continental literatures circulating into the wider world beyond the nations or continents where the literatures have their origins. It offers the exposure to a wide variety of texts and provides the opportunity to explore different world views. Being a flexible corpus, it negotiates the selections that are used in its discourse.

Even though World Literature is a corpus that allows different national or continental literatures that have cross borders to be brought together in a particular discourse and a corpus that presents the perceptions of different writers of national literatures on the generality of human experience, whenever the corpus is mentioned, the literatures of Western European, North American and Russian nationalities quickly come to mind. The emphasis on Western European, North American and Russian literatures in the World Literature corpus is widespread so much so that these literatures are perceived as synonymous with World literature. The emphasis on these literatures as the alternative corpus for world literature is even highly felt in the different world literature anthologies that have been produced over time. A very important example is the different editions of *The World Masterpieces* anthology that reveal the Eurocentric bias as it concerns the literatures that should be selected as world literature with the inclusion of the subtitle: “Literature of Western Culture” beside the initial title of the anthology. This subtitle is a further indication that literatures produced in places other than Europe, North America and Russia are not regarded as part of world literature. Similar biases are noticed in several other anthologies on world literature, which goes to reveal the emphasis on how normalized the perception of Western European and Russian literatures as alternative corpus for world literature have been.

Explaining why this is so, Damrosch (2016, p. 498) provides reasons for the selection for world literature in his field defining article entitled “Frames for World Literature”. According to him, the divide between the national or continental literatures that are selected and those that are excluded from the corpus, is connected with the claim that “some countries contribute more works to the corpus” than most other countries. Another reason for this, as Damrosch also maintains, is the “important issues of political and economic power” that have become the determinant of world focus. However, the exclusion of the literatures from Africa and other part of the world from being discussed as world literature and in full partnership with the literatures from Western Europe, North America and Russia has earned the corpus some criticism. Among these criticisms is Hirakawa’s (1979, p. 47) description of world literature as “an exclusive club of Europeans and Americans” and “a sort of Greater West European co-prosperity sphere”. And Friederich’s (1960, p. 15) lamentation that world literature does not encompass much of the literatures produced by writers of the world. According to him, “apart from the fact that such a presumptuous term makes for shallowness and partisanship [...], it is simply bad public relations to use this term and to offend more than half of humanity”.

However, some of these criticisms have yielded results. They have led to the incorporation of more and more national literatures other than the Western European, North

American and Russian literatures in the corpus. This became even so as many universities outside Europe, America and Russia began to take courses in world literature. While increasing number of literatures from central, eastern and northern Europe as well as the orient began to make the list, African literature is continuously excluded. By African literature, we refer to the totality of all national literatures written in Africa by Africans (Achebe cited in Ebeogu, 2015, p. 27). However, the inclusion of the literatures from the Orient in the list of literatures for world literature discourse did not earn them the full title as world literatures like other literatures from Western Europe, North America and Russia. As a matter of fact, in most world literature anthologies the oriental literatures are continuously listed under the masterpieces of the orient subtitle – and not under world masterpieces. The divide between these literatures is even evident in Eckermann’s (1951) account of a conversation with Goethe where the literatures of the orient are represented as the periphery of the world literature corpus while Western European literatures remain the centre. In the conversation Western European literature is represented as the centre which the periphery must measure up to.

Since the West obviously determines the literature that is good enough for world literature, little wonder African literature has not been aligned with other literatures in the world literature corpus. Affirming the politics behind the selection of the corpus, Abdu (2017) in a keynote address delivered at the 36th Association of Nigerian Authors International Convention in 2017, posits that “African literature is as global as any literature could be” (10). Abdullahi (2015, p. 14) simply affirms that “African literature has already got a place in world literature with the contributions of great writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and the many other younger writers following in their footsteps”. Abdu argues that the refusal to give African literature a place in the world literature corpus stems from European colonial myth of Africans’ sub-humanism. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Europeans institutionalized the myth of Africans’ inability to produce literature. To advance their claim that Africans are not fit to produce literature talk more of world literature, Europeans promoted the publication as well as the distribution of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palmwine Drinkard* in 1952. Because of the novel’s syntactic, structural as well as logical flaws, it became one of the bases upon which Europeans anchored their claim of African sub-humanism which had already been expressed in fictions such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1947) (Jonathan Peters, 10), though Tutuola’s novel no longer occupies a backstage.

The novel has since been a globally acknowledged classic. These were some of the issues Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* succeeded in putting to rest after its publication. The publication of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* charted a new beginning for African literature. Presently, African literature is home to a number of wonderfully written literatures that have crossed borders and that have spoken volumes about African culture to people outside the African soil. This becomes even more rewarding as African literatures are now being taught in universities even in Europe and America. As one thinks that African literature would begin to be aligned with other world literatures because of the landmark achievements it has recorded among the committee of world literatures, the literature is still being greeted with skepticism by most Eurocentric world literature scholars. These groups of scholars are reluctant about aligning African literature with other world literatures in their world literature discourse

because they felt the circumstance that gave rise to its establishment was one that challenged European supremacy as well as European myth of African sub-humanism.

Mapping African Literature in the World Literature Corpus

The earliest African literature texts to cross borders and that became known outside the African continent were produced by writers such as Antar, an Afro-Arab writer who wrote poetry described as “Antar romance” (see Awoonor, 2005, p. 146), Juan Latino, a displaced African writer in the Christian kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, Phillis Wheatley, the American slave turned writer, Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cuguanu among others. Juan Latino is said to have commented on colour prejudice that was making wave in the nineteenth century in the following lines: “If our black face, O King, seems to your ministers odious,/ Ethiops find your white faces no more to their taste” (see Awoonor, 2005, p. 147). Cervantes was said to have described Latino as “an erudite writer full of linguistic sophistries”. Even though these writers made significant contributions to the development of African literature as world literature, their contributions were not treated seriously since most of them wrote from outside the continent. The beginning of the African literary tradition that placed the African literature on the world literature map started between 1939, when Césaire published his *Cashier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*, which announced the Negritude movement, and 1958, when Chinua Achebe published his novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Prior to these times, European assumption about Africa as reflected in their literatures was that it was a primitive and demonic society and that its people were savages, who were of inarticulate tongue. Hence the advent of Europeans in Africa was that of a rescue mission. For example, the image of an African in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is that of a savage, without name and culture and lacks the ability to speak human language. This myth of African sub-humanism is also reflected in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* – one of the finest English short novels at the time. The novel describes pre-colonial Africans as “savages with wild eyes using an unrefined language consisting of grunts and short phrases sounding like a violent babble.” It states that at their first encounter with the whites, Africans could only react with “a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage.” African speech pattern was explained as cannibalistic instincts in fashion of Eurocentric poetics of the African image. The novel also portrays Africa as a society with bestiality which is different from the refined Europe. William Shakespeare’s *Antonio and Cleopatra*, as well as Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* also gave expressions to this European myth of African sub-humanism.

In order to properly contain these views that were promoted by European literatures, African writers wrote from African soil challenging this European myth about Africa. Apart from using the African literature to prove Africa a developing society, most of the literatures were published in Europe and America so as to spread the message across the two continents. The essence of this was to correct the wrong European impression of Africa. What this implies is that at its very inception African literature assumes the status of world literature. This is not only because the literatures crossed borders thereby fulfilling the world literature demand, the literatures were also aligned with European literatures in order to put the European myths of African sub-humanism to rest. The literature showed that the pre-colonial African society was

a progressive society before the advent of Europeans in Africa; it revealed that African society had its own political structures that were positioned for growth and development. The novel also depicts that Africa's contact with the Europeans disrupted the progressive growth of the society that "today greatness has changed its tune, titles are no longer great, neither are barns or large numbers of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the whiteman" (Achebe 1958, p. 87). "Africans no longer speak with one voice but sing strange songs [...] A man can now curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master" (p.98). The effect of this is reflected in the debased egotripism of Toundi the major character of Oyono's *Houseboy* (1975: 20): "I shall be the Chief European's boy. The dog of the king is the king of dogs". As is also showcased in African literature, this was so because Europeans did not understand the structure of the African society and they felt the society was mindless and unprogressive. Hence they left with us a lot of damaging consequences as revealed in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* (1983: 68 & 165). The novel contains the consequence of the colonial encounter on the African society:

I saw the colonial school and the church as one kind of giant ogre swallowing young Africans, digesting them, slowly, vomiting them up again sucked dry of all youthful essence- mere skeletons.

The novel also reveals that African students at the colonial schools were:

[...] 'miserable floating population', underfed, scrawny, bullied all the day by ignorant monitors. The books, in front of them, presented a universe which had nothing in common with the one they knew; they battled endlessly with the unknown, astonished and desperate and terrified.

What these novels had been able to establish at the world literature level is that, to use Lionel Trilling's (1967) words in his book entitled *The experience of literature*, cultures differ with different societies and it is wrong for one people to think their own culture is superior as to impose it on others. The pre-colonial African society was not a long night of savagery which the Europeans acting on God's behalf saved Africa from its own destruction. Achebe writes that that was the burden of the African literature: to correct these Western prejudices against Africans and to posit that

[...] African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. (qtd in Osuafore, 2003, p. 6)

This and many more earned the literature some world recognitions, such that many of its writers have now won the Nobel Laurel – one of the world’s greatest prizes in literature. In view of these, when Christopher Okigbo was to be honoured with an award as an outstanding African poet in Dakar, Senegal, he refused being addressed as just an African poet. He opted to be referred to as just a poet. This was done to stress the height African literature has attained among the comity of world literatures.

African literature has also been used to contribute to burning issues in world literature. For instance, it has been used to showcase that the African society share some belief systems with the European society. This similarity is evident in European texts such as Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, which share similar theme with Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s *Song of a Goat*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, which also has similar theme with Christopher Okigbo’s “Elegy to the Wind”. Solomon Awuzie has shown, in his essay entitled “Contemplating the Wind as Spirit: Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and Raji Select Poems,” that so many other African literatures chronicle the same theme as Shelley’s poem. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* for example the early European world view is reviewed. In it, it is posited that the fate of all men are in the hands of the gods. Sophocles demonstrates this world view in the play through the character of Oedipus: a man born with a curse that he is to kill his father and marry his mother. In his attempt to evade the curse, he towers up and ends up fulfilling the prophecy. Trilling (1967:44) explains the implication of the play in European terms: the play teaches “that all men must submit to what is ordained for them” (44). This world view is also expressed in both Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” and in the poetry of the American poet Emily Dickinson’s “There’s a Certain Slant of Light”. Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” for example expresses a world view that chronicles the European belief in some powerful deities or spirits that possess the abilities to move things and preserve life. Shelley addresses them as the “wild spirits” “which art moving everywhere” (1967, p. 886); whereas in “There’s a Certain Slant of Light” there is a reference to the Supreme light that appears and disappears.

Many African literatures have expressed similar themes. Hence, showing that the belief in spirit beings is a general phenomenon: it is a belief system that can be found among the Europeans, Americans and the African people. For instance, Africans believe in spiritual hierarchy in which “beneath the Creator God is a host of minor deities” (Awoonor, 2005:51). Some levels of distance are assigned to this Creator God, not because He cannot be reached but because He is considered the supreme spirit who must not be troubled with some details of the universe. Being aware of this the Creator God appoints for Himself lieutenants and assistants whose ultimate responsibilities are to oversee and act as guardians to other natural phenomena. These lieutenants and assistants of Creator God are the minor deities who act as the recipients of sacrifices and messages on His behalf. Hence the images of both the Creator God and the powerful deities are reflected in African literature. As we have seen in Dickinson’s poem which reveals the ability of the spirit being to possess everything at its appearance and to disappear, African deities have always been revealed to possess the abilities to act in like manner in most African literature. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s *Song of a Goat* (2001) presents us with the image of deities that are that powerful. This is evident in the play as Zifa and his entire household suffers for his father’s sin. The play shows the destruction of Zifa’s family as systematic: Zifa

is struck with impotency because the sprites are aware that that would lead to other complications and it does led to his brother, Tonye, taking his own life. Zifa's aunt was not also spared as she became possessed by the gods for refusing to do "what the oracle said" (p.18). In Camara Laye's *African Child* a powerful African traditional life couched in ritual, magic and ceremonies that reflect African belief in powerful deities is also portrayed. We also see similar depiction in Christopher Okigbo's "Heavensgate" poems where the worship of a harmless and quite goddess "Idoto" is focused on. Okigbo describes the enormous powers of "Idoto" all through his "Heavensgate" poems. In "Elegy to the Wind" he confronts us with a "wind spirit" who is described simply as a "white light." In line five of the poem, the persona reveals that "I will follow the wind to the clearing/ the silence the myth of her gate". The poem shows that African deities or spirits are friendly and can also be harmful. This is evident in the line where the persona notes thus: "O wind, swell my sails; and may my banner run/ the course of wider waters". Okigbo depicts that even though the spirits can be peaceful, they have both good and bad qualities.

The difference between European and African societies as reflected in the literatures is that Africans do not believe in the idea of the innocent victim that is expressed in European literature. In Africa any person who is punished by the gods earned the punishment. It must have being the consequence of the victim's own sin or those of his fathers. Even though Zifa is innocent of the offence, his punishment is linked to his father's sin. Orukorere, on the other hand, receives the punishment of her sin while she is alive. The import of the literature is that, to use the words of Choragos, one of Sophocles' characters: "Let every man in mankind's frailty/ Consider his last day, and let none/ Presume on his good fortune until he find/ Life, at his death, a memory without pain" (p.41). African literature reveals that the activities of the spirit beings in the lives of men show that the gods act just for their own enjoyment most of the time: whether in the cause of justice nor not.

Conclusion

This article has revealed that even though African literature is yet to be fully aligned with other literatures from around the world in the world literature discourse, the fact that the literature has already crossed borders in order to engage the European myth of African sub-humanism has given it the statues of a world literature. The fact that the literature engages similar themes as most world literatures is another great feat that has pinched it among the committee of world literatures. With this inclusion of African literatures in world literature discourse, it is revealed that most cultures of the world are similar and that the human race has a lot in common. Like all other national and continental literatures in the world that have crossed borders, the experiences that are represented in African literature can also be harvested for the benefit of all humanity.

This article therefore posits that even though African literature is yet to be fully aligned with other world literatures in the world literature discourse as well as in most of its anthologies, African literature has already achieved similar feats that qualify other literatures of the world as world literatures. Like most world literatures, African literature crosses borders and represents one of the avenues through which African cultures and values are exposed to the world. The article maintains that in most universities and centers where African literature is

taught outside the African soil, African literature has provided the opportunities for its host university communities to juxtapose African ways of life as exemplified in the literature with the host communities' own cultures and traditions. The article also engages the themes of most world literatures in African literatures in order to posit that African literature has helped to reveal that most cultures of the world have similar features and that the world is indeed a global village.

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