

The Challenges to Literature in Research and Development

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Main Research Topic in Literary Studies

In general we can say that Literary Studies focuses on signs and texts, and on how meaning and sense are generated by signs and texts. As we all know, we find texts today in all kinds of scientific research and in all cultural fields of a society. Even those societies and cultures which have been attached in past centuries to a much more oral cultural tradition have today integrated texts into their scientific and cultural archives. On the other hand, the definition of what a text is has changed tremendously over the recent decades, and today we acknowledge oral descriptions as kinds of texts, more precisely as textures, especially if they are memorized and reproduced within the context of a society's cultural archives. So, if we talk about texts, we are talking about a basic communication tool that is used in all cultural fields in almost all societies today. At this point we have already recognized a global cultural pattern: written and printed texts are today intercontinental, global and part of cultural reproduction and memory. So, if we talk about texts and textures, we talk at the same time about what I'd like to call "memory media, as well as cultural expression".

a variety of interpretations. These interpretations generate completely new texts – either fictional or factual ones. We might, then, look at a literary text as only one element in an ensemble of texts that have been written and linked with the text we are reading, both before and afterwards. This complex is also what we call today the open field of “cultural and literary discourse”. Talking about texts from a research perspective today means to take into account the impact of three main cultural sections on the genesis of cultural and literal meaning:

Literary research deals with three main cultural sections or cultural frames, in which we perceive culture:

1. Symbolic forms and elements:

[*Meaning:* language and other systems of description, notions and institutional thinking: like “national identity”, “ethnic group” etc. / role models / ritual translation-modules / reproduction and memory media]

2. Everyday life cultural expressions:

[*Meaning:* things and tools / all utterances and speech acts part in one cultural discourse / performative cultural elements]

3. Culture of Media and Reproduction:

[*Meaning:* cultural archive with all elements which have been transferred into a memory media / knowledge production by a cultural discourse]

Historical Development and Highlights

Of course, with this definition, we are already moving in the middle of contemporary challenges to literature and literary research. If we look back historically, the field of literature and research was much more restricted and normatively limited. There was no idea of communication

open discourse when readers and critics referred to the interpretation of texts. Until the end of the 19th century, we find clear regulations and norms, which would tell the audience how to read and interpret a text. The reader was supposed to know, with the help of certain regulations, exactly what the author had meant and what the content of a text was. These strategies were criticized, and very largely discarded, in the 20th century.

I want to call our attention to four relevant and most recent strategies here: communication theory, cultural studies, philosophy of deconstruction and post-colonial studies. In contemporary research, we look at textures rather than at texts, and we look at them as a complex mixture of language, images, all kinds of signs, cultural symbols and other elements of discourse. Also, what is not said in a text became equally important to what is said in a text. Consequently, there is neither a one-right-way to write, or even to read texts. Texts nowadays are mobile constellations, products in process; and the producer is a combination of the writer, the reader and the text itself, which comes to life, independent of its genesis.

I have given you, so far, a short insight into the structural approach of literary research today. But there are also the historical background and the ideological sides of literary research, each of which offers its own, new challenge in today's global discourse. This development in research can't be understood without looking at the complete disillusion that happened in the humanities, and to mankind generally, during the last century, the century in which – I assume – we all in this hall were born. We all had our own experiences in the 20th century, and listened to the experiences of our parents and grandparents. Their experiences were dominated until at least the 1960s by wartime and bombings; by genocide, massacres and suppression, by resistance and collaboration, and by refugees and heroes. If we are too

young, to have had these experiences, then at least we are told about the main historical developments that destroyed the idea of a world full of equality, liberty and fraternity. At the highest point of human development and technological progress, men reached, at the same time, the top of the powers of devastation, and of fostering inequality. This caused insecurities, but it also triggered new thinking and a new language and science among critical scientists and artists. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, the German Jewish scientist and philosopher Theodor W. Adorno made the unforgettable remark that after "Auschwitz," poems can no longer be written. This month, May 2005 marks the 60th Anniversary of Europe's (and the world's) liberation from Hitler's Third Reich and its collaborators. The significance of this anniversary is that even the complete failure and collapse of humanity can't, in the long run, suppress the arts, and in particular the magical beauty of poetry. But what tremendously changed was long-term approach to writing and research approach. After the fall of colonialism, the First and Second World Wars, and after the Holocaust, things were never taken as granted again. Like the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebé said in his famous novel from 1958, quoting the Irish poet William Butler Yeats: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold".

The literary field opened up the space of textures, and then became open processes, reflecting the unsayable as well as the sayable. We should be aware that this contemporary point of view offers us also a profound political basis and responsibility for reflecting on the cultural and social development of societies. Textures and textures, in particular literary ones, have always been part of the knowledge production apparatus of societies, and therefore they give us a key to understanding both historical developments and international relationships between people in the historic past. We will often find in literary texts historical writing and an unofficial view of developments, v

that have been banned from other coverage and from official history writing.

Having happily accepted an invitation to work, since October 2004, as a Lecturer in German Studies and German Literature at the University of Nairobi, I can't forget to mention one of the most important challenges to literary and text research today. Following the history of literary texts to contemporary times entails among other things, going into the archives of colonial and post-colonial times. As I have mentioned before, in previous centuries, the field of science and of literary research was much more restricted to norms. At the same time, we also have to take into account that the fields of modern science and of literary research have been dominated by the so-called "Eurocentric perspective." If we study the European travel-literature of the 18th and 19th and even the first half of the 20th century, we will find out that the encounter between European travellers and conquerors and their foreign counterparts on the African and South-American continents and in the Middle East Region is described as a non-communicative situation. Basically, a European monologue was established. Many of the European travellers and conquerors reported their experiences as horror and fear, and they hardly found a common language with the "other" people, who often represented as savages and uncivilized blacks. On the other hand, the silence on the side of the "other" was not only described in European books referring to this context, but all forms of expression generated in the "other" cultural contexts were ignored or discriminated against. The silence of the suppressed Aboriginal people all over the "other" continents continued because the cultural means and media that were used in the African, in the Arabic and in the South-American context were hardly ever regarded as valid or meaningful by European audiences. Besides, the Aborigines and original citizens of the respective continents were often not allowed to write, read, or to learn how to write and read. This heavy silence of the "other" continued

until the liberation-movements in the 1950s and 1960s broke through, and colonized people everywhere started to struggle hard to re-find and re-generate their own culture and social identity. The cultural and intellectual challenge since that time has turned out to be a question of how to integrate their own (traditional) cultural roots and history together with the new colonial (and postcolonial) culture and history. Like the US-American-Nigerian Political Scientist and African Studies Curator Okwui Enwezor once claimed, "the Short Century of Colonialism," the core colonial times was hardly 70 years long, but it had turned the whole world upside down, and we still feel its impact today.

Which challenges does this historical background carry for literary studies?

108399/2006

Contemporary Challenges

During the liberation movements in the 1950s and 1960s the "other" people in the colonized areas of the world started to raise publicly their voices in fine arts and in literature. The Nigerian writers Chinua Acheb  and Wole Soyinka and the Kenyan author Mugo Gathuru were among this group of African artists and philosophers who started to re-tell African history and African stories to their people. They could not write about African people and their history without investigating the Western impact and the cultural mixture that took place during colonial times; a mixture that could not be erased. In Europe and in North America as well, artists and writers gathered to re-write the untold history of the continents and the link to intercontinental development. We may recall names like the German *Gruppe '47*" (Group '47") or French writers like Albert Camus, Margrethe Duras and Jean-Paul Sartre. In the process, not only did the structures of texts open up – as I sketched out before – but also the storyline and plot in all kinds of literary genres changed toward deconstructed forms, to non-linear writing and to recollecting the unofficial parts of history and relevant

international political developments. The Kenyan writer Mugo Gatheru is a very good example for this new attitude among writers and researchers. Their works still have an impact today.

Mugo Gatheru was born in 1925 as a son of a Kikuyu-family. As a student of medical research in the late 1940s and in the 1950s he studied at universities in the US, in India and in Great Britain. He later wrote his life-story and published it 1964 under the title "Child of Two Worlds." Today it is common to talk of "cross-over biographies." Gatheru's autobiography is an early example for this, as he internalized both the cultural frames of his Kikuyu ethnic group and the cultural frames of Western research strategies and everyday life. When he looks back in his late thirties, he writes truly as a child of two worlds, committed to the idea of levelling out ethnic differences and committed to the idea of cultural diversity and plurality. He was convinced that Kenya itself would benefit if it could succeed in building a modern non-tribal state.

In today's well-known and often described cross-over biographies, the experience of cultural mixture and the existence of texts in process – all these contemporary phenomena of diversity and plurality have their origin in the experience of a more and more globalised world. It is a world that started with globally extended markets already in medieval times, and continued with colonialism and war. This is the background to the challenges faced by today's literary research and literature. To say it in one word: the time of reading and writing within the frames of the old definitions of national literature is over. The globalised world can't be ignored. In the field of literature and literary research, we find a way to write, to read and to research with an intercultural and cross-over attitude. We live today in a world – whether we like it or not – that is dominated by cross-over structures and by intercultural thinking. In contemporary

literary texts we can often find a story, where these structures are mirrored by an anti-totalitarian attitude. Modern History is entangled, as the Indian-German sociologist Shalini Randeria maintains, and fictional stories are entangled too – they offer us insights into a world where stories are divided and shared, where people are used to becoming children of two or of many worlds within our one world. In the field of literature and literary research we will find the tools to help us cope with an entangled history. These fields can help gain insights and tools that may help us build future societies, which are more focused on equality, liberty and on plurality, instead of on the idea of ethnic superiority, or the Eurocentric idea of a hierarchy of cultural values. The concept of how to accept an entangled history and to share and divide stories started in the 1950s and it is still a relevant challenge for us today. Like Mugo Gatheru wrote already 1964:

“Africa is my home. The Kikuyu are my people. To them I shall return. And I will return knowing that the World of Africa and the World of the West and of the East are equally important parts of our One World.” (p. 16)

Reference

R. Mugo Gatheru 1972. *Child of two worlds* (1964) New York: Mentor and Plume Books.