

BOOK REVIEW

Mukoma Wa Ngugi. *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018. 228 pp. Notes. Works cited. Index. \$70.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0472073689.

In *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership*, Mukoma Wa Ngugi attempts to question a certain, narrow literary history of Africa, which he sees as revolving around the decolonization novel. It proposes “rooted transnationalism” as an alternative strategy of reading across boundaries of time, nation, and language. Mukoma criticizes the centrality of the so-called Makerere generation, named for an influential meeting of writers at Makerere University in 1962, to the international construction and reception of African literature. Mukoma contends that that generation established “the African novel” as being grounded in a mid-century colonial tradition of literacy, including a normative use of English and a realist political mode. This understanding effaces what Mukoma calls “early African writing,” which he argues “has not yet become part of the African literary and critical imagination” (7). The book offers a critique of the barriers to the ability of contemporary authors to write in African languages (Chapter One); a reading of Amos Tutuola as a failed example of pre-Makerere African writing due to his poor mastery of English and a British publication industry hungry for exoticism (Chapter Two); a theorization and example of what a “rooted transnational” reading might look like (Chapters Three and Five); and a critique of some institutions’ desire to limit “African literature” or “African writers” to a certain kind of person and text that are easily legible as “African” (Chapter Four).


There is much to be admired in this book. The author demonstrates an impressive mastery of very contemporary Anglophone writing from across the continent and beyond. The plea to read African literature beyond the norms imposed by “Makerere” is well taken—although I wonder whether, by making it so central a target, Mukoma does not end up reinforcing its centrality after all. The argument that the burden of encouraging writing in African languages requires not just willing authors but also institutional support is downright inspiring.

A certain number of points are open to constructive criticism. First is the precise meaning and significance of “early African writing.” Mukoma

reiterates throughout the book that he primarily means early South (and Southern) African writing in languages such as isiXhosa, Sesotho, and isiZulu, but also English, from the first half of the twentieth century (4–6). At various points, he expands this definition to include other examples, such as Amharic hagiography and Atlantic slave narratives (25, 130–31). Nevertheless, in spite of titling Chapter Three “Africa’s Missing Literary History,” Mukoma’s monograph only reads one text from any of this material in any depth, namely A.C. Jordan’s *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1940, translated from isiXhosa in 1980). This reading is woven into a three-way comparison alongside Chinua Achebe’s uber-canonical *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013). This comparative reading highlights the divergent trajectories of various kinds of African novels on the world stage, but it does little to help the reader delve into the context or significance of early Southern African writing more broadly. Despite its repeated criticism of a certain, narrow *idée reçue* of African literature—including what Mukoma questionably calls “Africa-Is-A-Country literary criticism,” in reference to the popular academic blog (13)—*The Rise of the African Novel* ends up expending a great deal of energy on material that is already well-known and which had already been debated at the Makerere conference itself.

Relatedly, in spite of its ambitious title and talk of crossing linguistic lines, the book remains quite Anglo-centric. It does not treat the Francophone, Lusophone, Arabic, or Kiswahili canons virtually at all. That would be fine, except that the author never acknowledges this limitation. Nor does the book reflect on cutting-edge work that is being done in a variety of African languages and literary studies. I myself am most familiar with Wolof, where all kinds of developments, both historical and recent, could have informed and enriched Mukoma’s welcome argument that African-language literatures from many periods ought to be taken more seriously.

These constructive criticisms notwithstanding, Mukoma wa Ngugi’s *The Rise of the African Novel* is, at many points, eye-opening and moving. Its call to read more inclusively and trans-linguistically is one that deserves to be heeded.

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