



Review

Reviewed Work(s): A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language by Brenda Cooper

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gnosis of the world" (90).

Blackmore reads Adamastor as a figure of imagination that is central to the Portuguese colonial mission and its ideological impetus. Symbolically, the defeat of the monster clears the way to India and asserts the divine right the Portuguese believe they have on their side. In one of its most original sections, *Moorings* positions *Os Lusíadas* as a foundational text in the creation of a specular Other without whom the colonizer cannot exist. In a critical twist that echoes Bhabha's theory of mimicry, Blackmore proposes that through his role in the destruction of Adamastor Vasco da Gama now "enters Africa as much as Africa enters him" (135). Elsewhere he states:

... to round the cape successfully is to conquer the fear of Adamastor, to conquer the danger to da Gama's authority as a reliable seer and interpreter of the world.... Adamastor occasions a passage through a troubling interiority (134).

It should be clear by now that I have really enjoyed reading this study and have been provoked by its intellectual energy and critical insight. Yet I have a complaint — the book comes to an end abruptly and almost unexpectedly. A conclusion accounting for the journey the reader has just completed through the three rich and complex sections would have made leaving *Moorings* a less jarring experience.

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Brenda Cooper. *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*. Rochester, New York: James Curry, 2008. 182 pp.

The heterogeneity of African literatures produced in the past and present probably makes it untenable to essentialize the works of any given generation of writers. Indeed the ideological, temporal, geographical, and linguistic diversity amongst African writers militates against essentialism or oversimplification. In her new book, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*, Brenda Cooper seems to be keenly aware of that fact. Cooper prudently and pragmatically avoids dealing with the whole range of the new generation of African writers writing at home and away and using any number of languages. Rather, in an attempt to make sense of their thematic and aesthetic concerns, she focuses on writers of a particular kind, namely migrant African writers of English expression. Therefore, she selects as objects of her inquiry six liter-

ary works by five new African migrant writers.

Cooper's text is divided into eight chapters. After the introductory chapter, Cooper devotes a chapter to each of the six books she selected for analysis, namely, Biyi Bandele's *The Street*, Leila Aboulela's *The Translator and the Coloured Lights*, Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier*, Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicle*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Cooper succumbs to the temptation of dwelling too much on Adichie's texts, since Adichie's second book could have given way to another worthy migrant African writer's work. But even as one might berate Cooper for her somewhat tenuous justification for the inclusion of Adichie's two texts, there is no denying how it has lately become increasingly difficult for critics of African literature to ignore the young Nigerian-born novelist widely touted as the new kid on the block. On the whole, Cooper's study attempts to shed light on how these new migrant African writers use English subversively by transforming the imperial language into a tool for deconstructing colonial metaphors, and for conflating the literal with the figurative. Following Bill Ashcroft's conception of metonymy as a protest tool, Cooper argues that these writers "rely heavily on the enabling potential of the rhetoric metonymy" to challenge or contest received metaphors (1). However, Cooper's zealous attempt to distinguish between metaphor and metonymy in her reading of the texts is replete with contradiction and incongruity, sometimes forcing a distinction and at other times acknowledging the porous nature of the distinction. In a sense, her metaphor-metonymy debate tends to delimit the semiotic possibilities inherent in the texts she studies.

While Cooper acknowledges the debt this category of African writers owes to those who came before them, such as Amos Tutuola in the case of Bandele and Chinua Achebe for Adichie, the implicit rapture in African writing represented by the new generation of writers towards which she gestures does not seem to be clear or compelling enough. Granted, Cooper points to the cosmopolitan experience that migration has occasioned for these writers and how it has influenced how they see themselves and the world, but one could also argue that any number of earlier generation of African writers — from Olaudah Equiano of the *Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* fame to Achebe; from Ngugi wa Thiong'o to Wole Soyinka; or from Dennis Brutus to Nurridin Farrah — were exposed to a broad worldview that informed their writing. Moreover, Cooper's claim that these African writers' use of untranslated or unexplained words from African languages makes them different from earlier ones is imprecise. Adichie's use of Igbo words is comparable to Achebe's use of similar words (such as Ikemefuna's song in *Things Fall Apart*).

One of the most glaring drawbacks in Cooper's text is the tendency to

rehearse excessively earlier thinkers and theorists — so much so that the references to Lacan, Bourdieu, and Bauman suffuse and almost suffocate her own voice. The prose also suffers from a level of obscurantism and contradiction resulting from an over-reliance on opaque references and quotations. Also, Cooper reads too much into the objects mentioned in the literature (a corkscrew in Bandele's *The Street*, a winter coat in Aboulela's *The Translator*, a telescope in Mahjoub's *The Carrier*, a bobbin in Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicle*, ceramic figurines in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the decapitated child's head in *Half of a Yellow Sun*). Her claim that the materiality of these objects and their relation to both reality and symbolism is unique is not persuasive enough. Further, for a book that critiques Western commentators for misrepresenting Africa, it is curious that it would use demeaning expressions such as "where drums beat to the rhythm of Africa's dark heart" in unsubstantiated and unqualified fashion (6). One wonders whether such expressions do not exacerbate the misrepresentation of Africa.

A New Generation of African Writers tends to ask and answer the wrong questions. At the end of the book it is still unclear whether the new generation of African writers is writing anything new. Put differently, the text does not adequately answer the fundamental question: "What is new about this new generation of African writers?" since the newness that Cooper attempts to argue for is somewhat contrived and unconvincing.

Nonetheless, the book is important because of the attention it calls to migrant African writers. Albeit speculative, Cooper's attempt to link the writers and their protagonists is particularly rewarding and illuminating. She presents a nuanced understanding of the politics and ethics underpinning the works of this group of African writers. Although she characterizes them as not being "political radicals, who propose revolutionary change in the balance of power in the world of their novels," she is well aware of the politics of subversion and identity that are enacted in these writings (21). Hence, Cooper is alert to the risk of depoliticizing these emerging works, a move that would miss the point of the writing process as being fundamentally political in nature. She argues cogently that the writers dislocated and fractured identity at home in Africa and away in the diaspora dictates the depth and mode of their political engagement.

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