

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***'Man of the House' and Other New Short Stories from Kenya* edited by Emma Dawson (Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2011)**

I first met Dr Emma Dawson at the Oxford Literary Festival in 2011 where she was on a panel discussing recent African literature. Intrigued by her work, I followed Emma to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London a few months later for the Royal African Society's event entitled "Beyond the Postcolonial": new fiction from East and West Africa', where she and a selection of writers discussed and celebrated the launch of the various African anthologies that comprise the World Englishes Literature Fiction Series. Considering my Kenyan roots, I was especially drawn to the collection of Kenyan short stories, and, amidst fascinating writing from Cameroon, Nigeria and Uganda, it is this particular text that I will focus upon here.

Although the anthology prioritises the stories themselves, it also draws attention to the theory behind the 'new World Englishes fiction' (7) that it contains, and the editor's academic approach to the text is outlined in the introduction. Here, Dawson defines the term 'World Englishes Literature' (11) as writing produced from a country in which English acts as a second language, of which Kenya is an example.

The most prominent feature of Dawson's academic approach, however, is her emphasis on the distinction between World Englishes literature and native English-speaking countries, characterised as the West. She writes that 'World Englishes writers are less and less interested in their putative subalternity to a former colonial power', continuing on to say that 'World Englishes literature is not a synonym for postcolonial literature' (15). Indeed the anthology is unreservedly and excitedly driven by the ethos that 'World Englishes is (as it were) post-postcolonial', drawing on the fact that its contents 'includes a generation of writers' who no longer recall 'political independence' (15).

The anthology self-professedly moves forward from canonical postcolonial literature by writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to locate itself in the here and now of Kenyan society, acting as a means by which new and 'often unknown' (8) writers are able to tell their own personal story. The separation of Kenya and the West is further strengthened by Dawson's editorial pursuit 'to listen' rather than 'to tell' (7), as her preface describes the journey to Kenya to collect submissions.

Including fifteen short stories, the anthology reflects a vibrant range of mouthpieces on Kenyan life today, written by authors of different professions, ages, sexes, and from different locations within the country itself. Beginning with 'Man of the House' – the short story which forms the title of the anthology – Stanley A. Gazemba's portrayal of Sadu's demise immediately subverts any trace of traditional patriarchal society, replacing it instead with a tragic yet biting real depiction of modern-day life in Nairobi's slums.

It is extremely refreshing to read this narrative of Kangemi – one of the many Kenyan slums often presented to us in the West as an alien landscape devoid of humanity – from the perspective of Gazemba's protagonist and local inhabitant, whose fight for survival is portrayed alongside turbulent matatu rides, 'drinks with the boys at the bridge-side *Senator den*' (28), and his relationship with the elusive Muthoni. Indeed it is these small details and intricacies of everyday life, woven around larger concepts of broken relationships, poverty, crime and illness, that impact the reader and bring so many of the stories to life. Munene Mwiindi's tale of sexual temptation and infidelity is centred around the commonplace need to

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charge a phone, whilst Muthoni Garland's opening description of Rebecca in 'Kissing Gordo' – as she sits pregnant and 'encased in a silver lacy dress', 'shovelling' in pizza at Nairobi West's Pizza Den (38, 39) – works to convey the feelings of disgust, bitterness and seduction that in turn illustrate the complexity of brotherly ties, love and living with HIV.

Despite contemporary Kenyan literature's theoretical departure away from issues of the postcolonial as expressed in the introduction to the text, the writing within the anthology is still heavily concerned with the political. Whilst only Lloyd Igane's 'Shaba Park' – which allegorises the history of Kenyan politics through its portrayal of the animals within the Magana Maara province – deals directly with neo-colonialism, numerous writers engage with the impact of the 2007 post-election violence on Kenyan society.

Alison O. Owuor's 'Screaming Thunder' movingly intertwines turbulent recollections of war with Laurence's life in Nairobi, fusing memories of past conflict with the 'battle lines' of the orange and blue parties during the elections (84), which, like the abortion clinic where he and Anna work, threatens to swamp the fragile flicker of life in the city. Kahuho Mureithi's 'Taking Care of Suzanna' and Simon Mbuthia's 'Days Long Gone' provide similar representations of the strains of ethnic division on familial relations, and Paul Mutuku's 'Innocent Guilt' poignantly recounts the difficulties of inner-city youths in abstaining from participating in the election violence.

Tragedy, however, is juxtaposed with comedy as many of the stories contain emphatic elements of humour. Shalini Gidoomal's 'Reality Cheque' uses the microcosm of a reality-television show to satirise elements of Kenyan society, bringing her fiction right up-to-date as she boldly makes light of current-affairs issues both within Kenya and on an international level. Her pervasive use of irony provides an engagingly effective reality-check on the absurd aspects of Nairobi life, wittily tackling inconstant politicians, inefficient workmanship and corrupt economies.

What is particularly resonant about this collection of short stories is the variety of voices presented within the text, not just in terms of each individual writer, but through the range of characters recounted within their pages. Rasna Warah beautifully and hilariously enunciates the various Nairobi-types gathered together at 'The Last Supper', whilst Suhaila Karim eloquently explores the social dislocation felt by her protagonist, an 'Arab-Kenyan', who counters the assumption that 'if you are not black, then you are not Kenyan' (193).

The anthology as a whole captures the fullness and diversity of Kenyan life, and the writers' varying use of language contributes to this richness. Dawson describes the encouragement given to 'language innovation and creativity' (21) within contemporary Kenyan writing, and the differing modes of speech employed by the authors affirm that Kenya has its own form of English, and not a singular one at that. The intermittent use of Swahili in Gazemba's dialogue is reminiscent of Nairobi's urban slang, Sheng, and forges a rhythm that echoes the city's pulsating backstreets; the colloquialisms present in Owuor and Suhaila's writing similarly serve to convey an absorbing aspect of their protagonists' subjectivity. Ultimately, the energetic range of pithy short stories within this anthology defies any effort of strict categorisation, reinforcing the exciting new avenues that contemporary Kenyan literature is taking.

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