



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

This month I would like to talk a little bit about the reception of the African continent in the German-speaking world through the lens of its literatures. This is a vast topic and can only be superficially touched here but might be the introduction of a more specific scrutiny into different countries and writers within the next months.

First of all, one can say that African literatures really bloom in the German-speaking parts of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. In the last five years, approximately 400 books of fiction by African writers were published (excluding poetry and anthologies) on these three markets. The selection of writers is as diverse as the publishing scene and its readers.

The information sought after in the books that have been translated into German has been subject to enormous changes over the last decades, as has the postcolonial reception. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti and Ousmane Sembène were the first whose works were translated into German in the end of the '50s. During that time there was a focus on the topics of history and politics; topics that are still prevalent today.

With the advent of dictators like Idi Amin or Bokassa, books were published that dealt with the phenomenon of dictatorship and its role for the oppressed people. Novels by Congolese writers Henri Lopés or Y.V. Mudimbe, offered an experimental approach and told their sad and cruel stories in a way that questioned the prevalent image of Africa as 'the heart of darkness'.

The '80s in Europe saw a 'professionalisation' of the so-called 'Third-World-Movement' and therewith the topics of interest changed to a more sociocultural emphasis. Novels by female African writers such as Amma Darko (Ghana) or Calixte Beyala (Cameroon) were discovered and became part of a worldwide feminist discourse that was shaped by the idea that Africa's problems of that time had been caused by colonisation and that the new generation of readers need to know the consequences of this legacy and help overcome

the injustice of it – which was still very much a strong colonial view point as we know today.

The publishing of South African literature in German experienced an incredible boom during this time. It was predominantly white writers such as Nadine Gordimer, André P. Brink and JM Coetzee that garnered attention and were published by the big publishers and definitely shaped the image of South Africa through their writing. Beyond this, small publishers sold books by Lewis Nkosi or Zoe Wicomb that were widely read and told South Africa's fight against apartheid from another perspective. Anthologies of struggle poetry and performances by poets like James Matthews were also incredibly popular.

The '90s somehow saw a declining interest in African literatures. The reason might be the opening of the 'Iron Curtain' and the end of the Cold War that led to a new discovery of territories in Europe, that had not been part of the literary landscape for some decades apart from those few celebrated Samizdat writers such as Alkesandr Solzhenitzyn.

The end of the Cold War, on the other hand, led to a new discovery of those countries that had been perceived as enemies or allies in those 'proxy wars' that had been fought fiercely before. The 'Third-World-Movement' was somehow replaced by a more realistic attitude that has rather been based on partnership.

Even though it might be true that the majority of German-speaking people still cling to obsolete perceptions of 'Africa', there has been a major shift in the intellectual and cultural debates. This shift has led to a new reception of African literatures and offered them a much broader and less preconceived space.

A highlight of this new 'handling' of African literatures was a new translation of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* by German translator Uda Strätling in 2013. This translation so deeply and profoundly questioned our language and its use when it comes to transmitting traditional perceptions and ideas regarding 'Africanness' that it can really be regarded as a milestone in literary translation and also as a



milestone in a new perception of African literatures. Strätling freed the original text from all the inherent colonial baggage of its old translation and gave it the modern, fierce and visionary face that the author had intended.

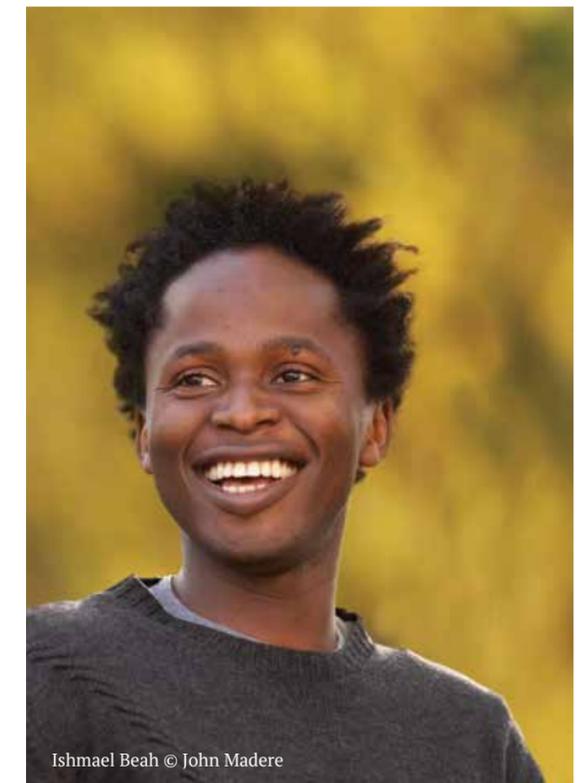
The new interest in African literatures and their writers coincides with a more informed literary world; of publishers, editors, literary reviewers and readers of course, who have a broader knowledge of what has happened on the African continent. One chance to enhance the reception of African literatures in an adequate and effective form is the occupation of more than one book in order to deepen the intellectual knowledge through comparative reading. Today, like never before, German-speaking countries are able to learn, to study and to explore other literary landscapes thoroughly and the amount of readers engaging in a new reception of 'Africa' has been growing over the past few years.

Of course there are the bestselling writers like Chimamanda Adichie, whose works are widely read and her readings in Germany have been visited by hundreds of people. Aside from the mainstream, there is an incredible amount of diverse and literary experimental voices that are read and discussed; voices that further question and change our conceptions of the countries that these voices write about. But their voices do not only tell us about their countries, their literature contains a worldliness that tells us a universal story, too and tells us about ourselves in this difficult and not-peaceful world. These voices very often open us to new literary traditions and forms that enrich our idea of writing and reading, of literary criticism.

Novels like *Tram 83* by Congolese writer Fiston Mwanza Mujila (which is shortlisted for this year's Etisalat debut prize) or Ishmael Beah's (Sierra Leone) *Radiance of Tomorrow*, which combines the tradition of oral literature with other forms in a very new way find their way onto the shelves of German readers, as did Shimmer Chinodya's important novel *Strife* that dealt with African cosmology in the changing African world.

An incredibly fruitful dialogue between writers and their readers has just started and it remains to be seen what the results will be. **CF**

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