

# TRANSLATING RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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# Russian Literature in Africa: An Overview

*Cathy McAteer*

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In their work on global literatures, Pascale Casanova and David Damrosch each chart key moments, definitive for African writers and for their contributions to the evolution of modern Africa's literary canon. Casanova traces Africa's journey from oral tradition to the formation of, specifically, Nigerian and Kenyan literature (occasionally in translation) and beyond, onto the world scene. She explores a chronology of significant contributions, including works from Nigeria's Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa (writing in Yoruba) and the internationally known English-language author Ben Okri, Algeria's Kateb Yacine (writing in both French and Arabic) and Kenya's English- and Kikuyu-language novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Their writings, Casanova argues, were decisive both in creating new literary spaces and reinventing "a national language distinct from the language of colonization".<sup>1</sup> Damrosch identifies African writers—Nigeria's Chinua Achebe and South Africa's J. M. Coetzee—among placeholders in a so-called "hypercanon" of postcolonial literature.<sup>2</sup> He also notes the less conventional case of Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, whom, as a "major writer in a peripheral country",<sup>3</sup> Damrosch describes as languishing "in the minor category, despite their seminal importance in the literary histories of their countries and their entire regions".<sup>4</sup> Several of these writers, notably Mahfouz, were heavily influenced by their reading of Russian literature, often the novels of Gorky, Dostoevsky, or Tolstoy.<sup>5</sup> Each of these theorists examines

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1 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. DeBevoise (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 228.

2 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 229.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

4 *Ibid.*

5 For an interesting if incomplete analysis of Dostoevsky's influence on Mahfouz and two other Egyptian writers, see Jihan Zakarriya, 'Dostoevsky's Philosophical Justice and Moral Dilemma in the Egyptian Novel', 20

to varying degrees, therefore, the significance of the successful circulation of African literature, given the continent's predominantly oral literary tradition and its many minority languages, beyond its borders to the historic centres of world literature. But Damrosch and Casanova show little, if any, awareness of Africa's other literary feat: its assimilation of world literature through translation. Neither analyses Africa's reception of foreign literature, let alone the specific case of Russian literature.

For a continent comprising fifty-four countries, some of which enjoyed close political links with Moscow during the Soviet years, there is surprisingly scant scholarship even within the field of Russian Studies on the reception and influence of Russian literature in Africa and on African writers directly influenced by their relationship with the Russian literary canon. Much as research on Asia's relationship with Russian literature fails to correspond to the continent's size and scope—as explained in the introduction to the Asia section of this volume—the absence of scholarship on Africa's relationship with Russian literature is equally striking. Only a few researchers are active: Jeanne-Marie Jackson, Rossen Djagalov, Monica Popescu, and the South African novelist, essayist, and academic, Imraan Coovadia. Discrete areas of interest define the research that has so far been conducted by scholars in this field. These include the connection between South-African born writer J.M. Coetzee and classic Russian writers; the role of Progress Publishers in disseminating Russian and Soviet literature across parts of Africa; and the significance to Nelson Mandela, as Coovadia asserts, of Tolstoy's devotion to non-violence (which echoes the case of Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi, explored extensively by our various Indian contributors in the Asia section).

Jeanne-Marie Jackson's academic monographs *South African Literature's Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation* (2015) and *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (2021) explore the links between nineteenth-century Russian and modern African literatures, which she describes as fraught in their relations with the wider world.<sup>6</sup> *The African Novel of Ideas* presents more broadly a "major transnational exploration of African literature in conversation with philosophy", yet even here, Jackson invites comparisons with Russian literature. Her fourth chapter, for example, analyses the significance of Fedor Dostoevsky's *Demons* (*Besy*) and the motif of suicide in Zimbabwean author Tendai Huchu's *The Maestro, the Magistrate, and the Mathematician* (2014), and in Coovadia's *Tales of the Metric System* (2016).

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June 2022, 'Bloggers Karamazov', the blog of the North American Dostoevsky Society, <https://bloggerskaramazov.com/2022/06/20/dostoevskys-philosophical-justice-and-moral-dilemma-in-the-egyptian-novel/>.

6 See Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *South African Literature's Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); and also her *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Oxford and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).



Opening with an epigraph from J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007)—“In South Africa, as in Russia, life may be wretched, but how the brave spirit leaps to respond!”<sup>7</sup>—Jackson's *South African Literature's Russian Soul* states from the outset the premise that unites her research: “the propensity of many of Russia's notable 19th-century thinkers to take a despairing view of their homeland provides a clear bridge to this book's South African context”.<sup>8</sup> Jackson does not aim to reveal “how writers construct new versions of reality” in South Africa inspired by the Russian literary canon, but rather to “show how it is that similarly problematic realities yield new constructions”.<sup>9</sup> She cites scholar Monica Popescu when highlighting the versatility of Communist Moscow as a model of progress for South Africa according to Alex La Guma (author of the 1978 travelogue *A Soviet Journey*), and La Guma's fellow critics of late-twentieth-century Afrikaner authoritarianism.<sup>10</sup> Chapters in Jackson's book triangulate Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Ivan Turgenev, and Lev Tolstoy, Coetzee and Marlene van Niekerk. Elsewhere, she explores rewritings of Chekhov's major drama in the contemporary Afrikaans playwright Reza de Wet's play *Russian Trilogy*,<sup>11</sup> and finally, she draws comparisons between Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, and Lewis Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego*. Her monograph presents a compelling case study of Russia's influence over modern South African literature.

Rossen Djalalov's chapter ‘The Afro-Asian Writers Association (1958–1991) and its Literary Field’ examines cross-cultural interaction between Soviet and African and Asian writers during the mid- to late-twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> His research, enhanced by rare, archived photographs that visually capture the collaborative mood of the Afro-Asian Soviet programme, illustrates the particular significance of the 1958 Tashkent Congress (and, during the same year, of a special reception of writers from the United Arab Republic at the Kremlin Palace hosted by Khrushchev). At this event:

over a hundred writers from Asia and the emerging African nations descended onto Tashkent [...]. Among the list of participants we find the nonagenarian W.E.B. Du Bois, who had just flown from Moscow, having persuaded Nikita Khrushchev to found the Institute for the Study of Africa. In Tashkent, he was joined by the major figures of the 1930s literary left outside of Europe or the Americas: the modernist Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, the Chinese polymath Mao Dun, as well as the founding figures of the Popular-Front-era All-India Progressive Writers

7 Jackson, *South African Literature's Russian Soul*, p. 1.

8 Ibid., p. 2.

9 Ibid., p. 14.

10 Ibid., pp. 18–19.

11 Ibid., p. 130.

12 Rossen Djalalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and Third Worlds* (Montreal and Kingston, London and Chicago, OH: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), pp. 65–110.

Association—Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer. Though poorly known at the time, some of the younger delegates at that meeting would go on to become the leading literary figures of their countries: the Indonesian Pramoedya Toer, the Senegalese novelist soon-to-become filmmaker Sembene Ousmane, the poet and one of the founders of Angola's Communist Party Mario Pinto de Andrade, and his Mozambican counterpart—the poet and FRELIMO politician Marcelino dos Santos.<sup>13</sup>

Djagalov's research on the inauguration and legacy of the Afro-Asian Writers Association, including its role as a counterweight to the Congress of Cultural Freedom (a literary outreach project sponsored by the CIA), offers valuable insight into the routes through which the Kremlin achieved collaboration and favourable political relations between non-capitalist nations. Djagalov describes the effort as an attempt to create what he calls "a Soviet Republic of Letters";<sup>14</sup> he emphasises the movement of African and Asian literature into Russian translation as a means by which the Soviet Union strove to consolidate this phenomenon. Djagalov's chapter, though mainly focused on the Soviet reception of Asian and African literature within the Soviet Union, also elaborates (as do many of the chapters in this edited volume) on the role played by Progress Publishers in Africa. In exploring the dissemination of Russian and Soviet literature to what Damrosch and Casanova call peripheral territories, Djagalov reveals the extent of Progress's sphere of influence. In the case of Africa and Asia, he notes that the Afro-Asian Writers Association, the "main organizational vehicle of the Soviet engagement with postcolonial literatures" directly supported Progress's work.<sup>15</sup> According to Djagalov, study of the organisation's official transcripts "would only confirm [...] suspicion of the Association as a propaganda vehicle for Soviet, Chinese, Egyptian, and even Indian foreign policy":<sup>16</sup>

The diverse agents of the Afro-Asian literary field—writers, cultural bureaucrats, publishers, critics, and readers—intuitively shared with contemporary dependency theorists such as Samir Amin, Raul Prebisch, and Walter Rodney an understanding of how they could escape their peripheral position within world literature: by delinking from the larger (literary) world-system, which kept them in a subordinate position; by developing their (literary) resources through interconnections; and by setting the terms of their own presence on the world (literary) stage. The Afro-Asian Writers Association represented just such an attempt

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13 Ibid., p. 65.

14 Ibid., p. 71.

15 Rossen Djagalov, 'The Afro-Asian Writers Association and Soviet Engagement with Africa', *Black Perspectives* (2 November 2017), <https://www.aaihs.org/the-afro-asian-writers-association-and-soviet-engagement-with-africa/>.

16 Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, p. 81.

to gain some autonomy from Paris and London and their interpretative authority.<sup>17</sup>

In this regard, the Soviet policy of soft power through cultural diplomacy created an emerging literary space for Afro-Asian writers that proved instrumental in propelling them towards global recognition. Djagalov observes that:

The Afro-Asian Writers' Association also sought to consolidate Third World literature as a coherent field through the Lotus Literary Prize, modeled after the World Peace Council's Lenin Peace Prize of the early Cold War. Envisaged as the Afro-Asian Nobel for literature, the Lotus Prize helped produce a veritable contemporary Afro-Asian canon: the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1969) and the South African prose writer Alex La Guma (1969), the novelists Sembene Ousmane (1971) and Ngugi wa Thiongo (1973), the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1975), and his compatriot, the poet, graduate of Moscow's Literary Institute, and future President of the Union of African Writers Atukwei Okai (1980). Many of the recipients received the award well before they acquired a significant literary reputation among Western publics.<sup>18</sup>

Monica Popescu's monographs—*South African Literature Beyond the Cold War* (2010) and *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (2020)—also explore (and frame in Casanovan terms) Africa's relationship with Russian cultural soft power.<sup>19</sup> In *At Penpoint*, the most recent of her publications, she poses a valuable rhetorical question:

If Pascale Casanova wrote the intellectual history of world literature with paths that weave in and out of Paris, how do we do justice to the stories of Ibadan, Kampala, Freetown, Dakar, and Johannesburg, as cities where writers forged alternative aesthetics and set up cultural solidarity networks with other marginalized artists' communities?<sup>20</sup>

Three previously unpublished case studies in the present volume answer Popescu's appeal for more stories to reinforce the notion of an African Republic of Letters. These case studies explore the circulation of Russian literature in Angola (Mukile Kasongo and Georgia Nasseh), Ethiopia (Nikolai Steblin-Kamensky), and in several Arabic nations (here, Egypt, Syro-Palestine, and Iraq are overviewed by Sarali Gintsburg). At the time of writing, Russian interests in

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17 Ibid.

18 Djagalov, 'The Afro-Asian Writers Association'.

19 Monica Popescu, *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War* (London and New York: Pan Macmillan, 2010); and *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2020).

20 Popescu, *At Penpoint*, p. 2.

Africa, as in Asia, are assuming new, post-Soviet significance: geopolitical lines are being revised in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This development will have an inevitable impact on Russia's cultural diplomacy in the region. According to Isaac Antwi-Boasiako, Russia has replaced promulgating Soviet-Communist ideology in the twentieth century by its desire in the twenty-first "to improve global perceptions of Russia".<sup>21</sup> To further this aim, Russia promotes itself as "the protector of the 'free world'" and of "traditional family values".<sup>22</sup> As Antwi-Boasiako asserts, "[m]any non-Western countries, especially in Africa, welcome these two narratives as convincing".<sup>23</sup> (The effectiveness of Russia's diplomacy campaign in Africa since the 2000s can perhaps best be illustrated by the number of African leaders who chose "not to condemn Russia for the war in Ukraine in 2022".)<sup>24</sup> During October 2022, Moscow hosted its own international conference, 'Past, Present and Future of Russian-Arabic and Arabic-Russian Translations', at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow.<sup>25</sup> In November 2022—immediately following the Frankfurt Book Fair, from which Russia was banned—Sharjah's 41st International Book Fair in the Emirates admitted Russian publishers and literary agents among the ninety-five attendant countries.<sup>26</sup> Under the theme of 'Spread the Word', the Sharjah Book Fair focused on literature in the Arabic language. If, against the backdrop of war in Ukraine, Russia's status persists for the foreseeable future as *persona non grata* in the Global North, we may reasonably assume that this status will steer Russian literature in translation decisively towards Africa and the Middle East.

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21 Isaac Antwi-Boasiako, 'The Quest for Influence: Examining Russia's Public Diplomacy Mechanisms in Africa', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 2022, Vol. 29, (4) (12 May 2022), 463–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2022.2153728>.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Schedule of the Institute of Oriental Studies Russian Academy of Sciences' conference 'Past, Present and Future of Russian-Arabic and Arabic-Russian Translations', <https://www.ivran.ru/en/announc?artid=210593>.

26 Sumit Arora, '41st Edition of the Sharjah International Book Fair Fall Inaugurated at the Expo Centre', *Adda247 Current Affairs* (3 November 2022), <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/41st-edition-of-the-sharjah-international-book-fair-fall-inaugurated-at-the-expo-centre/>.