African Literature Teaching in South African University English Departments

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In the winter of 1992 I spent two months in South Africa doing research on trends in recent literary criticism on African literature in English. It was my first extended visit to the country, so I rented a car for a month in order to travel to as many university campuses as possible to meet colleagues and make use of libraries. I was also curious to find out how much African literature was being taught at these institutions, so I started collecting course descriptions and book lists as I made my rounds. My aim was to discover which African authors and which books by those authors were prescribed reading in English courses taken by South African university students. What, in other words, was the instructional canon in anglophone African literature studies in South Africa? Of all the hundreds of African authors, dead and alive, whose works were available in English, which ones were now deemed worthy of serious academic attention? Who counted, and who did not?

I had carried out a similar survey six years earlier by collecting such pedagogical data from twenty-six universities in fourteen other anglophone African nations and then tabulating the results on charts that assigned a numerical ranking to authors and books prescribed most frequently in literature and drama courses. The scheme, which I called the Better Ultimate Rating Plan, was an effort not only to quantify qualitative discriminations made by teachers but also to discover the extent to which the English curriculum at these universities had been decolonised since independence. Were new African texts displacing some of the musty British classics that had totally dominated the syllabus during the colonial era? Was the study of English being Africanised?

1992 was an interesting time to raise analogous questions in South Africa, for it was squarely in the middle of what Nadine Gordimer, following

Gramsci, has called an interregnum (Gordimer)—a transitional phase—in this case two years after the release of Nelson Mandela from prolonged detention and the concomitant unbanning of the ANC and two years before the country's first truly democratic election. Some white universities had already started admitting black students in significant numbers a few years earlier, and there had been a great deal of public discussion about the need for curricular reform in a changing educational environment. In 1990 the Institute for the Study of English in Africa had published a collection of twenty essays by high school and university teachers entitled *Teaching English Literature in South Africa*, a volume aimed at ventilating opinions

> during a crucial period of political and social change ... from as wide a cross-section of the teaching community as possible (Wright 1990).

So the debate was already well under way, and modifications of the old Curricula Britannica were being introduced at every level of English teaching. Today there is no South African university English programme that does not offer some instruction in African literature.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the reforms have not gone far enough, that African literature on most campuses is still a marginalised step-daughter of traditional EngLit, which remains the queen mother of all its undernourished anglophone offspring. Moreover, in South Africa the battle for official recognition of indigenous literary legitimacy has only been half won, for native sons and daughters have crowded out most of the interesting foreigners from parts further north, the result being a kind of geographical apartheid in which Africa above the Limpopo is underrepresented in the pantheon of African letters. South African university students are now introduced to a sample of their own national literary heritage, but they are taught very little about Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, Zimbabwean and other anglophone African national literatures.

The data which follow have been gleaned from 139 course descriptions at 22 South African universities in the year 1992. This is not a complete inventory of all English courses in which texts by African authors were used. From certain campuses—notably Potchefstroom, Natal at Pietermaritzburg, and the Vista University campuses—it was not possible to obtain detailed descriptions of all the English courses offered in that year, but the sample, covering more than ninety percent of what was taught in English Departments in nearly one hundred percent of South African universities, is sufficiently large to permit gross generalisations to be made. A more comprehensive and more refined survey might change some of the final tabulations, resulting in slightly higher scores for some writers and slightly lower scores for others, but I believe the final results would remain more or less the same. What we

have here then is a crude measuring instrument capable of producing nothing more than a few brute truths.

Table One: Authors

Authors	Titles	Courses	Grades	Institutions	Totals
Fugard	12	36	4	17	69
Gordimer	11	39	5	13	68
Coetzee	6	37	5	15	63
Paton	3	17	5	13	38
Mphahlele	3	16	4	11	34
Head	5	15	4	9	33
Schreiner	1	13	4	12	30
Serote	2	14	4	10	30
Abrahams	4	11	5	8	28
La Guma	4	12	4	6	26
Plaatje	1	11	4	10	26
Ndebele	1	12	4	7	24
Ngugi	13	35	4	12	64
Achebe	6	31	4	15	56
Soyinka	11	17	4	11	43

Table One lists the South African and other African writers who scored more than twenty points in this survey. Point totals were arrived at simply by adding scores in four categories: number of titles plus number of courses plus number of grade levels (1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, honours, M.A.) plus number of institutions. For example, Nadine Gordimer earned 68 points because 11 of her books (including two of her short story collections and all her novels except *Occasion for Loving*) were assigned in 39 courses at 5 different levels in 13 South African universities. Athol Fugard scored a point higher but should perhaps be ranked slightly lower because two of his play collections—*Three Port Elizabeth Plays* and *Selected Plays*—repeat some of the ten individual titles already on his list. In any case, it is clear that Gordimer and Fugard are at the top of the teaching canon, followed closely by J.M. Coetzee, all six of whose novels published before 1992 were being taught somewhere in South Africa. After the Big Three the numbers taper off quite sharply, with only Paton, Mphahlele, Head, Schreiner and Serote scoring in the thirties and Abrahams, La Guma, Plaatje and Ndebele in the twenties.

Had we lowered the qualifying score to 15, we could have included such names as Dikobe (19), Smith (18), Bosman (17), Mda (16), and Plomer,

Tlali, and Mtwa/Ngema/Simon (15). There are several additional authors—Du Plessis, Essop, Matshoba, Modisane, Kuzwayo, Sepamla, and Breytenbach—who managed to score between 14 and 10, but they and others beneath them evidently have not yet earned much academic respect. In all, a total of 86 South African authors had their books taught in South African university English courses in 1992, but several of them, including some rather prominent figures in South African literary history—for example, Brink, Brutus, Butler, Campbell, H. Dhlomo, Jacobson, Jordan, M. Kunene, Livingstone, Millin, Rive—were nearly invisible in the survey for only one book by each was being taught in a single university English course in South Africa in that year.

This does not necessarily mean that these low profile authors were altogether forgotten or ignored. The poets and short story writers among them might have infiltrated the syllabus through anthologies, but since selections from anthologies seldom are specified in course descriptions, it was impossible in this survey to assign numerical value to every anthologised piece by every South African author. Some of them would have been taught, others not. And besides, a few anthology appearances would not have raised the total score of any of the trailing authors to the level of the half-dozen front-runners in the pack.

Of the non-South African African writers on the list, only three—Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Soyinka and Achebe—earned a qualifying score. Two others would have made the list if the qualifying standard had been dropped to 15: Armah (19) and Dangarembga (17). After that, it was very slim pickings indeed, with only four more—Lessing, Sembène, Okara and Emecheta—scoring above 10. In all, only 38 writers from other parts of Africa had their books taught in South African university English courses in 1992. Some big names—Awoonor, Clark-Bekederemo, Farah, Okot p'Bitek, Oyono, Senghor, Tutuola—were taught in only one course in one institution. Others equally important—most notably, Beti, Equiano, Okigbo, Rotimi—were not taught at all.

Table Two: Books

Titles	Courses	Grades	Institutions	Totals
Fugard, *Boesman and Lena*	14	4	11	29
Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*	13	5	11	29
Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*	13	4	12	29
Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue*	14	4	10	28
Plaatje, *Mhudi*	11	4	10	25

Serote, *To Every Birth its Blood*	12	4	9	25
Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*	11	4	9	24
Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories*	12	4	7	23
Gordimer, *The Conservationist*	10	3	7	20
Abrahams, *Mine Boy*	7	4	7	18
Dikobe, *The Marabi Dance*	8	3	7	18
Coetzee, *The Life & Times of Michael K*	8	3	6	17
Gordimer, *July's People*	9	4	4	17
Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*	14	4	12	30
Ngugi, *A Grain of Wheat*	11	3	8	22
Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*	7	4	6	17
Ngugi, *Petals of Blood*	9	3	5	17
Armah, *The Beautyful Ones ...*	6	3	6	15
Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*	7	3	5	15

If we turn now to Table Two, we can see which books were assigned most frequently. Among the South African texts the lead is shared by Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, and Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* (though one couldn't always be absolutely certain that this was the play assigned for reading when *Boesman and Lena and Other Plays* was the edition put on the book list for a course). Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*, Plaatje's *Mhudi*, Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood*, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* also score high enough to be ranked among South Africa's canonical texts, but where is Nadine Gordimer's *magnum opus*? There seems to be little agreement about which of her books is the most significant. *The Conservationist* earns a middling place on the list and so does *July's People* further on down, but none of her books has earned a commanding position in the pecking order. Much the same could be said of Coetzee. Like Gordimer, he has two books on the list, the preferred title being *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but even that one doesn't fare as well as those by other authors who seem to be best remembered for having produced a single masterpiece.

One might note in passing the near absence of books by exiled and formerly banned writers, Abrahams's *Mine Boy* being the exception that proves the rule. Maybe 1992 was still too early for some of these authors to have been fully rehabilitated and integrated into university syllabuses, but in the future one would hope to see more attention given to the best of them—Breytenbach, Brutus, Head, Kunene, La Guma and Nkosi, for starters.

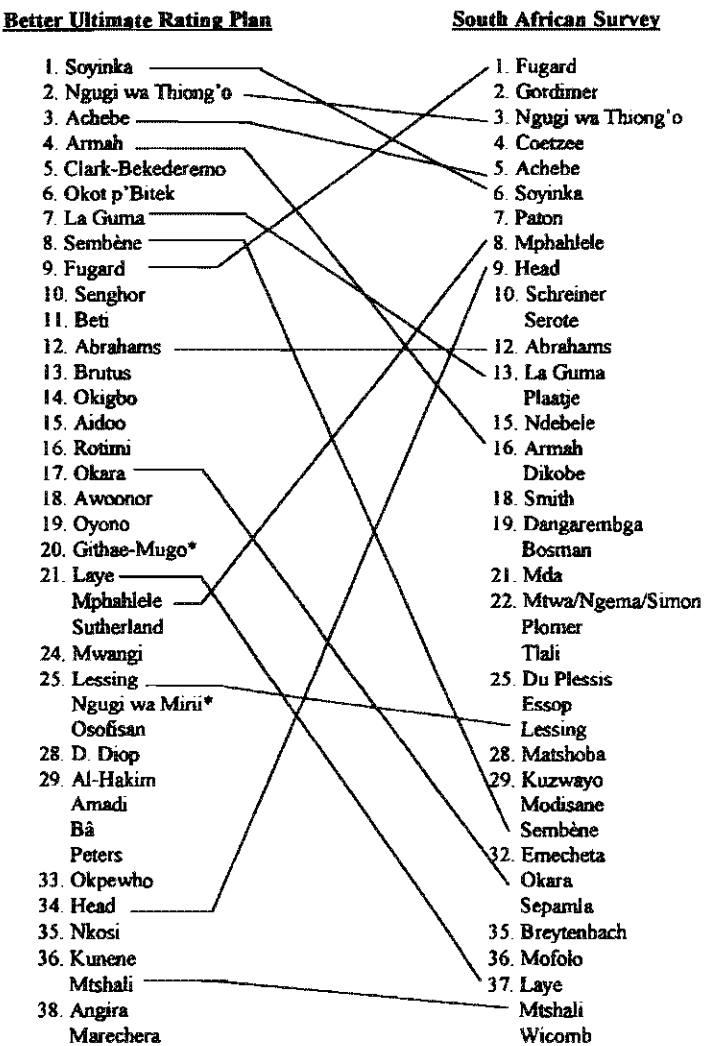
One would also hope to see more books by writers from elsewhere in Africa being used in South African university classrooms. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, followed at some distance by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, are the favourite selections now, and a handful of other novels by

Achebe, Ngugi, Armah and Dangarembga are read with some regularity, but why aren't more than one or two campuses reading, say, Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Road*, or *Death and the King's Horseman*, to name only a few works by Africa's first Nobel Prize winner in literature? And what about all the other African classics? Of the 35 non-South African African titles listed in the Better Ultimate Rating Plan as preferred texts in other anglophone African nations, in 1992 in South Africa only 5 were being taught in 6 or more courses, 5 in 3 to 5 courses, 7 in only 1 or 2 courses, and the following 18 were not taught at all:

Okigbo's *Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder*
Soyinka's *Idanre and Other Poems*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, and *Madmen and Specialists*
Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want*
Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*
Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and *Mission to Kala*
Armah's *Fragments* and *Two Thousand Seasons*
Sembène's *Xala*
Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation*
Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* and *Houseboy*
Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*
Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day*
Clark-Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat*
Aidoo's *Anowa*

Of course, one could turn this around and ask why at universities in other African nations are so few books being read by South African authors who are widely taught in South Africa. West, East and Central African university teachers do prescribe a bit of Fugard and a slice of Abrahams, but why don't they assign Gordimer, Coetzee, Paton and Schreiner to their students? Is there a colourbar or boycott in operation here? Not a colourbar surely, because those same university teachers also do not have their students read much of Mphahlele, Ndebele, Serote, Plaatje or Dikobe either. Head has been making some headway in the tropics recently, but hers may be a special case, fuelled as much by the growth of women's studies as by an increasing interest in feminist issues throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps greater reciprocity is needed on both sides of the geographical divide. The North needs to read more from the South, just as the South needs to read more from the North. Each nation or region may have its own hierarchy of educational priorities, but gaining a better understanding of neighbouring peoples and cultures must certainly be near the top of the list everywhere. And what better way could there be to improve mutual understanding in the entire continent than by reading masterworks of contemporary African literature?

Table Three: Teaching Preferences



*co-author with Ngugi wa Thiong'o

To show where the major differences in African literature teaching in North and South lie, I am attaching another table (Table Three) which sets the results of the Better Ultimate Rating Plan and the present survey side by side. This will enable us to see more clearly the adjustments that would be called for if we were to attempt to construct a Pan-African syllabus based on the

teaching preferences of both North and South. Obviously there is not much overlap in these lists. With the exception of Fugard, white South African writers are not being read up North, but eight black South African writers are being studied, three of them—La Guma, Abrahams and Brutus—quite seriously. In the South, on the other hand, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Achebe and Soyinka have been recognised as major talents, but only half a dozen other Northerners have been considered worthy of scrutiny. Southerners read Abrahams as attentively as Northerners do, tend to value Fugard, Head, and Mphahlele significantly higher and Armah, La Guma, Sembène, Okara and Laye significantly lower than Northerners do, and display very little regard for Brutus, Nkosi and Kunene. Lessing commands a modest measure of respect in each camp, but Mtshali is viewed by both as a minor talent. Several newcomers—particularly Ndebele, Dangarembga and Mda but also Kuzwayo and Wicomb—have made a favourable impression in the South but no conspicuous dent in the North, possibly because the data sample from up there is too old (having been gathered in 1986) for them to have elicited any response, positive or negative, since their books had not been published by then. There may be a slight time warp as well as pronounced demographic differences skewing the comparison of these two canonical rosters.

Table Four: University Prescriptions

Universities	Fug	Gor	Ngu	Coe	Ach	Soy	Pat	Mph	Hea	Sch	Ser	Abr
Bophuthatswana	*		*		*	*		*				
Cape Town	*	*	*	*		*					*	
Durban-Westville			*		*						*	
Fort Hare	*	*	*	*	*	*					*	
Natal, Durban	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Pietermaritzburg		*	*	*	*			*	*	*	*	*
North, Qwaqwa	*				*		*			*		
North, Turfloop	*		*	*	*	*	*	*		*		
Orange Free State	*			*						*		
Port Elizabeth	*	*		*			*	*		*		*
Potchefstroom	*			*			*					
Pretoria	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Rand Afrikaans	*	*		*			*		*	*		
Rhodes		*	*	*	*	*					*	*
South Africa	*	*		*	*		*	*		*		*
Stellenbosch	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Transkei			*		*	*	*	*				*
Venda	*	*			*						*	
Vista	*		*				*		*			
Western Cape		*		*	*				*	*		
Witwatersrand	*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*	
Zululand	*				*	*	*	*	*			*

One last table (Table Four) lists South African universities, showing where works by the twelve writers deemed most important by South African university teachers were being taught in 1992. Only two institutions—the University of Stellenbosch and the University of Natal at Durban—taught all twelve, but the University of Pretoria taught the first eleven, and the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Natal at Pietermaritzburg taught as many as nine each. On the low end of the scale the University of Durban-Westville, the University of the Orange Free State and Potchefstroom University taught only three each (but, as mentioned earlier, the records for Potchefstroom are incomplete). The average per campus was somewhere between six and seven of these writers taught in a three, four or five year literature programme. That's not very many, but at least it's more than was the case a decade or two ago.

Several interesting patterns are discernible in the institutional data. For instance, the University of the Orange Free State, the University of Port Elizabeth, Potchefstroom University, and Rand Afrikaans University taught nothing by Achebe, Soyinka or Ngugi wa Thiong'o, but the University of Bophuthatswana, Fort Hare University, the University of the North at Turfloop, and the University of the Transkei (all former Bantu universities) as well as the Universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Natal at Durban (the ones with the most inclusive curricula) and Rhodes University taught all three. The Orange Free State taught only white writers, Rand Afrikaans University taught all the whites but only one of the blacks, the University of Durban-Westville taught only black writers, the University of Bophuthatswana taught only blacks except for Fugard, the University of the Transkei taught only blacks except for Paton, and the University of the North at Qwaqwa taught only whites except for Achebe. The rest—by far the majority—taught a very mixed bag.

It may never be possible to achieve a perfect consensus on what should and should not be taught in university English courses in the new South Africa, but a generous mixing and mingling of talented writers from different racial, social, temporal and national backgrounds appears to be the most satisfactory way to balance competing interests and produce a syllabus that is both representative of the best from the past and inclusive of the best from the present. One would hope that such a syllabus would also to some extent accommodate itself to local circumstances and be capable of reflecting the remarkable heterogeneity of Africa itself, with its many diverse and complicated expressive cultures. University English literature teaching in South Africa—indeed, anywhere in Africa—should be a profoundly multicultural enterprise.

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