

# **Saints and Sinners in the Canonisation of African Literature: A Reply to Bernth Lindfors**

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Bernth Lindfors set out, in 1992, to gather information about the syllabi of English Departments in South Africa, in order to assess their responsiveness to the profound political changes which were taking place. But his project was not merely one of information gathering: he strove to evaluate the curricula in terms of their loading of African and South African texts against 'the old Curricula Britannica' (p. 6). In a compilation of empirical data drawn from course descriptions at 22 South African universities for the year 1992, Lindfors concludes that

African literature on most campuses is still a marginalised stepdaughter of traditional EngLit, which remains the queen mother of all its undernourished anglophone offspring (p. 6).

This conclusion is arrived at through a process, initially, of conducting a popularity poll whereby he establishes 'the twelve [African/South African] writers deemed most important by South African university teachers' (p. 13) and secondly, by rating universities in relation to the number of prescriptions they made of these 'top twelve'. (The relative proportion of African and South African texts to the old British canon is not revealed). Few of us engaged in the business of teaching literature at South African universities would quarrel with Lindfors's argument that South African universities' curricula should reflect (and reflect on) their South Africanness and Africanness. Indeed, many (if not most) English department curricula had begun the move away from the 'traditional EngLit' (p. 6) canon in the nineteen eighties. Nevertheless, in spite of agreement on this fundamental

question there are many points on which we must take issue with Lindfors. First of all, implicit in his essay is the assumption that a new canon of African and South African texts should be established, and conformed to. The notions of a new canon and of national and continental conformity to such a canon are both highly questionable. Furthermore, one must challenge Lindfors on his methodology: in ranking university English departments on a kind of saints-to-sinners continuum in accordance with the number of *most popular* South African and African texts which feature on prescribed book lists, Lindfors has used inaccurate data, and in questionable ways.

Let us begin with the canon-building issue. Upon reading Lindfors's paper 'African Literature Teaching in South African University English Departments', one might be forgiven for thinking that the last thirty years of theoretical developments, conceptual shifts and political challenges in the field of literary studies had passed him by without notice. Lindfors demonstrates a completely uncritical notion of canonicity. He claims that the usefulness of one of his tables lies in its ability to demonstrate 'the adjustments that would be called for if we were to attempt to construct a Pan-African syllabus' (p. 11). Here and elsewhere<sup>1</sup> the implication is that such a project would be worthwhile. Canonicity is in contention in literary studies throughout the world, and it is an issue of particular sensitivity and contestation where literary fields are relatively new and still developing. Since Foucault, it has become a commonplace within disciplinary studies to acknowledge that disciplines set up their fields of study through their own discursive practices, in a process that is neither neutral nor value-free. In 1982, in his introduction to *Re-Reading English*, Peter Widdowson (1982:3) made the following remarks:

'Literature' is, in effect, being recognised as the construct of a criticism which, while assuming and proclaiming its 'descriptiveness', its 'disinterestedness', its 'ideological innocence', has so constituted Literature as to reproduce and naturalise bourgeois ideology as 'literary value'. Literary value, therefore, as perceived by criticism in the 'great tradition' of master works or 'classic' texts, correlates closely with the values of liberal individualism in general, and substantially helps to underpin them.

Lindfors might well agree with this, and argue that his concern with the extent to which the literary field in South Africa has been 'decolonised' (p. 5) is precisely a concern to dis-establish the dominance of traditional EngLit. However, what he would like to see, it would seem, is its

<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example: '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 ...' (p. 13); this implies a desire for precisely such consensus.

replacement with an alternative 'African canon'. But the notion of a canon or its value is not open to debate. Toril Moi makes exactly this point in the course of her critique of aspects of Anglo-American feminist criticism. The point is not 'to create a separate canon' of women's or African writing, but 'to abolish all canons' (Moi 1985:78). Lindfors's opposition to what he terms 'the old *Curricula Britannica*' operates within the same limitations; his revealing terminology of 'masterpiece' (p. 9), 'masterworks' (p. 11) and 'African classics' (p. 10) demonstrates the operation of such criteria within his own critical discourse. As Moi (1985:78) argues, 'a new canon would not be intrinsically less oppressive than the old'. Reading on with Moi (1985:78), but substituting 'African' for 'feminist', we have this:

The role of the [African] critic is still to sit quietly and listen to [the authoritative African] voice as it expresses authentic [African] experience. The [African] reader is not granted leave to get up and challenge this [African] voice; the [African] text rules as despotically as the old [traditional EngLit] text.

The kind of substitution that is implicit in the Lindfors position might well achieve no more in cultural and educational institutions than neo-colonial 'transfers of power' achieved in political and economic institutions. Under the veneer of the progressive advocacy of African and South African Literature (drawn together under that truly American term 'multi-culturalism'), Lindfors is promoting a deeply conservative view of literary studies that privileges the *content* of curricula over approaches and methodologies, and so elides any examination of approach and its informing ideology. The effect is to discount the efforts of those English departments that have attempted a far more radical transformation of the curriculum than merely substituting one set of canonical contents for another.

There are times in the course of his paper that Lindfors speaks of the fields of African and South African Literature as though they have some objective, empirical existence quite outside and independent of the institutional practices that produce them—'what better way could there be to improve mutual understanding in the entire continent than by reading masterworks of contemporary African literature?' (p. 11)—but there is also, underlying the entire survey, an implicit recognition of the *interdependent*, if not positively *determining*, relationship between institutional practice and field of study. The canons that Lindfors identifies are the consequences of 'teaching preferences' (p. 12) and 'educational priorities' (p. 10). This is precisely the process that needs to be foregrounded and interrogated—the process whereby critical discourse *can be seen* to set up the field and establish the 'canon'. The question 'Who counted, and who did not?' (p. 5) is insufficient: we need to know *why* they counted. On what or whose terms?

Read in this way, the university departments that score the highest (and consequently appear to be the most saintly and progressive) in Lindfors's tables, could be interpreted quite differently as being the most conservative, in 'fixing' the canon, in limiting its parameters and, through determining its contents, also limiting the range of discourses and theories that are 'appropriate' to literary study. (To admit radically different, non-canonical contents might well mean that the whole category of Literature, as well as the practices that have institutionalised it, are interrogated.)

However, on the basis of the very limited empirical data provided in this paper, we can draw no such conclusions. The prescription of twelve authors over four or more years of study tells us nothing about how those texts are taught, what links are established, how courses are constructed, or what intertextual relationships are set up. Nor does it tell us anything about the 'educational priorities' that are currently shaping curricula in South African university English departments such as meeting the needs of a rapidly changing, and, in many respects, severely disadvantaged student body. The issues here are extremely complex for both academic staff and students, including such things as institutional access, cultural differences (including the 'alien' culture of the university itself), textual accessibility, linguistic and conceptual competence, and confronting a very wide, and frequently inappropriate, set of expectations. From this perspective, Lindfors's paper is so superficial as to be positively misleading.

But there is another important misconception underlying this notion of conformity to a canon: one way of achieving the goal of effective teaching is to be responsive to the specific and changing needs of students. In 1992 student populations from one university to another were significantly less uniform than they are today. (The racial and class composition of the student bodies of many universities tended still—in spite of anti-apartheid policies, in most cases—to attest to the impact of racist legislation affecting universities.) In this context, uniformity of syllabi is not only irrelevant, it is positively undesirable. Diversity amongst South African English departments' curricula must be understood at least in part as a response to diverse student populations and needs.

Furthermore, Lindfors's ultimate aim, namely, to encourage African universities 'to construct a Pan-African syllabus based on the teaching preferences of both North and South' (pp. 11f), is an extraordinary suggestion that may also bespeak a questionable attitude to Africa. Would he consider proposing that all university English Departments in continental America or Europe should strive to achieve critical consensus? It seems unlikely.

Moreover, his argument is itself internally inconsistent as he later pleads for the kind of heterogeneity and diversity which is incompatible with critical consensus. The analysis concludes with the following:

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 (p. 13).

The problem is that the diversity to which Lindfors refers is confined to continental Africa. As has been said, we are in perfect accord with Lindfors's insistence that 'traditional EngLit' should be dethroned, but many would argue that this does not mean that it should be utterly ostracised (as indeed it would have to be if one were attempting to score well in Lindfors's hit parade, given the fact that one can only prescribe so many texts for undergraduate reading lists). Why would English departments want to encourage such parochialism? Surely our students deserve to be able to meet with their peers at European and American universities and not be utterly ignorant of literatures in English produced out of Africa? Furthermore, many of our students who major in English intend to pursue teaching careers, and it would be extremely irresponsible of us not to equip them with *some* knowledge of British and American literature, examples of which they will undoubtedly be required to teach at secondary school level. Even more important is the move to extend students' acquaintance with the literatures of the pre-colonial and colonial worlds so that the ideologies which fuelled dreams of Empire might be interrogated. We would argue, too, for the inclusion of texts which have emerged from the rest of the post-colonial world. In the current context of the globalisation of world economies and cultures, to restrict our students' literary knowledge to the products of Africa is to severely disable them and limit their intellectual horizons.

This brings us to the second area of contention: Lindfors's empirical data is not all that accurate, and the information is used merely to shore up a project of canon-building. On the issue of accuracy, we cannot comment on the data used for other universities, but that for the University of Durban-Westville is certainly erroneous. 1992 prescriptions included a further six of Lindfors's canonical twelve (Gordimer, Coetzee, Paton, Head, Schreiner and Abrahams) which significantly raises the university's score from *three* to *nine*. This error has arisen because Lindfors left out of his calculations the UDW honours course prescriptions while crediting other universities with their prescriptions for honours courses as well as course-work Masters programmes. In a survey such as this, it is surely necessary to discriminate between those universities which offer post-graduate courses in African,

South African or post-colonial studies and those which do not. Failure to do so produces weird distortions in the findings. Lindfors is not comparing apples with apples, but a packet of apples with a crate. In a numerical ranking system the crates are obviously going to look more generous. The measuring instrument used by Lindfors is indeed crude, as he himself concedes; however, it produces not 'a few brute truths', but a few brute falsehoods. For instance, even if we overlook the distorting attention to the undergraduate syllabus only, we still find errors. Lindfors incorrectly asserts that UDW's English department 'taught only black writers' (p. 13). In 1992, Menan du Plessis's *A State of Fear* was required reading for undergraduates, as was Shula Marks's *Not Either an Experimental Doll*. These omissions arise because Lindfors includes only those authors who scored more than twenty points, points which were computed

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 (pp. 3-4).

The rationale behind this scoring process is hard to imagine; why, for example, should the spread of grades inflate a score? Surely some texts might not be deemed to be suitable for all grade levels; why should this indicate a lowered score? Furthermore, the decision to ignore authors whose works are taught at only a few institutions might well have been motivated by convenience, but again the omissions result in skewed—indeed, falsified—conclusions. At UDW at undergraduate level alone (allowing, again, for the failure to consider the honours prescriptions) Dangarembga, Emecheta, Soyinka (his anthology of African poetry), Ousmane, Okot p'Bitek as well as Dikobe, Tlali, Moloi (who does not even warrant a mention by Lindfors) and Mtwa/Ngema/Simon are disregarded.

Of concern, too, is Lindfors's decision to ignore anthologised authors. UDW's prescribed anthology of poetry (which includes poets of all race groups) for our 1800 first year students is factored out of the equation 'since selections from anthologies seldom are specified in course descriptions' (p. 8). One can sympathise with the difficulties involved in having to find out precisely which anthologised works are taught, but since the point is to examine what *is* taught, surely that is what has to be addressed.

We are less interested in scoring points at this level, however, than in pointing out that Lindfors's canonical system excluded any acknowledgement of the prescription at Durban-Westville of twenty-odd texts by African and South African writers within courses that have a sharp theoretical focus and that frequently transgress the literary and geographical boundaries within which Lindfors conceives of literary studies, and allow for a much wider set

of textual relationships within the literary world.

The ranking of texts according to popularity is, to say the least, a tautological enterprise: the most valuable texts are those that are most valued. But Lindfors's measure of value as the frequency with which texts are prescribed begs a number of questions. Why, for example, should conformity over 'the writers deemed most important' be sought? Lindfors asks 'where is Nadine Gordimer's *magnum opus*? There seems to be little agreement about which of her books is the most significant' (p. 9). This is a red herring. Divergence can be construed as the result of a healthy non-conformity, a thoughtful selection of texts to fit specific course objectives and student needs. Nor can one agree that because certain authors are taught at only a few universities 'they have not earned much academic respect' (p. 8) or are considered to be 'minor' talents (p. 12); similarly, favoured authors are not necessarily 'studied seriously' (p. 12). But perhaps most disturbing about Lindfors's drive towards conformity and critical consensus amongst English Departments is the moralistic implication that failure to teach the texts which feature on his hit parade is at best unfortunate, at worst a perpetuation of apartheid ideology. This kind of moralism is clearly unwarranted, given the incomplete data, the slanted interpretative process and the questionable motivation.

Lindfors is to be commended for drawing attention to the issue of decolonisation in South African university English Departments, but one simply cannot accept at face value his conclusion that 'traditional EngLit' had retained its supremacy; moreover, the narrowness of his focus obscures too many critical issues in this period of national and institutional transformation to be really useful. Transformation of institutional practices requires changes that are much wider and deeper than merely changing the content of curricula, and in this political context it is less important to be prescriptive about what changes should take place, than to open up institutional discourses to the contestation that is a necessary part of democratic social life.

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