



OPINION

African writers can't continue being marginalised by the rest of the world

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In most large bookshops across the world, including in African cities such as Nairobi, novels by African writers are often “ghettoised” in a remote corner next to the Travel or Anthropology section. This phenomenon is a result of a variety of factors.

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One, it is assumed that novels by African writers are valuable, not so much for the stories they tell, but for the insights they provide into African culture and traditions.

Two, there is a widely held belief, especially among liberal Western literary critics, that “the African novel” is a special genre that should

be judged in the context of the author’s socio-historical background and aesthetic traditions, and not by Western values.

Three, owners of bookshops assume that readers of books by Africans will only do so when they are forced to read them, as students of African history and society, as foreign correspondents sent to cover “the dark continent” or as literature professors who need to make comparative analyses of “African” and Western literature.

The interesting thing about the ghettoisation of books by Africans is that while books about Africa by Western writers find pride of place in the fiction or non-fiction sections of bookshops, books about Africa by African writers are given their own space in the back of the bookshop where they can only be found by those who search for them.

Hence, a highly mediocre memoir, such as *The White Masai* by Corrine Hofmann, will be displayed prominently in the front of the bookshop and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s seminal book, *Decolonising the Mind*, will either not be stocked or will be relegated to a dark corner.

No one understands this phenomenon better than the Zimbabwean writer Petina Gappah, whose short story collection, *An Elegy for Easterly*, was recently shortlisted for the prestigious Orwell prize for political writing.

At the Storymoja Hay Festival in Nairobi last weekend, Petina wondered whether the label “African writer” was an impediment to the mainstreaming of so-called “African literature” and whether this labelling was based on the false assumption that a story written by an African was representative of his or her entire society.

This then leads to the question of “authenticity” and whether an African writer is true to her traditions and values, or whether she is merely mimicking Western literary forms.

Petina believes that these discussions are misleading, if not patronising. People write because they have something to say, not because they want to be ambassadors for their entire societies.

“Writing is not about representation,” she says. “It is about my take on the world and all the worlds that I inhabit.

“These worlds could be real, such as Zimbabwe, where I was raised, or Geneva, where I lived for many years, or they could be worlds of my imagination which I have never visited. My stories are mine – they are not the voice of every Zimbabwean.”

The narrative about Africa was, until recently, being told mainly by Western writers such as Joseph Conrad and Karen Blixen. These works often portrayed Africans as savage beings inhabiting wild and beautiful places that were only accessible to the most adventurous Europeans.

But this is slowly changing with the emergence of new African writers such as Chimamanda Adichie and Ben Okri, who have helped to mainstream literature by Africans and who are now being judged not as “African writers” but as literary icons in their own right.

The Storymoja Hay Festival is in itself an attempt to mainstream literature by Africans into the global literary circuit and to expose non-African writers to literature from the continent.

Some of my favourite moments during the festival included watching a highly irreverent but extremely funny performance by the award-winning comedy writer Jane Bussman, who cleverly managed to make a highly political and disturbing statement about the Ugandan Government’s war against Joseph Kony of the Lord’s Resistance Army using British humour and satire interspersed with horrific images of child soldiers and dead bodies.

But the moment that really touched me was when a young woman came up to Atsango Chesoni, a member of the Committee of Experts (who was sitting next to me during a highly entertaining performance by Dub Poetry exponent Benjamin Zephaniah), and asked her to autograph a copy of the new Constitution.