

# Reading to reveal the world

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**Abstract:** Following the critical principles as they were articulated in an earlier article on South African literature (Buikema, 2009), the paper discusses a more recent call for literary engagement in the context of contemporary debates on world novel and world literature. In a dialogue with Buikema's reading of two South African novels, *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk, the paper turns to Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) following a similar method of interpretation, which emphasizes the singularity of text and combines close reading with contextual approach.

**Keywords:** world novel, feminist ethics, Octavia Butler

My first major project in the field of transnational literature and border studies was a special issue of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* entitled *Writing across the Borders* that I edited together with Paola Bono. In the editorial, Paola and I pointed at some of the problems in border studies we were particularly interested in at the time. Referring to scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Ponzanesi and Azade Seyhan, we focused on border culture and border writing, and the ways in which they destabilise traditional values and hierarchies in cultural and literary theory (Bono and Lukić, 2009). Rosemarie Buikema (2009) contributed to the special issue with an article in which she was looking at two South African novels: *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (1999) and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk (2004). Offering a close reading of the two novels, Buikema raised several points which were important for me not only in the context of that particular journal issue, but as part of a larger discussion on how to read literature in times when literary criticism, and in particular feminist literary criticism, was going through a disciplinary crisis, debating its own foundational concepts.

In her article, Buikema (2009) brought together two perspectives which I found equally important: an emphasis on the specific character of (literary) works of art and an expectation that the same work of art is engaged with the world it speaks

to; or, to put it in her words, she argued for “a synthesis of the work-immanent approach, so deservedly criticised in the past, and the contextual approach to art and culture that was so rightly taken on board” (313). Thus, on the one hand she argues for “the method of meticulous textual analysis” with an understanding that “form is what defines a work of art; form constitutes its singularity par excellence, which is why it will always withdraw from being appropriated by sheer identity politics” (313). On the other hand, however, whatever literature also deals with,

(...) its most important effect is always the production of awareness. Becoming aware of difference. Literature performs an awareness of alterity, of the other, of what is new and the difference. Thus, literariness comprehends the dimension of language that has the capacity to reveal the world. It has the potential to create new realities, not by giving up what we want, but by dissecting and deconstructing our expectations. Literature does not present us with solutions for questions concerned with identity politics or other matters, but foregrounds those questions as such by telling stories and by situating characters in diverse locations and times. (Buikema, 2009, 315).

My ongoing interest in transnational literature is still framed by the same wish to work within the “coalition between different forms of studying culture” (310), where the singularity of literary texts and the worlds created by them are understood and interpreted with respect to the difference that includes the main principles of feminist ethics. So almost fifteen years later, I am coming back to Buikema’s article with an aim to put it in a dialogue with calls for socially engaged literary texts as they were articulated in recent debates on world literature. Recognizing these calls as relevant, but at the same time lacking gender perspective, I am proposing here a reading of Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) as an early example of a gendered ‘world novel’ (Ganguly, 2016; see below) which demonstrates awareness of alterity based upon feminist ethics. *Kindred* is relevant here because of the ways in which the novel, speaking to collective trauma of racism in the US, interrogates relations between race and gender, that is a set of questions which Buikema addresses in her article from a South African perspective.

Debjani Ganguly’s (2016) arguments concerning the contemporary novel as a ‘global form’ are important here for my reading of *Kindred* (1979). Ganguly postulates the existence of a new novelistic genre in her study *This Thing Called the World*, where she makes the following claim:

My primary thesis is that around the historically significant threshold of 1989, a new kind of novel as a global literary form emerged at the conjuncture of three critical phenomena: the geopolitics of war and violence since the end of the cold

war; hyperconnectivity through advances in information technology; and the emergence of a new humanitarian sensibility in a context where suffering has a presence in everyday life through the immediacy of digital images. (2016, 1)

Ganguly (2016) holds that what she calls 'contemporary world novel' is a "distinctive literary formation" (1). This is the novel, which has a new chronotope, the world. Not focusing on the fall of the Berlin Wall but on the larger geopolitical context, Ganguly sees "the period around 1989 as a critical threshold of the 'contemporary' that contains within its intensified temporality developments from the 1960s to the present" (6). She refers to these developments as 'cracks' in the liberal consensus that emerged between 1968 and 1989 to be further fractured by "the excesses of a neoliberal world order" (7) in the coming decades. It is a period in which what she calls the 'genre of the world novel' comes to the stage to offer a critical perspective on these events (6-7) in works that "express a new kind of humanitarian ethics, a new internationalism built on a shared dread of human capacity for evil coupled with a deep awareness of the ambiguities of sharing grief across large expanses of ravaged death worlds" (10).

It is important to emphasise that for Ganguly (2016) there is a clear difference between the worlds of fiction and the 'actual' world we live in, where the world is "related to, but not synonymous with its material and chronotopical coordinates" (21). The position Ganguly takes enables her to investigate the ways in which the contemporary novel engages with actualities but without reducing the novel to a mere 'reflection' of experiential reality. In other words, fictional worlds are seen here as non-mimetic; at the same time, they are involved with our present reality, and the world novel as a genre is also defined through this involvement. The world novel can be seen as a form of socially engaged literature while Ganguly also recognises the "ontological sovereignty of fictional worlds" (Doležel, 1998, 21).

Similar is the position of Pheng Cheah (2016), who "seeks to understand the normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethicopolitical horizon it opens up for the existing world" (5). Understanding normativity as "what ought to be" (6), Cheah considers that literature has the power to "change the world according to a normative ethicopolitical horizon" (6). And while Ganguly defined the genre of the world novel through its engagement with the actuality we live in, for Cheah such an engagement is the main characteristic of what he considers to be 'world literature':

I am proposing here a normative conception of world literature as the literature of the world (double genitive). This refers to imaginings and stories of what it means to be a part of the world that tracks and accounts for contemporary globalization and earlier historical narratives of worldhood. Such imaginings are often informed

by concepts of the world from non-Western traditions, both precolonial and postcolonial. Such a literature is also one that seeks to be disseminated, read, and received round the world so as to change it and the lives of peoples within it. (Cheah, 2016, 210)

In Cheah's (2016) view, then, the power to be critical is particularly present in postcolonial literature, which became "world literature by virtue of its participation in worlding processes" (213). Therefore, both Cheah and Ganguly (2016) argue for some form of social engagement as a defining characteristic of what they recognise as contemporary world literature (Cheah) or the world novel (Ganguly). However, significantly, neither of them considers gender, although it is a crucial aspect of the social processes they engage with. It would be important to analyse the ways in which gender regimes globally and locally affect worlding processes in Cheah's sense of the term (2016, 211), or the way the world is conceptualised through the genre of world novel as Ganguly (2016) understands it. But since gender regimes cannot be analysed in isolation, it is an intersectional perspective that is required in approaching the actual and fictional worlds that Cheah and Ganguly speak about. This further means that Ganguly's list of three critical phenomena that shape the appearance of the 'world novel' as a global form needs to be supplemented by another key phenomenon, the rise of emancipatory movements from the 1960s that changed social relations and the ways in which marginalised individuals and social groups perceive themselves.

In order to support this claim, I would like to now turn to a novel that was written before the 1989 time threshold set by Ganguly (2016), but that in many ways corresponds with some of my points here. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is a well-known piece of fiction, which was originally published in 1979, but continues to gain popularity in our time as well. It speaks strongly to the larger project of rethinking colonial histories, the history of slavery, but also to the times we live in. Written in the first person, the novel entails the personal and family history of an Afro-American woman-writer who by a strange turn of events experiences travel through time and space. I am emphasising here the fact that the narrator of the novel is a writer since this metatextual element signals to the reader the significance of literature for understanding the world(s) we live in.

As Cheah (2016) emphasises, worlding processes are temporal, and one of the ways in which literature can produce change is by engaging with the question of time. While progress-oriented capitalist globalisation perceives time as linear, through narrative fiction alternative modes of heterotemporality can be examined (191-215).

Heterotemporality is one of the key narrative tools in *Kindred*. The novel is structured around different timelines, connected through the lived experience of the main character, Dana, who is also the narrator of the novel. Dana travels through

time on several occasions; she goes to the past involuntarily, drawn back by one of her ancestors whenever he is in peril. Her ancestor, Rufus, the white inheritor of an estate, invokes her unwittingly, but once she goes back to his time, he wants to keep her there, both as his slave and as a special person in his life. The difference that Dana brings to the past as an educated and emancipated young woman, and the knowledge she brings from the future do not protect her from being captured into slavery and from experiencing it in the most humiliating way.

*Kindred* (1979) represents a combination of two genres, slave narratives and speculative fiction. And, as Nadine Flagel (2012) points out, mixing these two genres allows Butler to critically interrogate them one against the other:

Time travel, the most prominent aspect of speculative fiction in the novel, permits Butler to construct moments of concrete contact – often conflict – between her protagonist, Dana Franklin, an African American woman living in 1976, and slavery among her ancestors in nineteenth-century Maryland. Through the insertion of slave narrative elements, Dana’s otherwise fantastic experience of slavery becomes typical, credible. Butler’s intensely literal questions about slavery also push open the latent content of such aspects of speculative fiction as time travel, human/non-human and master/slave dialectics, and dystopias. Reciprocally, Butler’s insertion of speculative elements exempts the slave narrative from the stringent demands of documentary realism, such as chronological rigidity and a male-centred emphasis on education (Flagel, 2012, 218).

I am not going to engage in the storyline of *Kindred* in more detail here but aim to use it as an important example of postcolonial and decolonial narratives, which deploy fantastic elements in order to underline the relevance of historical knowledge. If we read *Kindred* in such a way, then the generic elements of speculative fiction (in this case time travel) appear as narrative tools with which history can be made real for the reader. History is not problematised here in the way it is problematised in historiographic metafiction, instead it is rediscovered and relived with an aim to engage the reader affectively, and to show that the past cannot be separated from the present.

This is also the point at which *Kindred* opens up to be read in the framework of ‘new world literature’ as Cheah (2016) puts it. Butler vividly shows how this history is still present and operational in the 1980s. What Dana experiences is the past in the present, the past which has the power to intervene in the present and subjugate it unless it is confronted. Her ancestor Rufus’s power over her is not limited to the times when she is called to the past; it stretches to the present where she is coming back with scars from physical punishments she has been exposed to. The slaveholder’s power is operating upon both racialized and gendered principles,

which the novel demonstrates both within the larger picture, which is generally known, but also on the much deeper level of interpersonal relations. For example, despite his love for her, Dana's husband Kevin, as a white male person, is not able to fully understand her position once he finds himself in the past with her:

"This could be a great time to live in," Kevin said once. "I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it – go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true."

"West," I said bitterly. "That's where they are doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!"

He looked at me strangely. He had been doing that a lot lately. (Butler, 2004, 97)

This reaction does not imply that Kevin is a heartless person who does not recognise the hardships of slavery. When he is forced to stay in the past, he actually joins abolitionists and helps runaway slaves. The meaning of Kevin's reaction is going far beyond the role of Kevin as an individual character in the novel; it indicates the way in which power relations operate: those who are not exposed to immediate repression accept inequalities more easily. Due to her time travelling Dana is both an insider and an outsider to the world of slavery; in terms of feminist epistemology, she is the one who is in the position of epistemic privilege, the one with the 'double vision' or 'dual perspective'. But she is not simply in the position of an observer; she actually relives the experiences of her ancestors while at the same time perceives them from a late 20th-century point of view.

By evoking standpoint theory here, I want to underline an epistemological claim behind the novel, which is very close to the decolonial request for 'liberated knowledges' (Mignolo, 2018, 146). The intervention of *Kindred* into a historical past is complex. The novel engages with questions of gender in a number of interrelated ways bringing a female point of view into the history of slavery. As a participant/observer in the past, Dana experiences the ways in which the roles of femininity and masculinity have been historically racialized, and how gender relations operate within the Black community. But as an agent of change, she focuses on education, in this context, on literacy in the first place. And while her husband gets engaged as an educator for the young Rufus, Dana is secretly teaching Black children to read and write, something that was strictly forbidden.

The knowledge about the past that Dana is forced to obtain is literally acquired through the body, which gets to be molested, beaten, and eventually mutilated in a final act of forceful separation from the past. But her missing hand, lost on her final travel, also marks that the past can never be left behind. At the same time, the narrative acknowledges its own inadequacy to transmit fully the knowledge that Dana has acquired. Dana cannot speak about her time travelling to anybody

but her husband Kevin for no one else would believe her. This is also a message to the reader: only those willing to engage affectively with the narrated story and with the experiences of the oppressed can come closer to grasping its real meaning.

As a novel about racism, and about the racialised and gendered nature of power, *Kindred* reads as an early example of the world novel in Ganguly's sense of the term and as a part of world literature in Cheah's sense of the term. And in a dialogue with Buikema's (2009) reading of *Disgrace* (1999) and *Agaat* (2004), we can also say that it raises in a similar way "problems that foreground the limits of our judgement and imaginative powers", and it embodies "a search, not so much for the right answers as for a state of susceptibility to the right questions" (Buikema, 2009, 309). In other words, the arguments that Buikema is using to speak for literary relevance of Coetzee's and van Niekerk's novels apply to *Kindred* as well.

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