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READING POST-MONOLINGUAL NOVELS: THE VALUE OF NON-COMPREHENSION

> Muhidin, who was on his evening walk, the tap-tap of brogues with steel heel and toe caps announcing his approach, had pronounced, »Ni kisukuku. Alieishi tangu enzi za dinasaria.« […] As the kettle now hissed and spat water at Muhidin, he heard her voice:
>
> »Sisimizi mwaenda wapi?
> Twaenda msibani …«[1]

> Budhanbang-galang don't like walga-galang or maliyan-galang, and they will duck when they are at risk of being divided upon.[2]

> My mother would have approved, if not of the clothes, then certainly of the plumpness. Dekhte besh Rolypoly, she'd have said.[3]

1. Challenging monolingual self-sufficiency

Despite their apparent difference, the quotes above share some striking similarities. All three quotes are taken from contemporary anglophone novels, written by authors whose histories are, in different though interrelated ways, shaped by the after-effects of colonialism. *The Dragonfly Sea* is the second novel by Kenyan author Yvonne Owuor, *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray* has been written by Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal Australian author; and the last example is taken from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, penned by Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy. Moreover, all three novels mobilize multi- and translingual strategies to explore the lifeworlds of their protagonists and to embrace plurality as a principle of community-building. And lastly, the novels by Roy, Owuor and Heiss fall, broadly speaking, into the category of literary fiction (rather than genre fiction) and have been published by major Western publishing houses (namely Simon & Schuster, Alfred A. Knopf and Hamish

1 Yvonne Owuor, The Dragonfly Sea, New York 2019, p. 17.
2 Anita Heiss, Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray: River of Dreams, Cammeray and New York 2021, p. 326.
3 Arundhati Roy, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, New York 2017, p. 148.

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Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin). The latter aspect is not trivial since modes of production have substantial consequences for the literary text: They impact the possibilities – and constraints – of literary language and they also structure the texts' circulation in the international literary sphere.[4] Simply put, published by transnationally operating media conglomerates, *The Dragonfly Sea*, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray* target a larger international audience across the anglophone world rather than a predominantly domestic one. Thus squarely located within the ›anglosphere‹, the readability of *The Dragonfly Sea*, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray* obviously relies on the dominance of English in a range of different places. And yet, as Stefan Helgesson and I have argued, the novels, simultaneously, namely through various forms of literary multi- and translingualism, put pressure on the very kind of readability granted by the preeminence of English.[5] Thriving, as they do, on the boundaries between languages and subjecting English to the conceptual, material and affective specificities of other languages, these novels offer a challenge to the »self-sufficiencies«[6] of the anglosphere *and* of monolingual readings. Or, to put it more positively, the novels by Owuor, Heiss and Roy remind us that even the world's largest language (in terms of L2 speakers) relies on various forms of relationality and co-existence.

Following Yasemin Yildiz,[7] I call novels that take issue with the ›monolingual norm‹, entrenched in many institutional policies and the international book market, ›post-monolingual novels‹.[8] Post-monolingual novels in English link the hyper-central language of our contemporary age to one or more other languages which coexist at its side, sometimes peacefully, sometimes antagonistically – but almost always with transformative effects. They make clear that multilingualism in literature is not just an addition of different monolingualisms, directed at readers who are, ideally, themselves multilingual and who can be ex-

4 Cf. Birgit Neumann, Post-monolingual Anglophone Novels: Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* and Karina Lickorish Quinn's *The Dust Never Settles*, in: Journal of Literary Multilingualism 1 (2023), no. 1, pp. 94–117.

5 Cf. Stefan Helgesson and Birgit Neumann, The Postmonolingual Turn, in: Recherche littéraire / Literary Research 37 (2021), pp. 223–230.

6 Sherry Simon, Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory, London and New York 2012, p. 1.

7 Yasemin Yildiz, Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition, New York 2012.

8 Cf. Neumann, Post-monolingual Anglophone Novels.

pected to fully comprehend the text.[9] Rather, placing Swahili (Owuor), Bengali (Roy) and Wiradjuri (Heiss) in novels that address a globally dispersed anglophone readership, post-monolingual novels ask for reading practices beyond comprehension and beyond the ideal of a fully shared literary language. More specifically, as post-monolingual novels open one language, English, to the influence of other languages, they also push reading practices that expect comprehensibility (or what reader-oriented criticism in multilingual studies considers the communicative function of language) toward their limits.[10]

In the following, the essay will briefly reflect on the appearance of literary multi- and translingualism in some contemporary post-monolingual novels before moving on to a discussion of the reading practices these novels call for. Though running the risk of cementing an already existing bias in multilingualism studies, I deliberately put emphasis on the genre of the novel in English (published by transnational media conglomerates). The reason for this is that the novel and its literary languages are typically more rigorously policed by the demands of the market than, say, poetry or genre fiction (e. g., fantasy or speculative fiction).

2. Post-Monolingual Poetics and Readings – The Right to Opacity

The representation of multi- and translingualism in narrative fiction is sometimes considered a near-perfect imitation of extratextual, ›real-life‹ language, inflected by place, time and subject-positions. From this perspective, multilingualism, tied to the category of voice, primarily operates in the service of verisimilitude and a sense of locality. Yet, we should note that the representation of speech in general and of literary multilingualism in particular is an aesthetic configuration, intricately connected to the affordances of literature and its creative, inventive potential. In other words, while multi- and translingualism are evocative of reality, namely the reality of some multilingual collective, they always go beyond that reality by establishing new links between languages and

9 The concept of ›Nichteinsprachigkeit‹, mentioned by Till Dembeck in the introduction to this section, is relevant here. See also Juliette Taylor-Betty's comments on non-monolingualism in this volume.

10 Julia Tidigs and Markus Huss, The Noise of Multilingualism: Reader Diversity, Linguistic Borders and Literary Multimodality, in: Critical Multilingualism Studies 5 (2017), no. 1, pp. 208–235.

testing, possibly reconfiguring, the boundaries between them. Beyond »the ›surface effects‹ of language«,[11] committed to the creation of verisimilitude, language, in post-monolingual novels, should therefore be valued as a creative and generative force that has a performative effect: As such, literary multilingualism construes its own reality *as* language and *of* language. Occurring within an anglophone novel, it posits multilingualism as the linguistic norm, rather than the exception and constructs communities that emerge from and grapple with linguistic »*thrown-togetherness*«.[12] More specifically, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, for instance, makes it clear that concepts such as ›a language‹, ›mother tongue‹, ›mono- and multilingualism‹ are hardly in tune with habitual language use in India. And just as importantly: The novel actively validates such practices by constantly intermingling different languages and, step by step, ›disinvesting‹[13] monolingual norms.

Implied in my remarks is the assumption that multi- and translingualism partly assume their meaning in relation to a prevalent monolingual norm, which is, to varying degrees, enforced by the international publishing industry and which is, again to varying degrees, expected by readers. In other words, if multi- and translingualism become salient and hence a prompt for interpretation, they become so also because they deviate from standardized expectations to be confronted with ›one‹ language – presumably one, respective readers are well familiar with. The ›postmonolingual condition‹, that Yildiz has described so persuasively, references just that: *a tension*, and uneasy oscillation, first and foremost between the realities of multiple – lived and literary – multilingualisms and the ongoing persistence of the monolingual norm, including its »homologous logic«, i. e., the requirement of unitary forms of categorization.[14] Note that the said tension is not resolved by the possible existence of readers who are themselves multilingual and who will be capable of understanding, for instance, both Bengali and English. Though these readers will indubitably exist, the fact that novels such as *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *The Dragonfly Sea* are published by the trade publishing industry ultimately means that they target anglophone readers across the world who, to quote Juliana Spahr in

11 Rebecca Walkowitz, Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature, New York 2015, p. 43.

12 Mike Baynham and Tong King Lee, Translation and Translanguaging, Abingdon and New York 2019, p. 7. (Emphasis in original)

13 Cf. Till Dembeck and Georg Mein, Philology's Jargon: How Can We Write Post-Monolingually?, in: Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism, ed. by Liesbeth Minnaard and Till Dembeck, Leiden 2014, pp. 53–70.

14 Yildiz, Beyond the Mother Tongue, p. 11.

a different context, »will have fluency in English but not necessary in the other languages«.[15]

In other words: Post-monolingual novels actively and strategically factor in a certain degree of incomprehensibility as integral to their poetics and the reading processes they elicit. If I say to a certain degree it is because firstly, the majority of post-monolingual novels will still, to a considerable part, be written in one namable language and, secondly, because some of the multi- and translingual elements will usually be translated, glossed or loosely explained in the predominant language. In a recent essay, Stefan Helgesson has argued that literary multi- and translingualism are therefore best understood as negotiations of »regimes of comprehensibility«.[16] Regimes, according to Helgesson, reference the – culturally and historically variable – forms of multilingualism that »will in a given context be made publicly and textually visible«;[17] accordingly, regimes of comprehensibility are fairly rigidly controlled (typically by publishers) so as to secure a larger readership.

Still, in post-monolingual novels, some in- or non-comprehension will inevitably persist, and, precisely because it forms part of a *literary* poetics, this phenomenon deserves attention. Approaches to literary multilingualism have recently offered some valuable re-evaluations of incomprehension, which go far beyond the ›multilingual-literature-for-multilingual-readers‹-paradigm and the resulting exclusion-inclusion dichotomy. Reader-oriented approaches[18] emphasize that reading is more than semantic comprehension, and accordingly, they put a premium on the affective dimensions of incomprehension. Puzzlement, surprise, uncertainty and irritation are some of the effects that literary multi- and translingualism may elicit in readers. Decoupled from discursive signification, non-comprehensible multi- and translingualism may also draw readers' at-

15 Juliana Spahr, Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment, Cambridge and London 2018, p. 18.

16 Stefan Helgesson, Shifting Comprehension in Novels by Abdulrazak Gurnah and Zoë Wicomb: Lingualism in Action, in: Journal of Literary Multilingualism 1 (2023), no. 1, pp. 118–133, p. 119.

17 Ibid., p. 123.

18 See, e.g., Doris Sommer, Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education, Durham and London 2004; Julia Tidigs and Markus Huss, The Noise of Multilingualism: Reader Diversity, Linguistic Borders and Literary Multimodality, in: Critical Multilingualism Studies 5 (2017), no. 1, pp. 208–235; Rainier Grutman, The Missing Link: Modeling Readers of Multilingual Writing, in: Journal of Literary Multilingualism 1 (2023), no. 1, pp. 15–36.

tention to the material side of language, i. e., to the script and its visual appearance on the book page (or in any other medium).[19]

I would like to suggest a further, more specific assessment of the possible effects of multi- and translingualism on readers, based on the fact that these constellations are typically tied to the speech of *individualized* characters and sometimes narrators. More to the point: literary multi- and translingualism – and the resulting non-comprehension on the side of readers – typically occurs within a social constellation, evoking the full range of ethical and political complexities as well as insecurities that sociality entails. The potential incomprehensibility of the speech of others has prominently been addressed by a number of philosophers, most notably by Caribbean French scholar Édouard Glissant. Glissant introduces the concept of opacity in his widely cited book *Poetics of Relation* (1997), positing it as a counterpoise to hegemonic language politics, which are predicated on the intersections between racial and linguistic inequality.[20] According to Glissant, Western societies almost obsessively seek to render cultural others transparent, and language politics, that is, an enforced monolingual standard and compulsory translation, functions as a major instrument of achieving such transparency.[21] Against the authoritarian drive to render others readable, Glissant invokes the right to opacity, which demands interaction, exchange and relationality beyond full (discursive) comprehension. ›Opacity‹ defends the right of cultural others to linguistic inscrutability and hence their right not to be understood on the terms defined by a hegemonic majority. Directed against shallow forms of multilingualism, opacity therefore also offers possibilities of sustaining more just forms of sociality.

From this point of view, multi- and translingual configurations, such as those we find in Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Heiss' *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray*, are also challenges to grapple with the irreducible opacity of others, of other people, who speak languages that are not the readers' ›own‹. Placed within a largely comprehensible text, instances of opacity serve as intermittent reminders of the limits of understanding, transparency and controllability. Instances of opacity are not invitations to misunderstanding and non-communication, working to accommodate »monolingual incompetence«.[22] Rather, emerging at a moment when, to quote Gram-

19 Cf. Neumann, Post-monolingual Anglophone Novels.
20 Cf. Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, transl. by Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997.
21 Cf. ibid., pp. 118–120.
22 Grutman, The Missing Link, p. 33.

ling, »the modern pretense of civic monolingualism« is quickly crumbling,[23] they ask readers to accept that some speech acts will inevitably remain opaque and fall outside their comfort zones of the known, the familiar and the transparent; as such, they are also inducements to imagine new – possibly post-monolingual – ways of community-building, which escape the coercive uniformity of monolingual norms. Tolerating linguistic opacity in fiction requires readers to trust in the meaningfulness of utterances they do not fully comprehend rather than seeing them as signs of »adversity, deficiency or endangerment« and use them as a pretext for stigmatizations and exclusion.[24] What results from instances of opacity is a process that, following Emily Apter, one might call the ›de-owning‹ of language;[25] a de-owned language asks even so-called native speakers to see the foreign and other in what is presumably their own and to share some of the privileges that are enshrined in monolingual norms and that come with claims of language possession. Becoming a post-monolingual reader means finding more unstable, contingent, humble and unpredictable »ways of being in language«.[26] If this humbleness and contingency matters, then that is because it might provide new, more hospitable ways of approaching others and of thinking about civic participation.

To be sure, scholars who pursue market-oriented approaches would most likely take issue with such a positive and ultimately ethical take on literary multilingualism. For scholars such as Brian Lennon[27] and Pascale Casanova, there is little to celebrate about the use of multilingualism in literature, at least not in anglophone literature. They consider it, by and large, as one more shallow (and commodifiable) token of difference, activated to please metropolitan readers. Casanova, in her volume *La langue mondiale: Traduction et domination* (2015), for instance, makes a case for perceiving multilingualism in anglophone fiction as a central device for cementing the hegemony of English in the international book market.[28] For her, multilingualism is, first and foremost, an instance of the insatiable appetites of the anglophone, which incorporates ever-new languages to showcase its global flexibility and thus to promote its hyper-centrality.

23 David Gramling, The Invention of Multilingualism, Cambridge 2021, p. 138.
24 Ibid., p. 129.
25 Cf. Emily Apter, Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability, London 2013, p. 15.
26 Rachael Gilmour, Unmooring Literary Multilingualism Studies, in: Journal of Literary Multilingualism 1 (2023), no. 1, pp. 37–54, p. 37.
27 Brian Lennon, In Babel's Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States, Minneapolis 2010.
28 Cf. Pascale Casanova, La langue mondiale: Traduction et domination, Paris 2015.

But just because, from a market-oriented perspective, literary multi- and translingualism might be seen as »linguistic exhibitionism«,[29] does not mean that it can be reduced to just that. Literary language, all the more so literary multi- and translingualism, is polyvalent, shaped as it were, by multiple factors. While, in the age of conglomerate publishing, it seems futile to read *against* the market, it seems reductive to read only *with* the market and to argue for literature's subsumption under capital.[30] Equating literary devices with rather generalized claims about the mechanisms of the market ultimately means that a number of questions concerning the experience of reading and the ethics of the text become unaskable. If we agree on a minimal definition of literature as a form of verbal art (targeting human readers), then it is certainly worth engaging more rigorously with the specificities and potential effects of its language.

29 Anjali Pandey, Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction, Basingstoke 2016.

30 Cf. Pieter Vermeulen, Reading alongside the Market: Affect and Mobility in Contemporary American Fiction, in: Textual Practice 29 (2015), no. 2, pp. 273–293.