

# The Politics of Canons: The Marginalised Black African Experience in Comparative Literature

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## Abstract

*This essay is written, either as a protest discourse, or as a direct response to the Euro-American politics of canons in Comparative Literature. The purpose, however, is to analyse the strategies deployed in the struggle for power, canonical legitimation, as well as the way one can assume a literary position with the questions being: how do the black African writers see their literary canons in the context of Comparative Studies? What is the new vision of the black African writers' literary practice in the post-colonial era, conditioned by limited freedom? Aiming at a better understanding of the politics of knowledge production, and to break free from the literary commandments of both Europe and the West, this essay introduces the concept of broken calabash, as a way of seeking self-legitimation and freedom. With strong consciousness, the concept is framed with a double purpose: (1) it does not hesitate to declare its rupture from the Anglo-American literary traditions, but, at the same time, it does not abandon the power of literary canons; (2) It challenges the politics of inclusion-exclusion of canons imposed by the initiators of the "classical" literary traditions. Ultimately, this essay invites new consideration of ways to develop the politics of criticism that stays clear of re-institutionalising the dominant norms of textual codification through the hegemonic canons of both Europe and the West.*

**Keywords:** politics, canon, comparative literature, African Literature, and de-coloniality

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## Introduction

The Euro-American canons of literature are seen as a factor – a reflection of, and a powerful actor in the changing power relations in Comparative Studies. Their texts are read as canonical texts of knowledge. Jennifer Rahim and Barbara Lalla observe that, 'Certainly, the battle over control of intellectual resources in the assembly of canons remains a pertinent concern for the vulnerable nation-states of the developing world, and minority groups of whatever type of persuasion.'<sup>1</sup> One of the problems could be that the road to African canon-formation is hindered by the absence of the African dreams as compared to the West and Europe – because the Anglo-American literature is often read as a representation of world literature, appreciated more by people of the Third World, and fully engaged by them as a

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<sup>1</sup> Rahim Jennifer and Lalla Barbara, *Beyond Borders: Cross-Culturalism and the Caribbean Canon*, (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2009), 8.

hypothesis of the already acknowledged Anglo-American exceptionalism – an obvious sign of the dominant world order in the literary field.

What a disaster would it be for the next generation of African literary critics, if we failed to speak towards the redemption of the marginalised black African canons today? What, then, is the use of comparative studies, if there is no inclusion of other cultural/literary canons – for instance, the African canons? In fact, is there any African canon that is applied in the study of Comparative Literature? How does the world perceive Africa through its own work of imagination?

The African critics, both past and present, relied, and still rely on the Anglo-American literary canons, which are often branded as ‘civilised’ classics to engage with literature produced by Africans within and outside Africa – and to frame their ideology of domination within the context of their civilising mission (or in the context of their Enlightenment Project). It is obviously the case of whenever the gun of a new canon is shot in both Europe, and in the West, the sound is more loudly heard in Africa than where it was first shot, and the African literary critics are awakened to the fact that they have to imitate the sound of the gun fired by the Anglo-American canon-setters. It is, of course, the case of whenever it pours in Europe, and in the West, then, it drizzles in Africa and then again, the African critics desperately rush with empty bowls in their hands to pick up the trickle-down left-overs of the Anglo-American canons – which are copiously adopted as frames of reference/analysis in African literary/cultural studies. Here, the tension between the dialectics of the ‘civilised’ and the ‘uncivilised’ is better captured by what Karl Marx says of class ideology. Marx’s argument, as referenced by Karl Radek is that:

...those who rank as the thinkers of the class are active creators of its ideology, who make the production of the illusion of this class about itself their principal means of subsistence, while the other part takes a more passive, a more receptive attitude towards these thinkers and illusions, since, while being in reality active members of the class, they lack sufficient time to create illusions about themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See Marx Karl, as cited by Karl Radek, ‘Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art,’ Radek Gorky, Zhdanov Buharin, and et al., (eds.,) *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934: The Debate on SocialistRealism and Modernism*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 75.

But we must realise, as Africans, that whatever the Anglo-American canons are, they are not meant for our cultural redemption. We need to shift our gaze from the burn-fire of Western illusion to our own realities, to our own peculiarities. In doing so, this essay would attempt to answer some of the questions raised earlier on, and in closing, it would suggest some possible solutions to the problems of canonical exclusion of African theory – as a case, which permeates the entire field of Comparative Literature. We need to re-invigorate the ‘alter-Native’ debates introduced by some Caribbean artists, such as Christopher Cozier, as a response to the dissatisfaction with the exclusionary politics against the black canons – and possibly calling for a once-and-for-all redress.

### **Framing the Debate for African Canons in Comparative Literature**

Could anyone, either of African or Anglo-American origin, tell us of any African literary canon, which is used as a frame of critical reference in the study of Comparative Literature? Someone just needs to tell us! For example, a course known as, ‘Theory and Techniques of Comparative Literature,’ in which the ‘Theory-Applying Studies,’ designed at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) was, to a large extent, meant to examine the bond between the Afro-Asian literatures but, in actuality, it lacked any elements of Afro-Asian canons.

The idea of Afro-Asian literature is a false marriage (or a false hybrid formation); because there is no cultural treaty of imagination that exists between Africa and Asia in this context. The Anglo-American presence in comparative studies ultimately reinforces the canonical domination over other continental literatures, and this perpetuates the politics of exclusion, especially that of Africa. The African canon-setters can borrow a leaf from the experience that culminated into the writing of *The Health Anthology of American Literature* in 1990. The idea first came to the prospective editors in the tumultuous year of 1968. It was a radical period that the editors realised that:

Large numbers of teachers and scholars of all ethnic backgrounds began to question the ‘canon’ of American literature – that is, the list of works and authors believed to be sufficiently important to read, study, write about, teach – and thus transmit to the next generation of readers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lauter Paul, Miller Quentin, Schweitzer T. Ivy, Zagarell Sandra, and et al., (eds.,) *The Health Anthology of American Literature*, (Lexington: D.C. Health and Company, 1990), xxxiii.

But the challenge at the time, as the prospective editors envisaged before the writing of what became *The Health Anthology of American Literature*, was ‘how to provide teachers and students with a textbook that truly displayed the enormous richness of the cultures of America.’<sup>4</sup> In doing so, they wanted their students to have an idea of the ‘formal and the historical cross-currents which helped shape individual works within a given period [and] a much richer selection of authors from each time frame than is available in any other anthology.’<sup>5</sup> Also, the editors believed that:

Reading this *range* of writers offers opportunities for drawing stimulating comparisons and contrasts between canonical and non-canonical figures, between female and male, between one ethnic writer and another. It allows [them] to study the diverse and changing cultures of America, not only a narrow group of authors.<sup>6</sup>

Again, the editors included many ‘reasonably familiar but undervalued authors’<sup>7</sup> and, in another instance, they allowed themselves to be protected by ‘how a text engages concerns central to the period in which it was written as well as to the overall development of American culture.’<sup>8</sup> Therefore, they thought that these selections ‘[reflected] an effort, which [they believed] appropriate and important, to reconnect literature and its study with the society and culture of which it is fundamentally a part.’<sup>9</sup> With this pattern of thought, most of the works they ‘treat issues and subjects that have often been downplayed, even avoided...’<sup>10</sup> We may take it up from here to engage with critical themes, such as what it means to be ‘African,’ especially as a people who live on the margin of the world. We must make a loud pronouncement as ever on the theme of marginality, and to intensify the question of what it means to be ‘African’ by borrowing from the example of those teachers and scholars of other ethnic backgrounds in America, who were able to challenge the exclusive politics of canon in American literature in the 1960s, and whose confrontation, compelled the editors to do an anthology which,

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<sup>4</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxiv.

<sup>5</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>6</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxv.

<sup>7</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxv.

<sup>8</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxv.

<sup>9</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxvi.

<sup>10</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell, and et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxvi.

...includes material[s] by 109 women of all races, 25 individual Native American authors (as well as 17 texts from tribal origins), 53 African-Americans, 13 Hispanics (as well as 12 texts from earlier Spanish originals and two from French), and 9 Asian-Americans. [They] have also included significant selections from Jewish, Italian, and other ethnic traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Remember that this was the guiding principle that acted as the foundation for American canon at the time in question. But how do we deal with this in Comparative Literature, as a discipline larger than the subject of American canon? Susan Bassnett offers what seems to be some good hope when she says that Comparative Literature: '... involves the study of texts across cultures; it is interdisciplinary and is connected with patterns of connection in literatures across both time and space.'<sup>12</sup> Bassnett's claim as deployed in this context could mean the exploration of cultural diversities (or richness) in the study of Comparative Literature.

But, now, let us return to what we mean by canon. In *A Can(n)on in Need*

*Is a Can(n)on Indeed*, Liviu Papadima defines canon as something:

Built out of fragile and composite raw materials such as rules, norms, measurements, conventions, names, judgements, beliefs, contentions, and much more, with the help of sophisticated machineries that include exegesis, gossip, salons, universities, magazines, academies, encyclopedias, and publishing houses, aesthetic canons are meant to make objects of art endure.<sup>13</sup>

Further, Papadima suggests that 'Very often canons are rooted in a societal 'ideal,' in a collective project, much the same way that 'imagined communities' are born.'<sup>14</sup> In other words, Paul Lauter asserts that:

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<sup>11</sup> Lauter, Miller, Schweitzer, Zagarell et al., (eds.) *The Health Anthology*, xxxvi-xxxvii.

<sup>12</sup> Bassnett Sussan, *Comparative literature: A critical introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 19-20.

<sup>13</sup> Papadima Liviu, 'A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,' Papadima Liviu, Damrosch David, and D'haen (eds.) *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, (Amsterdam: Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden, 2011), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Papadima, 'A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,' 11.

What has come to be called ‘the question of the canon’ is one front in this cultural battle, a particularly vital one. By ‘canon’ I mean the set of literary works, the grouping of significant philosophical, political, and religious texts, the particular accounts of history generally accorded cultural weight within a society. How one defines a cultural canon obviously shapes collegiate curricula and research priorities, but it also helps to determine precisely whose experiences and ideas become central to academic study, [...] debating the canon turns out to be a symbolic way of arguing a variety of other social and political issues – basically, who has power and how it is exercised.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning who has the authority to exercise power, C.L. Wrenn demonstrates the idea of power relations in his use of language. He argues that the ‘fundamental differences in patterns of thinking among peoples must impose relatively narrow limits. An African language, for example, is incompatible with a European one for joint approaches in Comparative Literary study’, and he concludes that only European languages, medieval or modern’ were appropriate for comparatists.<sup>16</sup> Wrenn’s concern about range and comparability has dominated discussions about setting standard, which, according to Charles Bernheimer, they needed to act very urgently, ‘before our subject gets too thinly spread.’<sup>17</sup> Bernheimer calls Comparative Literature their own ‘subject,’ not ours. Consequently, by the end of the 1970s, Robert Clements highlighted the problems of African languages in comparative studies. His view, arguably, became the genesis of exclusionist politics against African canon in Comparative Literature. Africa, to him, would present linguistic barriers to the study of comparative studies. Clements’ report shows that:

Africa, which would seem at first to present the major language problem, presents fortuitously little difficulty, for the main literary vehicles will remain English and French, Portuguese will surely decline, especially as the chief theme of its poetry, liberation, has been achieved. The same fate awaits Afrikaans.... The language of Alan

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<sup>15</sup> Lauter Paul, (ed.) *Reconstructing American Literature: Course and Syllabi, Issues*, (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1983), viii-x.

<sup>16</sup> Wrenn, *The Idea of Comparativ*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Comparative literature in the age of multiculturalism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 31.

Paton in the South and the Francophone Kateb Yacine in the North are preferred to a continent – wide Babel.<sup>18</sup>

Clements forecloses any objection to the inclusion of works written in African languages by contending that ‘one can hardly expect a comparatist to know these minor languages that not even the Africans themselves read.’<sup>19</sup> He further argues that, ‘if anything worthwhile should get written in an African language, it will eventually be translated, a curious and strategic exception to Comparative Literature’s usual requirement(s) of access to the literary object in its original language.’<sup>20</sup> What followed Clements’ declaration was a deliberate exclusion of African literature in African languages, as well as in non-Anglo-American genres. The terms of this exclusion manifest an anxiety about the competence of the non-African comparatists. The upsurge of interest in the non-Anglo-American studies is another development we welcome so much, while searching for ways to accommodate this interest as a classical tradition.

Harry Levin’s rhetorical question of ‘What shall it profit our students to gain Swahili and have no Latin? But to the Africans, it profits to gain Latin, French, Greek, German, etc., and lose their mother tongues and even lose everything African [;]’<sup>21</sup> presents more challenges to us. The Anglo-Americans always feel thankful to themselves for imposing their cultures on us. This is enough reason for us to focus on the development of African literature instead of relying on the Anglo-American canons of literature that devalue our literary cultures and traditions. African literature can be comparative without necessarily involving the European literary canon, and, as Gérald Albert asserts, ‘the comparative approach is absolutely necessary for the study of African literature in its relation to other literatures of the world but also on its own as purely African phenomenon.’<sup>22</sup> Gérald also reminds us that,

Language and literary form and genre are intimately connected, in Africa as elsewhere, using praise poetry as one example of the fact that the preservation of vernacular languages ensures the maintenance of

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<sup>18</sup> Robert J. Clements, *Comparative literature as an academic discipline*, (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Robert, *Comparative literature*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Robert, *Comparative literature*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Levin Harry, ‘Comparing the Literature,’ *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, (17, 1968), 14.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Gérald, *Comparative literature and African literatures*, (Via Afrika Limited, 1981), 6.

peculiarly African genres, which may become one of the continent's contributions to the world literature.<sup>23</sup>

No doubt, Africa has contributed immensely to the world civilisation. The study of African history has authenticated this claim in more ways than one such that even the European anthropologists have acknowledged the fact that Africa is the cradle of civilization. Despite this, the politics of inclusion-exclusion binary in Comparative Literature is clearly obvious, and this makes one wonder if Comparative Literature compares anything in relation to African studies at all. For Africans, the term Comparative Literature is an unhappy choice of a discipline because it does not recognise any literary theory or canon of African origin. And this has created a problem worthy of special attention. Critics such as Boughedir Férid, for example, have noted two important schools in African cinema, namely, the 'Med Hondo School,' and, of course, the 'Ousmane Sembène School' – both of which formulated the authentic African film style. The Med Hondo School is believed to have radically challenged the fact that destructive rumour does not dwell only in the *content*, but also in the *form* of Anglo-American cinema – and this school encourages the practitioners of African cinema, (as well as literature) to adopt an anti-colonial strategy to counter the Anglo-American images and misrepresentations of Africa in film production.

On the other hand, the Ousmane Sembène School contends that African cinema should be framed in the context of its audience: the post-colonial audience. It is believed that the taste of this public is conditioned by what the school refers to as a 'cinema of distraction.'<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the arguments of this school have been prominently captured in the Algiers Charter on black African cinema, which, in turn, led to the formation of Fédération Panafricaine des Cineastes (FEPACI) in Tunisia, at the Carthage Film Festival in 1970. As prominent as these schools, they are never considered anywhere in Global Studies. Why? Because they carry anti-colonial tone, particularly as they seem to decolonise the so-called classics of Anglo-American cinema, for example.

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<sup>23</sup> Albert Gérald, 'Literature Emergent: The Euro-African Experience,' *Comparative Literary Theory: New Perspective*, (Council on National Literatures, 1998), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Férid Boughedir, 'Aesthetics: The Two Major Schools of African Cinema,' Angela Martin, (ed.,) *African Films: The Context of Production*, (London: BFI, 1982c), 83.



Since Comparative Literature assumes Anglo-American power by making itself a dominant art rather than a subjective choice and by method of excluding other literary canons, I have developed a working concept of *Broken Calabash*, as a reflection of a shattered world. The concept of *Broken Calabash* boldly makes a legitimate claim, which is a declaration of an independent existence of each literature of the world. And because canons are mere products of a people's cultural orientations and experiences, all cultures are capable of generating their own canonical ideas for a better understanding of their various facets of life and knowledge much the same way that concepts such as, Africological phenomenology, *Kawaida* philosophy, *Ubuntu* philosophy, African Womanism, and Afrotiumphalist perspective evolved from the cultural experiences of the African people, but hardly could anyone read or hear about them anywhere in the study of Anglo-American classics, or in any documents of the 'civilised' empires.

### **Critical Perspectives on the Nature of Comparative Literature**

Actually, the field of Comparative Literature is supposed to be a beautiful, melting pot for cross-cultural studies, or something like a hold-it-all bag, which can accommodate all literatures of the world without discrimination. The field, if void of canonical politics, will be one of the best disciplines, which allows cross-pollination of ideas, arts, cultures, music, and paintings. However, this is not the case here. It has reached a point of heightened awareness that the politics of canon, which plays up against African literary canons in the study of Comparative Literature, is a clear act of dismemberment. It is a reflection of the old slur that negates the African languages and cultures in Anglo-American classics. Comparative Literature is shattered because of the ideological crises in the field, and its contents are circulated around as a waste product of cultural and imaginative materials. The cracked pot is a panacea to the crises in Comparative Literature.

I would return to how the cracked-pot-metaphor is a solution to the problems in Comparative Literature later on. However, series of definitions of Comparative Literature seem to be liberal in character, but in practice, they are denigratory and discriminatory. To justify how liberal the nature of Comparative Literature is, some definitions by eminent scholars like S.S. Praver, M.F. Guyard, Henry Remak and C.I. Maduka, who have given us some foundational bulwarks in the

study of the subject would suffice. Prawer defines it as ‘a study of literature which uses comparison as its main instrument.’<sup>25</sup>

He extends the definition by stating that Comparative Literature ‘makes it comparisons across national frontiers.’<sup>26</sup> Guyard, as quoted by Obafemi O, Tinuoye, M & Bobunde, also corroborates Prawer’s view when he says that: ‘Comparative Literature is the history of international literary relations. The comparatist stands at the linguistic or national frontiers and studies the exchange of themes, ideas, books or sentiments between two or more literatures.’<sup>27</sup> In the same train of thought, Remak equally defines Comparative Literature in terms of the literary relation between nations, as well as the relationship between literature and other areas of knowledge. For him, Comparative Literature:

[I]s the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music, philosophy, history), the social sciences (e.g. Politics, Economics, Sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., and the other.<sup>28</sup>

Maduka Chukwudi shares a similar view with Remak, but with a more comprehensive touch and here is it:

Comparative literature could be defined as the study of literature as an integrated single body of knowledge transcending the frontiers of national literature and traditional subject areas. Thus a study of literary phenomenon (e.g. symbol, theme, style) beyond the confines of two or more national literatures (e.g. Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Kiswahili, Zulu) or an examination of a feature common to literature and any other discipline [sic] such as history, politics, religion, music and sculptures could be considered comparative.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Siegbert Prawer, *Comparative literary studies*, (London: Gerald Duckwell and Co. Ltd., 1973), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Siegbert, *Comparative literary*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Guyard, *New Introduction to Literature*, Obafemi Olu, Tinuoye Mary, & Bobunde Charles, (eds.) (Y-Books: A Division of Associated Book – Makers Nigeria Limited), 56.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Remark, ‘Comparative literature: Its definition and function,’ Newton S, and Horst F, (eds.) *Comparative literature method and perspective*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Chukwudi Maduka, ‘Comparative literature: Concept and scope,’ Asein S O (ed.) *Comparative approaches to modern African literature*, (Ibadan: Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1982), 10.

Chukwudi expresses the view that comparative literature is not only a study of literature across nations, but also a relation of literature or text across national literatures – an endeavor which may be done within a single nation. This definition partly espouses the very need to have individual comparative literature such as the European literature, the American literature, the African literature, the Asian literature, the Caribbean literature, etcetera, and hence, the concept of *broken calabash*, which, at the surface value, it literally symbolises the breaking apart of something.

### **The Broken Calabash as a New Critical Model in Comparative Literature**

Here, what is *the Broken Calabash* meant for? Of course, one may like to know why the idea of *Broken Calabash* in the first place, and what is all about. It is about the desire to create a new, but open canon, as reconstructed for its democratic qualities, not an elitist or repressive canon as we see in the Anglo-American canonical traditions. However, in an attempt to clarify this concept, I find inspiration in the questions asked by Papadima, which are:

Should it please? Is it meant to open our eyes towards the world we live in and towards our own selves? Should it mould our souls? Is it meant to redefine our minds, our thinking? Should it expand our limited existence? Is it meant to unite different people or does it separate people in emphasizing differences, between individuals, between cultures? Canons, disciplines and cultural borders are all spectres of our inquietude about the fate of literary reading.<sup>30</sup>

To sum up Papadima's questions in one single explanation in relation to the analysis of *the Broken Calabash* approach, and as an approach which challenges us to supply provisional answers – it ultimately serves the ideal of helping the individual think for him or herself in the struggle for narcissism (or self-love/identity) in a capitalist world of ideology. For example, the crises in Comparative Literature have betrayed its original mission, as a supposedly liberal-humanist, and all-inclusive discipline. These crises, framed in the context of the *Broken Calabash* model, suggest the separation of people by stressing the differences between them and their cultures.

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<sup>30</sup> Papadima, 'A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,' 17.

Wellek René and Warren, for example, published *Theory of Literature* in 1949, in which they echoed with Goethe by stating that, ‘Literature is one; as art and humanity are one.’<sup>31</sup> As true as their claim may seem, that is not the true reflection of what Comparative Literature represents, because a decade after the *Theory of Literature* appeared, Wellek and Warren were already talking about the crises in Comparative Literature, and even as the subject appeared to gain ground in the 1960s and early 1970s, flaws in the idea of universal values, and of literature were already ripped open to be seen. It is clear that comparatists have focused their attentions mainly on one restricted area of study, which is, the adaptability of Western literary theories, canons, and methods to the exclusion of non-Western literary theories. This is not an accusation of any kind, but a clear fact, which is evident in what Clements calls ‘the three major ‘dimensions’ of American or European comparative literary studies – Western heritage (or Western literature), East-West, and World literature – are in fact scopes in [a] sense.’<sup>32</sup>

The great waves of critical thought that swept through one school of thought to the other: for example, from Structuralism to Post-structuralism, from Feminism to Deconstructionism, and from Semiology to Psychoanalysis, shifted attention away from the activity of comparing texts and tracking patterns of influence between the role of the writer and the role of the reader. Moreover, as each new wave broke over the preceding one, notions of single, harmonious readings were shattered forever, hence the idea of *Broken Calabash*, as conceptualised in this essay. It expressly shows the semiotic break-up of a world that is no longer one, because there is no fair representational politics of national canons in the study of Comparative Literature. It further explains how the real world is polarised along cultural, ethnic, regional, tribal, political, ideological, continental lines, and so on. Papadima’s argument is useful to us here and in trying to unravel the challenge of choosing a canon, Papadima contends that:

How is it possible to decide in a legitimate, acceptable way, on such a delicate matter? Let us imagine a world with just a couple of dozen artists of all times: writers, painters, musicians, and so on. In this world, the sheer idea of an aesthetic canon would be considered a bizarre

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<sup>31</sup> René Wellek, “The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature,” *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970), 11.

<sup>32</sup> Robert, *Comparative literature*, 7.

fantasy. Fortunately, this is not the case. We need canons – if we really need them – [then] we need to choose.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Papadima maintains that, ‘...canons, past and present as well, are a matter of choice... But value itself, the core of all canons, is a highly controversial notion. Some would say that it is arbitrary, that it depends on our individual needs – the rest is either pretense or politics.’<sup>34</sup> Here, politics becomes the core of choosing a canon or the value of one canon over the other. *The Broken Calabash* model charges at the racial discrimination, as well as the defacement of African linguistic and literary theories in Comparative Literature. If the break-up of the world literatures as espoused by the *Broken Calabash* model can make each literature of the world gain legitimate recognition, then, the division is necessary at this crisis point. The debate is to press home the demand that each broken part can actually find its separate way, its new life, as well as its new form of existence like the *banyan*-tree. The cracks on the pot indicate the break-up of Comparative Literature for lack of fair representation of other literary cultures. *The Broken Calabash* concept is a clear image of a shattered and riotous world that could no longer hold itself together and the desire for an independent existence is ideal. The cracks further symbolize the political, cultural, social and ideological crises – something well beyond the semiotic representation of a mere image. It is a clear sign of a people yearning, either for recognition in the collective sense, or for a break-away from the imperial centre of knowledge production depicted in the image below.

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<sup>33</sup> Papadima, ‘A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,’ 9.

<sup>34</sup> Papadima, ‘A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,’ 9.



For instance, in the 1950s, and early 1960s, graduate students in the West turned to Comparative Literature as a radical subject, because at that time, it appeared to be transgressive, moving across the boundaries of a single literature. The debates on whether the subject existed or not still continued unabated from the previous century. Bernheimer dismisses the fact that ‘there is no such thing as comparative literature.’<sup>35</sup> Haunt Saussy admits that ‘The successful propagation of traits from the Comparative Literature family has not been accompanied by mechanisms of identification and control...We are universal and anonymous....’<sup>36</sup> Here, the paradoxical placement of Comparative Literature by university comparatists creates some doubts about its existence in a way. Comparative Literature has been

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<sup>35</sup> Charles, *Comparative literature*, vii.

<sup>36</sup> Saussy Haun, *ACLA Report 2004*, (web-version as presented on the ACLA website in early 2005, of the Adobe pdf-file typescript), viii.

under attacks by critics and scholars alike, but Saussy claims that the subject is out of wood, and perhaps, it has won its critical battles. In Saussy's 2004 unpublished report as cited by Robert Weninger, he (Saussy) says that Comparative Literature:

[Has] never been better received in the American university. Premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion. Authors and critics who wrote in 'foreign languages' are now taught (it may be said with mock astonishment) in departments of English! The transnational dimension of literature and culture is universally recognized, even by the specialists who not long ago suspected comparatists of diletantism. 'Interdisciplinarity' is a wonder-working keyword in grant applications and college promotional leaflets.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Saussy's claim, by the late 1970s, a new generation of graduate students in the West turned to literary theory such as Women's Studies, Semiotics, Film and Media Studies, as well as Cultural Studies as the radical subject choices, abandoning Comparative Literature to what were increasingly seen as flaws from the perspective of liberal-humanist prehistory. Even as that process was underway in the West, Comparative Literature began to gain ground in the rest of the world. New programmes in Comparative Literature began to emerge in places like China, Taiwan, Japan and other Asian countries. According to Mithaela Irimia, as referenced by Papadima, advocates 'the status of disciplinarity in researching [comparative] literature.'<sup>38</sup> In Irimia's opinion, she argues that 'the specific disciplines of literary studies derive from a long-term process, comprising the emergence, sedimentation and institutionalization of *literature* and the accreditation of the *classic modern canon*,' both phenomena described as embedded in (cultural) history.'<sup>39</sup> Again, following the path of what is called 'the long modernity,' Irimia further notes that, 'In the mid-1700s the disciplines, like

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<sup>37</sup> Saussy, *ACLA Report 2004*, viii.

<sup>38</sup> See Mithaela Irimia, as cited by Papadima Liviu, 'A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,' Papadima Liviu, Damrosch David, and D'haen (eds.,) *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, (Amsterdam: Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden, 2011), 15.

<sup>39</sup> See Mithaela Irimia, as cited by Papadima Liviu, 'A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,' 15.

the literary canon, [came] into being as they are still with us, albeit undergoing sea changes like never before.<sup>40</sup>

From the beginning, the idea of canon was, and is still the subject of the debate, but the Anglo-American canonical tradition is however not based on any ideal of universalism, rather, it is based on the very aspect of literary study that many Western comparatists had sought to deny: that is, the specificity of national literatures and the canon of specificity – much as Saussy argues that ‘Theory is no longer a badge of special identity or mark of infamy; everyone, more or less, is doing it, more or less.’<sup>41</sup> Majumdar stretches the argument further, saying that: ‘It is because of this predilection for national literature – much deplored by the Anglo-American critics as a methodology – that Comparative Literature has struck roots in the third world nations and in India in particular.’<sup>42</sup> Ganesh Devy quoted by Majumdar, goes a little further to suggest that Comparative Literature has been ‘used to assert the national cultural identity,’<sup>43</sup> and this national cultural identity is more assertive in the Anglo-American context. For example, developments in Comparative Literature beyond Europe and North America do, indeed, act through, and across all types of assumptions about literature that has increasingly become Eurocentric. Instead of a Eurocentric view, David Damrosch recommends that:

[A] multicentric view on world literature, sustained by ‘a double movement, both inward and outward,’ enabling the strengthening of the links to one’s own culture, on the one hand, and the widening of the scope of inquiry to the ‘varieties of comparatist practice’ on the other hand.<sup>44</sup>

What we have today is a varied picture of comparative literary studies that changes according to where it is taking place. African, Indian, and Caribbean

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<sup>40</sup>See Mithaela Irimia, as cited by Papadima Liviu, ‘A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed,’ ..., 15.

<sup>41</sup> Saussy, *ACLA Report 2004*, viii.

<sup>42</sup> Majumdar Swapan, ‘Multiculturalism: Forced and Natural: A Comparative Literary Overview,’ *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, (41, 139-144, 2003), 140.

<sup>43</sup>See Ganesh Devy, as cited by Swapan Majumdar, *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimension*, (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1987), 53.

<sup>44</sup> Damrosch David, ‘Comparative World Literature,’ Papadima Liviu, Damrosch David, and D’haen (eds.), *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, (Amsterdam: Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden, 2011), 13.



critics have challenged the refusal of a great deal of Western literary criticism to accept the implications of their literary and cultural policies. The growth of national consciousness, awareness, and of the need to move beyond the colonial legacy has significantly led to the development of Comparative Literature in many parts of the world, even as the subject entered a period of crisis and decay in the West. The way in which Comparative Literature is used in places such as China, Brazil, India and other African nations, is a double motif in a sense deployed to explore both indigenous traditions and imported traditions, throwing open the whole vexed problem of canon.

What is being studied is the way in which national culture has been affected by the importation of foreign cultures. It is possible to argue that as we have come to the end of the twentieth century, we have also entered a new phase in the troubled existence of Comparative Literature; meaning that the subject is in crisis. For example, the falling number of students and the uneasiness of many comparatists had shown a reluctance to engage in definition of what exactly the subject consists of. The apparent continuation of the old idea of Comparative Literature as a binary study – that is, the study of two authors or texts from two different systems, all these factors, reinforce the picture of a subject that has lost its way, even as courses in literary theory and post-colonial theory proliferate list of books in the field of Comparative Literature.

While Comparative Literature in the Third World and the Far East changes the agenda for the subject, the crisis in the West continues. The new Comparative Literature is calling into question the canon of great European masters and this process coincides with other challenges – for instance, that of feminist criticism, which has questioned the male orientation of cultural history; and that of post-modernist theory, which also reevaluates the role of the reader. But, apart from the re-valuation of the role of the reader, the *broken calabash* critically questions the imperial inclusion-exclusion politics of canon-formation in Comparative Literature – the politics of what to be taught and what not to be taught, especially in the African example.

## **Conclusion**

African linguistic and literary canons have been defaced and striped of their existence in the click of world literatures. This ugliness, therefore, precipitates the political struggles and cultural ownership of a literature which continues to gain

some “independence” from Euro-American colonial control, and continues to re-inforce its commitment to theorizing anti-colonial resistance canons to fight the influence of Euro-American literary traditions in shaping and re-shaping its values. This essay mainly debunks Comparative Literature, and frames it as literature of prejudice, discrimination and oppression that only depicts African literature as literature belonging to savages, who lack any canonical paradigm. Discrimination in Comparative Literature is used as its main determinant matrix of denigrating the Third World literatures.

The anaemic presence of African literary canons in the context of Euro-American studies, or as shoved to the margin of discourse is a deliberate exclusion from, as well as an imperial rejection of African thinking in the mainstream Global Studies. The acceptance of the neo-imperial domination as it is in the study of Comparative Literature, clearly demonstrates the continuation of colonial project in Global Studies.

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