

Booms in Literatures of the Global South

By Roanne Kantor | February 16, 2019

“Boom” is a term used to describe the sudden growth in both popularity and perceived literary quality of writing from a particular region within a relatively compressed time frame, usually ranging between one and two decades. The post-World War II period has been characterized by successive booms in Latin American literature, South Asian literature, and more recently perhaps, Anglophone African literatures.

Literatures from the Global South seem particularly susceptible to boom phenomena. This may be because of relatively rapid changes in reading, writing, or publishing communities within a boom’s region of origin, or because literature from these regions is received as either novel or politically significant as it circulates beyond that region, especially as it enters markets in the Global North. Indeed, booms seem to require changes in reading communities both at home and abroad in order to flourish. While the use of “boom” as a term to describe literary trends has been controversial, it can also be a useful heuristic for suggesting how and why a certain region of the Global South draws outsized interest as representative of “world literature” in a given moment (Kantor 2018).

Latin American and South Asian Literary Booms

In literary studies, the term is derived from the so-called Latin American boom of the 1960s. This period is generally understood to have begun in 1958, with the publication of Carlos Fuentes’ *Where the Air is Clear* (*La región más transparente*); it reached an early milestone in 1963, with Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*) and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *In the Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*); and it achieved its pinnacle in 1967, with Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*) (Martin 1989). Authors who came to regional and sometimes also international prominence in the two preceding decades — including Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Juan Rulfo, Jorge Luis Borges, and Octavio Paz — are sometimes categorized as “pre-boom” writers, although they often saw their prestige rise as part of the boom itself (Kerr and Herrero-Olaizola 2015; Donoso 1983). Neil Larsen, among others, dates the close of the boom to the clashes around the Cuban Padilla affair (1971), the imprisonment of author Heberto Padilla for his criticism of the Castro regime, a very tidy conclusion (Larsen 2011; Iber 2015). Ángel Rama, in contrast, offers two alternatives for the close of the boom: 1967, in which the very success of García Márquez’s book first solidifies and then ossifies a previously inchoate phenomenon, and 1973, the year of Augusto Pinochet’s coup in Chile, in which stylistics of the boom were no longer sufficient to the political situation they faced (Rama 2005).

The extended, though less intense, attention to Latin American writing after the dissolution of the boom is sometimes called the “post-boom.” While the post-boom was characterized by a gradual diminution of interest in Latin American literature, that period also marked the

consolidation of Latin American literary studies in the United States. Even as Latin American boom novels came and went, initiatives begun in their wake — the Latin American Studies Association, its flagship journal, the *Latin American Research Review*, departments of Latin American Studies and positions for Latin American literary specialists within departments of Spanish or Romance Languages — remained robust and continued to grow in subsequent decades (Cohn 2012).

Meanwhile, a new literary boom was gathering force across the globe. The South Asian boom has its roots in Salman Rushdie's 1981 Man Booker Prize win for *Midnight's Children*, widely recognized to have inaugurated a sea change in the global reception of Anglophone South Asian fiction (Joshi 2002; Ranasinha 2007). During the 1980s, Rushdie, along with Anita Desai, dominated prizes and bestseller lists in a way that had not been possible for South Asian Anglophone writers in previous decades. However, the field opened in a much more significant way following the economic liberalization of India in 1991, making Rushdie and Desai more properly figures of the "pre-boom," as per the Latin American analogy. The boom itself, then, begins in 1993 with Vikram Seth's record-setting payout for *A Suitable Boy*; it achieved its recognizable shape in 1998 with Arundhati Roy's record-shattering bidding war and subsequent Booker win for *The God of Small Things* (Squires 2007); and it reached peak a decade later in 2008, with the coincidence of the Booker Prize win for Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and the Academy Award for Best Picture to Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*. What is less clear is when the South Asian boom concluded, as there was not a political event equivalent to those in Latin America that marked its end. This may suggest limitations on building an overly rigid model of booming based on the Latin American case. Nevertheless, there seems to be an increasing consensus in the field that South Asian Anglophone fiction does not garner the attention that it once did. In 2017, for example, a well-attended MLA panel about the future of South Asian literary studies seemed to generate a panicked consensus that there was none (Ray 2017).

Some scholars have argued that the South Asian boom in fact comprises two distinct moments (Mufti 2016). The first focused on India; the second turned attention to Pakistan, coalescing around interest in Islam and the American security state after 9/11 and included writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Daniyal Mueenuddin (Mufti 2016). Even so, the Pakistani boom seems to coexist with and perhaps continue to propel a sustained interest in Indian fiction in the 2000s. Novels published between 1993 and 1997 experienced a surge in popularity after 1998, just as did writers of the pre-boom era in Latin America after 1958. For this reason, we might include a term like "high boom" (1998-2008) to designate the most active moment within a long-term period of enhanced attention.

Toward a Theory of Booms in the Global South

With the above examples in mind, it is possible to draw some conclusions about booms as a phenomenon in the literatures of the Global South. First, booms require several factors to explain their emergence. These factors can be organized into three general categories: creators, curators, and contexts. Each category, in turn, proffers a different argument about the driving factors for a boom. Creators theories hold that authors succeeded in the global market primarily by adopting stylistic innovations and subject matters that found a niche among new, global audiences. Magical realism is the literary mode most readily identified with both the Latin American and its South Asian counterpart (Zamora and Faris 1995;

Siskind 2014). This connection is bolstered by Salman Rushdie's famous avowal of the influence of reading García Márquez in 1975, the year that he began composing *Midnight's Children*. "I think all of us can remember the day when we first read Gabriel García Márquez; it was a colossal event" (Rushdie 2007). It must be emphasized, however, that magical realism was much less prominent in the Latin American boom before its peak in 1967, and the majority of texts that share styles between the two booms are not magical realist in any significant sense.

Context theories emphasize the role of economic and political conditions as determining factors under which a certain kind of literature becomes more appealing to global audiences, more accessible, or both. These include government policies, language of production, demographic shifts in readership, and changes in market flows. Among these contextual changes, one of the most significant has been the general expansion of literacy and, specifically, the proliferation of both readers and writers of English in the postcolonial world. As such, writing from the Global South is increasingly available to English-speaking audiences without translation (Shankar 2012; Sadana 2012). This has led some observers to claim that composing in English automatically orients writers toward the expectation of readers in the Global North. Literary organizations like the Sahitya Akademi have long awarded prizes for Indian literature in various languages and supported its translation with a view to promoting a coherent, mutually involved multilingual literary sphere (Sadana 2012). Yet it is not clear that these activities have had a wide impact beyond India. More recently, the Jaipur Book Mark, a publishing-focused offshoot of the Jaipur Literary Festival, has begun compiling catalogues of new titles from various Indian languages in search of English translators, offering to facilitate various aspects of rights acquisition and publication which can otherwise be quite difficult to secure (Jaipur Book Mark). It is yet to be seen what kind of impact this may have on their transnational circulation. So, while the language of production certainly plays an important role in allowing literature to boom, this transition alone is insufficient to explain the popularity of South Asian novels in the 1990s and 2000s (see Kantor 2018).

Curator theories hold that a few key micro-level players set the macro-level terms of the literary game. These include juries of literary prizes, literary agents and editors, scholars, translators and other kinds of patrons. Among these, the circulation of cultural capital enabled by literary prizes is particularly important. There is continuity between the role of prizes in bringing Latin American literature to global prominence in the 1960s, especially the Biblioteca Breve prize in Spain and the Casa de las Américas prize in Cuba, and the popularity of South Asian literatures fueled by prizes like the Man Booker (Rama 2005, Iber 2015; Huggan 2001). Still, literary prizes have grown significantly in number and importance since the 1960s (English 2005). They have intensified in parallel with a more general rise of commoditization of publishing industries all over the world, meaning the reduced autonomy of editors, the increased emphasis on profitability, and consolidation and transnational reach of major publishing houses (Narayanan 2012; Squires 2007).

There are two further points crucial to thinking about booms in literatures of the Global South. First, most of the scholarship on "booming" novels has focused on their transnational circulation, especially in the Global North. However, boom phenomena also depend on the growth of local reading audiences, growth that occurs through a range of contextual factors including economic mobility and educational attainment (Rama 2005). While booms do not

occur without transnational readerships, they are not exclusively transnational in scope or aim, nor are their transnational readers exclusively located in the Global North. So, for example, Latin American literature first boomed transnationally in Spanish in Latin America, and only subsequently among readerships in French, English, and other languages associated with the Global North (Donoso 1983). Only recently have scholars of South Asian Anglophone novels begun to analyze the ways in which such literature may actually orient itself toward an audience of readers in the indigenous bourgeois and elite classes — though some debate remains as to whether this represents a shift in writing practice or merely critical orientation (Nadimiti 2018, Srinivasan 2018).

Second, booms do not emerge in isolation from one another. Again, as part of that larger, multilingual diffusion, Latin American mid-century literature made an outsized impact on Anglophone regions of the Global South, not least in its influence on Salman Rushdie and his breakout novel, *Midnight's Children*, the watershed event of the South Asian pre-boom (Siskind 2014). This suggests that the South Asian publishing phenomena has emerged on a template developed first for literature from Latin America. There is now growing evidence for an Anglophone African boom arriving in the wake of the South Asian boom, fueled by authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yaa Gyasi whose work regularly wins prizes and appears on top-ten lists. Ruvani Ranasinha and Robert Foster have argued that the transnational popularity of mid-century African Anglophone writing was furthered by political and artistic movements in the African diaspora in the United States and United Kingdom (2007; 2008). It would certainly seem that something similar is happening with African and Afro-diasporic cultural production now. If this trend continues, Anglophone African fiction, or perhaps even a very malleable category of African and African-diasporic fiction, will develop into a transnational market that has already been conditioned by the existing popularity of South Asian literature, to such an extent that African authors are being shepherded by the same literary agents and judged by the same prize committees that, only a few years ago, were focused on South Asian writers (Lee 2014). For this reason, it is useful to think about booms as a mobile and iterative category, even as their precise contours may shift as they move across space and time.

Booming presents a paradox because it ossifies a particular moment in a region's literary history as being emblematic of the total. This can make it difficult for new and different writers to become legible in an increasingly competitive market. Yet booming also puts regions on the map of the world literary canon, facilitating connections between otherwise unrelated regions of the Global South whose ultimate manifestation is not totalized by its market situation.

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