

Representing Dictatorship in the Global South

By Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra | July 30, 2019

As the history of fascism in the twentieth century makes clear, authoritarianism and dictatorship are by no means problems specific to the Global South. And yet, a particular type of autocratic ruler — vain, cruel, bombastic, given to all kinds of excesses — is immediately recognizable as the archetypical “Latin American,” “African,” or simply “Third World” dictator. This trope recurs across all forms of cultural production as well as in the larger conversation about politics in the regions of the globe understood as part of the Global South.

Although approaches vary, emphasis on the dictator’s outrageousness and vulgarity (in the sense of being grotesque as well as unrefined or coarse) predominates. To cite examples from cinema, the historical referent may be explicit, as in Kevin Macdonald’s *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), which follows a Scottish doctor into Idi Amin’s Uganda. Played by Forest Whitaker, Amin is a commanding and even beguiling presence; but the film also includes an extended scene in which the doctor helps Amin to expel trapped gas, producing a resounding fart. Alternately, the dictator might be a composite whose historical inspirations are legible but not necessarily explicit. See Sacha Baron Cohen’s fevered reworking of the archetypical North African dictator, and Muammar Gaddafi in particular, in *The Dictator* (2012), where the fictional Admiral-General Haffaz Aladeen is set loose in New York City. Dictatorship itself is often treated as inevitable in “certain parts” of the world. See Woody Allen’s *Bananas* (1971), which opens with a newscaster for the (fictional) program *Wide World of Sports* announcing, “They’re going to kill the president of this lovely, Latin American country [the fictional San Marcos] and replace him with a military dictatorship, and everybody is about as excited and tense as can be. The weather on this Sunday afternoon is perfect.” In such instances, the pervasive phenomenon of dictatorship in the Global South appears endemic, the symptom of an underdeveloped political culture or, worse, an underdeveloped political imagination.

Representations of dictatorship *from* the Global South share elements of this descriptive vocabulary, particularly in its satirical or parodic registers. But they also, in ways often overlooked, contest the underlying assumptions of the representations described above. Representations of dictatorship from the Global South denounce the dictator and dictatorship while also pointing to the larger, global forces that prompt, sustain, and benefit from dictatorial regimes in the Global South. Dictatorship is understood as a phenomenon constituted in the entanglement of local political struggles with the unequal distribution of global power. It is a problem conditioned by histories of colonization, neocolonialism, ongoing economic peripheralization, and/or proxy battles between more powerful nation-states. The latter was particularly salient during the Cold War. While the rhetoric of democracy versus totalitarianism served as a structuring opposition between the West and the Soviet Union in this period, authoritarian regimes flourished throughout much of what was then called the Third World, benefitting from the tacit and in some cases explicit support of competing

superpowers. Indeed, the geopolitical exigencies of the Cold War distorted the outcomes of the wave of decolonization that swept much of the globe in the wake of World War II and cut short the social and political gains of the wartime economic boom in regions such as Latin America.

Representations of dictatorship from the Global South, therefore, are fundamentally about power understood at both the national and global scale, as well as in its political, economic, and cultural dimensions. In this configuration, literature and cultural production more broadly become modes of interpretation. Accordingly, representations of dictatorship from the Global South should be treated as more than simple reflections of political facts on the ground. Criticism of the dictator's vulgarity, for instance, is ancillary to the larger structural analysis at work.^[1] Fictional representations of dictatorship, moreover, exceed their historical referents (the particular dictator or dictatorship the author has in mind): first, by turning attention to the larger global systems that sustain and benefit from dictatorship, and, second, by drawing on the descriptive vocabulary (tropes, archetypes, and so on) already in place for thinking about dictatorship as such. As I have argued elsewhere (2019) about the dictator novel, as the conventions of the genre cohere it acquires a self-generating force separate from the actual incidence of dictatorship. Representations of dictatorship may take a particular historical referent as starting point, but they are as much about the existing conventions for thinking and speaking about dictatorship as they are about dictatorship itself.

Focusing on literature and the dictator novel in particular, this entry outlines protocols for engaging with representations of the dictator and dictatorship in the Global South. It offers, first, an overview of the history of writing about dictatorship, as the material substrate out of which genres such as the dictator novel coalesce. Second, it puts forth a preliminary typology for the dictator novel, distinguishing it from the larger category of "dictatorship literature." This entry also includes a bibliography of critical works on literature and dictatorship in Latin American and African literatures, drawing on my primary fields of expertise.

On Literature and Dictatorship: An Overview

Just as dictators are often hostile to writers and writing, writers have long mobilized the written word against tyranny. Novels about dictators and dictatorship satirize or parody the authoritarian leader, condemn his collaborators, and register experiences elided in the official record. In so doing, these works propose to uncover and dislodge the practices of authority and violence on which dictatorship relies. They are part of the culture of writing and resistance and, in this broad sense, are works of politically committed literature or what Jean-Paul Sartre (1945 and 1948) called *littérature engagée*. But this history precedes twentieth-century theorizations of commitment.

In Latin America, the tradition of writing about and against authoritarian regimes — whether in the form of *caciquismo*, *caudillismo*, charismatic dictatorship, or military junta — stretches back (at least) to the political turmoil that followed independence in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In Argentina, for instance, the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1835-1852) gave rise to a range of literary responses, including Esteban Echeverría's allegorical short story "El matadero" ("The Slaughterhouse," 1838-1840; published 1871); serialized novels such as José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851-1852; 1855) and Juana Manso's *Los misterios del Plata* (The Mysteries of the Plata, 1852; 1855); Juan Bautista Alberdi's play, *El*

gigante Amapolas y sus formidables enemigos (The Giant Amapolas and his Formidable Enemies, 1841); Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's genre-defying combination of ethnography, biography, and political tract in *Facundo o civilización y barbarie* (*Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, 1845); and a wide range of vernacular (gaucho) poetry written both for and against Rosas. In this context, to talk about the dictator as a problem of national consolidation was also to talk about the desired political community of the new nation.

Although these conversations took place across many genres, in the early decades of the twentieth century the novel emerged as a major venue and the dictator as a key figure for understanding Latin American reality. Key works include Martín Luis Guzmán's *La sombra del caudillo* (*The Shadow of the Strongman*, 1929; Mexico) and Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (*The President*, 1946; Guatemala). This lineage reaches an apex at the end of the Latin American literary "boom" in the early 1970s, with three dictator novels published in quick succession: Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (*Reasons of State*, 1974; Cuba), Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo* (*I the Supreme*, 1974; Paraguay), and Gabriel García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975; Colombia).[2] The archive continues to expand, incorporating more recent works, such as Mario Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del Chivo* (*The Feast of the Goat*, 2000; Peru), which looks back to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930-1961), as well as literary engagements with the post-dictatorship period and the long afterlives of state violence. A notable example of the latter is Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), which weaves together the violence of the Trujillo dictatorship with the experiences of the Dominican diaspora in the United States (see Harford Vargas 2017).

Analogous traditions have taken shape in the post-independence literatures of Africa and the Middle East, as well as South and East Asia. In African literatures, novels about dictators and dictatorship begin to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, as a subset of the broader category of the literature of political disillusionment that followed the anticolonial and nationalist literature of the early-to-mid century. Examples include Ousmane Sembène's *Le Dernier de l'Empire* (*The Last of the Empire*, 1981; Senegal), Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie* (*Life and a Half*, 1979; Republic of the Congo) and *L'État honteux* (*The Shameful State*, 1981), Henri Lopès's *Le Pleurer-rire* (*The Laughing Cry*, 1982; Republic of the Congo), Doumbi Fakoly's *La Retraite anticipée du Guide suprême* (*The Early Retirement of the Supreme Guide*, 1984; Mali), Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987; Nigeria), and Aminata Sow Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation* (*The Ex-Father of the Nation*, 1987; Senegal). Here, the dictator stands alongside the larger complex of issues facing newly independent nations (see Fanon 1961). These include the lasting effects of colonization, the forces of neocolonialism, and the collaboration of the emergent postcolonial elite with those external forces — all defining characteristics of what Achille Mbembe (2000) would later term the "postcolony." More recent works, including Ahmadou Kourouma's *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (*Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, 1998; Côte d'Ivoire) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*, 2004–2007; 2006; Kenya), pay increasing attention to the transnational dimensions of dictatorship, putting pressure on the formal and conceptual limits of the genre as it enters the twenty-first century.

Because it precedes the emergence of these other traditions, the Latin American dictator novel — and, to a lesser extent, its criticism — frequently serves as a benchmark for thinking

about the dictator novel elsewhere in the Global South. Examples of transcontinental influence, allusion, or similarity do exist: Labou Tansi parodies elements of García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* in *The Shameful State*;^[3] the Algerian writer Yasmina Khadra's *La Dernière nuit du Raïs* (*The Dictator's Last Night*, 2015), which imagines the death of Muammar Gaddafi from the dictator's perspective, has been compared to Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*;^[4] the use of stream-of-consciousness narration in Mahmoud Dowlatbadi's *The Colonel* (2012; Iran) recalls that of Asturias's *The President*;^[5] Mohammed Hanif cites both García Márquez and Vargas Llosa as influences in the acknowledgements of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008; Pakistan). But it would be incorrect to extrapolate from such instances a necessarily genealogical relationship between the Latin American dictator novel and dictator novels elsewhere in the Global South: these works do not "descend" from *The Autumn of the Patriarch* or *The Feast of the Goat*, even if they are often compared to those novels by critics and readers. Paradigms of importation or imitation do not sufficiently explain the recurrence of the dictator novel across time and place, nor do they properly account for the formal and thematic variations that occur in these works. Instead, it is necessary to read a given work in relation to the dictator novel as a trans-regional genre as well as in the context of local literary debates and practices.

The Dictator Novel: A Working Typology

With this in mind, I offer here a preliminary typology for the dictator novel in the Global South. It is intended as the starting point for a comparative analysis that is at once informed of the conventions of the genre and able to grasp the differences between the multiple literary traditions with which individual texts are engaged.

First, the dictator novel should be distinguished from the broader category of "dictatorship novels" or "fictions of dictatorship" for its attention to the dictator as a character in the text, up to and including focalization through the dictator (narrating from the dictator's perspective or point of view). The dictator novel is first and foremost an analytic endeavor, as per Ángel Rama's (1976) analysis of the Latin American tradition. Rama makes a strong distinction between what he calls anti-dictator "diatribes" (works whose primary purpose is to enumerate a dictator's crimes) and the dictator novel as a work that examines the dictator as an individual, together with the historical and social contexts that make his regime possible (1976, 9-10). Focalization through the dictator, which capitalizes on the novel's capacity for exploring the psychology of individual characters, is the most explicit mobilization of the dictator novel for an analysis of the internal workings of political power.

The centrality of the dictator to the dictator novel holds even in cases where he makes only a brief physical appearance in the text. For instance, the dictator is largely in the background of novels such as Guzmán's *The Shadow of the Strongman*, Asturias's *The President*, Sembène's *The Last of the Empire*, or Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. But he looms over and determines the actions of those in his immediate circle, who remain in the thrall or "shadow" of the dictator. By contrast, dictatorship novels focus on the social, interpersonal, and psychological consequences of living under dictatorship. These narratives often unfold within the context of a romantic relationship or the nuclear family, where the smaller unit is a synecdoche for the nation and where the dictator or dictatorship are the background against which this drama plays out. Occasionally, these two tendencies intertwine as distinct plot lines within a single work, as in Mármol's *Amalia*, Asturias's *The President*, or Ngũgĩ's *Wizard*

of the Crow.

Second, the dictator of the dictator novel is fundamentally a *literary* figure, even when there is a discernible historical referent or set of referents for the dictator. In the most immediate terms, recourse to fiction (thick or thinly veiled) is a tactical response to the dangers of writing about a present political reality. Yet fiction also makes available new critical, narrative, and aesthetic possibilities that require attention on their own terms. In other words: the actual dictator or dictators the writer has in mind matter less than the development of the figure within the text, which is in dialogue with other fictional representations as much as with any possible historical referent. Literary representations of the dictator have a common vocabulary of tropes, themes, and critical motifs that recur across time and place. These include the dictator's "barbarity," expressed as lack of education, cruelty, or vulgarity; solitude, whether as actual physical isolation or alienation from the hordes of sycophants; family dysfunction, where disorder in the dictator's family mirrors and even anticipates that of the nation; and subservience to foreign powers; as well as attention to the broader problems of corruption, social hypocrisy, and the moral or tactical failings of the opposition.

The third feature is the dictator novel's tendency to refer to and reflect on itself as a work of literature (self-reflexivity). The dictator novel is acutely concerned with the writer's relationship to the dictator, as indicated by the proliferation in these works of writer-figures — including journalists, historians, biographers, storytellers, secretaries, and artists — who are either in the dictator's service or are aligned against him. There is also a recurrent concern with the dictator's linguistic or rhetorical capacity, even when expressed as a lack thereof, as in the trope of the uneducated or barely-literate dictator. This self-consciousness produces a turn inward, toward the question of the writer's affinities with the dictator, and away from questions of political futurity. The degree of self-reflexivity and self-criticism necessarily varies, and dictator novels are certainly not all works of postmodern metafiction. But anxiety about the possible similarities between writer and dictator is a vital part of the dictator novel and is, in fact, an unease that lies only partially hidden at the heart of the genre. As Yunior, the narrator of Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* puts it: "[Salman] Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*" (2007, 97n11).

Finally, as I emphasized at the start of this entry, the dictator novel in the Global South also attends to the external or global forces that support and benefit from the existence of dictatorial regimes. Dictatorship in these novels is never simply a local question. Even when a narrative pays little explicit attention to the larger geopolitical context of a given (fictional) dictatorship, it registers the influence of international forces. Foreign advisors, diplomats, security experts, and other operatives lurk in these novel-worlds. Very rarely are these outsiders seen as viable support for opposition to the dictatorship. This is true even in nineteenth-century Latin American iterations of the genre (see, for instance, the role of the British ambassador in Mármol's *Amalia*). In the twentieth century, the "gunboat diplomacy" of the United States in Latin America and the involvement of multinational companies such as the United Fruit Company are vital points of reference. Later, the Cold War becomes the

framework for discussing the role of the United States and Soviet Union in sustaining dictatorships in Africa as well as Latin America.

Attention to the role of global political and economic forces offers a distinct image of the dictator, who must placate external interests in order to remain in power. The resulting disjuncture between the dictator's apparent omnipotence at home and his servility abroad is often the subject of derision and comedy. But it also raises serious questions about how opposition to dictatorship can and should be organized. Dictator novels written around the turn of the twenty-first century—most notably, Ngũgĩ's *Wizard of the Crow* — pay increasing attention to the influence of global capital and finance on dictatorial regimes, over and above the interests of individual nation-states or even political blocs. As one emissary proposes to the dictator in *Wizard of the Crow*: "The world will no longer be composed of the outmoded twentieth-century division of East, West, and a directionless Third. The world will become one corporate globe divided into the incorporating and the incorporated" (2006, 746). Opposition to dictatorship, Ngũgĩ's novel argues, must take the form of transnational solidarity and resistance to those global forces (see Armillas-Tiseyra 2018a). It is in these latest iterations of the dictator novel, then, that the emergent Global South consciousness of the dictator novel is most explicitly manifest.

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[1] For a more in-depth discussion of the aesthetics of vulgarity and their role in authoritarian regimes, see the chapter "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity" in Achille Mbembe's *De la postcolonie (On the Postcolony)*, 2000); for a discussion of vulgarity and representations of the dictator, see the chapter "The Things and Its Doubles" in that same volume.

[2] The near-simultaneous publication of these works was not a coincidence. In the late 1960s, all three writers were involved in a project about Latin American dictators titled "Los padres de las patrias" ("The Fathers of the Fatherlands"). Organized by Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa, this was to have been a collection of short texts authored by prominent writers of the moment, but it never materialized. I discuss the history of this failed project and how it informed the subsequent dictator novels at length in the third chapter of *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (2019).

[3] See Armillas-Tiseyra 2019, 137-139.

[4] Robin Yassin-Kassab, "Yasmina Khadra Imagines Gaddafi's Final Hours" in *The Guardian*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/15/the-dictators-last-night-yasmina-khadra-review-novel-muammar-gaddafi>.

[5] Dowlatabadi's novel, which explores the violence following the 1979 revolution in Iran, was written in the wake of those events but remains unpublished in the original Persian. Instead, translations have appeared in Germany (2009), the United Kingdom (2011), the United States (2012), France (2012), and Spain (2013). As such, it is an instructive example of something that is true for many such works: for reasons of censorship (explicit or otherwise) they are often published and circulate outside of the context in or about which they were written. Asturias himself worked on *The President* while in exile in Paris in the 1920s and 30s but did not publish the novel until 1946.

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