



Lotus blossoms

What the Cold War did for the Afro-Asian literary movement

PETER KALLINEY

IN OCTOBER 1958, more than 200 writers met in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, then part of the Soviet Union, for the first Afro-Asian Writers' Conference. The conference was the first attempt to bring together African and Asian writers working in many languages. The African American intellectual and civil rights campaigner W. E. B. Du Bois was a distinguished guest. Established writers - including the Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand, the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the Egyptian man of letters Youssef El-Sebai and the Chinese novelist Mao Dun - joined their Uzbek hosts, Zulfiya and Kamil Yashin, for the event. Representatives of the Union of Soviet Writers made sure everyone knew of the role the Soviet state had played in the gathering. The Senegalese novelist and film-maker Sembène Ousmane, the Mozambican poet-revolutionary Marcelino dos Santos and the Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer also made the journey. It was an ambitious attempt to open channels of cultural exchange that would transcend economic and political differences.

Under the auspices of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA), seven big conferences followed - in Cairo (1962), Beirut (1967), Delhi (1970), Alma-Ata (1973), Luanda (1979), Tashkent (again, in 1983) and Tunis (1988). For most of its existence the AAWA could boast hundreds of members in dozens of countries. In 1967 the organization appointed El-Sebai editor of *Afro-Asian Writings*, a quarterly international magazine of literature and the arts based in Cairo, which appeared simultaneously in Arabic, English and French. After a few issues it was rechristened *Lotus*. Aside from the international conferences and magazine, the association awarded the annual Lotus prizes to some of literature's best-known African, Asian and Middle Eastern personalities: Faiz, Sembène, dos Santos, Chinua Achebe, the South African Alex La Guma, the Angolan Agostinho Neto, the Palestinians Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish, and the Algerian Kateb Yacine.

Prior to the formation of the AAWA writers from the decolonizing world reached international audiences by writing in European languages and by working with metropolitan publishers in London,

New York, Paris and a handful of other cities in the global north. With the emergence of the AAWA, different options became available. Beirut, Cairo, Colombo, Delhi, East Berlin, Luanda, Moscow, Tashkent and Tunis became nodes of production and distribution. By turning to the AAWA network, writers from the global south, whether working in global or regional languages, could attempt to reach new audiences without first appealing to Euro-American outlets.

After the Second World War the United States and the Soviet Union each committed resources to supporting intellectuals in the non-aligned world. The Soviet cultural diplomacy machine believed it could win hearts and minds with literary ventures. Although there were ideological differences between Soviet- and US-sponsored networks - the Soviets banged the anti-colonial gong, while the US network trumpeted intellectual freedoms - the era's cultural diplomacy programs were sometimes difficult to tell apart. The CIA covertly sponsored a range of cultural activities in Africa, Asia and the Middle East through the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) - and the Afro-Asian movement was the Soviet equivalent. The CCF's Makerere conference in Kampala in 1962 looks suspiciously close, in aims and format, to the Tashkent conference four years earlier. Likewise, when the AAWA mooted ideas for the magazine that would become *Lotus*, some believed that it should be modelled on the CCF's transatlantic showpiece, *Encounter*.

Each side kept tabs on the other. A confidential Nato report on the Tashkent meeting, compiled by the British embassy in Moscow, says that "although many of the delegates have been pleased at the opportunity to make contacts", they were also exposed to the obvious shortcomings of the Soviet system, especially with regard to freedom of expression. Another Nato working paper interprets the Tashkent gathering as part of a larger Soviet effort to infiltrate the Afro-Asian solidarity movement that emerged with the Bandung conference of 1955. "It is unlikely [the Soviets] will drop the mask of working with Afro-Asia and endeavour to assert open leadership of the movement", the document predicts, "but [they] will probably continue to support nationalist aspirations in the decolonizing

W. E. B. Du Bois, centre, at the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference in Tashkent, 1958

“Both the US and the Soviet Union used state sponsorship to manipulate international literary culture

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world in an attempt to drive a wedge between these areas and the NATO bloc.”

The Soviets, in turn, kept a close eye on the CCF. An early issue of *Lotus* gloats over the CCF funding scandal, when CIA involvement made international headlines. The main difference between US cultural diplomacy and the Soviet model was that the Soviets called attention to their work in the non-aligned world. They demonstrated some savvy by being honest about their position, which allowed the AAWA to continue its programs long after the CCF imploded in 1966-7.

Many writers worked with both the US- and the Soviet-sponsored initiatives. Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) first appeared in its original Arabic in *Al-Hiwar*, the CCF's journal in the Middle East. A few years later it appeared in Russian as part of a book series with links to the AAWA. La Guma, likewise, moved easily between these supposedly hostile networks. His first important publication, *A Walk in the Night* (1962), was published by the Nigerian CCF affiliate Mbari and featured at the Makerere conference. He also did piecework for the CCF's African radio venture, the London-based Transcription Centre. Before long, however, he became a leading figure in the AAWA, serving as editor of *Lotus* and doing a stint as the association's general secretary. Several other African writers, including Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, had significant involvement in both networks. Neither US nor Soviet cultural diplomacy programmes were in a strong enough position to make explicit demands of ideological loyalty from collaborators, who were happy to exploit the Cold War dispute for their own purposes.

The Soviet-sponsored Afro-Asian movement was, in fact, distinctive less for its ideological line than for its perspective on language and translation. The trilingual *Lotus*, at its peak, published 3,500 copies of the English and French editions, and a smaller number in Arabic. It had no single source language. Every submission went through the process of translation into a minimum of two other languages; many were originally written in another language altogether.

And *Lotus* was only one part of the AAWA's translation project. Foreign titles appeared in Russian and other languages of the Soviet Union, but the Soviet translation industry also created books for export in non-Soviet languages. Because of this Afro-Asian writers were among the most widely translated authors by the Soviet literary apparatus. A writer such as La Guma might expect 10,000 copies of his novels to be printed in the UK by Heinemann for the African Writers Series, to be distributed mainly in anglophone Africa. A Russian translation of the same novel might warrant 50,000 copies, with another 25,000 copies in Ukrainian and 10,000 copies in Hungarian. A quick glance at Unesco's figures on global publishing from 1961 gives a sense of the scale. The world's top six writers being published in translation were V. I. Lenin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leo Tolstoy, Agatha Christie, Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare. Four of the top six are in the list because of the Soviet translation industry; Tagore was a favourite of the Soviets as they reached out to audiences in the Afro-Asian world. African and Asian writers looking for publishers to sell their books abroad suddenly had different choices.

The Afro-Asian movement's commitment to multilingualism did not emerge spontaneously. The Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934 is usually regarded as the moment when Stalin's henchman Andrei Zhdanov commandeered the Union's literature, steering it towards socialist realism, state administration and censorship. For Afro-Asian writers, however, the 1934 event would be remembered differently. In his address on revolutionary literature, Maxim Gorky cited linguistic diversity as a source of cultural vigour: "Soviet literature is not merely a literature of the Russian language. It is an All-Union literature [including] the literary creation of the national minorities". Nikolai Bukharin echoed

Gorky's sentiments: "An All-Soviet literature is growing up in our country, in which the literature of national minorities possesses enormous significance". Bukharin and Gorky knew their audience. The majority of the 600 delegates hailed from these minorities.

Surprisingly, *Lotus* did not impose socialist realism as a house style. Instead the magazine featured anti-colonial messages in a variety of aesthetic packages. A few regular contributors - especially Soviet writers - kept faith with the tenets of socialist realism. But most contributors from other parts of Asia and Africa did their own thing and received a sympathetic hearing. They included experimentalists such as Yacine and Nuruddin Farah. In any copy of *Lotus* from the 1970s you will find a wide range of literary practices, although some kind of anti-colonial message was always desirable. Pieces from southern Africa, Palestine and Vietnam appear in just about every issue. South Africa's non-white writers, in particular, found *Lotus* welcoming. The importance of this fact should not be underestimated. Many South Africans, including La Guma, who appeared in its pages were banned from appearing in print in South Africa. For them, and for others, the literature of anti-colonial nationalism happened in an extranational context.

When *Lotus* readers were not taking a literary tour of South Africa or Palestine or Vietnam, they were getting to know Soviet Asia better. Subscribers learnt how Kazakh falconry, Uzbek textiles and Tajik folklore were flourishing under the protection of the Soviet state. What Bukharin and Gorky called the national minorities of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

were the Soviet trump cards played on the Afro-Asian cultural diplomacy circuit. The choice of Tashkent for the inaugural conference, rather than Moscow or Leningrad, was part of a calculated strategy. In their downtime delegates might be whisked off to a thriving co-operative farm or an indigenous dance staged for their benefit.

Many AAWA participants were not persuaded, but a few become converts. In his travelogue *A Soviet Journey* (1978), La Guma takes his readers on a tour of Soviet Asia. He was impressed; he thought the decolonizing world could follow the Soviet model of economic development, allowing parts of the world that were underdeveloped in the capitalist model to make economic progress without sacrificing cultural distinctiveness, national heritage - and languages and literary traditions especially.

The AAWA did not always enjoy calm seas and a following wind. It barely survived the Sino-Soviet split. As the Beirut conference drew near, in 1967, the Chinese delegation called for the organization's headquarters to be moved from Colombo to Beijing. They wanted it to hew a more militant line, allowing for no compromise with insufficiently revolutionary intellectuals. After some public sparring the Chinese severed ties, setting up a rival organization, the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau. It peeled off a few AAWA delegates from non-aligned regions and produced its own propaganda magazine, *The Call*. The Cultural Revolution seriously curtailed the activities of this breakaway venture. In the meantime the Soviet-led faction relocated to Cairo. The dwindling significance of the Chinese-led faction and the spectacular implosion of the CCF gave the

AAWA a boost. By the early 1970s *Lotus* was the pre-eminent international literary journal in the Afro-Asian world.

By the end of the 1970s, however, the organization began to wobble. In 1978 its editor, Youssef El-Sebai, by then minister of culture in Egypt, was assassinated in Cyprus by a Palestinian splinter group angered by Anwar Sadat's state visit to Israel in November 1977. *Lotus* moved to Beirut, but this arrangement only lasted until 1982, when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon forced another move to Tunis. Publication became irregular, the journal's funding threatened by stagnation in the Soviet bloc. In 1989 *Lotus* suspended publication in English and French, and by 1991 it had produced its final issue in Arabic. *Lotus* and the AAWA outlasted their CIA-backed rivals by more than two decades, but they could not survive the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The integration of African and Asian writers into the world literary system is often treated as a legacy of European imperialism, but the Afro-Asian project tells a different story: it certainly didn't happen through the enlargement of a capitalist market for books and ideas. Both the US and the Soviet Union used state sponsorship to manipulate international literary culture. Writers from the decolonizing world may have been self-conscious about their participation in international circuits of exchange during the Cold War, but that context gave them more, not less, room for manoeuvre because the superpowers were competing for their attention. And one of the fruits of that two-sided sponsorship is a culturally heterogeneous global literature that barely existed a century ago. ■



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