



Books! Readers, Authors, Publishers and Festivals in Africa – Samira Sawhani

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The Nokoko journal is committed to a world where people are free from all forms of oppression and exploitation, where respect for individuals' varied differences is maintained, and where everyone can realise their full potentials. NokokoPod is a companion to the journal, covering current African issues. It aims to bring forth new perspectives that broaden, trouble, complicate and enrich current discourses. Edited and annotated versions of the conversations will be made available on the journal website.

This issue of NokokoPod is all about books – authors, readers, publishers and festivals. The podcast for this discussion is available on the Nokoko journal website. This conversation took place on September 6th, with Logan Cochrane in Ottawa, Canada, and Samira Sawhani in London, UK. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Samira Sawhani. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.

Logan: Welcome to NokokoPodcast #10 of 2019. We have covered a number of topics this year: the protests in Sudan,¹ the change of government in Ethiopia,² the coming elections in Botswana,³ the conflict in Cameroon,⁴ and the restriction of freedoms in Tanzania.⁵ Many of the past episodes have been political or conflict related. Today, I am really excited to be joined by Samira Sawlani⁶ who is going to talk to us about books, authors, publishing and what is happening in these spaces with African authors, African publishers and African readers. For those of you who know her, she is a writer and an analyst who is focusing on East Africa. Samira has written some articles about books by African authors, specifically on new books and books to look out for, which you can find on AfricanArguments.⁷ Welcome and thank you for joining us today.

Samira: Thank you.

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- 1 Cochrane, L., Ahmed, E. and Elkazin, T. 2019. Protests in Sudan - International Actors and the Future (Part 2): Elfadil Ahmed and Tag Elkhazin. NokokoPod 2019(6): 1-19.
 - Cochrane, L., Ahmed, E. and Elkazin, T. 2019. Protests in Sudan - History and Demands (Part 1): Elfadil Ahmed and Tag Elkhazin. NokokoPod 2019(5): 1-24.
 - 2 Cochrane, L. and Kefale, A. 2019. Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Asnake Kefale. NokokoPod 2019(3): 1-16.
 - Cochrane, L. and Mandefro, H. 2019. Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Hone Mandefro. NokokoPod 2019(2): 1-25.
 - Cochrane, L. and Zewde, B. 2019. Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Bahru Zewde. NokokoPod 2019(1): 1-16.
 - 3 Cochrane, L. and Brown, C. 2019. The 2019 Elections in Botswana: Context, History and Future – Chris Brown. NokokoPod 2019(9): 1-35.
 - 4 Cochrane, L. and Afungang, R. N. 2019. The Conflict in Cameroon – Roland Ngwatung Afungang. NokokoPod 2019(8): 1-28.
 - 5 Cochrane, L. and Mngodo, E. K. 2019. The Changing Landscape of Freedoms in Tanzania: Esther Karin Mngodo. NokokoPod 2019(4): 1-16.
 - 6 Samira Sawlani on Twitter at @samirasawlani
 - 7 For 2018: <https://africanarguments.org/2018/12/13/africa-books-2018-must-read/> For 2019: <https://africanarguments.org/2019/07/16/best-african-books-2019-so-far/>

Logan: Let us start off with the writers of these books. I think we know some of the big names of the past that we come across in African Studies, but it seems in the last few years there has been an expansion of writers, where they are coming from, and what they are writing about. Could you tell us a bit about the trends you are seeing as someone watching the authors?

Samira: Over the years, we have seen a lot of political novels and novels capturing history. While that is still the case, what we are also seeing is a lot more light stuff, humorous stuff, more satire. Books such as the one written by the South African writer Angela Makholwa, who wrote a book called *The Blessed Girl*.⁸ That is a book about a very sassy South African girl and while this story has more serious undertones to it, we are finally seeing a lot more books out there where we have got characters who are falling in love, and falling in lust, and getting themselves into all sorts of trouble. It is no longer just that idea that if it is an African novel it has to be very serious and has to be really political. At the same time, we are seeing a lot more creative nonfiction coming out across the continent. Coincidentally or not, with the death of Robert Mugabe⁹ a book that will probably be read a lot over the next couple of weeks and months is by Panashe Chigumadzi who has written a creative nonfiction book.¹⁰ We are seeing a lot more of that as well, where people are trying to tell history but from a very fictional perspective. That is

8 Makholwa, Angela. 2019. *The Blessed Girl*. Bloomsbury: London and New York. Angela's website: <http://www.angelamakholwa.com/> and Twitter @AngelaMakholwa

9 The podcast took place on the day that the death of Robert Mugabe was announced.

10 Chigumadzi, Panashe. 2018. *These Bones Will Rise Again*. Indigo Press: London.

Panashe on Twitter: @PanasheChig

more about the kinds of the things that are coming out from the continent right now.

Logan: Are you seeing changes in the location of authors? Who is producing these books in different countries or regions?

Samira: There has always been a longstanding saying - do we call it a joke? - that 'everyone is from Nigeria.' That is fast changing. While there are some brilliant writers continuing to come out of Nigeria, we are seeing writers making the international stage from across the continent. Peter Kimani¹¹ from Kenya, for example, is doing really well. *The Dragonfly Sea*,¹² by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor who is another Kenyan writer, is another, which we are seeing in bookshelves across the UK. *Manchester Happened*¹³ by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi,¹⁴ from Uganda, took the UK and the African continent by storm. We are seeing loads more books coming out. We are also seeing a little bit more translated literature. Last year, the first novel from Madagascar to be translated into English came out, which was *Beyond the Rice Fields* by Naivo.¹⁵ This year we have seen *Thirteen Months of Sunrise*¹⁶ by Rania Mamoun, from Sudan, which was just translated into English a couple of months ago. There is a lot of that coming out as well, which is it's own market because you do meet people who say that they are particularly interested in novels that have been translated from the native language. Those are the

11 Peter's website: <http://petekimani.co.ke/> and on Twitter @kimaniPete

12 Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo. 2019. *The Dragonfly Sea*. Penguin Random House: New York.

Yvonne on Twitter @AdhiamboKE

13 Makumbi, Jennifer Nansubua. 2019. *Manceshter Happened*. Oneworld.

14 Jennifer's website: <https://jennifermakumbi.net/>

15 Naivo. 2017. *Beyond the Rice Fields* (translated by Allison M. Charette). Restless Books: Brooklyn.

16 Mamoun, Rania. 2019. *Thirteen Months of Sunshine*. Comma Press.

kinds of things that we are seeing. Poetry has always been popular, however the rise of young poets from Africa and diaspora, particularly due to social media, is really something to watch and they are so talented. It is beautiful to read their work. That is the gist of it.

Logan: When you engage with authors or read their discussions - regarding this question of language - do you see that there is intentionality behind choosing to write in another language and then have it translated to English? Or, is that what is more comfortable? Do you see any conversations around questions of language?

Samira: I have seen conversations and I have had conversations. For some, let's say authors who are writing in Arabic, that is something that they are more comfortable doing in order to get ideas across and tell the story they want to tell. There are also writers who say that they do not think English can best capture what they are trying to say, which I think is quite valid. When I look at the things I can say in the language that I can speak, for example Hindi, I know that there are just certain things I can get across in that language which English will not do justice to. It seems to be a mix of things.

Logan: It seems, for some authors, and maybe it varies by country, I think there is also a push for a revival or a recognition of the knowledge that is embedded in those languages.¹⁷ If we only were to write in the colonial languages of English or French, we are also sending a message about which languages are important, those that we are investing our time into, and thus it is a rebalancing of that conversation about how valuable African languages are.

17 See: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. 1992. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. East African Publishers also by James Currey.

Samira: Absolutely. I really do agree with that. Perhaps we can say it is part of the movement of reclaiming; reclaiming our literature, our music, our narrative. Language is such a big part of that. For those of us who do not speak certain languages, to have these books translated into English is great. However, I do see the value of the writer choosing for their work to be written in Kiswahili or Somali or Luganda, or whatever they classify as their mother tongue.

Logan: Taking a step back away from the specific translated works, you mentioned some changes in the topic or the genre - Could you elaborate a bit more on the high level trends that you are seeing?

Samira: I see a debate and discussion often taking place amongst African authors, in that they are expected to constantly write about serious subjects - conflict, poverty, corruption. While that is part of any given story, they do not feel that they are given the opportunity to write things which are just fun. In terms of the bigger trends, there seems to be a real appetite for stuff like romance, romantic comedies, and content that could be classified under the category of 'Hallmark movies.' I have seen a lot more of that coming through. There is also a mix of story, politics and the paranormal that seems to be another great trend that you see. I was reading *The Old Drift*¹⁸ by Namwali Serpell,¹⁹ who is from Zambia, and there are parts in the book that are really futuristic but then it is also about colonialism. That is something which I think people are really enjoying. We are also seeing more thrillers. We are seeing more comedy. A great book, which really had me laughing, a kind of dark comedy,

18 Namwali Serpell. 2019. *The Old Draft*. Hogarth: London and New York.

19 Namwali's website: <https://www.namwaliserpell.com/> on Twitter @namwalien

was *My Sister the Serial Killer*²⁰ by Nigerian writer Onyinkan Braithwaite.²¹ We are seeing people demand different. We are seeing people say, 'well, if western writers can write about a whole load of things, then we want African writers to be able to do the same because we want to read it.' Ultimately, I think a lot of us read to see ourselves in stories and people get tired of just seeing the same old narrative coming out from any region.

Logan: With some of these books and their popularity - you mentioned some of them taking the readership by storm and becoming very popular - is that linked to this idea that readers may be familiar with a certain type of writing or a certain type of character in a book and now they are seeing something different and it is speaking to them more? Maybe that that is why some of these books are getting picked up from these other genres?

Samira: Definitely. I think that that is a big reason. You mentioned language, there is also the legacy of colonialism, which is demanding that we break the barriers and boundaries placed upon us. I think when readers are picking up these books, part of it is also because they are saying 'we do not want to be boxed up as people in a continent always struggling, always suffering, experiencing war, corruption and poverty.' I think that is another reason why there is such a demand.

Logan: For these books you have mentioned, and the others that you have written about, are the publishers national publishers or international publishers? What kind of distribution exists? Is it

20 Oyinkan Braithwaite. 2018. *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. Doubleday: New York. An earlier version of this book was previously published as *Thicker than Water* in Nigeria by Qamina in 2017.

21 Oyinkan's website: <https://oyinkanbraithwaite.com/>

easy for a reader in Nigeria to get a book written by someone in Zambia? How do those things play out?

Samira: A lot of these books have been published by International Publishers. What we are seeing is that a lot of these international publishers are small publishing houses, set up by people in the diaspora. A publisher like Cassava Republic²² has really changed the literary landscape because they are based in the UK and they are publishing a lot of writers from the African continent and those in the diaspora. In terms of distribution, I am lucky enough that I have been to a fair number of African countries and you do see more and more in the bookshops. While there is a big collection of books by writers from the West, there is also a space for writers from different African countries. Every time I have travelled, to Kenya for example, every time I go to Nairobi I see more bookstores with bigger collections of books by African writers. It is growing and the Internet really helps as well.

Logan: I am seeing more book fairs and book festivals, in places like Nairobi or Cairo or elsewhere, that create a space for authors to promote their works, where readers may encounter things that they did not know existed, and also where publishers may see new markets.

Samira: The rise of the book fairs in Africa is so telling about how reading and literature is popular on the continent and how much it is growing. In this year alone, just based on the internet, I have seen the Mogadishu Book Fair,²³ the Hargeysa Book Fair,²⁴ the

22 Cassava Republic: <https://cassavarepublic.biz/>

23 Mogadishu Book Fair on Twitter @MogBF

24 Hargeysa International Book Fair on Twitter @hibf

Swahili Literary Festival,²⁵ the Abidjan International Book Fair, Writivism in Uganda,²⁶ the Kismayu book fair. I have seen so many new literary festivals come up and it is great to see such a huge range of writers there. As you said, publishers as well. At the events, in making sure that the panelists are from across the continent, it is giving more exposure of these writers to audiences in other countries.

Logan: What is the feel when you attend these events? Who is walking around?

Samira: Really, really good African writers. I feel like it is the *creme de la creme*. They have writing workshops. They discuss the various topics, from their own process to what their books are covering to literature in general. It is great to see how many of these literary festivals pull in such big crowds. These places are packed, they really are.

Logan: You mentioned changing some of the narratives and speaking to different topics, moving away from the corrupt state or failing state stories or the negativity and instead telling other stories. Within those other stories, or even within some of the more traditional storytelling, are there underlying messages that you see that some of the authors want to tell? That may be very explicitly or may be indirectly through other means.

Samira: The book I mentioned earlier, *The Blessed Girl*,²⁷ it is interesting because while you are reading it you encounter the main narrative: it is about this young woman in Johannesburg who has a collection of sugar daddies, she is driving a sports car and has a great

25 For details, see: <https://africanwriterstrust.org/swahili-literary-festival/>

26 For details, see: <http://writivism.com/> on Twitter @Writivism

27 Makholwa, Angela. 2019. *The Blessed Girl*. Bloomsbury: London and New York.

apartment penthouse, handbags and makeup and there is all this craziness going on. However, underneath it there are stories around mental health, family history, even apartheid and the way that has had an impact on men in South Africa. She talks about the risks that come with having a sugar daddy and why women sometimes find themselves in such arrangements. It is really nice to be able to read something quite fun and frothy while it has got those serious themes running through it. There is always a burden on writers that every story has to be saying something, which is particularly the case for writers in Africa or from Africa. Angela Makholwa²⁸ gives us a really nice way to do things, where you can have a fun story with serious undertones. Another example is by Frances Mensah Williams,²⁹ the book is called *From Pasta to Pigfoot*.³⁰ The book is about a British-Ghanaian young lady who goes back to Ghana to visit family friends. She falls in love and it really is the kind of story that you want to watch on TV. There is this amazing romance that goes on. It does not really have any serious messages coming out of it, but what it does say is that a normal British African girl goes off to Ghana, falls in love, and does or does not live happily ever after.

Logan: When I was reading your summaries of the 2019 books, one thing that stood out, which maybe is not new but was a theme for me, was the agency of people whose stories are not often told. An example of that is *The Wife's Tale*³¹ by Aida Edemariam.³² We are hearing stories that are not typically told from a perspective that is not typically heard.

28 Angela's website: <http://www.angelamakholwa.com/> and Twitter @AngelaMakholwa

29 Website: <http://francesmensahwilliams.com/>

30 Frances Mensah Williams. 2015. *From Pasta to Pigfoot*. Jacaranda Books.

31 Aida Edemariam. 2018. *The Wife's Tale: A Personal History*. Knopf Canada: Toronto.

32 Aida on Twitter @AidaE

Samira: Definitely. This is also where other issues come into play. Due to social media, and more global conversations, when a political event happens - we need to reflect much more on whose voices are heard. Are your experts in Africa or from Africa? Today, with Mr. Mugabe's passing away, are you commissioning Zimbabwean writers to write about his legacy? In the same way, I think we are seeing that in literature. People want stories from authentic voices.

Logan: Maybe that is also a recognition of some of the biases in the story. In *The Wife's Tale*, a gendered bias is being countered in a genre where the male narrative has been dominant. We are seeing history from someone else's eyes, whose perspective we would not have access to without some of these authors bringing this out for us.

Samira: *The Wife's Tale* is a good example of that, where it is from a woman's perspective and she is telling the story of a woman, which traditionally we have not seen enough of.

Logan: I keep mentioning these posts that you are doing for AfricanArguments.³³ Could you give us a quick recap from 2018? What books should be on our reading list that maybe we missed?

Samira: When I come to do these lists, I absolutely dread them because the process of cutting it down is a lot of work and really difficult. I would definitely say that Panashe Chigumadzi's *These Bones*

33 For 2018: <https://africanarguments.org/2018/12/13/africa-books-2018-must-read/> For 2019: <https://africanarguments.org/2019/07/16/best-african-books-2019-so-far/>

Will Rise Again is a book that I cherish.³⁴ I think it is so well written. In terms of non-fiction, as we have not talked about nonfiction much, Nanjala Nyabola's³⁵ *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*³⁶ is absolutely a must read if you are looking at social media and Kenya. Harun Maruf's³⁷ *Inside Al Shabab*,³⁸ if that is your area of interest, is also a great read. I have spent years complaining about how much non-fiction about the continent is written by white men. For me, it is something great to see more African non-fiction coming out. For the poetry, Ijeoma Umebinyuo³⁹ is a great Nigerian poet and Koleka Putuma⁴⁰ from South Africa is another who I would say is really really worth reading. For books, *Silence is My Mother Tongue*⁴¹ by Sulaiman Addonia,⁴² which is set between Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, is another great book. *Freshwater*⁴³ by Akwaeke Emezi,⁴⁴ really spooky but something so different, was great. *The Dragonfly Sea*⁴⁵ by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor⁴⁶ is fabulous. And, because of the things

34 Chigumadzi, Panashe. 2018. *These Bones Will Rise Again*. Indigo Press: London.

Panashe on Twitter: @PanasheChig

35 Nanjala's website: <http://www.nanjalawrites.com/> on Twitter @Nanjala1

36 Nyabola, Nanjala. 2018. *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Kenya*. Zed: London.

37 On Twitter @HarunMaruf

38 Maruf, H. and Joseph, D. 2018. *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington.

39 Ijeoma's website: <https://www.theijeoma.com/>

40 Koleka on Twitter @KPutuma

41 Sulaiman Addonia. 2019. *Silence is My Mother Tongue*. Indigo Press.

42 Sulaiman on Twitter @sulaimanaddonia

43 Akwaeke Emezi. 2018. *Freshwater*. Grove Press.

44 Akwaeke's website: <https://www.akwaeke.com/>

45 Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. 2019. *The Dragonfly Sea*. Penguin Random House: New York.

46 Yvonne on Twitter @AdhiamboKE

that happened in Zimbabwe today, I would say *House of Stone*⁴⁷ by Novuyo Rose Tshuma.⁴⁸ I could just keep going! I mentioned Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi,⁴⁹ she wrote a book called *Kintu*⁵⁰ that has done really well. *Kintu* goes into history and brings it back to the present time - pre-colonialism and the present time. Those books are really starting to make a big mark across the literary scene. Elnathan John's⁵¹ *Becoming Nigerian*,⁵² a satire, is one of the best books I have read, in my whole life. I could go on and on and on, but we would be here forever. But, just one more thing: we are seeing a rise in the collection of short stories. Just this year alone: Helon Habila's⁵³ *Travelers*⁵⁴ and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's⁵⁵ *Manchester Happened*⁵⁶ - these books are doing really well. People seem to enjoy short stories. The Caine Prize for African Writing⁵⁷ releases a collection every year. I was reading one of those stories on the train yesterday and it just made me cry - people were handing me tissues. There seems to be a demand for short story collections.

Logan: Before we jump to 2019, if listeners or readers are interested to find some of these, of course they are available in print, are they also relatively available in e-copies for their e-readers and so on?

47 Novuyo Rosa Tshuma. 2019. *House of Stone*. W. W. Norton & Co.: New York.

48 Novuyo's website: <http://novuyotshuma.com/>

49 Jennifer's website: <https://jennifermakumbi.net/>

50 Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi. 2017. *Kintu*. Transit Books.

51 Elnathan's website: <https://elnathanjohn.com/> on Twitter @elnathan_john

52 Elnathan John. 2020. *Becoming Nigerian*. Cassava Republic Press.

53 Helon's website: <https://www.helonhabila.com/> on Twitter @helonhabila

54 Helon Habila. 2019. *Travelers*. W. W. Norton & Co.: New York.

55 Jennifer's website: <https://jennifermakumbi.net/>

56 Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi. 2019. *Manchester Happened*. Oneworld.

57 For more details on the Caine Prize for African Writing, see: <http://caineprize.com/>

Samira: Yes. There is a lot of discussion about how the e-book market, based on the figures, has not really taken off in Africa, beyond Egypt and South Africa. However, the writers who have made it international are very much on your iBooks and Kindle and all the rest of it.

Logan: We are more than halfway through 2019. What has stood out so far this year of books that should be on our desk, that are maybe not?

Samira: Basseyy Ikpi's⁵⁸ *I'm Telling the Truth, but I'm Lying*⁵⁹ came out last month. It is a selection of essays on mental health. That was mesmerizing. I just finished reading *A Particular Kind of Black Man*⁶⁰ by Tope Folarin,⁶¹ another Nigerian one that that was very good. *The Shadow King*⁶² by Maaza Mengiste⁶³ is out in the next few weeks - that is one I have pre-ordered. *The Cape Cod Bicycle* by Billy Kahora is another great one. *When the Plums are Ripe*⁶⁴ by the Cameroonian author Patrice Nganang⁶⁵ is due to come out soon. We do not see much literature coming out from Cameroon - at least literature in English - that is also one to get your hands on.

58 Basseyy's website: <http://basseyyikpi.com/> on Twitter @Basseyyworld

59 Basseyy Ikpi. 2019. *I'm Telling the Truth, but I'm Lying*. Harper: New York.

60 Tope Folarin. 2019. *A Particular Kind of Black Man*. Simon & Schuster: New York.

61 Tope on Twitter @topefolarin

62 Maaza Mengiste. 2019. *The Shadow King*. W. W. Norton & Co.: New York.

63 Maaza's website: <http://maazamengiste.com/> on Twitter @MaazaMengiste

64 Patrice Nganang (translated by Amy Reid). 2019. *When the Plums are Ripe*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York.

65 Patrice's website: <https://nganang.com/> and on Twitter @nganang

Logan: If readers or listeners are interested to attend or to follow any of the book festivals or fairs that you mentioned is there any particular place you might recommend, a website or a list, for these book festivals?

Samira: There is a gentleman called James Murua⁶⁶ and he seems to make a list of the upcoming literary festivals on his website.

Logan: We can also find and follow you and a number of places - you are on Twitter. Is there anywhere else we can follow your writing and work?

Samira: Twitter is the best place to find me.⁶⁷

Logan: You have the posts on AfricanArguments.⁶⁸ If anyone wants to find those, we will put the links in the PDF of this podcast. Readers and listeners can also find the lists for past years on AfricanArguments, and I assume that where we can look for future years of books that are coming. Thank you very much for joining us. This is really nice to change the direction of NokokoPod and also to hear about all these great authors and all these emerging things that that we may not know about and that we should know more about. We should be reading more of these works.

Samira: Do not hesitate to get in touch. I am always reading. I have always got books and can recommend them based on whatever you are interested in reading.

66 James's website: <https://www.jamesmurua.com/>

67 Samira Sawlani on Twitter at @samirasawlani

68 For 2018: <https://africanarguments.org/2018/12/13/africa-books-2018-must-read/>

For 2019: <https://africanarguments.org/2019/07/16/best-african-books-2019-so-far/>

Logan: We will follow you on Twitter and we will hear about what you are reading there as well. Thank you very much for joining us.