

## Why World Literature: Introductory Dialogues

Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay

In this issue, we acknowledge the phenomenal rise of world literature in current (Euro-American) literary studies. Although world literature as an object of study was revived in the 1990s, it was not till the last decade or so that scholars expressed such intense engagement with the issue. A number of journal special issues, anthologies, monographs, conferences, and symposia were published which widened and complicated the use of the term.<sup>1</sup> Alongside the definitive volumes of David Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003) and *How to Read World Literature* (2009), which have variously focussed on the issue of translation, there have been more critical interventions regarding methodology and employment of the term, notably by Emily Apter who has questioned the possibility of communication and meaning-making through translation, by Pascale Casanova who has pointed out the importance of world publication circuits and cultural capital, by Francesca Orsini who has highlighted the question of significant geographies as opposed to marginal geographies shaping literary imagination and form, and by Franco Moretti and the Warwick Research Collective who have attempted to politicise the category of world literature through a world-systemic reading.

The rise of world literature has pushed the fields of comparative and colonial and postcolonial studies to a disciplinary crisis. World literature as a field seeks to bring so many national literary traditions into critical focus that there are often doubts raised by comparative studies scholars over territorial expertise and language competency available in reading world literary works. While scholars such as Damrosch and Susan Basnett have long been speaking of translation's benevolent uses, it does not need reasserting that a lot gets lost in translation, especially if all of us are translating the national or regional literary traditions into one language, English, because of English's global dominance. The comparatists ask whether without attending to the specificity of language and aesthetic traditions, a study of the world would only essentialize and reify the notion of *the* world. Colonial and postcolonial studies have been cognizant of these questions and produced some significant works in the Asian and African contexts. But again, not the entire world was subjected to colonialism in the same way as Asian and African countries were. In fact, there were different forms of colonialism and imperialism in British-dominated and in French-dominated countries. There have been lesser works on comparative continental colonial systems. Postcolonial studies scholar Neil Lazarus urges us to read the world through a systemic lens which understands territories as core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral, related to an unequal distribution of power, and which is sensitive to specific literary and linguistic traditions (Lazarus 19-40).

World-systemic analysis has not always been very attentive to the question of contingency and specificity in a system, as recent criticisms of Warwick Research Collective's literary use of the theory show.<sup>2</sup> But what is striking about a systemic literary analysis of the world is that it sees world's literatures as a *problem* for which one needs a method of inquiry and interpretation rather than posits the world as an ever-increasing space filled with ever-increasing literary works. Franco Moretti borrows from Immanuel Wallerstein in arguing that as global capitalism has travelled from the European core countries to the peripheries, literary works, themes, topics, and styles, notably of the novel which is the brainchild of bourgeois capitalism, have also travelled and dominated the literary traditions of the semi-peripheries and peripheries. They have not outlasted the existing and pre-capitalist traditions but have given birth to coeval, coagulated literary traditions where pre-capitalist and capitalism-motivated literary forms have interacted, mutated, and transformed into eclectic products. Moretti asks us to see the world as one and unequal ("Conjectures on World Literature" 54-

68). These eclectic world forms are what the WReC scholars read as irrealism, where capitalist bourgeois realism and the traditions of non-realist or local aesthetic and cognitive practices merge and interact (WReC *Uneven and Combined Development*, 7).

Lazarus has long been speaking of a world-systemic study in postcolonial scholarship. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, Lazarus reminds us of the two important periods, the post-Second World War period when capital and labour had struck a historic compromise, and of the 1970s, when cold war, oil crisis, and internal political strife had compelled many of recently decolonised countries to conform to the diktats of World Bank and IMF – to the structural adjustment programmes, otherwise known as the official beginning of twentieth century globalisation (Lazarus 23). The principle of free market capitalism, which made possible the rise of several liberal political and literary interventions in the 1980s, from sex and gender to identity and diaspora oriented theories, to poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postcolonial studies, also weakened the force of organised Marxism. Post-1991, US neoliberalism, marketization, and globalisation won, of which world literature as a revived field of scholarship was an offshoot.

But what kind of world literature is this? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Death of A Discipline* tells us that world literature, if understood as an ensemble of a few canonized texts from national literary traditions to be taught to sophomores as is done in the US, would hardly make any useful contribution to society, knowledge or scholarship, other than essentialising conservatism. Spivak on the other hand asks us to understand the world not as a globe to be explored for knowledge and dominance but as a planet, which is part of a larger solar system and which is also self-sufficient, complete with human and nonhuman life-worlds. There have also been other useful critical interventions in this respect by such scholars as Timothy Brennan and Rob Nixon which have not only complicated the term world in world literature but also allowed a rethinking of the term, postcolonial as well. Almost two decades ago, Timothy Brennan lamented postcolonial studies scholars' negligence of globalisation related questions, and their prioritisation of identity-based scholarship, while Rob Nixon pointed out the minimal scholarship in green, ecocritical, and planetary aspects in postcolonial studies despite the field's direct historical links with the issues of domination of nature, animal, and human labour.<sup>3</sup> The rise of globalisation and of world literature as a discipline (?) and the interventions of globalisation and eco-theories have compelled postcolonial scholars to rethink the discipline.

One may ask here why the editors are discussing postcolonial studies in an issue on world literature. The reason primarily lies in our naming of the issue: we asked why world literature. Is it a useful category to understand today's social, political as well as literary concerns? By now, readers will have noted that we have commented upon global capitalism's or globalisation's obvious links with the field of world literature. Thus, as globalisation can hardly be ignored, world literature, which has also been defined as global literature, has risen significantly as an object of study. There is however another reason to our naming of the issue. By 'why world literature', we also meant whether it was a useful and viable category or frame of analysis for every country as globalisation has encroached almost every territory on the planet. This is where the issue's *raison d'être* appears to be more engaging for us. This second point arises from the editors' residential locations. Writing from India, a country colonized by the British for almost two centuries, and then dominated or internally colonized by the combination of industrialists, politicians, patriarchs, and upper caste Hindus, we wonder if the term 'world' is suitable for understanding India's socio-literary imaginations and thoughts? Are subaltern, postcolonial, Dalit, caste or class more useful as frames of literary analysis here? If this is not the case, why do we see such a muted response to the category of world literature from scholars of the ex-colonized countries? When discussions of world literature arise in the context

of India, why is it that mostly old Sanskrit or medieval literary traditions become the focus of understanding and analysis? What happened to the world and to India in the last two centuries?

It is odd since colonial writers such as Rabindranath Tagore espoused notions of world literature much before world literature as a category of thought or as a discipline of analysis found its footing in the core European countries. Tagore was writing on world literature when the world, dominated by western European powers such as Britain, France, Germany and others, were tearing itself apart for imperialist greed. Tagore spoke about the need for humanism through world's literatures (Tagore 138-150). Almost a century later from Tagore's world, there has not been much substantial change. Capitalism has become more global. Empire and imperialism have added consumerist and technological forms of dominance to the existing form of physical force. True, there are no world wars now but there are permanent states of war, especially in West Asia. Widely rampant are cases of racism, casteism, gender exploitation, religious fundamentalism, and famine and starvations. Amidst all, there is also a contemporary rise of global fascism. In this atmosphere, we need Tagore's suggestions of a world literature filled with compassion and pity for the human and nonhuman kind – a critical world humanism, so to say. And this critical world humanism can only arise if we are sufficiently attentive to the local as well as global issues and contexts – especially how the local is shaped by the global and how the global is imagined and practised differently by different local traditions. It would be useful to understand how global capitalism's influences are registered in the thematics and stylistics of a local text, or how vernacular languages and aesthetic traditions respond to the contexts of neoliberal modernity. What are the questions that a local, untranslated text may raise for a world that is striving to be homogenous? What is the mode and practice of criticism in a local text that responds to world socio-economic contexts? We think that it is possible to raise these questions through an analysis of local postcolonial texts because they are all part of the publication and consumption pressures of the world. This is what we would like to do in the next part of the Introduction, to understand in what way an untranslated, local text can be world literary – through which we think we would be able to offer a more grounded, diverse, and heterogenous understanding of world literature.

--000--

Before addressing the question regarding an untranslated literary text's claim to the appellation of world literature, let us first state that due to the fact that world literature is a critical methodology that studies the transnational and transcultural reception and afterlife of literary texts, it is directly implicated in the circulation of global capital from one part of the so-called 'world' to another. Whether this 'world' has the status of a world at the first place is yet another question. World Literature highlights the character and function of literature as global commodity. Ann Steiner for example has argued that world literature is entirely conditioned by global book market (*The Routledge Companion to World Literature* 316-324). To put it provocatively, in a sentence that makes use of what Spivak famously called 'strategic essentialism,' world literature is nothing but the literary index for the global movement of spectral capital. And what's more, it even enlivens the spectre! The biggest problem with this paradigm lies in its predominantly uncritical approach towards the geopolitics of its own proposed theory of circulation. At the least, it fails to qualify that its existence is based on a circulation which is nothing but a global service of goods in the field of cultural and intellectual capital with its inbuilt structures of selective appropriation, partial representation and political exclusion.

Though the critical framework of world literature is less of a canon and more of a method or practice of reading, the very fact that it is founded on the act of translation speaks to its complicity

with the politics of literary canonization. We need to ask here what texts get translated and what don't? What is it that dictates the translation of vernacular texts into global English? Is it about linguistic and cultural opacities or is it about the distinctions of mainstream and underground literatures? Is it not primarily about saleability? Leaving aside the aspect of loss in translation, let us first ask what makes a text worthy of translation? In a multilingual country like India, there has always been a tension between the young tradition of Indian English literary writing and various older traditions of vernacular literature. Many writers have made a conscious choice of 'writing back' in the colonial master's language whereas others have decided to write in the vernacular which is no less political a choice. This also complicates the latter writers' desire to be translated. Given the fact that English is the *lingua franca* in India, translation of vernacular Indian texts into English is on many occasions aimed at making them available to a pan-Indian audience and not a global audience as such. The yearly translations, undertaken by the Indian *Sahitya* (literature) *Academy*, target the Indian national audience, much more than the trans-national readership outside India. What is interesting here is the national enclosure of the so-called world-life of a literary text in translation. A Bengali or Malayalam novel in English translation, for example, only reaches other linguistic zones within the inherently multi-cultural Indian nation-scape. Moreover, it reaches only a certain 'class' of English-reading and English-speaking urban Indian readers and not the vernacular readers in these culturally diverse zones. How are we to think of this highly segmented space as a wide and unitary 'world'?

Coming back to the question about what gets translated and what does not, let us consider the question of marketability. Though culturally marginal, subaltern and Dalit texts are now increasingly being translated for the issues they raise and their global connect with practices of racism and discrimination, when it comes to the Indian vernacular *avant-garde* tradition of experimental literary texts, translation still seems a far cry. Major Bengali *avant-garde* novelists like Sandipan Chattopadhyay and Kamal Chakraborty have not been translated at all into English, in spite of winning major vernacular literary awards like Bankim Purashkar which generally ensures the translation of the prize winning text into English. Even writers like Bani Basu who are in between literary mainstream and *avant-garde* are scarcely translated into English. This makes us wonder whether linguistic angularity, not unrelated with the concern of saleability, is an issue here. Is it because of esoteric form and style that certain writers are rarely translated into global English? Subimal Misra is a case that might strengthen our suspicion. His early short stories, which are less experimental in terms of narrative form, have been translated into English while his series of 'anti-novels', stylistically terse and punctuated with ludic visual texts and calligraphy, are yet to see the light of English translation. But why call translation into English or any other European language, 'light' at the first place? Why at all would that be the central criterion for entry into the gamut of world literature? An untranslated Bengali novel like Sandipan Chattopadhyay's *Hiroshima My Love* (1989) not only makes an intertextual reference to Marguerite Duras's 1959 French screenplay of the same name but also has California as its setting. The text itself, in ways more than one, decides to cross Indian borders and reach out to trans-national literary traditions as well as alterities of global culture. California is not just a passive setting in the novel. If the Sierra Nevada range of the El Capitan mountain forms its nerve-centre as a landscape of mourning, the novel also gives a great deal of critical importance to the Americanised cultural practices of non-resident Indians. Without depending on the act of translation, a novel like this always already stakes its claim in the category of world literature. In a locally rooted idiom, it approaches global ideas of hybridity, i.e. the ambiguity of going through the intense affective experience of mourning in an unfamiliar foreign soil outside one's own country.

We would like to suggest a markedly different model where *ideational transit* rather than translational transport might become a more useful tool to attribute a text with qualities of world

literature. The fundamental premise of this model lies in a conviction that ideas can travel without translation. When ideas travel across national borders, the travel is still conditioned by global capitalism. But because it is not a text that travels as global commodity but an idea, it can actually have multiple iterations in polyphonic textual structures. We would argue that this idea is a more open texture of potentials than an already translated text doing the rounds. While these ideas are subject to translation, 'translation' in this instance returns to its older sense of 'transformation.' To translate is to change here without any fidelity to the original because the original is not a well-made text but a loose constellation of wandering ideas. This thesis of radical idealism undercuts the complex hegemony of translation and proposes a different paradigm where one set of ideas can *encounter* its homologous set in a different cultural and national or even ethnic context.

Language certainly remains the vehicle for these trans-national, migrating ideas but they are not merely linguistic entities. These ideas are not reducible to language and therefore not reducible to linguistic translation either. This does not mean that they do not get translated into language. Of course they do. But there are manifold subjective contexts in which writers translate these ideas into their fictional texts. While translation, with the advent of Google translator seems to have become a managerial interpreter of globalised cultural imperialism, our global traffic of encountering ideas offers a more open framework in which global circulation of ideas will not only reinforce the globality of such networks but will also retain the agency to critique those networks and their cultural logic of circulation. For example, a writer in India might acquire an idea of modernity as a socio-cultural phenomenon from their exposure to world news and global developments and then assimilate that notion in their works in a specific geo-political context. Modernity in a country like India is inseparable from colonial experience while it is not like that in England and these are crucial geo-political differences. When a British and an Indian writer channel their respective ideas of modernity, they are expected to have radically diverse textual manifestations. Irrespective of whether the Indian writer in question writes in the vernacular and remains untranslated, the text he or she produces, merits entry into a global dialogue because of the questions it raises.

We are aware of the fact that we are shifting the paradigm of world literature from reception to textual thematic here. If a text appeals to a trans-national or global issue from the local colours of its own specific context, even if it remains untranslated, we would like to believe that it should still be considered world literature. Bengali-Indian writers, Kamal Chakraborty and Nabarun Bhattacharya have produced dog-novels [*Kukur* (2003) and *Lubdhak* (2006)] in recent times, living in the city of Kolkata and while they (especially the latter) were influenced by translated texts like Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* (1925), they did not simply write an Indian corollary to a European literary text. The idea of animal rights binds the Bengali texts with Bulgakov's Russian novel or even J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* and the subsequent *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) which were strong on the question of animal rights and featured the dog as an important representative of that theme. While the local contexts in South Africa, Russia and India lend the idea with diverse possibilities of manifestation and execution, the uneven realities of the world system ensure that the visibility of the problem in the Indian city of Kolkata is altogether different. The figure of the stray dog, living in the streets is a hyper-familiar image in the so-called 'third-world' context while in a humanist American novel like Paul Auster's *Timbuktu* (1999), which deals with the homeless master's relationship with his pet dog, the ground realities are very different. One could say that the dog-revolution, Bhattacharya imagines in *Lubdhak*, is a geo-politically conditioned act, which would have been less plausible in the American novel, tackling a similar ideational content. This is how similar ideas can be subjected to very different cultural 'translations' at the hands of different writers, operating from different parts of the world. This is where a global transit of ideas can be a fruitful way of considering what text enters into a thematic and notional rubric of world literature.

This is what the editors believe. This may not be what the contributors think. The contributors have imagined and problematized the world in world literature in diverse and potential ways, ensuring the element of a creative and critical dialogue that *Sanglap* as a journal promotes and encourages.

Michael Tsang's contribution "Hong Kong as a Test Case for World Literature" thoroughly studies the methodological inclinations as well as strategies in the field of world literature by subjecting the category to a rigorous geo-political critique by raising the question about the contemporary Hong Kong literary scene and its complex language politics, the inter-layering of the global and the local and the complication of the core-periphery model. Tsang develops interesting issues of theoretical and historical importance such as Hong Kong's state of perennial coloniality or long and vague post-coloniality. He interrogates the field by unveiling the dominant ideology that sets it into motion. Josh McMahon's piece "What are You Trying to Say?: World Literature and the Frustration of Translation" raises the central yet problematic issue of translation within world literature studies. McMahon visits the dominant theories of translation and world literature, offered by Damrosch, Walkowitz, Apter and others, and finds limitations in their various culturalist, cosmopolitanist, or untranslatability theories. He also recognises, through an astute reading of Casanova and Huggan, the role that institutions play in canonizing specific English or Anglophone texts as world literature or producing an 'alterity industry' out of 'othered' local texts. These perceptions do not force him to cancel out the uses of translation in world literary studies but to speak of a theory that is capable of seeing translation as a gain in a critical-political sense. Translation, McMahon posits, is an opportunity through which texts gain new genres or cultural milieus, new reception aesthetics and political meanings. It becomes both a text moored to its 'original' contextual meaning and a text giving birth to a new meaning or set of meanings in a new context. It is through these dual elements that a text makes a critical contribution to world literary aesthetics.

Sayan Bhattacharyya's article "Words in a world of scaling-up: Epistemic normativity and text as data" is an interesting intervention, attempting to make a critical bridge between Digital Humanities and World Literature studies. Bhattacharyya argues for an analogy between the expansive scale of 'big data' analysis and world literature as a big, canonical construction of literatures around the world and develops a sophisticated critical strategy of technological discourse analysis. Here we stare at subtle geopolitical exclusions of non-European languages in the archive of big data—discriminations, not unlike the critical exclusions that pervade the Anglo-centric field of world literature. Thirthankar Chakraborty's piece "World Literature: From the Politics to a Poetics" discusses the field in its complex history and focalizes Samuel Beckett's views and letters on nationalism and translation in order to critique the centre-periphery model at work in the field. It also considers Rabindranath Tagore's notion of 'Viswa Sahitya' as a condition, endemic to all literatures, in the context of world literary studies. As Beckett's impossible intra-lingual translation of the proper name into a common noun (Mallarmé as 'mal armé' in a French letter) suggests, world literature is continually haunted by the ghost of the untranslatable. Chakraborty's article contributes to this haunting by highlighting Beckett's emphasis on the impotence of the writer, which makes us perceive world literature from a different vantage point.

Mitzi E. Martínez Guerrero's article "What Cities Enclose: A Geoliterary Approach to World Literature" makes another important methodological intervention. Guerrero, like Tsang, understands the usefulness of the term semi-periphery. But unlike Tsang who employs a world-systemic approach, Guerrero uses semi-periphery as a geoliterary space. Guerrero argues that it is in the semi-periphery that the urban retains the existing pre-imperial tradition and the European core superimpositions, giving birth to a modernity that is simultaneously one and unequal. She reads from the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* and the Portuguese author Goncalo Tavares' novel *Jerusalem* and shows how their works use urban space both in a tactile and liminal form. She

also notes how these authors use their novels to comment intra-diegetically on society, culture, and aesthetics. For her, it is through the literary representation of the semi-peripheral urban space, what she calls a geoliterary approach, that alternative and self-critical understandings of world literature can be built. In “Samuel Beckett’s ‘The Way’ and *Stirrings Still*: Analysing the Self from ‘Schopenhauerian Buddhist’ Perspective,” Pavneet Kaur attempts to understand Beckett’s influence of Schopenhauer’s Buddhist philosophy. Through a reading of Beckett’s influence of Schopenhauer, Kaur establishes the premises for European world literary studies and then interrogates such premises through an engaged reading of Buddhist philosophy and Beckett’s late prose works. Kaur argues that the self in Buddhist philosophy is always dependent and essenceless, while the veil of illusion or Maya offers it a notion of singularity which is questionable. Beckett raises these aspects prominently through the employment of inconsistent narrative structures, the use of the self as a maze and the disintegration of the body parts and voice organs. Through a close reading of Beckett’s works and a distant reading of Schopenhauer and Buddhism, which she calls a Schopenhauerian Buddhist framework, Kaur argues that a more nuanced and non-culturalist understanding of world literature is possible.

Karly Berezowsky’s essay “Transcendence through Illumination: Marginalized Identity Re-valued as Art and Literature” engages with the worldliness of art through the medium of female autobiography and agency. Berezowsky takes up the historical period of the 1980s Chile, suffering from Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship, and studies how the Chilean writer Diamela Eltit interrogates the coercive homogenization of female identity in the novel *E. Luminata* through a radical exploration of the body and sexuality of her eponymous protagonist. Critically borrowing from Susan Friedman, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and others, and acutely studying the metafictional elements within art, Berezowsky dissects the possibilities of a radical feminist autobiography. The difficulty of translating the text and the text’s wide social translatability force her to think if these textual aspects of preventing to give fuller meaning and yet trying to reach a wider audience could be a truly critical world literary condition.

### Notes

1. See Levine and Mani, eds., “What counts as World Literature”, pp. 141-306; see Routledge and Wiley-Blackwell companions cited below; consult the number of panels organised on the topic of world literature in the flagship annual literary conventions such as the MLA and the ACLA; there has been a new journal in the field, titled *Journal of World Literature*, published by Brill.
2. See the responses to Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC’s) book in *Comparative Literary Studies*, pp. 503-561.
3. Brennan, “Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory”, in *The Postcolonial and the Global*, pp.48-69; Rob Nixon, “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism” in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, pp. 233-51.

### Works Cited

- Brennan, Timothy. "Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory." In *The Postcolonial and the Global*. Eds. Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2008. 48-69. Print.
- Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton (N.J.): Princeton UP, 2003. Print.

- Damrosch, David. *World Literature in Theory*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. Print.
- D'haen, Theo, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. London: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Lazarus, Neil, "The Global Dispensation since 1945." In *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, Ed. by Neil Lazarus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- Levine, C., and B. V. Mani Eds., "What Counts as World Literature?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 74.2 (2013): 141-306. Web. 7 Sept. 2017.
- Steiner, Ann. "World literature and the book market." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2015. Print.
- Nixon, Rob. "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism." In *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Eds. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 233-51. Print.
- Damrosch, David. *How to Read World Literature*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.
- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013. Print.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. Malcolm DeBevoise. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "World Literature." In *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*. Eds. Sukanta Chaudhuri and S. K. Das. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010. 138-150. Print.

[souritster@gmail.com](mailto:souritster@gmail.com)

[arkaless@gmail.com](mailto:arkaless@gmail.com)

© Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay, 2017