World Literature & Minority Cultures: Perspectives from India

M Asaduddin
Definition

- **World literature** is sometimes used to refer to the sum total of the world’s national literatures.

- It usually refers to the **CIRCULATION** of works into the wider world beyond their country of origin.

- Often used in the past primarily for masterpieces of Western European literature.
Contemporary Scenario

• Readers today have access to an unprecedented range of works from around the world in excellent translations
• Since the mid-1990s a lively debate has grown up concerning both the aesthetic and the political values and limitations of an emphasis on global processes over national traditions.
Asymmetry

• Translation is usually done in English / French / Swedish for the benefit of the Nobel Prize Committee or other Prize Committees.

• What is not translated in English does not exist, as far as transnational circulation is concerned.
History- Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832)

• Has discussed the concept of *Weltliteratur* in several of his essays in the early decades of the nineteenth century to describe the international circulation and reception of literary works in Europe, including works of non-Western origin.

• The concept achieved wide currency after his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann published a collection of conversations with Goethe in 1835. [Goethe spoke with Eckermann about the excitement of reading Chinese novels and Persian and Serbian poetry as well as of his fascination with seeing how his own works were translated and discussed abroad, especially in France.](#)
Marx and Engels

‘National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the many national and local literatures, a world literature arises.’

(1848)
Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

• From this narrow provincialism we must free ourselves; we must strive to see the work of each other as a whole, that whole as a part of man's universal spirit in its manifestations through world literature. Now is the time to do so.
WL: Current Definition

• World literature is effectively literature that circulates globally. It is mostly in English and generally accessible only in metropolitan centers. Yet it is a category that has significant purchase in the academia, demonstrated by the fact that Norton’s Anthology of World Literature has been ranked 28 in Amazon’s list of best selling anthologies.
Theorists of WL

• In recent times, David Damrosch’s notion of “translation and circulation of literatures”, Franco Moretti's statistical methods in the humanities and Pascale Casanova's idea of a "republic of world letters," have revived debates on world literature.

• Damrosche, *How to Read WL?* 2009
• Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 2013
• Pascale Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 2005
A Fine Balance?

• Even in this scheme of things, non-Western literatures occupy positions of subservience.
• Translations are supposedly to ensure that worthy texts make it into the global canon.
• What does not circulate globally is regarded as provincial, not good enough, not “world literature”.
• Circulation through translation is not always a reliable indicator of merit.
WL: New Territories

• As world literature as a discipline moves out of the Euro-American “core” of earlier comparative literature to the Asian-African-Latin American “peripheries”, it must revisit its earlier assumptions to shape a new discourse on the subject.
India

• ‘Unity in Diversity’ has remained the nationalist aspiration from independence in 1947
• Asymmetrical growth of regions and language-literatures makes some regions and languages ‘dominant’ pushing others to margins
• Absence of a common *lingua franca*
• Ambiguous position of English because of colonial intervention
Indian Literature/s

• ‘Indian Literature is one though written in many languages.’
• Can there be ONE literature written in MANY languages?
• What are the common elements that bind literatures written in different Indian languages?
• Are the minorities represented?
Indian Literature: Myth or Reality

- What is the extent of awareness/knowledge of Indian Literatures among different linguistic communities in India?
- Do Indians know literatures of their neighboring states?
- Do writers and readers communicate with each other often enough?
- Fraught relationship of mainstream Indian literature with minority literatures, particularly Dalit literature
Who/What represents India?
Circulation is the key?

• A miniscule section of literature produced in Indian languages is translated into English and tiny fraction of that section travels outside India.

• What travels now almost seamlessly and is widely visible abroad are Indian novels in English: Contours of courses in Indian Literature, South Asian Literature in India and abroad.
Correctives to WL

• Selection of texts holds the key
• A shift from the dominant to the marginal
• Texts generally ‘unread’ (non-canonical) and voices ‘unheard’ need be accommodated
• Literary canons need be expanded to accommodate minorities of all kinds – racial, linguistic, gendered ...