

# A Review of World Literature: Theories and Models

**Sonali Ganguly**

*Research Scholar, International Institute of  
Information Technology, Bhubaneswar*

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume : 6

Issue : 3

Month : June

Year: 2018

ISSN: 2320-2645

Received:

02.04.2018

Accepted:

14.06.2018

Published:

26.06.2018

Citation:

Ganguly, S., & Das,  
L. (2018). A Review  
of World Literature:  
Theories and Models.  
Shanlax International  
Journal of English, 6(3),  
6–12.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.5281/  
zenodo.1298596](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1298596)

**Dr. Lipika Das**

*Supervisor IIIT, Bhubaneswar*

## Abstract

*This paper intends to project, a brief critical overview of the existing theories and trends in the study of world literature. It begins with the emphasis on the origin and gradual evolution of the term world literature and its journey to become a discipline in the literary studies. The paper is broadly divided into two segments. The initial part would deal with the theories generated by the experts followed by the counter-arguments, challenges, and limitations associated with world literature. I would also attempt to demonstrate the plurality in defining world literature, and the last segment of the paper would interrogate the concept of world literature through an Indian literary perspective.*

**Keywords:** World Literature, Indian Literature, Translation, world literary market, Circulation, Reception

## Introduction

World literature (W.L) as a discipline has received a significant momentum since the 19th century. The long list of intellectuals and scholars from almost every corner of the world, starting from Goethe to Damrosch, Casanova to Gayatri Spivak and Milan Kundera have not only projected their respective views to define this new discipline but also broadened the dimension of world literature. These discussions re-framed the idea of national literature and world literature. The origin of world literature can be traced back to Weimar, a small town in Germany, 1827. Goethe's proclamation "The epoch of world literature is at hand, and each of us must work to hasten its approach" (Goethe, 19) announced a new beginning in the field of comparative literature and the perspective towards the world literary texts.

This proclamation hasn't only opened the door for several interpretations, but also made the intellectuals and scholars to hasten the task of defining world literature and giving it a proper shape for better understanding. The attempt to define world literature ultimately ended with the formulation of several theories. The worldwide circulation and the reception of literary texts demanded a better understanding of the term world literature as it has left the world perplexed with the evolving avatars such as Bishwa Sahitya in Bangla Mirovania litera tu ra in Russian, Dunya edebiyati in Turkish Sekai, Bungaku in Japanese, literatura mundial in French, Shijie de wenxue in Chinese and World Literature in English.

The quest to search the answer to the question ‘what is world literature’ found the scholars in the midst of unending theories, all making an endless effort to define world literature. Is it the total of all the national literature? Or quintessential literature of the modern times? Is it the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projection of otherness (Homi Bhabha) or it is the autobiography of civilizations (Richard Moulton). Does world literature involve the circulation and reception of the literary texts beyond their boundaries of origin (Damrosch) or it refers to the global market where the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange? (Fritz Strich). Is it the interconnectivity of the entire humanity (Tagore) or merely the collection of western masterpieces (Mathew Arnold). The definition of W.L. may be one of the above or the combination of all. Whatever might be the definition, but the common feature it highlights is its vastness and a broader perspective to include the national and regional literature within its frame.

### **Origin, Evolution, and Limitations of World Literature**

Goethe and Tagore envisioned the possibility of world literature (W.L) when the concept of world literature was not flourished completely. Goethe’s (1827) view that national literature doesn’t have any meaning now doesn’t indicate the culmination of national literature rather it referred to the meaninglessness of restricting literature within a national boundary. It indicated the advent of world literature. Goethe probably had foreseen that the author’s recognition in his nation won’t matter anymore as the reception in the whole world through the literary exchange and translation would earn him and his work the deserving position in the world literature. He also predicted about the global circulation and reception of literature that “the work that appeals to the masses would enjoy limitless expansion.” In this context, another pioneer of world literature, Rabindranath Tagore considered time as the best judge. The literature that doesn’t resist the test of time (Mahakaal) would wither automatically. He advocated world literature, not as Tulnatmak Sahitya rather as Vishwa Sahitya. In the words of the bard, “Literature is not the

mere total of works composed of different hands.” He conceptualized W.L. as a master mansion without a planned structure. The master builders (authors) contribute to the continuous process of mansion building through their work where time plays the role of the testifier (Tagore, 55). After Goethe, it was Friedrich Angles, and Karl Marx (1848) gave a stunning remark about the bourgeois domination over the world market. Referring to literature, they stated, “the National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become increasingly impossible, and from the numerous national and local literature there arises a world literature. The emergence of the world market is the by-product of European colonialism which complicates the idea of world literature; implicitly indicating the extension of colonialism. The Communist Manifesto aspired to be a model of world literature and in this process got translated into six languages such as English, French, Germany, Italian, Flemish, and Dutch. The concept of the world literary network was also emphasized by Fritz Strich in his attempt to define world literature. He stated, “World Literature is a network having fundamental economic character serving to promote traffic in ideas between people, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange.” Hugo Mltzl, (1877) one of the theorists of world literature perceived W.L. as an ‘unattainable ideal.’ He questioned the misunderstanding of the concept of world literature by the world and condemned the childlike demand of the nations for their world literature. He asserted that this conception of every nation to insist on monoglottism and the desire to prove the supremacy of their language would ultimately end up with futile attempts. He insisted upon the adherence to the two principals, i.e., translation and polyglottism (Meltzl 39). His journal ‘Acta,’ the first journal of comparative literature considers ten working languages such as German, Spanish, French, English, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Icelandic and Hungarian. He believed that comparison is possible only in the availability of the object in the original form. The non-western languages didn’t receive a place in his principle of polyglottism to which he stated, “its possibility is only when the Asian literature will finally accept our alphabet.” The mutual acceptance and tolerance for

each other can only enrich world literature was the opinion of Goethe. We find, one section of the world remained alienated and struggled to cope up with the European languages in the race of acquiring world literary space. How can the concept of world literature be justified until there is a unification of literature from across the world irrespective of language and culture? The Chinese scholar, Zheng Zhenduo (1922), also emphasized the need for the global unity of literature in spite of differences between literature arising from the locality, nationality, period, and style to make it world literature. The partial attainment of world literature is reflected in the work of Pascale Casanova (2005) as she pointed out that the literary pieces get access to international reception through a wide network controlled by Western Europe (France, Great Britain, USA). She emphasized the need to modify the instruments to measure, analyze, understand and compare text. World literature is not the total of the world's literary production rather a world-system within which literature is produced and circulated (Alexander Beecroft, 2008).

It was Franco Moretti, the Stanford world literature expert, who perceived world literature to be a unified but unequal system, which contradicts the equal Weltliteratur that Goethe wished for and Marx prophesied. He, further, considered world literature as a problem that demands a new critical method, a new hypothesis. He generated the scientific approach of studying World literature, i.e., to perceive it as a problem that demands a new critical method, a new hypothesis where Distant reading can serve as a tool to survey the world literary system. Moretti (2003).

Later, the term 'world literature' received a clear picture in the work of one of the leading proponents of world literature, David Damrosch. In his book, *What is World Literature*, he has attempted to give clarity to the concept of W.L. "All literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin either in translation or the original language." In this aspect, we see the Nobel Prize-winning literary pieces that receive proper circulation. The Nobel Prize becomes instrumental in providing the world stature to the literary text which gets translated rapidly. He was not even blind towards the fact that many quality literary works don't get translated and are deprived of getting circulated across borders. There are

instances of writers such as Sandipan Chattopadhyaya and Kamal Chakraborty, who even after receiving the vernacular literary award such as Bankim Puraskar doesn't get the sanction of the English translation. He believed that the world literature is still not completely global. It has remained confined to a specific small canon. It raises the question that how can world literature justify the term 'world' when it includes only the western production of literary texts. The word 'world' in the term 'world literature' has lost its essence under the subjugation of the elite forces as perfectly identified by Martin Puchner. He considered the cosmopolitan center as a magnet that attracts everything and the world in the process of moving towards it get filtered through the hegemonic culture. The world cannot remain confined to a region or a continent as a dominant force in evaluating the truth to give them entry into the world forum.

Every nation attempts to visualize and comprehend world literature in their way complicating the issue, raising the question of their space in the world forum. As Bharati Tiwari questioned- "what literature from India would enter the tradition of W.L.?" the question that demands attention is how does India perceive world Literature? What criteria do the Indian Literary texts follow to enter the world forum? Damrosch answered to this puzzle in his book 'What is world literature' that every literary work enters to the world literature by traveling abroad through translation. He further stated that as criteria to enter into the world forum, the literary works can either be a classic, masterpiece or window on the world. The selection of the literary texts for the anthology of world literature is made on this basis.

Wang Ning, a prominent Chinese anthologist, and translator in one of his interviews in Shanghai spoke about the important criteria for considering a literary work as world literature. First, the literary text must have traveled beyond the boundary of nations, countries, and languages and must have gone through translation. *1001 Nights* can be the best example which has been translated into several languages and has been read almost worldwide, especially the stories such as – *Ali Baba*, *Aladdin*, *Adventures of Sindbad*, and *The Thief of Bagdad*. Authors such as Orhan Pamuk can also be one who

qualifies this criterion having been translated into 50 world languages. The second criterion is linked with the anthologization of the world literary texts. It must be included in some anthology as people turn to the anthologies as the trusted collection of world literature. Anthologizing world literary texts are an attempt to place the deserving texts in the world forum, unveiling the existing classics which didn't receive attention for long and were almost left forlorn. Damrosch is instrumental in taking this initiative where the books are chosen across the globe consisting different cultures. Anthologizing the masterpieces such as 'The Tale of Genji', and 'The epic of Gilgamesh' as the modern masterpieces of World literature has not only exposed the world to the oldest masterpieces, but also projected the power of literature to capture complex emotions, reshape the history of the civilization. 1001 Nights proved to be the most circulated literary pieces, but hardly received any literary value in its place of origin.

The World's Classics anthology and the Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century supported the existing Eurocentric perspective in dealing with the world literature. The Encyclopedia contains 131 nationalities and cultural groups, 9 entries are Scottish and 138 are English. China, the most populous country on earth and being one of its oldest cultures, holds 28 entries. India, the second most populated one has 32 entries.

This stands in contrast to Sweden's 37. Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation, has 4 whereas the USA is represented with 261 listings. Norton Anthology of World Literature, Anthology of the Masterpieces of World literature and Longman Anthology of World literature are some of the notable attempts to place the literature of the world in the world forum. Thirdly, expansion of the reachability of the literary works among ordinary readers would make it the inheritance of different generations of writers. The literary works which have remained unnoticed, so far need to be referred to the university curriculum or by the academicians to increase their appreciation by the educated masses. The expansion of the reader's horizon would expose them to the different literature across the world.

The world literature experts such as David Damrosch, Martin Pucher, Wang Ning are involved

in anthologizing the world literary pieces so that the long-marginalized literature across the world could be given their deserving position. Damrosch stated in one of his interviews they have attempted to overcome the Eurocentric perspective while choosing the texts from the literature across the world for the anthology of world literature. The horizon has been extended from the Indian Epics to The Tale of Genji, The Epic of Gilgamesh and Don Quixote. Every nation demands its recognition in the world literary market, resulting in the occasional clash between the regional, national and world literature.

The restricted scope of world literature is exhibited by Damrosch in his work when it comes to the reception of the world texts. In the words of Damrosch "Reception of a text depends on American interests and needs than with a genuine openness to other culture." The literary pieces get access to the international reception through a wide network controlled by France, Britain and United States. The reception is also dependent upon a wide circulation of the texts through translation and the rate of readership it earns.

### **Translation in World Literature**

Translation receives a prominent role in the circulation of world literary texts. It serves to assemble a fragmentary world. Susan Bassnett has a remarkable contribution in the field of translation studies. She focused on the essential role of a translator in establishing a link between the author and new target readers. She further stated that, translation connects the languages and ways of life. In her book, Translation Studies, she referred to translation as a means of encouraging the readers to return to the original Source text. Several emerging issues of translations are also addressed by Lefevre and Bassnett in their books The Translator's Invisibility and Translators as Writers respectively. Their discussions highlighted the role of a translator in maintaining transparency in the translation to such an extent that it seems less like a translation. Arguments are also raised in the favor of the translators being the creative writers. Emily Apter in her work 'Against World Literature' advocated the concept of 'Untranslatability'. Harrison and Spivak too spoke in the same tone. Harrison in his work

‘World Literature: what gets lost in translation?’ emphasized on the need for reading the literary texts in their original language to find out what exactly is lost in translations. He also emphasized on language learning without which the study of World Literature remains incomplete. Gayatri Spivak (2003) too assumed that the threat of monolingualism invading comparative literature would result in the English language textbooks becoming pervasive globally. Martin Puchner in his recent paper “Goethe, Marx and Ibsen” addressed to issues raised by Apter and stated that the impossibility of a perfect translation is used to draw the conclusion that good translation is not only imperfect but also impossible. Experts such as Sujeet Mukherjee, Sandipan Bhattaharya, Arka Chattopadhyaya in their work “Why World Literature” questioned the standing of Indian Literature in the world forum. The concern is about the marginalized literature and the languages as well in the name of Globalization. The study of globalization in relation to world literature focuses on several directions.

Globalization has changed the approaches to studying literature as it has made the production, circulation, and reception easier than ever. The development of print culture has seen the massive publication of books keeping in mind the reader’s interest and habit. The commercial attitude of the publishing houses has resulted in the emergence of popular literature pushing the aesthetic part aside. The availability of the thriller and detective books shifted the reader’s attention from Dickens’ and Austen to a new growing trend. Similarly, the translation of the classics in the English language in one way or the other confines world literature in a provincial language that has today received the stature of Lingua Franca as a result of Globalization. It’s the circulation and reception that earn recognition for a literary piece of writing. A majority of the work gets translated into the globally dominating language, English for better circulation. The increasing dominance of English as a global language contributes to neocolonialism (Beckett, 2007). Danilo Pasi in his article ‘The English Language and the Globalization’ discussed the importance of English as a tool for international communication and the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and cultures. The roots of English gradually

expanded and dominated every sphere of life, such as politics, Economy, business, travel, international relations, education, banking, and communication. The inescapable domination of English has also been discussed by Yukio Tsuda in his work. He perceived that the world had taken the domination of English for granted to such an extent that the attention never shifted to its negative impact. He pointed out the anxiety and insecurity of the other languages those have been pushed to the periphery as the center is preoccupied with English and the control of the mind of the global population by the speakers of English. The users of the English language can be natives, the foreign language users, and the second language users. The power game involved in the hegemony of English was observed by Jiao Xue & Wenjing Zuo.

### **Indian World Literature**

All the projected models of world literature so far are western in origin; may it be the model of Polyglottism by Hugo or the world literary system by Alexander Beecroft, distant reading by Moretti, world literary space by Casanova, or Damrosch’s model based on the circulation and reception of texts. Their cases and study are based on the western texts. In this context, the questions that demand attention is that, how can the literature generated in the west become the world literature for the entire world? Would these models suggested by the western theorists be applicable in the Indian context? India is a mini world within itself embodies multilingualism and multiculturalism. The literature produced does never remain confined within a single linguistic or cultural domain. Does this indicate the necessity of redefining world literature from an Indian perspective?

The western models were applied to study the Indian literature. In the 20th century the world literature was considered as a framework for the national production. The attempt to look beyond the Eurocentric approach, made the Indian intellectuals put forward several models for a better study. The universal model of world literature was pioneered by Rabindranath Tagore. He identified the role of every author in the making of world literature. He perceived world literature to be under consideration and the authors of all regions, time and space to be

the participants in the process of making of the world literature. According to Tagore, Interconnectivity of the entire humanity is the subject of world literature. This abstract idea of world literature as Viswasahitya served as the base on which several other theorists built their conceptions. Sri Aurobindo's hierarchical model is based on a static concept of class and levels. He focused on a critical standard to create an assembly of the poets of the worlds based on 4 criteria such as imaginative originality, Expressive power, Creative genius and scope of Subject matter.

He included selected 11 poets as world poets and placed them in a hierarchical order. This model limits to a single genre, i.e., poetry and is silent about the other genres. Hazari Prasad Diwedi used the term "Manushyata," which is partially similar to Tagore's concept of "Viswamanava" and claimed that the literature should elevate mankind from the rust to a dignified position. The Indian perspective questioned the ultimate objective of world literature. The test of literature is with whom and what does it stand? Shamsa Bahadur Singh focused on the establishment of peace, which, he believed, should be the ultimate accomplishment of literature. In this sense, the literature that propagates world peace can be better termed as world literature. The huge gap between western and Indian perspective towards world literature was ascertained by the experts. The American comparatist H.H. Remak professed that, "with so many heritages inside the political structure of the nation, Indian Comparative Literature is strongly oriented towards Indian cultures and methodology appropriate to their situations."

The concept of Indian world literature received clarity in the works of Harish Trivdi, who claimed that India has several models of writing a literary history of India but no specific model of world literature. The Weber-Winternitz Sanskritic model of writing Indian literary history can be better termed as the history of Indian literature in Sanskrit because the preference of the texts is based on those are written in Sanskrit. I admit the rich ancient Indian literature written in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit language draws the western attention, but it doesn't denote that the essence of Indian literature vanishes in other languages. The assumption of the modern Indian literature to be wretched and negligible is a biased,

Eurocentric and partial judgment of Indian literature. Prof. Shiv Prakash, Eminent poet and playwright recently expressed his concern in an interview:

"The hegemony of the English language is a threat to the development of Indian literature."

He grieved over the fact that Indian literature faces loss in the hands of the 'Indian-foreign Scholars.' The way to elevate Indian literature is to study it from a non-Euro-centric perspective. Harish Trivedi in his article "Comparative literature, world literature, and Indian literature" addressed the issue and warned not to be indifferent towards this issue while writing the history of world literature.

There emerges a need to maintain the balance between all the literature of all the languages and all periods. He stated in clear words that in world literature no language such as English should receive more space for over-representation than the other languages, however dominant it might be. The visible monopoly of the English language is the cultural and linguistic hegemony in the world literary forum is referred as 'Linguistic Imperialism' by Alastair Pennycook (1995), and Robert Phillipson went to the extent of condemning the English language for replacing and displacing other languages.

## Conclusion

World Literature is not the clash between the colonial and colonized literature demanding their literary space. The former tries to prove its supremacy over the other, whereas the later attempts to claim its independent identity in the world forum. World literature may provide knowledge but, if it doesn't contribute to the world peace and nourishment of human values, doesn't make it worthy of existence in the world forum. We need to visualize literature through a non-Eurocentric perspective and not only in English, but in several languages to get the real essence of world literature.

## References

- Beecroft, Alexander. (2014). "World Literature without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems", World Literature in Theory. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 180-192. Print.
- Bhattacharya, Sourit, Chattopadhyaya Arka. (2017). "Why World Literature: Introductory Dialogues." *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 1(1).

- Casanova, Pascale. (2004). *The World Republic of the Letter*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: England.
- Casanova, Pascale. (2014). *Literature as a World. World Literature in Theory*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 192-208. Print.
- Damrosch, David. (2003). *What is World Literature?* Princeton University Press.
- Damrosch, David. (2014). *World Literature in Theory*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Guo, Yan., & Beckett Gulbahar, H. (2007). "The Hegemony of English as a Global Language: Reclaiming Local Knowledge and Culture in China", *Convergence*, XL(1).
- Meltzl, Hugo. (2014). "Present tasks of Comparative literature", *World Literature in Theory*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 35-42, Print.
- Moretti, Franco. (2014). "Conjectures of World Literature", *World Literature in Theory*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 159-180, Print.
- Pizer, John. (2014). *The Emergence of Weltliteratur: Goethe and the Romantic School*. *World Literature in Theory*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 22-34, Print.
- Puchner, Martin. (2013). "Goethe, Marx, Ibsen and the Creation of World Literature", *Ibsen Studies*, 00(0).
- Tagore, Rabindranath. (2014). *World literature*. *World Literature in Theory*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 47-58. Print.
- Tiwari, Bharti. (2012). "Tagore's Comparative World Literature", *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, Routledge.
- Trivedi, Harish. (2013). "Comparative Literature, World Literature and Indian Literature", *Interdisciplinary Aler-natives in Comparative Literature*, Sage Publications, 17-33, Print.
- [www.icosilune.com/2008/10/susan-bassnett-translation-studies](http://www.icosilune.com/2008/10/susan-bassnett-translation-studies)
- Xue, Jiao., & Wenjing, Zuo. (2013). "English Dominance and Its Influence on International Communication", *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(12), 2262-2266.
- Zhenduo. Zheng. (2014). "A View on the Unification of Literature", *World Literature in Theory*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 58-67, Print.
- "What is World Literature? David Damrosch in Conversation with Wang Ning", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, ISSN: 0004-1327 42(1) 171–190, 2011.