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**Citation:** Saribaş, S. (2020). World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World. *Premium e-Journal of Social Sciences (PEJOSS)*, 4(8), 314-320.

## WORLD LITERATURE TODAY: FROM THE OLD WORLD TO THE WHOLE WORLD

### ABSTRACT

Although masterpieces of Western literature have long been considered the cornerstone of World Literature, this stance has started to be questioned with a brand-new global perspective. The problems with today's perception of *Weltliteratur*, as well as these of the past, still need clarification at some points. Even though it is unlikely to draw a precise picture of what "World Literature" is or define "the literature" of "the world," this paper will provide an overview of world literature from the old world to the new with the help of distinctive approaches to definitions of world literature.

**Keywords:** Literary History, Comparative Literature, Global Translation, The World Republic of Letters World, Literary Space

## GÜNÜMÜZDE DÜNYA EDEBİYATI: ESKİ DÜNYADAN TÜM DÜNYAYA

### ÖZET

Batı edebiyatının başarıları uzun zamandır Dünya Edebiyatının mihenk taşı olarak görülse de bu yaklaşım yepyeni küresel bir bakış açısıyla sorgulanmaya başlanmıştır. Günümüz ve aynı zamanda geçmişin *Weltliteratur* algısıyla ilgili sorunların, hâlâ bazı noktalarda açıklığa kavuşturulması gerekmektedir. "Dünya Edebiyatının" kusursuz bir resmini çizmek ya da "bütün dünyanın" "edebiyatını" tanımlamak pek mümkün olmasa da bu makale dünya edebiyatının tanımlarına getirilen özgün yaklaşımların yardımıyla eski dünyadan yeni dünyaya dünya edebiyatına genel bir değerlendirme ortaya koyacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Edebiyat Tarihi, Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat, Küresel Çeviri, Dünya Edebiyat Cumhuriyeti, Dünya Edebi Alanı

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Until recently, "Western Literature" was accepted as the starting point of world literature; however, with the tremendous expansion of literary space and time, *Weltliteratur* now involves everything from the very first Sumerian poems to Chinese novels as well as contemporary African local tales. According to the prominent German writer Goethe, literary works from different cultures that have been produced for thousands of years are excellent and admirable pieces, along with European literary works. Goethe implies that if he had any idea of other cultures in literature, he would not even utter a single word in the name of *Weltliteratur* because Germany did not have a rich culture during his own youth. Therefore, he was able to extend his vision to other cultures and develop the concept of *Weltliteratur* by gaining knowledge of other cultures. In a speech to his student Eckermann in 1827, Goethe notes that "Nowadays, national literature doesn't mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hastening its advent" (Moretti,2000:54). In his essay "The World Republic of Letters," Christopher Prendergast states the importance of Goethe's interest in creating *Weltliteratur*:

*"Although Goethe's aspiration is towards a transcendence of the 'national' ('national literature has not much meaning nowadays'), the parties to the imagined conversation are essentially national literature (world literature concerns 'the relationship of nation to nation'). Secondly, there are the*

*limiting implications of the central even privileged, place assigned by Goethe to Europe in his account. While it would be absurd to accuse Goethe of a kind of blind Eurocentrism (given the extraordinary sensitivity with which he entered into the spirit of Persian and Chinese literature), in several of the fragments there is what appears to be a virtual identification of world literature with European literature ('a European, in fact, a universal world literature,' 'European, in other words, World Literature'). But, for all its limits, Goethe's example matters a great deal. If we start here, it is at once to acknowledge those limits and then to take from him what is useful for our own times"* (Prendergast,2004: 3).

Even Goethe praises other literature; however, he puts Western Literature in a central place and perceives that other literature can only be measured against the masterworks in Western Literature. Marx and Engel pursued the idea of world literature in 1848 with the declaration of the *Communist Manifesto*: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the many national and local literature, a world literature arises" (Moretti,2000:54). Alongside Goethe's world literature progression and Marx and Engel's support for the idea of global literature "from the many national and local literature" in 1848, Frances Ferguson emphasizes in his essay "Planetary Literary History: The Place of the Text" that "ever-growing awareness of planetary interconnections in political, economic, and ethical life has lent urgency to the project of thinking in terms of a planetary system of literature" (Ferguson, 2008:657).

## **2. DISTINCT PERSPECTIVES OF WORLD LITERATURE**

There are different approaches to the meaning and content of world literature. While Goethe and Damrosch at one point agree that Western Literature is not unique, superior nor representative of world literature, Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti believe that it is not possible to focus on everything in the whole world. Thus, Moretti simply explains world literature and comparative literature in the following manner: "Comparative literature has not lived up to these beginnings. It's been a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature). Not much more." (Moretti,2000:54).

In her book *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova argues that the Hierarchical Structure is an order that directs the literary world. That is to say:

*"Literary history is incarnated in the structure of the world letters which supplies its motive force; that the events of the literary world take on meaning through the structure that produces them and gives them form and, in so doing, makes Literature at once stake, resource, and belief"* (Casanova, 2007:82).

Since the sixteenth century, Europe has shaped the literary world because when one measures oneself, the old influences the other (young one). As Henry James states, "It takes a great deal of history to produce a little bit of literature" (Casanova,1999:83). The tension between the old and new-or dominant and dominated literature-was the emerging point of the great literary revolution. In the nineteenth century, nations dominated by literature-but not politically dominated-started to claim that "they had accumulated sufficient assets of their own" (Casanova,1999: 84) and could produce national literature which would upset the hierarchies. As a result of this, in a great literary destitute (1890-1930), there occurred great literary revolutions.

Casanova also identifies literature as a distinct world from politics, which means it is against the nation and nationalism. Yet, literature never denies the nation completely either. Instead, it uses literary instruments to constitute an independent way. Even though literature is not completely free from political domination, it has its own ways and means of asserting a measure of independence, including aesthetic, formal, narrative, and poetic strategies. Casanova remarks that the literary space in France was the freest in relation to political and national institutions. Thus, French Literature was adopted as a universal one by all nations (Casanova,2007:87). In fact, she claims the idea of modernity stems from Paris. She says that there is an exact measurement in Paris about modernity in language, literature, and fashion. She adds that to shape or have a rich literary history, a nation must be an old one. Otherwise, it is counted as an intruder:

*"The mode of what Moretti calls "sociological formalism" and of what they both see as "systematic" analysis, with Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Pierre Bourdieu as models. And one*

*major effect of their reliance on a systematic approach is that they shift their relation to their materials and deliver themselves of insights that have all the impersonality of what Moretti calls "distant reading" (and this in spite of the distinctiveness of their authorial reports on the impersonal data). Casanova writes as a sociologist of literature rather" (Ferguson, 2008:664).*

Thus, it might be said that there should be a starting point or a measurement to decide what is or is not world literature. Franco Moretti, too, supports the idea that one should use other sources to widen his or her work. He names this concept "distant reading," meaning that in order to enrich the primary/original source, the author should benefit from outside sources also. This is called "synthesis" by Moretti. Ferguson paraphrases Moretti's approach to world literature:

*"To register the enormity of this task for the readers who would be its foot soldiers, Moretti observes, 'we are talking of hundreds of languages and literature here. Reading 'more' seems hardly to be the solution. Especially because we've just started rediscovering what Margaret Cohen calls the 'great unread'" (Ferguson,2008:657).*

Emily Apter also interprets Goethe's ideal and Moretti's view in her essay "Global Translation": The 'Invention' of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933; She notes that:

*"Goethe's ideal of Weltliteratur, associated with a commitment to expansive cultural secularism, became a disciplinary premise that has endured, resonating today in, say, Franco Moretti's essay 'Conjectures on World Literature,' in which he argues that anti-nationalism is really the only raison d'être for risky forays into 'distant reading'" (Apter,2004:77).*

Therefore, one could claim that anyone who is capable of studying comparative literature would understand Moretti's concern about nationalism in literature. Moretti claims that it is not possible to read and understand everything in literature. He even feels himself to be an ignorant outside of his British and French studies:

*"The literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system. The question is not really what we should do-the question is how. What does it mean, studying world literature? How do we do it? I work on the West European narrative between 1790 and 1930, and already feel like a charlatan outside of Britain and France" (Apter,2004:77-8).*

Moretti also has questions similar to those posed by Goethe, Damrosch, and Casanova. However, the questions are too abstract and large to be answered. Moretti also asserts that world literature is connected to comparative literature which is "a permanent intellectual challenge to national literature especially the local literature" (Apter,2004:77).

### **3. WHAT IS WORLD LITERATURE?**

These questions actually play a prominent role in qualifying the concept of World Literature. In his book *What is World Literature?* David Damrosch points out that *Weltliteratur* is not a canon that opens up from West to the World. In his essay "World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World," Damrosch explicitly notes that "no shift in literary studies over the past generation has been greater than the opening up of the canon from a focus on a relatively restricted core of masterpieces to the expansive multicultural landscape so evident today" (Damrosch, 2000:7). And Damrosch asks:

*"What classic texts will have to be dropped in order to make room for the new arrivals within the physical and temporal boundaries of courses and anthologies? What cultural context needs to be provided--and what cultural context can feasibly be provided--for non-specialists to have meaningful encounters with African orature, Japanese renga, and Mozarabic kharjas? How are all these works to be read alongside Petrarch and Wallace Stevens, always assuming that both of these latter authors still remain on the syllabus?" (Damrosch, 2000:7).*

To these questions, the answer is both simple and complex: translation. Thus, it can be said that from Damrosch's perspective, World Literature is something that gains value with good translations. With the correct presentation, these works can occupy a place between the source and target cultures. New discoveries

may attain a place in this canon as much and often as commonly accepted classics. Damrosch explains *Weltliteratur* according to the ease of access rather than aesthetic qualities. He asserts two main points regarding the accessibility of the literary work: translatability and method of interpretation, which is called “hermeneutic openness” by a French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. John M. Kopper, in his essays “How to Read World Literature, and: Teaching World Literature, and: The Longman Anthology of World Literature”, analyzes Damrosch’s approach and explains that:

*“Through repeated circular exchanges, the ‘elliptical refraction’ of national traditions contribute to increased knowledge of both the writer’s and one’s own culture. ‘World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement’ (Kopper, 2010:281). (...) Indeed, the first two criteria do produce a canon of sorts—at least a grand, if shifting, the division between texts that remain readable outside their own cultures and others that don’t—but Damrosch’s implied point is that some texts acquire value through their estrangement from our world. His language suggests some form of transnational, salutary cultural shock: a moment of defamiliarization that forces readers to reenter their own world through another door. Damrosch considers world literature to consist of texts appealing enough to our knowledge to draw us into their own textual modes of expression yet that at the same time remain transcendently resistant. In cruder terms, this idea seems to reduce the commonplace that great literature is worth reading more than once. In an age when academic learning usually embodies Paul Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutics of discovery,’ Damrosch’s approach is closer to Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutics of revelation’ (Kopper,2010:403).*

Damrosch also categories world literature as two issues in order to understand what it actually includes: temporality and its field. While Damrosch emphasizes the multicultural features of the concept and the importance of good translation, he also explains its multi-temporal side because—as Damrosch points out in his book *What is World Literature?* — World Literature cannot be limited to only contemporary literature or the recent present. On the one hand, it is possible that a problem may occur if the former pieces are left out of the frame. On the other hand, trying to study such an extended period of time is likely to complicate the situation. Thus, it can be concluded that the time frame will cause the *presentism* issue which results in ephemeral works. At this point, Pascale Casanova in her book *The World Republic of Letters* corroborates the idea of rooted history.

Secondly, the field of the works and the question of where world literature should be based arise. Goethe believes in classics and some specific areas like Europe. He thinks that world literature is actually Western literature, even though his remarks to Eckermann about Chinese literature seem to counter this: “The Chinese have thousands of such novels, and had them while our ancestors were still living in the forests” (Damrosch,2003:12). He is not multiculturalist and cannot get rid of the idea that Western Europe is the privileged literary area, especially Greece and Rome. Pascale Casanova, in her essay “World Literary Space”, takes Paris as the central place of literature and modernity. She perceives Paris as the core point of modernity and literature and considers anything else an intruder. Damrosch differs from her in his views on world literature by repeatedly emphasizing the value of translation and the merging of different works of literature by supporting Goethe’s point of view. Goethe and Casanova share the belief in the superiority of western literature.

Damrosch also concentrates on the issue of local manifestations. To him, it does not matter how much of a global perspective a work has, it is still *from somewhere*. He gives the example of Eckermann’s book about Goethe. He perceives the book as “an interesting example of a work that only achieves an effective presence in its country of origin after it has already entered world literature” (Damrosch,2003:32). It was not a surprise for Goethe, as well, that the book opened a window to other literature and then came back to its own stage with a revival at home. However, Damrosch, in his essay “World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World,” also emphasizes the problems that translation may cause. People like Senator Henry Cabot Lodge attained the view that no translation can replace the original text and give the same sense as its original language. Lodge says that:



*“The most important part of the collection is that which gives selections from those writers whose native tongue is English. No translation even of prose can ever quite reproduce its original, and as a rule, cannot hope to equal it . . . it may safely be noted that the soul of a language and the beauties of style which it is capable of exhibiting can only be found and studied in the productions of writers who not only think in the language in which they write, but to whom that speech is native, the inalienable birthright and heritage of their race or country” (Damrosch, 2000:8-9).*

Lodge believes that the literary work should not be translated to other languages because it risks the loss of meaning. Damrosch says that the translator ought to be aware of cultural differences while translating. And, in order to highlight the importance of a good translation, in his book *What is World Literature?* Damrosch quotes Lawrence Venuti’s statement that most of the translations “Spread American culture abroad than to bring the world home to America” (Damrosch, 2003:113).

In his essay “Conjectures on World Literature,” Franco Moretti points out the goal of studying every literature for a day of synthesis. He explains:

*“Writing about comparative social history, Marc Bloch once coined a lovely ‘slogan’, as he himself called it: ‘years of analysis for a day of synthesis’ and if you read Braudel or Wallerstein you immediately see what Bloch had in mind. The text which is strictly Wallerstein’s, his ‘day of synthesis’, occupies one third of a page, one fourth, maybe half; the rest are quotations (fourteen hundred, in the first volume of *The Modern World-System*). Years of analysis; other people’s analysis, which Wallerstein’s page synthesizes into a system.”*

*“(…) Now, if we take this model seriously, the study of world literature will somehow have to reproduce this ‘page’—which is to say: this relationship between analysis and synthesis—for the literary field. But in that case, literary history will quickly become very different from what it is now: it will become ‘second hand’: a patchwork of other people’s research, without a single direct textual reading. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional to the distance from the text: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be” (Moretti,2000: 57).*

Franco Moretti, in contrast to Goethe and Marx, does not fully support the idea of *Weltliteratur* which obliges the reader to wander around looking for extra limitless sources from history and genres. He basically defends the idea of sticking to one global form like the novel (or film) and delimiting the large scale of literary works. He believes it is impossible to create the concept of world literature through a collection of masterpieces of different nations. He asserts that “world literature is not an object, it’s a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That’s not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager—a hypothesis, to get started” (Moretti,2000:55). He claims literature should be categorized in order to be more digestible. Thus, Moretti borrows from the idea of economic history. Both Moretti and Casanova emphasize the inequalities of the global literary field, which Moretti describes as “one, but *unequal*.” He considers literature to have an interior and outer edge—or maybe a half-edge—that are tied up together in a relationship of growing inequality: “*One, and unequal*: one literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literature); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it’s profoundly unequal” (Moretti,2010:56).

#### **4. NATIONALISM IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

Anyone who is capable of studying comparative literature would understand Moretti’s concern about nationalism in literature. Even Moretti claims that it is not possible to read and understand everything in literature, he feels like an ignorant person out of his British and French studies. If you cannot synthesize whatever you read by comparing it to another literature (comparative literature concept), it means it is nothing. While he talks about the relationship between analysis and synthesis, he also concludes that distant reading and analysis and synthesis will make the work second hand. So, as time goes on, and the work gets analyzed and compared by other works, it will become something entirely different from its original.

Richard G. Moulton, who is one of the pioneers and founders of comparative literature, “describes world literature as ‘the autobiography of civilization’” (Prendergast,2004:3). Even if this description of world literature, at first, sounds attractive and correct, it is problematic in today’s world. In the contemporary age, instead of direct historical and subjective background information, “we are more likely to want to break up and diversify this story and its subject according to the plurality of human cultures” (Prendergast,2004:3). Therefore, it is not clear how to adapt world history to world literature. “In the perspectives of world history, one might be tempted to classify the ‘literature’ of the world into three broad kinds: folk literature (That is, orally transmitted unwritten literature), traditional literature and modern cosmopolitan literature” (Prendergast,2004:6). However, world literature does not completely have to deal with all of these. In her essay “Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature,” Rebecca L Walkowitz defends the idea that there should be a collaborative effort to determine the works of world literature. She asserts that:

*“World literature may require a special kind of collaboration, both for study so that scholars can see how a text circulates in many languages and for production so that writers can produce books in many languages, but all scholarship involves some kind of collaboration, since, as Damrosch reminds us, ‘texts come to us mediated by existing frameworks of reception and interpretation’ (Walkowitz,2007:295). “(...) And all literature, too, involves some kind of collaboration, in more visible (editing, publishing, printing, distributing) and less visible (building on previous representations, uses of language) ways” (Walkowitz,2007: 221).*

Walkowitz here supports the idea of the translation paradox which is suggested by Apter and Damrosch. In her essay “The Translation Zone” (2005), Apter gives a list of ‘Twenty Theses on Translation,’ starting with “Nothing is translatable” and concluding, after nineteen statements, with “Everything is translatable” (Walkowitz 2007:221).

## 5. CONCLUSION

As a matter of fact, in his essay “Frames for World Literature” Damrosch elucidates and summarizes the very recent understanding of World Literature. He believes that with the explosion in the translation of older classics, additional literary works have been accepted and read as world literature. Thus, the earliest classics and masterworks have split away from each other. With the effect of the postcolonial and postindustrial era on the literary, Damrosch points out that there is a new system which has three levels: “a hypercanon, a counter-canon, and a shadow canon” (Damrosch, 2003:511). To put it simply:

*The hypercanon is populated by the older ›major‹ authors who have held their own or even gained ground over the past twenty years. The counter-canon is composed of the subaltern and contestatory voices of writers in less-commonly-taught languages and in minor literature within great-power languages. (...) Additionally, in postcolonial studies as in British Romanticism, there is a shadow canon of figures everyone ›knows‹ (most often just through one or two brief anthology pieces) but who are rarely discussed in print (Damrosch, 2003:511-2).*

Damrosch gives the examples of Kafka to Kleist, Wordsworth and Byron to William Hazlitt and Robert Southey and so on. Beyond all these theoretical explanations, in reality, world literature functions based on individual bases. That means “world literature is what an individual reader experiences in reading works written outside the reader’s own home tradition” (Damrosch, 2003:513). Every mind that reads the same thing is another new world and another shaper of literary work because everyone’s perception differs according to cultures. Thus, there is no ultimate definition or explanation of what world literature is and what it may turn into in the future.

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