

An Overview of the World Literature: Theories and Models

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Abstract

This paper is an extensive review of the origin and evolution of world literature. It begins with the discussion on the evolving theories and the counter arguments on world literature followed by a brief critical overview of the existing theories and trends in the study of world literature. Based on the above discussions, an attempt has been made to understand the two fundamental concepts. First, the entire process of production, publication, circulation, and reception of literary works in the world literary market, and second, the standing of Indian literature in the world forum. The paper is divided into two major segments. The initial section reviews and discusses the existing theories of world literature and sheds light on the technicalities associated with getting placed in world

literature. The consequent segment of the paper highlights the challenges associated with world literature.

Keywords

World literature, Globalization, Production, Reception, Circulation, Translation

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, where we can find Goethe's prolonged discussions with Eckermann on the reception of numerous literary works of several cultures and languages. He appreciated the reception of the literary work moving beyond linguistically and politically drawn cultural borders through increased translation activities. The idea of world literature was generated from his inclination towards reading literature across the world such as Chinese, Persian, Arabic, Siberian, Sanskrit, including German and many more either in translation or in the original language. His over quoted statement- "the epoch of World

literature is at hand and each of us must work to hasten its approach”(Goethe, 19) serves as the base on which the entire structure of world literature rests upon. This proclamation has not 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.

Even though Goethe was the pioneer of W.L. and his proclamation on world literature is taken as a foundation stone by the later theorists to formulate theories on world literature; he didn't attempt to define the term in his discussions with Eckermann. Every theory ultimately moves around the question stated by Damrosch 'what is world literature'? 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 *Vishwa Sahitya* in Bangla, *Mirovania litera tu ra* in Russian, *Dunya edebiyati* in Turkish, *Sekai, Bungaku* in Japanese, *litteratura 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 ever-evolving theories, all making an endless effort to define world literature. Is it the sum 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 refer 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.

Theories of World Literature

Goethe and Tagore envisioned the possible expansion of world literature when the concept of world literature had not flourished at all. Goethe viewed that National literature doesn't have any meaning now (Goethe; 19). It indicated the advent of world literature, but doesn't indicate the culmination of national literature rather it referred to the meaninglessness of restricting literature within a national boundary. Goethe probably had foreseen that the author's recognition in his nation would not matter anymore as the reception in the whole world through the literary exchange and translation would definitely earn him and his work the deserving position in the world literature. He also predicted about the global

circulation and reception of the literature that “ the works that appeal to the masses would enjoy limitless expansion” but didn’t speak about the evaluation criteria. 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 (*Mahakala*) would wither automatically was his view. He advocated world literature, not as *Tulnatmak Sahitya* rather as *Vishwa Sahitya*. “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) who 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 to the extension of colonialism. The *Communist Manifesto* aspired to be a model of W.L. 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 a traffic in ideas between people, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange.”

Hugo Meltzl, (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 own world literature. He asserted that this conception of every nation to insist on monoglotism 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, time 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 sum total of the world's literary production rather a world-system within which literature is produced and circulated (Alexander Beecroft, 2008). A scientific approach of World literature was developed by Franco Moretti, the Stanford world literature expert. He 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 to be a problem that demands a new critical method, a new hypothesis where a scientific approach of study through Distant reading can serve as a tool to survey the world literary system. Moretti (2003).

The concept of world literature may not be the same for all the scholars. Every scholar has a unique perspective towards world literature as Amiya Dev viewed "if you want me to define world literature, I may say it is the sum total of texts available to me at this moment, translations included. Its fool to say that world literature would be one

for everybody". The scholars attempted not only to define world literature but also to analyze the process of circulation and reception in the world.

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 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 in the original language". In this aspect, we see the Nobel prizewinning 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. Damrosch in the 7th annual session of the Institute of World Literature (IWL) held at Copenhagen in 2017 presented his concern for the three challenges that world literature faces today. The first, being the untranslatability of the specific literary texts. Second, is the demarcation of the origin of W.L. to 1827 whereas literary texts which can be considered as world literature existed much before that. The last challenge is the major one which speaks about the inclusion of literary work across the world in the world literary canon. 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 talk about the 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.

Challenges in dealing with world literature

Every nation attempts to visualize and comprehend world literature in their own 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 work 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. The

figure below illustrates the process of translation and its significant role in the circulation of literary texts.

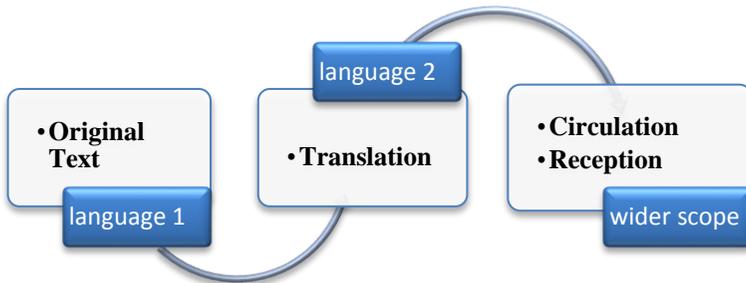


Figure1: The process of transmission of text across borders

This process gets complicated when it remains under the subjugation of one language in the name of the global connection, and its dominance implicitly indicates the cultural and literal colonialism. In the present era of globalization, English has a dominant position as a medium of literary exchange across the world. The hegemony of the language could also be seen in the preference of the language by the Nobel laureates. The graph below displays the choice of English as a language by the Nobel laureates:

Noble Laureates wrote in the Languages

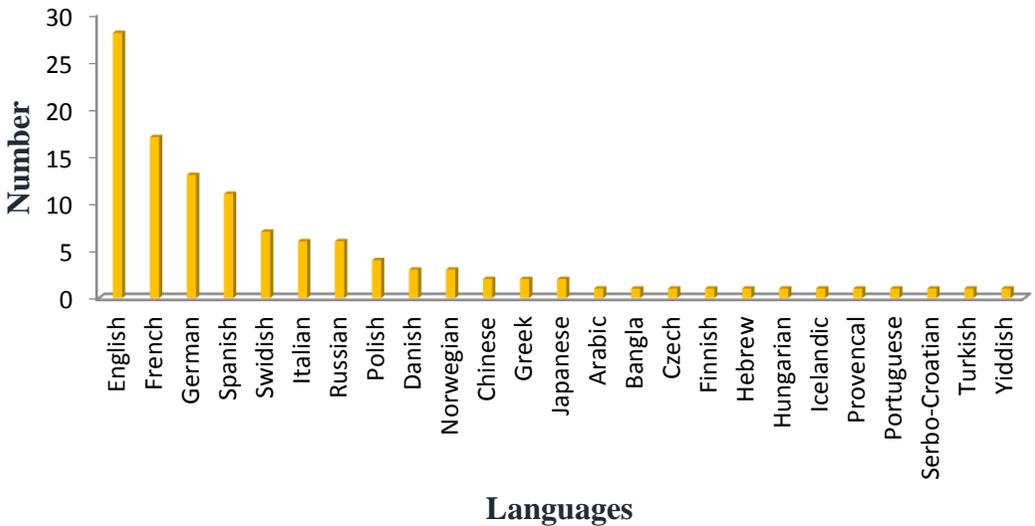


Figure II- The Preference for the English Language by the Nobel laureates

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). The hegemony of the English language in the name of exposure to the world market, huge circulation pushes behind the minority languages establishing an unthreatened domination in world literature. The emerging writers of India get their recognition through the west as the books written by them get published and prized in the west. So, they enter

the Indian market through the west. Damrosch too opined that “many works of literature don’t get translated into English due to less link with the west even if they have high linguistic value in their language. Moreover, the literary piece needs to get American concern and fit comfortably with American images of foreign culture to get translated.” It demonstrates the hegemony of a specific perspective in World forum. 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. This monopoly of a single language in the world literary market is referred as ‘cultural imperialism’ by J.Miller and ‘Neocolonialism’ by Beckett. The anxiety for the growing command of the English language is also evident in the assumption of Gayatri Spivak (2003) that the threat of monolingualism invading comparative literature would result in the English language textbooks becoming pervasive globally.

Damrosch in his ‘what is world literature’ mentioned that one of the criteria for a literary work to enter the domain of world literature is through circulation beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. Here translation serves as a bridge between the source language and the

target language. Furthermore, Literature gets translated from English into other languages which in one way or the other expands the horizon of English Literature but the translation from another language to English is the rarest of rare. This politics of the English translation are pointed out by Lawrence Venuti where he spoke about the domination of the major literature over the minor. It gets evident from an instance when the USA rejected to translate Argentine Jorge L. Borge's fiction till French translations appeared in 1950 by a distinguished press. Is it not an alarming situation where the hegemony of few major languages makes it critical for the other languages to make their space in world literature? We observe authors sometimes adapt to the western ideologies and follow the norms of the west with an expectation to get international recognition. Spivak criticized this practice of world literature and opined "Anglo-American enterprise dominating the market of the world literature" and the study of world literature ignores the power of a work in its own language. Goethe too advocated to know and cherish each poet in his own language and within the specific area of his time and culture.

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 own recognition in the world literary market, resulting into 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 re also addressed by Leferve 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 study literature as it has made the production, circulation and reception easier than ever. The development of print culture has seen 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 has 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 (2013).

Indian World Literature

All the projected models discussed above are western in origin; may it be the model of Polyglottism by Hugo or world literary system highlighted 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. The question that demands attention is that, how can the World literature generated in the west become the world literature for the entire world as we can't consider the world being confined within the west. Whether the models suggested by the western theorists are 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, the 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 four criteria such as imaginative originality, expressive power, creative genius and scope of the subject matter. He included selected eleven 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 Trivedi, 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 instead of being considered as the history of Indian literature can be better termed as the history of Indian Literature in Sanskrit. I admit the rich ancient Indian literature written in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit language draws the western attention, but it doesn't mean that the essence of Indian literature vanishes in the other Indian languages. The assumption of the modern Indian literature to be wretched and negligible is a biased, Eurocentric, and partial judgement of Indian literature. Harish Trivedi in his work has warned not to be indifferent towards this issue and avoid its repetition while writing the history of world literature. We need to be conscious regarding the balance between all the literature of all the languages and all periods. Trivedi 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. Similar was the concern of prof. Shiv Prakash when he appealed to read Indian literature from a non-Eurocentric perspective. World literature shouldn't be again mingled with the

micro-nationalism by advancing regional languages against the colonial hegemony of English as stated by Sisir Kumar Das (1973). Yokio Tsuda in his work 'The hegemony of English and strategies of linguistic pluralism: proposing the Ecology of language paradigm' claimed that the international dominance of English demands to re-examine it; as a problem of linguistic hegemony. The rapidly globalizing world has made English a dominant language by giving it the stature of the link language or defacto international language.

Conclusion

The English Language is at the center of production and circulation of the world literary market that attracts all literary works that surrender to its monopoly to let into the world forum. This cultural and linguistic hegemony of English is referred as 'Linguistic Imperialism' by Pennycook (1995) and Robert Phillipson went to the extent of condemning the English language for replacing and displacing other languages. There seems the necessity of securing the linguistic and cultural pluralism to maintain the essence of world literature. Hence, the margino-centric approach suggested by T. Satyanath would open new dimensions of world literature. It means to reverse the approach to world literature from margin to center. In simple words, the possibility of studying the canons of world literature not in English rather in other Indian languages explores the new area of research.

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.

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