The Routledge Companion to World Literature

Edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO WORLD LITERATURE

In the age of globalization, the category of "World Literature" is increasingly important to academic teaching and research. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* offers a comprehensive pathway into this burgeoning and popular field.

Separated into four key sections, the volume covers:

- the history of World Literature through significant writers and theorists from Goethe through to Said, Casanova and Moretti
- the disciplinary relationship of World Literature to areas such as philology, translation, globalization and diaspora studies
- theoretical issues in World Literature including gender, poetics and ethics
- a global perspective on the politics of World Literature.

The forty-eight outstanding contributors to this companion offer an ideal introduction for those approaching the field for the first time, or looking to further their knowledge of this extensive field.

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WORLD LITERATURE AND POSTCOLONIALISM

Robert J.C. Young

The relation of world literature to postcolonialism remains virtually unmarked territory. There has been little direct exchange between these two separately demarcated domains of literary study. Why is this so? The reason must lie in the fact that their respective positions with relation to literature remain largely incompatible and disjunctive. What do they have in common, and what keeps them apart?

The two share a fundamental perspective on literary studies that at first sight ought to put them in dialogue with each other: both seek to move the study of literary texts beyond the confines of the classic boundaries of European literature. In this context, world literature has a much longer history, going back to Goethe's use of the term *Weltliteratur* in 1827, while postcolonialism, and the idea of postcolonial literature, are generally reckoned to have begun as critical concepts with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 (Said 1978). However, this historical difference immediately opens up the distinction between world and postcolonial literatures in another way. Goethe's idea of world literature, conceived in terms of the circulation of excellent works of literature, stemmed in part from his enthusiasm for texts from other cultures, amongst which Sir William Jones's translations of the Persian poet, Hafiz, figured notably. However, it is also the case that Jones's translations, first of Persian and then of Sanskrit literature, form part of a postcolonial story whose overall perspective is founded on the fact that Jones's work was conducted in his role as a judge in the service of the East India Company; his translations from Oriental languages were in part intended to facilitate the exercise of colonial power. Analysis of his writing, it has been argued, cannot be purely "literary" and ignore the context of Jones's work (Niranjana 1992).

In general, concepts of world literature offer themselves as disinterested, even though the varying fortunes of world literature as a literary concept have generally been precipitated by external world-historical events. Apart from the statistical perspective offered by Franco Moretti (Moretti 2000, 2005), in general world literature, whether in its original Goethean formulation or in its early or late twentieth-century reincarnations, is promoted on aesthetic grounds as the best literature, literature of such quality and insight that it transcends its local context to establish itself as

universal, shared by all cultures. As a result, world literature is hard pressed to avoid traditional questions of judgment and taste. The degree to which it relies on such criteria is indicated by the fact that, until very recently, most accounts or selections of world literature remained predominantly European in emphasis (it was a way of bringing classical and modern texts together) with only a relatively minor number of non-European works included. This is not entirely unexpected, given that, however counter-cultural, the idea of world literature coincided with the period of imperialism in which European cultures were set as the universal standard that transcended all non-European others (see Kadir in this volume).

One method that became popular in the nineteenth century to establish literary value was the concept of the classic. Setting aside eccentric views such as those of T.S. Eliot, who believed there was only one classic (Virgil's *Aeneid*) (Eliot 1945), the idea of the classic remains the foundation of attempts to found a literary canon on the idea of literary value (see Kirby in this volume). Though one of several examples in its time, the series of "The World's Classics" published by Oxford University Press from 1906 has been the most long-lived and influential attempt to establish a canon of world literature. However, even today, only a tiny proportion of its titles come from outside Europe. Although the list does include texts from a wider range of non-European languages, only Chinese is mentioned on the website (World's Classics 2010). As with the word "universal," so "world," in the context of literature, has often simply meant European.

David Damrosch has sought to move the idea of world literature beyond this older perspective, introducing two new modes of conceptualization (Damrosch 2003). The first can be compared to J.M. Coetzee's discussion of the classic, where he suggests that the classic achieves its status by being read (or played, in the case of his example, the music of J.S. Bach) through the generations (Coetzee 1993). For world literature, Damrosch suggests a comparable principle of empirically tested value, namely the circulation of literary texts beyond their cultures of origin, generally in translation, though in this case Damrosch argues that there is no guarantee that the text's circulation as a classic of world literature will continue throughout time – with writers (and indeed composers), readers' interest comes and goes. Alongside the classic, and the "masterpiece" or modern classic, Damrosch adds a further category where the selection criterion is social and informational rather than aesthetic: he characterizes this as "a window on the world." Reading an Indian-American novel such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (Lahiri 2003) will give the American reader information about Indian culture, from a quasi-anthropological point of view: here the novel's main function is to represent the diversity of literary cultures and to act as a form of cultural translation for Western readers. This may work just so long as the other culture is not represented as too different, which may account for a common preference for the use of diasporic writers who may write in English or other European languages, rather than local ones who write in their own indigenous languages and do not write for Western audiences. So to learn about Afghani or Iranian society, today we read *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini 2003) or *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2003).

Damrosch suggests that these different modalities of world literature can exist side by side. Less easily assimilable is the position of Pascale Casanova in *The World*

Republic of Letters (Casanova 2004 [1999]), where she points to the institutional formation of world literature as a field over the last 200 years. Casanova claims a more specific aesthetic for world literature, emphasizing the degree to which cosmopolitan Paris promoted avant-garde modernist writers from around the world, which enabled them to transcend the limitations of their local cultures held back by an adherence to limiting, realist criteria. The Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, who remained largely untranslated and out of global circulation until she was promoted by Hélène Cixous in Paris, would be one of many possible examples. World literature in this context therefore retains its aesthetic basis, but one firmly set in the debates between modernism and realism, leaving realism relegated to the local, implicitly more primitive outlying national literary sectors. While Casanova's historical account appears in many respects irrefutable, this formation has undoubtedly been replaced or at least supplemented today by a new genre of transnational writing which has never been national, often written by diasporic authors, which is promoted by international publishers for a world market-place. This popular literature is typically global in scope, concerned with both Western and non-Western subject matter, even if generally written in English (Walkowitz 2009). A novel such as Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (Kunzru 2004), concerned with a hero who moves from India to the USA and then escapes to Mexico, is typical of the transnational subject matter of such writers. This can be linked to the growing tendency of some writers, such as J.M. Coetzee or Orhan Pamuk, to write for translation. Here, reinterpreting Walter Benjamin, it might be claimed that it is the translatability of the literary work that allows it to accede to world literature.

Much of the debate within the field of world literature in recent years has thus been over the question of how to define what makes literature world literature. Should it be Goethe's universal cultural heritage, Damrosch's works that circulate beyond their own cultural borders, Casanova's avant-garde world republic of letters, or Walkowitz's new transnational genre for a globalized book industry? World literature in this respect makes up more a heterogeneous field of critical debate than a constituted canon.

A definitional debate of this kind has been more or less absent in the realm of postcolonial literature, even though it might at first sight seem to present the same problems, as a category, as world literature, namely that it includes almost everything. Given that most countries in the world have at some point been colonized, or at least semi-colonized, and that those colonizing countries not recently colonized, such as Great Britain, have nevertheless themselves been transformed in the second half of the twentieth century by immigration ("reverse colonization") from their former colonies, there are few literatures that could not, in some sense, be described as "postcolonial." One important distinction here would be that in this context postcolonial would always refer to relatively recent writing. Britain and India may be, in different ways, "postcolonial," but few would suggest that John Donne or the authors of the *Dharmasutras* are postcolonial. An immediate means of distinguishing world from postcolonial literature, therefore, would be in terms of historicity, and indeed one way in which world literature has sought to define itself has been by emphasizing "classic" historical rather than contemporary writing.

Even with this caveat, the global scope of postcolonial literature remains very substantial. However, it is noticeable that while the term "postcolonial" has been the subject of extensive debate, there has been remarkably little discussion of what defines "postcolonial literature." This may be because the basis of postcolonial literature has never been, in the first instance, aesthetic criteria, but rather, the effect that it seeks to achieve – it is a literature written against something, namely conditions that obtain in the everyday world. We might call this an aesthetic, but it is more obviously located in terms of what Barbara Harlow, following the work of Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani, called "Resistance Literature" (Harlow 1987). Two years later, in *The Empire Writes Back*, which proposed the category of a certain kind of literature called "postcolonial," Ashcroft et al. placed the emphasis not so much on the postcolonial as a historical category, that is, literature coming after colonialism, but rather on literature which resists colonial power (Ashcroft et al. 1989). By this understanding, literature written against colonialism during the historical time of colonial rule may be termed postcolonial, or at least be considered within the framework of postcolonial studies. In this respect, postcolonial literature was defined against the older category of Commonwealth literature, which simply meant writing, in English, from Commonwealth countries. Ashcroft et al. argued that although this was at one level a neutral term that included all writing from those countries, at another level it maintained an implicit cultural and political hierarchy which left Great Britain at the centre and relegated all other literatures written in English to the margins of "real" English literature; only Anglo-American literature had succeeded in establishing itself as a separate category, while Irish or Scottish literature, for their part, were simply assimilated into English literature without trace.

It is in this context that postcolonial literature as a literature of resistance takes on its significance. Many works of postcolonial literature – and of criticism, moreover – involve what Ashcroft et al. term "writing back," a strategy which sometimes goes so far as to rewrite earlier classic texts from the perspective of the colonial characters who figure in their margins, as in Jean Rhys's reworking of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in her *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys 1966). Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has long been subject to such treatments. Part of the way in which postcolonial literature "resists" has thus been its rewriting of the colonizer's own classics, making them truly worldly. Postcolonial criticism has followed suit with its own reinterpretation of the classics, from Shakespeare to Jane Austen, showing the extent of their involvement in questions of colonialism, slavery, racism, and the like, and the extent to which the colonial framework determines the terms of the domestic drama. Whereas at some level world literature must always be claimed as universal for it to merit its place at the world literary table, postcolonial literature makes no such assertion, and indeed insofar as it involves resistance, will always in some sense be partial, locked into a particular problematic of power. This power structure may be typical, more generally, but the specifics with which the literary text is concerned will always be allied to the particular local and historical instance. The writer is less concerned with aesthetic impact than making a critical intervention, an intervention that is always directed beyond the novel, to the state of the world outside. Postcolonial literature does not simply illustrate the diversity of different cultures around the globe. It is

rather concerned to expose and challenge imbalances of power, and the different forms of injustice that follow from such factors. Postcolonial literature will always seek to go beyond itself to impact upon the world which it represents: partial, metonymic, it will always be engaged with realities beyond itself.

Postcolonial literature always makes a statement about something in the world, often disturbing our current assumptions and perceptions as it does so. It may not necessarily be "realist" in style, but it will always engage with the politics of the real. It is this quality of commitment and involvement that is distinctive, and it is for this reason that, despite the eminence of Salman Rushdie, who uses magic realist techniques derived from Gabriel García Márquez, realism remains the predominant aesthetic of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial literature remains a literature concerned with the world, a world which that literature seeks to change by telling the stories that it shares with its readers. It is always interested, in the same way that Edward Said's *Orientalism* constituted a deliberate intervention (with the additional argument that so-called disinterested scholarship was in fact interested in its own way). For this reason, there is a close relationship between postcolonial theory and literature: while theorists read literary works, it is clear that, just as much as in fine arts and other media, authors and artists read postcolonial theory.

These are the reasons why there are few debates about what makes up postcolonial literature as a canon, because the individual, whether reader or instructor, is free to involve any literary text if he or she can make an argument that that text demonstrates postcolonial concerns. The selection is determined by the individual critic's *Ansatzpunkt* or starting-point, as Erich Auerbach put it (Auerbach 1969: 13–14). There are few courses in "postcolonial literature" or literatures as such. Typically, postcolonial literature is organized according to geographical criteria, thus mediating the distance between national and world literatures through the regional, with its complex interplay of major and minor literatures and languages (Deleuze and Guattari 1985) – or by bringing together texts from a wide range of locations according to certain specific themes such as resistance, marginality, diaspora, queer sexualities, gender, etc. The individual instructor then chooses the texts to relate to the overall preoccupation. As a result, much postcolonial literature is read topically, or at least valued for its treatment of themes, while aesthetic criteria come only at a secondary level.

For the same reason, the authors themselves at times, one suspects, write novels that explore well-known issues of postcolonial theory, particularly when the local literary culture values thematic concerns over aesthetic or "literary" ones. The high institutional status of the social sciences in India, for example, means that many postcolonial literary critics prefer to write versions of social science rather than literary criticism, while similarly many Indian novelists write what might be termed "social science fiction" which embodies and explores the concerns of the established field. There have been few contemporary Indian literary critics, aside from the late Meenakshi Mukherjee, who write a literary criticism concerned with the particular aesthetic resources of a writer's language. The limitation of some postcolonial criticism is thus that the critic often reads his or her material in largely thematic terms. The emphasis on content rather than language or form has meant that postcolonial literatures are easily read in translation, with literary value demonstrated in terms of

the common social or historical concerns of the author and the critic. To that degree, texts rise and fall in popularity faster than in other literary arenas.

Thematics need not, however, simply mean content at a basic level. If world literature is universal, postcolonial literature, though partial, achieves a certain universality through its relation to the ethical. One characteristic that defines postcolonial literature as a literary form is its relation to ethics: in that sense, it could be said to be closer to certain nineteenth-century European models than the avant-garde rebel literature of the twentieth century. Postcolonial literature is characterized by an ethics of humanity, of the humane in its broadest sense (which means that it will also be concerned with the lives of animals), just as much as it is defined by a critical focus which challenges inhumanity in its modes of the abuse of power in whatever particular historical form that might take. The ethical focus leads to an interest in questions of justice, of human rights, of ecology, of religion and secularism, of inequality in power relations, whether colonial, postcolonial, involving gender, class, or caste, the respective roles of dominant and minority languages, or the continuing struggles of colonized and indigenous peoples. This might be simply termed the political, but it is political in its broadest sense, involving the survival of peoples and their cultures.

If these are also questions raised in other areas of the humanities and social sciences, what, it might be asked, can be the contribution of literature? How do postcolonial literature and theory differ from historical, sociological, political, and anthropological accounts of specific historical or cultural moments? One characteristic would be its realist particularity, whereby it positions itself in a recognizable historical narrative, for example the history of British colonialism in West Africa in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958). This novel also provides what amounts to a virtual anthropological account of life in a West African village, making a powerful point that just because it was a culture without writing does not mean that it was a culture without strong morality, social rules, or a sense of its own history. Beyond that, the novel combines its analysis of objective and sociological processes with the subjective experience of those involved, notably the main character Okonkwo. It is this combination of the subjective with the objective, the ability to articulate the ways in which larger historical events are felt on the pulses of the people who undergo them, that marks the distinctive mode of postcolonial writing. At the same time, following Frantz Fanon (Fanon 1986), postcolonial literature exposes the violent splitting in situations of subjection between how people feel to themselves, and the ways in which they are treated by society. The most violent form of this discrepancy is the experience of racism or castism. What made it worse in colonial times was that, through education and other forms of cultural subjection, people were made to internalize the degraded figure that they cut in the eyes of their colonizers and to see that as the true form of themselves. Postcolonial writing inhabits these tense, painful borders between psychic and material life, articulating a personal experience of reality and history – but of realities and histories very different from those traditionally celebrated in Western countries.

Within its aesthetics of humanity, the take of postcolonial writers on the realities that they depict will range across many different possibilities, but typically alternate between the tragic and the comic. An emblematic moment here would be 1961, the

year of the publication of two postcolonial classics – Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1965 [1961]) and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (Naipaul 1961). The first treats the humiliation of colonialism as tragedy, the second as farce. Fanon's famous text, angrily advocating resistance to colonial power, would become the bible of the decolonization movement, a handbook of emancipation, both personal and political, that continues to inspire artists as well as activists today. Naipaul's novel, on the other hand, articulates the very hopelessness of being a colonial subject that Fanon is fighting against and seeks to turn around through recourse to anti-colonial violence. Mr Biswas' attempts to realize himself are always failures, gently and at times unbearably mocked by the author. Samuel Smiles's widely read Victorian manual *Self Help: With Illustrations of Character, Conduct and Perseverance* (1859) follows Mr Biswas around like a mocking bad penny. *A House for Mr Biswas* does not protest directly in any way against colonial rule, but it expresses all the frustration and bafflements of defeated desire that form the kernel of the sense of being born into the provincial colony, the narrowness of a life that will only ever be secondary, the half-life of the colonial situation. Much art of an earlier period grapples with this quandary, often reaching out to international modernism as a way of transcending the local and the provincial, the belatedness of colonial culture (as in the case of the Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand, for example). This international modernist strain has long left the postcolonial literary realm, or, arguably, has been translated into the new literary mode of the global literature market. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* exists at the cusp of these two moments.

The conjunction of Fanon and Naipaul's works, two postcolonial classics by authors of very different political persuasions, highlights the degree to which postcolonial literature is often judged in terms of its argument as much as its literary quality – the tension between content and value in postcolonial literature. Naipaul is routinely attacked for espousing unacceptable opinions in his work (Nixon 1992). Should literature simply reflect the dominant social view, or should its content or aesthetic form exist in tension with its own society (Said 2005: 20)? Literature from former colonies written by postcolonial writers does often voice sentiments of resistance to colonial rule, or analyze the deleterious effects of colonial culture upon the society and the individual. While Naipaul does the latter, he certainly does not offer the former. One of the aspects of postcolonial writing that critics find most difficult to deal with is colonial or postcolonial writers who do not articulate perspectives on colonial rule and its culture, or on such matters as caste or gender, that accord with those of contemporary times. These perspectives, however, are not stable in themselves. This has meant that the writers who have been most widely taught, such as Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, or Tayeb Salih, despite their differences in cultural background, express sentiments comparable to each other, a factor that has allowed postcolonial literature to develop as a field. Writers whose work does not accord with contemporary views, such as Henry Derozio in the nineteenth century, or Naipaul in the twentieth, remain problematic, however masterly their writing, since postcolonial literature as a field is never neutral.

It can be asked how far some contemporary writers have achieved pre-eminence as a result of the perspectives they present and how far their strengths depend on more traditional literary qualities. In that sense we might compare world literature to

postcolonial literature in terms of language models: whereas world literature is conceived from a presumption of cultural free speech, in which each culture is free to express itself as it may wish, postcolonial literature is assessed from that of the speech act, directed to an audience, and aiming to communicate with and affect the audience who will receive it. If the effect of the speech act is not welcome, this can be particularly difficult for contemporary readers, and not only with respect to older writers or those writing in previous centuries. This distinction marks exactly the terms of debate around Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses:* should it be accepted on a principle of free speech and free artistic expression, or should it be criticized on the grounds of its deliberately seeking to cause offence?

The questions of speech and the freedom of expression that speech affords are fundamental to postcolonial literature in a different way. While aesthetic value is not a major focus for postcolonial literature, the questions of language and of translation are central, even if they operate unacknowledged beneath the surface. In this respect, we may contrast the situation of world literature, which, though it might acknowledge the uneven relation between literatures and their respective languages, is not always concerned directly with issues of language and translation, or at least not until very recently (see Venuti and Bermann in this volume). Whereas world literature is generally approached in terms of individual writers expressing themselves in their own language, which we may, however, read in translation and which may require the mediating role of the critic, this assumption is never simply a given for the postcolonial writer, who very often exists in a state of anxiety with respect to the language in which he or she writes.

Language anxiety is fundamental to postcolonial writing. It was first articulated directly with respect to the decision as to which language the writer should choose to write in. The alternatives here are usually marked by the names of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. At a certain point in his writing, Ngugi decided that he could no longer write in English, the language of his former colonizers, rather than his own native Gikuyu. By his using English, the world that he was trying to portray, its very epistemological foundation, was already translated in certain respects into the cultural perspectives of the very colonial culture that he was trying to resist (Ngugi 1981). By contrast, Achebe argued that English, though the colonizer's language, was effectively now also an African language and one that had become inflected in its new milieu (Achebe 1988). The writer could use English, but should continually subvert it by inflecting it towards local idiom. In making this argument, Achebe was following the lead of James Joyce, who as an Irishman writing at the beginning of the twentieth century was confronted with the same issue: should he write in Irish or English? His decision was to write in an elaborate Irish-English embellished and subverted so that it certainly cannot be read as English in any straightforward way. Salman Rushdie could be said to have followed more directly the Joycean path. A different choice would be that of Samuel Beckett, namely the decision to get away from the colonial language by writing in a third, and for Beckett neutral, language, in his case French.

In more recent years, as English has become a global language, it has also to some extent become an unmarked medium by means of which writers can mediate their own cultures, an option that is particularly attractive for writers whose native

tongues are "small languages," or for those such as Dalit writers, who object to writing in the Hindi which is the dominant language of their caste oppressors. The question of language choice will always have to be made, but whatever language they choose, many postcolonial writers nevertheless retain a certain anxiety in their relation to the particular language in which they write, the more so if this is a major European language such as English or French. This is one reason, for example, which makes the Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida in certain respects a "postcolonial writer," as he shared a marked sense of being estranged within his own language (Derrida 1998). If world literature consists of literary works that successfully circulate internationally beyond the confines of their own borders by typically wearing their own original cultural context "rather lightly" (Damrosch 2003: 139), any work of postcolonial literature will always be riven by its own context, since it will be the literature of a culture forcibly internationalized by the impact of foreign cultures and languages from beyond, which were imposed without choice.

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