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Moving the Compass: Decolonizing World Literature

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Abstract:

This paper examines world literature as a contested category through a study of three literary figures from the Global South, namely: Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938–2025), and Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016). Putting their work into conversation enables us to challenge the Eurocentric humanism and Western aesthetic ideal that have dominated the framing of world literature. Proposing a decolonial approach, the paper exposes how literature from the global South, as exemplified in the writings of Tagore, Ngũgĩ and Devi, has resisted dominant epistemological framing through empirical depth, linguistic diversity and methodological complexity. Moving from Tagore's transcultural humanism to Ngũgĩ's anti-colonial militant nativism to Devi's stringent decolonial critique of the excesses and violence of the postcolonial nation-state, this paper makes a case for transnational and translational engagements while posing a fundamental scholarly challenge to the borders and boundaries of world literature. Echoing Stefan Helgesson, world literature today must shift the compass from centre to margin, engage with different literary "ecologies" (Beecroft), and be attentive to their mutual interaction. World literature must pluralise its temporal framing and reach into the archives of the past while remaining politically committed to a critique of the present through a multi-axis approach that takes into account the complex interactions between history, geography and language.

Keywords: World Literature, Global South, Decoloniality, Eurocentrism, Literary Ecologies, Rabindranath Tagore, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mahasweta Devi.

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> "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." (Fanon 17–18)

> "Our speech, that is all our utterances," are "filled with others' words." (Bakhtin 89)

In 1918, the notable Soviet writer and cultural leader, Maxim Gorky, established the World Literature (Vsemirnaia Literatura) Publishing House. Its aim was to introduce to the Russian people, as Gorky explained in the introduction to the first catalogue of the publishing house:

> Bravely entering the path of spiritual unity with the peoples of Europe and Asia, the Russian people in all its masses ought to know the peculiarities of history, sociology, and psychology of those nations and tribes with which it aspires to build new forms of social life.[1] (qtd. in Khotimsky 120)

Gorky's publishing house put together an impressive list of literature for its first catalogue (even if many of the texts that had been translated never made it to publication because of issues beyond the control of Gorky himself). The first catalogue showcased writing from France, England, America, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, as well as from Canada, India, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, and Brazil. From these nations, close to 1,200 authors were represented.

Talking about the need to have a publishing house that centres itself on engaging with world literature, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment and one of the major figures of Soviet cultural politics, summarized this policy in his 1928 introduction to the journal Vestnik inostrannoi literatury. As Maria Khotimsky puts it, creating an image of a progressive state concerned with mass education, questions of world culture became part of the ideological agenda of the Bolshevik government (125). This is amply evident in Lunacharsky's view. He wrote:

> The Union of Soviet Republics is a unique country. [. . .] However, it does not exist on a continent that is removed from the rest of the world, and neither does it desire to be fenced off from the rest of the world. Conversely, the Union is very interested in participating in the life of the entire world and shaping the life of the world in accordance with the governmental and societal principles that are at the basis of the Union. (qtd. in Khotimsky 125)[2]

World literature should engage readers of the world, but lest we forget, it is also a deeply political and ideological enterprise, as is clearly evident in Lunacharsky and Gorky's aims and objectives. Functioning ideologically as a civilizing mission, world literature particularly as introduced by Goethe as *Weltliteratur* was an attempt to impose values of the European bourgeoisie on the world, particularly in its colonies. Based on a Eurocentric universalism, Goethe envisioned world literature bound by common aesthetic principles that he held were standard practice across cultures. As Arun Kumar Ghosh in his article "Rabindranath Tagore and the Global South: Decolonizing World Literature through Transcultural Humanism" argues: "the idea of world literature, since Goethe's original invocation of Weltliteratur in the early nineteenth century, has carried within it both a promise and a paradox. It promises a transcendent exchange among cultures, yet in practice it has too often perpetuated the very hierarchies it sought to dissolve. The canon of 'world literature,' as institutionalized through European academic discourse and global publishing circuits, continues to privilege Western epistemologies as the measure of literary universality" (1).

Nineteenth-century culture across national boundaries meant European culture (specifically German, French, English). This mapping of literary prestige onto economic and cultural power was closely linked to European imperialist policies in the nineteenth century. France, Germany, and Britain, among other European powers, engaged in intense national rivalries for aggressive expansion driven by industrial needs. Fighting over markets and

resources, major European powers justified colonial conquest and direct rule over large parts of Africa and Asia citing reasons such as Social Darwinism.

Providing a philosophical rationalization for imperialist, colonialist, and racist policies, sustaining belief in Anglo-Saxon or Aryan cultural and biological superiority, European powers used not just brute force to subjugate the colonized but also put in sustained efforts through religious, social, and cultural institutions like the church, courts, and the press to build the myth of African/Asian inferiority. Printing, publication, and circulation of literature became closely tied to this ideological project of asserting European superiority. Colonialism became a significant site of cultural production; it was indeed in this context that many constructions of Self and the Other were produced (Pennycook 8–9).

David Damrosch in What Is World Literature? argues that world literature is in fact "a mode of reading that can be experienced intensively with a few works" and that this intensive reading leads to a "detached engagement with a world beyond our own" (281). I argue that while Damrosch's provocative and flexible definition of world literature as (1) "writing that gains in translation," (2) writing that functions as an "elliptical refraction of national literatures," and (3) "a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (281) is a good place to begin locating the 'what' in what is world literature; it is not true to suppose that world literature involves a reading that is intense yet detached. Detached objectivity is a desirable trait in a discerning and critically engaged reader. However, the intensity that Damrosch talks about can also lead to a form of involvement that transcends narrow boundaries of region or nation and calls for a passionate engagement with such literature and its Lebenswelt (the lived world/living environment).

Damrosch also quite compellingly asserts that world literature is best read only in relation to other pieces of literature; I argue that while literary greatness is measured within a comparative framework, great works of literature can often transcend that framework and

stand on their own merit and the quality of readership that they attract. Great works of literature move into the realm of world literature when there is a widespread recognition of their literary quality; when such literature has the unique ability to convey human emotions/issues/concerns yet are rooted in the particular, in the immediate, in the regional/local; can draw diverse readers into its fold; grapples with fundamental concepts and conflicts of its own time and place such as: those of colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial struggles, neoliberal political economy, capitalism, modernity, genocide, war, the onslaught of neo-imperialism and the material dimensions of human suffering and power in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

World literature thus draws its readers in and also brings its readers out. By drawing readers in, I mean the ability of great literature to make itself intimately known to readers who are inside and outside of its orbit in terms of the Lebenswelt (lived reality). When readers are drawn out, great literature acts as a force that propels readers to seek out more connections outside of their own orbit of lived reality. In other words, world literature is a combination of centripetal force and a centrifugal one; acting simultaneously pulling in and pushing out; keeping the readers in a state of perpetual tension. When one is reading great literature from one's own world, there is real engagement and interaction between the reader and the characters/setting/plot (a familiar literary eco-system), there is a sense of being pulled in to the centre of gravity while at the same time there seems to be an apparent, outward force that pushes readers to seek, explore and journey into other worlds that are beyond their own.

What is the 'What' of World Literature?

Damrosch in his highly influential book What Is World Literature? quite succinctly maps out what he understands world literature to be:

> I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language (Virgil was long

> read in Latin in Europe). In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base, but Guillén's cautionary focus on actual readers makes good sense: a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture. (4)

Thus, Damrosch is clearly alluding to the fact that world literature moves beyond borders, has an enduring appeal, and "consist[s] of a huge corpus of work . . . that stems from widely disparate societies with very different histories, frames of cultural reference, and poetics" (4). What is very compelling is Damrosch's argument that world literature is not some "global babble" or some universal/common literary patterns that find harmony in a melting pot or a conflicting multiplicity of separate national literatures vying for attention. World literature is a "mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike" (5).

When readers respond to literature with collective recognition of key concerns, a fundamental transformation takes place. That particular literary work is freed from the confines of a particular time and place, it begins to take another shape and move across borders and boundaries. When that happens, literature becomes a contact zone; it collaborates, translates, revises, adapts and is open to the vitality of the world. In that furious, frenzied space of mixing and churning, in that crucible of ideas, of creative intercourse, is born what we call "world literature".

Some of the constitutive factors that determine what can be called "world literature" are: wide circulation and extensive readership; canonization, in the sense that such works have been included/incorporated into academic curricula (while it may be important to read these works within academia as worthy scholarship, it may not necessarily be a liberating project). When a work is considered as literature, it is understood that it is worthy of

academic study; it is widely accepted as art, as creative expression through special use of language, i.e., it has the quality of 'literariness'. When literature becomes world literature, there is a stamp of approval given by several institutional authorities that wield considerable cultural and political power. The categorization of certain kinds of literature into world literature may be susceptible to essentialization, particularly by academic institutions, influential academics and critics, publishers, reviewers, prestigious presses, and important award committees—an overlapping set of bodies that have the reach, influence, and power to determine the worth of any such work and provide endorsement and approval.

Damrosch maintains that the variability of a work of world literature is one of its constitutive features. There is little doubt that variability means the complex process of gaining literary recognition through inclusion and acceptability by readers. Works that have had an enduring appeal remain in the sphere as masterpieces over historical time and space. Works of Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dickens, Faulkner, Woolf, Brontë sisters, Austen, and George Eliot are entrenched in world literature as classics, while many works that were once considered classics fall out of favour (such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764) or are rediscovered and placed within the sphere of world literature as classics (such as Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* [1928–1940]; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* [1925]). There are works that in a specific cultural moment gain institutional favour and become part of world literature (such as Bob Dylan's songs, which are recategorized as poetry and thus seen to have great literary merit). While institutional gatekeepers of canons and categories may push for the inclusion of certain works as merit-worthy, readers may be divided over what they consider as classics of world literature. Certain works may be loved by a large number of readers spanning geography and cultures, while other works may enjoy select readership privileging an alternate way of reading while also transcending the limits of both time and space. The formation and categorization of

world literature is thus marked by the "complex dynamics of cultural change and contestation" (Damrosch 6), by the shifts in circulation and readership. This shift is not simply a movement away from the linguistic and cultural point of origin, but also a transformation of the ideological landscape, and a challenge to power and hierarchy.

Text, Language, Readability: The Politics of Translation

Damrosch also points out how world literature is inextricably tied to the nature and quality of translation. When a work crosses borders and moves into the sphere of world literature through translation, there may be a "loss of authenticity or essence" or there could be a "gain in many ways" (6). Access to foreign literatures and discovery of new writers, recognition of similarities and ineradicable differences, consciousness of kinship with others, possibilities of networking and collaboration, awareness of global issues, heightened sense of collective humanity, making common cause with those spread far and wide, and insight into new and alternate ways of being, among others. According to Goethe, "any full response to a foreign text is likely to operate along all three of these dimensions: a sharp difference to enjoy its sheer novelty; a gratifying similarity that we find in the text or project onto; and a middle range of what is like-but-unlike—the sort of relation most likely to make a productive change in our own perceptions and practices" (qtd. in Damrosch 12).

The benefits of literatures in translation far outweigh the fallout from bad translations. Damrosch cites the example of Goethe's conversations with Eckermann. In Eckermann he found a person who could act as a mediator and take part in the networks that Goethe had with a host of European writers. Goethe had a lively sense of the ways his own books could benefit by translation, even as he himself read voraciously in a surprisingly wide range of foreign literatures. Thus, his keenness to not only read world literature but also to get his own work translated revealed how nuanced his encounters with foreign texts were and how frenetic the world of translation was. "He constantly recommends to Eckermann books he has

been reading, in English, French, Italian, and Latin, and he reads translations as readily as originals, even in the case of his own works. 'I do not like to read my Faust any more in German,' he remarks at one point, but in a new French translation he finds his masterwork 'again fresh, new, and spirited'—even though the translation is mostly in prose (276)" (qtd. in Damrosch 6–7).

It is evidently clear that through translation, a piece of literary work may be vitalized, become a mirroring (Spiegelung):

> As he wrote in an article for his journal Kunst und Alterthum, "Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one. What naturalist does not take pleasure in the wonderful things that he sees produced by reflection in a mirror? Now what a mirror in the field of ideas and morals means, everyone has experienced in himself, and once his attention is aroused, he will understand how much of his education he owes to it" ("Some Passages," 8). (qtd. in Damrosch 7)

This is how he sees Weltliteratur come into being: primarily through the medium of translation.

World literature gains through translations; however, it is important to keep in mind the politics of translation itself, the ideological traction that pushes for a notion of cosmopolitanism seemingly embedded in the very idea of world literature. The project of translation of classics particularly into English/German/French has been an imperial one. European colonial powers were heavily invested in the project of translation. Ancient literatures of the subcontinent along with literatures from Africa, the Far East, and South East Asia were regularly translated into European languages. This was a way of knowing the colonized in order to better govern; it has also been an ideological tool to further subjugation, to impose European cultural and literary standards as normative and superior. The corollary was that European literatures also began to be translated in the colonized world by those who

gained access to the colonizer's language and began to challenge this "decisive supremacy" (eine entschiedene Oberherrschaft). In that contact zone of instability and power struggle, writings from the Empire are set as gold standards. Greatness can be achieved only if one emulates desirable foreign (imperial European) models. The crushing weight of which on one hand fuelled provincial anxiety and on the other a gradually simmering and then a full-blown resistance to it.

As Keya Majumdar in her essay "Appropriating the 'Other'" points out, it is important to remember that "translation has come a long way from being just a re-writing in another language or a 'carry over' of meaning in a linguistic activity to the present position of an 'intellectual activity' which is almost identical with the transposition of culture, where transformation is a rule, not fixity" (163). Modern translations in the twenty-first century take on intertextual, polysystemic hermeneutics, with a dialogic dimension and a constant interexchange between culture, language, and literature. In a Bakhtinian sense, the world of translation expands the sphere of interpretation, "opens the text to other realms of understanding, by re-reading and re-creating by its radical suggestion that all reading is, in fact, deconstructive" (164).

Moving the Compass: Decolonizing World Literature

Colonialism, the rise of the nation-state, the development of the national language, and the formation of national consciousness, particularly in the nineteenth century, were followed by twentieth-century decolonial struggles for independence and self-determination. Following independence from colonial rule, nation-states began to assert themselves on the world stage. One of the spaces in which such struggles took place was the academy. Campaigns often cited transformation of the curriculum as an important step toward wider struggles against systemic structures of exclusion and exploitation. The result was that in the Anglophone world, for instance, the curriculum started moving toward some sort of

diversification. With the institutionalization of postcolonial literary studies in the 1980s and 90s, particularly in the metropolitan centres of the West/Global North, we see how the contemporary canon has shifted, adjusted, and transformed literature studies. Compared to the earlier university curriculum, we see literature departments across the Anglophone world offering modules that include texts from different cultural as well as geographical spaces that scholars and students of postcolonial, feminist, and ethnic minority literatures now encounter. The canon has widened, it has diversified; but is diversification decolonization?

Anna Bernard in her 2023 essay "Decolonizing Comparative Literature" defines decolonization as a political outlook that takes its inspiration from the great mid-twentieth-century anticolonial liberation struggles across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. She goes on to argue that while the discipline of Comparative Literature was more in the nature of a depoliticized 'worlding,' later projects of cultural decolonization as practiced in the metropolitan academy focused on a more radical and purposeful comparative praxis demonstrated by the Afro-Asian Writers' Association's (AAWA) literary journal *Lotus* (1968–91) among others (153). In her book *Decolonizing Literature: An Introduction* (2023), she talks about one of the missed opportunities of postcolonial literary studies: its focus on diversity and in some cases the literature of post-independence disillusionment has meant that much of the literature and theory that emerged from the struggles themselves has been overlooked.

Urging scholars and readers to engage with literature and theory of anti-colonial worldmaking which is "explicitly partisan and interventionist" ("Decolonizing Comparative Literature" 154) and takes into account "anti-imperial and anti-capitalist resistance" (156), Bernard makes a case for readers to reflect on the impact that such a remaking of the curriculum might have on how literature students and scholars approach texts, how we understand our own relationships to the history of decolonization, and how we think about

what literature is for. This radical reworking is possible when readers are encouraged to read as widely as they possibly can, and to draw on the immense resources that the literature of past struggles offers to our present moment.

World Literature from Below: Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938–2025), Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016)

Treating the global literary field as a sphere of influence emanating from the centres and transforming the periphery, figures such as Goethe, Auerbach, and later David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova turned the spotlight on European literature, making it function like a fulcrum on which pivots world literature. “The result was that world literature became an echo chamber of European self-determination . . . [and] the Global South —the historically colonized, multilingual, and poly-cultural sphere—enters world literature not as a producer of paradigms but as a recipient of recognition” (Ghosh 1). This Eurocentrism has been under scrutiny, critiqued and examined by numerous scholars. Graham Huggan, in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), critiqued how Western markets commodify difference through the spectacle of cultural otherness. Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013) exposes how untranslatability resists the homogenizing logic of global literary commodification, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline* (2003) urges a planetary consciousness that exceeds national and Eurocentric frameworks (Ghosh 1). She sounds an urgent call for a ‘new Comparative Literature’ that would resist appropriation or determination by the market while considering ways to preserve, protect, and promote the multiplicity of languages and literatures at the university. She famously calls for a Comparative Literature that would ‘include the open-ended possibility of studying all literatures, with linguistic rigor and historical savvy’ (Bernard 155). However, most of the critical interventions unfortunately remain tethered to Western theoretical genealogies. A decolonial framework is still in the making; theorization

of world literature from the Global South is an unfinished project that needs to find an alternative to the cosmopolitanism rooted in the empire's universality (Ghosh 2). One of the methods that have been considered is to move away from a universalist reading of literature and focus on a comparative, translational, and context-specific approach. Although David Damrosch and Martin Puchner edited *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2009) and Puchner edited *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (2018) put together a wide and heterogeneous collection of non-European literatures, the anthologies did not centre on twentieth-century anticolonial thought, which according to Bernard is an essential decolonial strategy for practitioners (critics/scholars/researchers/teachers/students) of Comparative Literature. Thus, an alternative genealogy of world literature to those proposed by Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova, one that instead arises from the global struggle against capitalist imperialism and takes projects like the AAWA and the Soviet Union's World Literature Publishing House as key points of reference according to Bernard is the need of the hour ("Decolonizing Comparative Literature" 156).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941): Cosmopolitan Humanist

> "The world in which we live is not made of nations but of human relationships." (Tagore)
>
> "The wanderers of the world have belonged to the world." (Tagore)

As the first non-European Nobel laureate in Literature, Tagore was catapulted onto the world literary stage in 1913 as a voice to be heard and considered. Tagore, privileged as he was, traversed the literary, cultural, political boundaries of that time to become what we call today a "cosmopolitan intellectual". The ease with which he moved across borders confounded both colonial and nationalist categories (Ghosh 2). Writing in multiple genres and in both native Bangla and English, Tagore's poetry, music, plays, and prose (both fiction and non-fiction) not only exemplified sensitivity and beauty but were also deeply political

and humanistic. Foregrounding what is today known as transcultural humanism, Tagore's writings reflected a modernity that was intensely human and a reimagining of collective humanity itself. As Ghosh very succinctly argues:

> Through his vision of VisvaManava—the universal human—and his institutional project Visva-Bharati (World University) literally India in the World, Tagore articulated a radical alternative to Eurocentric cosmopolitanism: a transcultural humanism grounded in ethical interrelation rather than abstract idealism. For Tagore, "the world" was not an external aggregate of nations but an inner continuum of the spirit, where every act of creation participates in a shared rhythm of being. (2)

Preceding and even surpassing contemporary theories of postcoloniality and globalization, Tagore's cosmopolitanism is starkly different from European cosmopolitanism. Tagore sees the boundaries between nations as arbitrary and stridently moves forward to engage and experience other worlds. His verse song written in 1911 "*Dure kothay, dure, dure, amar mon beray go ghure ghure*" (Eng. Trans. "Far away, far-far away") talks about the eternal wanderings of the human soul, where the mind travels like a wanderer to distant, marvellous, sometimes melancholic far-flung places on the earth. A spirit which does not belong to any one place in a definite way but disperses like the sound of the flute, floats like the air, moves like the wind; uncontained, untethered, free.

Tagore's philosophy of the human spirit constitutes a decolonial framework for world literature. His writings, particularly *Gitanjali* (1912), *Sādhanā* (1913), *Nationalism* (1917), and *The Religion of Man* (1931), elaborate a vision of literary and ethical universality rooted in experience, not domination. Tagore's world literature does not emanate from the metropolis toward the margins; it flows in concentric circles of empathy, through translation, music, and cultural exchange. His journeys to Japan, China, Latin America, and Europe were less diplomatic than dialogical—acts of listening across difference (Ghosh 2). Tagore's spiritual cosmopolitanism was an alternate way of experiencing the world and his works

decolonized the very grammar of Eurocentric world literature. Foregrounding transcultural humanism, Tagore insisted on a humanity that does not centre itself on European values or experiences but finds meanings and messages across cultures—a relational universality that considers the particular over the general, and looks for connections through diversity, a recognition of plurality and an articulation of planetary belonging.

Tagore's works are significant because they show how in times of high colonialism and the height of empire, voices from the Global South transcended European aesthetic and moral authority. His works are particularly significant today as we see a rise in vigilante nationalism. Troubling the binaries of the coloniser and the colonised; Tagore although a stringent critic of western imperialism also expressed a sense of deep disquiet about chauvinist nationalism. In *Nationalism* (1917), he warns that "a nation is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose," contrasting political nationalism with spiritual humanism (9). He foreshadows Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe's notion of 'Afropolitanism', which resists both nativist closure and Western universality by asserting a relational modernity grounded in shared vulnerability (Mbembe 59–60). Tagore's emphasis on plurality and his transcultural humanism can thus be read as an early form of cosmopolitanism that is based not only on privilege but on shared empathy.

Tagore translated his own works moving through linguistic and cultural borders. Read in China, Japan, Iran, Argentina; Tagore moved in circuits of self-translations in horizontal networks that connected South to South as distinct from what Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) theorizes as world literature as a symbolic economy, governed by an unequal distribution of literary capital centred in Paris, analogous to Bourdieu's sociological model (23–25). Tagore's works travelling through the horizontal networks challenge Casanova's mobility-based definition which although shifted the focus from intrinsic aesthetic value to modes of transmission, still remained anchored in Western

institutions of recognition. Turning Western translation theories on its head, Tagore through self-translation recreates the original text. His translation of *Gitanjali* is not a replica of the original. Instead, exercising control over representation, Tagore turned lyric song into meditative prose. As Lawrence Venuti notes, translation is historically associated with "domestication," the rendering of the foreign familiar to the dominant culture. Tagore reverses this process: his translations estrange English from itself, infusing it with the cadence of bhakti devotion and the syntactic rhythms of Bengali. The result is an English that sounds simultaneously intimate and otherworldly—an instrument of cultural reciprocity rather than cultural conquest (Ghosh 6). When W. B. Yeats wrote the introduction to the 1912 edition, he heard in it a voice that "has been born again in our time." That rebirth, however, was reciprocal: English itself was reborn through Tagore's spiritual syntax. Translation thus becomes transculturation—a process, to borrow Fernando Ortiz's term, whereby cultural contact produces mutual transformation rather than assimilation.[3] The *Gitanjali* translations into Japanese, Persian, and Spanish during the 1910s and 1920s extended this process horizontally, demonstrating how Tagore's poetics of relation could travel without imperial escort (Ghosh 6).

Circulation of Tagore's works through self-translation thus exemplifies what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls "the decolonization of the mind"—the reassertion of creative agency beyond imperial geographies (*Decolonizing the Mind* 28–30). As Ghosh argues, Tagore must be read as a figure of epistemic resistance rather than an abstraction of universal humanity; a writer who pushed for ethical reciprocity rather than metropolitan validation.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938–2025): Decolonizing Language

Translation is "the most potent form of intercultural communication" (Bassnett 1)

With reference to Brecht, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Barrel of a Pen* (1983) stated what it is he considers to be the task of the Western writer in regard to Third World Literature

(Gugelberger 1): “He must expose to the native audience the naked reality of the relationship between Europe and the Third World. He has to show to his European reader that, to paraphrase Brecht, the water he drinks is often taken from the mouths of the thirsty in the third world, and the food he eats is snatched from the mouths of the hungry in Asia, Africa and South America” (74). Confronting the politics of empire and capitalism, Ngũgĩ’s work stands firmly in the domain of decolonial literature challenging power, domination, and ruthless exploitation. Throughout his literary career, Ngũgĩ wrote to expose the devastating impact of colonial rule in Africa and his native Kenya. His major works such as *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1980/82), *Matigari ma Njiruungi* (1986), *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), and *The Perfect Nine* (2020) were written in English and native Gĩkũyũ. He wrote to recover and reclaim lost and suppressed African languages, epistemologies and reassert African identity. This effort to fight imperial rule and recover African futures was at the core of his intellectual and creative endeavours.

Ngũgĩ advocated the use of African languages for African literature and insisted on writing in his native Gĩkũyũ. Giving up writing in English in 1977 was for Ngũgĩ a political act of resistance and a struggle for cultural reclamation. In one of his most significant prose works *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Ngũgĩ challenges linguistic hierarchies arguing for the use of indigenous languages to decolonise the African psyche and unshackle the fetters of the colonial tongue. Moving the compass from the imperial centres towards Africa, Ngũgĩ advocates for the hierarchy of languages to be torn down. His fight is for indigenous African languages to find their rightful place in the literary world. Calling himself ‘a language warrior’, Ngũgĩ fought for linguistic decolonization through writings in his mother tongue that would be made available to non-native readers through translation.

Ngũgĩ argued that true liberation will come with the rejection of dominant European languages and embracing indigenous ones. Reclaiming identity, agency and autonomy through Gĩkũyũ, Ngũgĩ sought to restore the dignity of African languages, reconnect African people with their history and challenge the internalized superiority of European tongues. For Ngũgĩ, this was part of the broader struggle against imperialism, colonial domination, exploitation and appropriation. His unrelenting criticism of colonialism, neo-colonial imperialism, and the capitalist West made him a dangerous intellectual, an uncomfortable voice for the literary establishment; perhaps that is why he never received the Nobel Prize.

Ngũgĩ had been at the forefront of world literature for decades. He had been translating his Gĩkũyũ works into English himself, and he used many platforms to champion the practice and cause of literary translations, which he called 'the language of languages' (Metaxatos 193)[4]. In addition to his advocacy for writing in African languages, Ngũgĩ considered how publishers, authors, and academics can further use translation to facilitate a global conversation between cultures. Discussing translation as a bridge between cultures; proposing that dialogue among African languages is the way to unify African peoples; reflecting on the complexities of auto-translation or translating one's own work; exploring the essential task translation performed in the history of the propagation of thought; and pleading for the hierarchy of languages to be torn down; Ngũgĩ is a giant figure who inspires and motivates writers all over the world to find their own voice and yet makes an outspoken case for the value of literature without borders.[5]

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016): Writing Resistance

Deconial struggles to liberate people from the yoke of colonialism is an ongoing project, even within postcolonial nations. Confronting the structural power of neo-colonial nation states after the formal overthrow of the colonial administration, decolonial struggles mark the continuation of exploitative and extractive conditions of life post formal

independence. When viewed through the lens of decoloniality, aggressive nationalism replicates the same structures of exclusion and hierarchy that colonialism once imposed. Instead of dismantling oppressive power dynamics, such a substitution often results in the marginalization of minority voices whether linguistic, cultural, religious, or caste-based, under the guise of reclaiming national identity. Thus, decolonization must aim for inclusivity and critical engagement, not simply a reversal of power that reestablishes dominance under a different name.

The history of India's emergence from a colony to a postcolonial nation state is marked by the narrative of people's struggle and agency. However, what is silenced or lost in this narrative are the moments of confrontation that mark this transition. This confrontation was not simply between the colonizer and the colonized but between the bourgeois nationalists who began to assert power after independence and the tribals or indigenous people who fiercely resisted the attempts towards proletarianization. Subaltern protests and peasant rebellion against state authority, multinational corporations' land-grabbing ventures, and institutional tolerance of spectacular sexual violence against lower-caste women have continued to expose the fault lines of Indian democracy.

Mahasweta Devi tells the stories of the most underrepresented, the most deprived, and the most exploited of India: those who are caught in the cycle of violence, exploitation, and oppression as body, worker, and object and are yet able to resist deep-seated caste prejudices, destabilize the notions of victim and violator, and problematize notions of hegemonic homogeneity that symbolize the idea of India. During the mid-80s, in Bengal, Mahasweta Devi took to journalism, left her college job, and started writing about small and unknown communities, distant people whom most did not even know existed. Initially, her energies were absorbed by the Adivasi struggle in Jharkhand, but later in the 90s, she also took to writing about the Lodhas and the Kheria Sabars (Devy 186). In the Sabar community, a

school was established with which she was associated. She started writing about the life of these people. She worked for the tribal communities and worked with them. Spending a lot of time in the forests and villages of east and central India, Devi gained a sharp insight into the ways in which these subaltern communities were treated by society and the state.

Although literature has long ceased to be the most effective medium of social criticism and the advancement of alternative visions, it yet remains a very important source of intervention, especially in the Indian context. Devi's works trouble the intersections of class, caste, and gender. Her writings take into account the intersectional oppression and exploitation of the Dalits and the tribals and converge to create what is now well known as "gendered subalternity".

Often set in rural India, Devi's writings scathingly reveal how the postcolonial nation-state continues to colonize its most marginalized. In her work the project of literary representation and translation is a thoroughly decolonial one. Redefining resistance through her revolutionary aesthetics, Mahasweta Devi turns the lens inwards, compelling the postcolonial nation state to encounter its own violence and confront it. Exposing the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy, Devi's interventionist and radical narrative praxis is a powerful attempt to advance subaltern representational politics. Her narratives—deliberately desentimentaliized and detached—present the predicament of Dalits and tribals who continue to live under feudal conditions within the modern nation-state.

Devi's works have courted controversy and raised the heckles of the Indian state. Her literary activism and political work in the rural hinterlands and forests of eastern and central India came under severe scrutiny and sanction from state authorities. However, her stories made it across the borders, crossing not just inter-state boundaries but also coming upon the world through translation. She is one of the writers whose works have been very productively translated from native Bangla to English, most notably by the very well-known academic and

scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Her works have been translated in all major regional as well as world languages. She has, like Tagore and Ngũgĩ, also translated her own works as well as been a translator for works by others.

Mahasweta Devi's works can be situated firmly in the circuit of world literature. Her literary activism inspired not just oppressed groups to fight exploitation within the nation-state but also found resonance in struggles for justice beyond national boundaries. Rooted firmly in the particular, in the local, Devi's writings vibrate through the world like a drum beat, moving outwards, gathering in force, disturbing the carefully curated calm that belies the collective rage fermenting beneath the surface. *Breast Stories* (1997), *Rudali (Female Weeper)* (1993), *Hajar Churasir Maa (Mother of 1084)* (1974), *Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest*) (1977), and her numerous other plays, essays, short stories, and novels are a testimony to the fact that resistance writing as an intellectual activity must be rooted in context yet must find a voice and life also outside of it. In fact, through translation of her work, Devi becomes a global literary icon, writing for all oppressed people who are fighting for land rights, reproductive rights, right to self-determination, justice, and freedom from capitalist exploitation.

Embodying the category of 'world writer', Mahasweta Devi dismantles the earlier projects of cultural decolonization which privileged diversity over organized struggle. Situating her writing as resistance, she expands the sphere of representation and interpretation; the translations of her work taking on an intertextual, polysystematic hermeneutics. Pushing readers to confront their own ignorance, bias, and inattentiveness; compelling readers to test their patience; opening up spaces for intercultural and uneven encounters; Devi's works both in original language and in translation amplify decolonial complexity and the provisionality of our own knowledge claims.

Conclusion

World literature has taken on a disciplinary life of its own with a rich methodological range. Developments that can be registered in, for example, *the Journal of World Literature by Brill* (2016), Aamir Mufti's *Forget English*! (2016), Siraj Ahmed's *Archaeology of Babel* (2017), Baidik Bhattacharya's *Colonialism, World Literature, and the Making of the Modern Culture of Letters* (2024), or the book series *Cambridge Studies in World Literature* (2024) edited by Debjani Ganguly and Francesca Orsini, present us with a field of study whose empirical depth, linguistic diversity, and methodological complexity make it a very promising area of scholarly engagement.

Stefan Helgesson in "World Literature and Decolonization" puts forward the idea that "world literature as a field of study is not historically doomed to reproduce just one imperial episteme, but rather that it emerges out of an uneasy dialectic between imperial and decolonial tendencies. For the world literature scholar desirous of pursuing a decolonizing trajectory, there is in other words much to build on, even as that dialectic also serves as a reminder of the inherent tensions in decolonization itself: one group's decolonization might transform into another group's subjugation under colonialism" (59). His incisive analysis of the decolonial project in world literature points to the heft in "global comparatist work" (58) which moves the compass as it were from the imperial origins to consider its conceptual history as "split and unstable" (58). Discussing Debjani Ganguly's critical take on the decolonizing approach to world literature, Helgesson points out that Ganguly's critique of world literature has potential to disrupt and decolonize what we have for long known and studied as world literature (58). In her chapter "Decolonizing World Literature," Ganguly observes that there is a striking difference between:

> influential theories of world literature that perpetuate a universalist narrative of European expansion and diffusion and the diversity of global comparatist work that

> illuminates cartographies of literary world-making across various scales and linguistic zones, and within temporal frames irreducible to European literary history or the capitalist world system. (421)

Ganguly proposes to study world literature along the axes of history, geography, and language:

> The historical axis illuminates the imperial backstory of current iterations of world literature in the rise of comparative philology and orientalist scholarship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It also pluralizes the temporal framing of world literature by reaching back to medieval and early modern instances of literary worlding in Arabic, Chinese, Latin, Persian, and Sanskrit and situates the contemporary valence of English in a literary longue durée. The cartographic axis highlights literary world-making athwart transregional zones such as the oceanic, the hemispheric, the archipelagic, and multilocal. [. . .] Finally, along the linguistic axis [. . .] the contemporary resonance of world literature and its counterpart, global anglophone, cannot be grasped unless we disaggregate English from imperial models of the past. (421)

Hence, decolonial complexity reigns in opposition to imperialist simplifications (Helgesson 59).

World literature today is a complex, contested terrain. Moving from David Damrosch's idea of elliptical refraction and translatability, to an encounter with untranslatability of other voices, world literature has no fixed rules. It is a constant and uneven interexchange between and among spaces and cultures, voices and mediums; language and literature. There is a lot of pressure to include writers who win prestigious awards like the Booker, the Pulitzer, the Sahitya Akademi, the Nobel, among others, while geopolitical concerns or national ideologies may play a big role in shrinking or expanding the frame, putting a strain on the legitimacy of the category itself. However, a decolonial approach seems to be one of the most fruitful analytical methods of studying and doing world literature.

Endnotes

[1] Gorky was referring to the peoples of revolutionary Russia and not specifically ethnic Russians. Quoted by Maria Khotimsky in her article "World Literature, Soviet Style. A Forgotten Episode in the History of an Idea." *Ab Imperio* 3 (2013), pp. 119–154.

[2] The Bolshevik government was quite heavily invested in translation as an ideological project to promote both domestic as well as international policies. Revolutionary Russia culminating in the formation of the USSR in 1922 promoted translation as a means of mediating between and unifying the different pre-existing linguistic communities within and beyond the borders of the state.

[3] The term *transcultural* was coined by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in his 1940 study (and his subsequent works 1963; 1995) to describe the merging and converging of cultures, to denote Afro-Cuban culture and its distinct characteristics. In Ortiz's coinage, the term meant existing cultures blending and becoming something new. Transcultural was a move away from acculturation and deculturation to signify the creation of a new cultural phenomena which was in most cases shaped by cultural domination, colonial conquest and subjugation of the colonized at that time. Ortiz provides devastating examples of the effects of Spanish colonial rule on Cuba's indigenous people. Uruguayan literary critic Angel Rama incorporated it into literary studies (applying it to the study of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, José María Arguedas, Juan Rulfo, Augusto Roa Bastos) and published his influential work *Writing across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America* (1982) and *The Lettered City* (1984). Rama became best known in the western academia for his idea of "narrative transculturation", developing it into the theory of literary transculturation. He used transculturation to describe the process of cultural negotiation between Latin American worldviews, its traditions and its values and the advanced centres of the Anglo-European world. His work pointed out how the art of highest standard came from the raw materials of

Latin American traditions; authors such as Arguedas was deeply aware of the uneven and unequal encounters between the centre and the peripheries and in their work foregrounded the insurgent vernacular; to restore, preserve and uphold native literary traditions and indigenous heritages. For recent works on the idea of transculturation and subaltern literary resistance to appropriation by the west, and a call for internationalisation of peripheral literatures see Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery* (2020).

[4] Metaxatos, Robert. Review of *The Language of Languages: Reflections on Translation*, by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 54 no. 1, 2023, p. 193-196. *Project*

MUSE, https://dx.doi.org/10.2979/ral.2023.a915648.

[5] https://seagullbooks.org/products/the-language-of-languages

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