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Indian Graphic Fiction as World Literature

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Abstract:

World Literature invokes not only a constellation of texts that have been in felicitous circulation but importantly also alludes to the notion of what constitutes the 'world'. In the last few decades, these ideas have been tested for their ideological congruities and consequently reframed the ways in which one views the relationship between the Global North and the Global South by initiating powerful South-South conversations. Placed within these larger debates, this paper will argue for ways in which locatedness in literary practices from India could be politically charged to inform new ways of doing 'world literature'. With its multidimensional text/image format that responds to layered lives in India, the comparatively recent form of the graphic novel holds promises of launching new idioms in the regrounding of the 'world literature'.

Keywords: World Literature, Global South, South-South Dialogues, Indian Graphic Novels, Locatedness, Decolonial Literary Practices, Text-Image Narratives.

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World Literature invokes not only a constellation of texts that have been in productive circulation but importantly also alludes to the notion of what constitutes the ‘world’. Over the last few decades these ideas have been tested for their ideological congruities and consequently reframed the ways in which one views the relationship between the Global North and the Global South by initiating powerful South-South conversations (Chakraborty 2020). Placed within these larger debates, this paper will argue for ways in which locatedness in literary practices from India could be politically charged to inform new ways of doing ‘world literature’. With its multidimensional text/image format that responds to layered lives in India, the comparatively recent form of the graphic novel holds promise of launching new idioms in the re-grounding of the ‘world literature’.

We are placed at the cusp of the radical re-imagining of our disciplines. After a major rejigging of English departments post the evolution of postcolonial and area studies and the proliferation of comparative literature departments, as the humanities undergo a serious reimagination in the era of techno-capitalism, we are in the midst of the resurgence of the ‘world literature’. At the outset, it is a promise to be seated among the major conversations in what constitutes as literary practice. But it also packs within it layered contingencies of semiotic ambivalences of location and language. After having been critically dismantled in the first phase of postcolonial theoretical movements in the English departments of the world, ‘world literature’ has made an astounding comeback. In the recent past there have been special issues on world literature (think South Asian Review), there are journals on world literature (Journal of World Literature, World Literature today) and book series by Cambridge University press and Springer on the same. The new-found respectability of the genre, particularly in the Global South, has probably much to do with the newer conceptualisations of the world rather than a dismantling of the hierarchies that shaped the Eurocentric views on World literature. Beginning with the early nineteenth century, the term gained prominence with the emergence

of the concept of weltliteratur through Goethe. Goethe envisioned a world of literary circulation based on the printing circuits of Europe that admitted literary practices outside the narrow geographical confines. Later such circulations came to imply capitalist and by extension colonial markets and complex ways of circulation. One is obviously reminded of the ways in which colonialism ensured certain literary practices were enforced through reading practices, often through the modern knowledge networks. In this regard among many, the works of Gauri Vishwanathan and Frantz Fanon come to our mind.[i] In the heydays of postcolonial theory this was played out most obviously in the debate on the status of third world literature and world literature between Frederic Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad. Jameson for all his Marxist critical faculties was blind to the ways in which his first world privileges and modes of reading informed his categorizations of the different worlds and their attendant literatures. Despite his best efforts at masking his Anglo-American reductionisms, he proposed to read 'third world literatures' as national allegories. Much like his predecessors, he viewed Anglo-American literature as the normative practice that evolved to engage with an interiority as opposed to the allegorical nature of third world literature. His appreciation of third world literature within world literature therefore was premised on an oppositional stance that blurred both geographical and temporal boundaries. Ahmad sought to clinically expose the hazardous nature of this presumption based on the efficacy of the 'English' publishing world and foisted on a flattened literary canon. In Ahmad's analysis the focus shifts to literatures beyond the English canon, including the practices of translation (Ahmad 1987). These discussions and their attendant problems of textuality, language, translations and circulations were debated across postcolonial classrooms and in many ways shaped the outcomes of comparative literary studies in the Global South (Dev 2000, 10). At the turn of the millennium David Damrosch moves the conversation to ways in which texts circulate and are received. His discussions on the feasibility of the term 'world literature' frequently bleed into considerations that inform the comparative

literature. In one of his early essays on the subject, he firmly placed American Anthologies on World literature as an anchor to read into the shifting paradigms of 'world literature' that began to accommodate literary practices outside the Western Canon (Damrosch 2000, 10; Cheah 2015).

In the recent past, particularly in the works of Baidik Bhattacharya and Debjani Ganguly there has been an attempt to puncture a neat conceptualization of 'world literature' anchored in the Global North. Bhattacharya (2018) attempts a radical repositioning. He suggests that an understanding of what constitutes world literature as merely radiating from a European prototype is at best misleading. The circulation and reception of texts outside of the European world never limited itself to the possibilities of reading that one might expect of European surveillance. In fact, he shows how texts were produced, circulated and adapted across postcolonial cultures were firmly located in the postcolonial practice. This reconceptualization re-routes decoloniality of disciplines in a direction that prioritizes re-iterations and move beyond stabilizing 'encounter' aesthetics.

Ganguly's recent work re-maps the comparativist framework, offering to open the discussion "along three axes: historical, cartographic and linguistic" (Ganguly 2025). While "[t]he historical axis 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 current 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. These crosscut the binaries of Global North and South, and resist being appropriated within a single world-system in which non-European worlds invariably appear as belated or derivative or minor." This framework intends to redefine the contexts of location and locatedness and a dialogue that very recently Orsini has continued: "the notion of location in world literature has been through genre. Each genre, as we know,

codifies a particular relationship between signifier and signified and thus establishes its own, recognizable idiom and rhetoric. But while each genre carves up the world and limits the universe of discourse according to its partial intention, it presents itself to the reader or listener as a whole (Conte). Therefore, to decode the location and perspective of a genre to the world – often in relation to other genres and discourses – is a rewarding exercise" (Orsini and Zecchini 2019, 8). These recent positions attempt to decentre notions of postcolonial locatedness even when it doesn't dismiss the centrality of the nation-state. A loose morphology of a world order as an afterthought of a world literature where boundaries are fuzzy dismisses radical disjunctures in the intellectual history of European modernity. Postcolonial positions have worked hard to reclaim the boundaries of these specificities even when it has contended it. Therefore, locations and their imaginations continue to play important roles in the ways identities, marginalities and more recently vulnerabilities and precarities have been mapped. Placed within these new directions in the studies of world literature, I propose that the graphic novel is a form which carries within itself the possibility of openness (endless reiterations and parody) and provides an apt receptacle for some of these conversations. Visualities are one of the earliest literacies that we develop and that circulate beyond the obvious parameters of the highly controlled world of the texts and textuality. The idioms of exchange and travel and its contentious relationship with the text offer a unique entry point into the ways of semiotic attachments and movements. The endless possibilities of reiteration, adaptations, parody and critical unease with stability and meaning making, make the graphic novel portable.

Graphic novel and World Literature

While its origins might trace back to the nineteenth century print cultures that incorporated various forms of storytelling, the modern graphic novel is widely believed to have formally begun with Will Eisner's "*A Contract With God*" in 1978. Its recent origins allow for a radical shift in storytelling that has routinely accommodated contemporary concerns within a

language of radical difference. The form's unique visual-verbal structure is proven have addressed complex global issues, particularly those emerging from the Global South. A recent edited volume by James Hodapp, *Graphic Novels and Comics as World Literature* (2022), argues for a dynamic notion of World literature that emerges from the Global South that confronts questions of "translation, commodification, circulation and Orientalism" (p.3). This collection of essays foregrounds the possibility of movement of ideas across the world through World Literature that can bridge cultural gaps and yet maintain local specificity. These specificities present themselves often as embedded visual cultural cues. These make the texts highly mobile, the visual nature of the text makes them more accessible for translation and international distribution than text heavy forms. Monika Schmitz-Evans begins by introducing the ideological implications of 'repetition' used in graphic texts. This includes the obvious use of quotes but also offers the possibility of constantly adapting from other literary texts. This offers a unique self-reflexivity that then defines the genre. Its modes of transference and circulation then add to "contribute efficiently to the process of levelling out the differences (or rather, the distinctions) between high culture and popular culture" (Schmitz-Evans 2018, 219).

The Indian Graphic novel that formally begins with Orijit Sen's "*River of Stories*" (1994) firmly positions itself in the league of graphic narratives from the Global South. Sen's graphic narrative writes resistance and Adivasi rights into a fluid form giving thereby framing new knowledge registers. In the choice of the subjects and its execution the Indian graphic novel has served a potent medium for decoloniality that serves to 'delink' from Eurocentric knowledge systems and narrative structures. Following in Sen's footsteps, the graphic form has engaged with subjects both visual, political and literary that other more established literary and artistic mediums have shied away from (Sarma 2018). By utilizing "decolonial visuality", Indian graphic narratives work towards reclaiming marginalised histories--- such as ecological displacements, Adivasi rights, Dalit experiences, communal riots and partition trauma--- and

creatively integrate indigenous art forms to challenge deep seated Western visual and literary conventions (Gupta, Bhattacharjee and Tripathi, 2024).

Read within this context, "a comparative postcolonialism could offer itself, then, as the methodological innovation of this formation in the same way that the postcolonial comparatism that Spivak proposes for a reformed comparative literature in the metropolitan United states academy is, but with more practical ease" (Rajan2020, xi). The prescient concerns that the form has addressed in India combined with a new vocabulary make possible the "slide from 'literary history' to 'world literature' the literary discipline makes a belated entry into the globalization debates, a time-honored, social-scientific inquiry into the time and place of uneven development" (Tanoukhi 2008, 599).

Translational worlds: Amitav Ghosh's *The Jungle Nama*

This section follows primarily the arguments that Radha Chakravarty foregrounds to position Amitav Ghosh's work as World literature. Her arguments are moored in the foundational principles of comparative literature studies in India. Following the role that Tagore's very radical use of the notion of *vishwasahitya* suggests, which eschews the possibility of loose universalism in the favour of a fiercely local literature with a global outlook, she sketches the terrain of the development of comparative literary praxis in India. She contends that translation holds the key to understanding this framework that is rooted in the postcolonial aesthetics of South Asia. She notes, "think a world literature connected by translation, as a dynamic field, 'a human universe' where differences and heterogeneities are not erased but instead seen as part of a web of interrelations between disparate elements that nevertheless have some shared features or common concerns" (Chakravarty 2021, 20). Chakravarty's framework incidentally offers to extend the notion of translation, from a language-language transfer to a more culturally fluid passage. This helps accommodate the diasporic community writing in English within this framework. I argue that the aesthetic

composition of *Jungle Nama, A Story of the Sundarban* (2021) brings to fruition these concerns of the emerging notions of world literature from the Global South. One of the most evocative aspects of this retelling of the folktale of Bon-bibi, the guardian deity of the forest of the Sundarbans and worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims, is the visual storytelling of Jungle Nama. The text is 'illuminated' by the Pakistani origin Salman Toor. Illumination in the case of visual arts in often used to refer to the act of adding decorative art pieces to medieval manuscripts often in the form of gold and silver to accentuate the reading the process.[ii] It has a long history in the Indian subcontinent in similar forms and practised through similar iterations in the manuscript tradition in India. The illumination of a medieval text with a continuous performing tradition opens a possibility for ideological recasting of the myth and the visual vocabulary that accompanies it. Toor is a contemporary artist based in New York who has evolved a modern visual vocabulary for predominantly brown queer people.[iii] Toor sacrifices his otherwise colourful palette for an intense interplay of black and white for giving life to an aesthetic vocabulary of the Sundarbans. Apart from the predominantly South Asian tropes of the forest, the fauna and the omnipresent boat, he chooses to draw apparitions of characters. Toor likely uses multiple brush-pens to integrate the white background into the picture as a structural light source. Sometimes working across the double-page spread, Toor uses the central gutter as a natural physical barrier that he then designs to bridge using fluid brush strokes. The thick heavy blocks complemented with thin lines and continuous strokes create a three-dimensional effect within the two-dimensional frame. Interestingly in his images the form borders on abstraction but is compensated by strong rugged brushstrokes that evoke raw nature with imageries of logs, crashing waves, undulating trees, steep cliffs, snakes, tigers and stormy seascapes. The high-contrast ink textures create a chiaroscuro effect. It immediately alerts the reader to the possibility of connecting this aesthetic with the linocut form. Toor's use of positive and negative space in the images reminds one of the relief carving process of the

linocut images. In the typical linocut, the artist carves areas of the linoleum block to reveal the white paper underneath and leaves the raised areas to absorb the black ink. Toor creates a similar effect by using the white paper as a structural element and then drawing out shapes within that with dense, negative black fields. The angular, sharp and jagged edges that we find in the drawings reminds one of the physical remnants of the linoleum cut. This aesthetic vocabulary links the text with the modernist art that emerged out of Shantiniketan, most prominently in the works of Nandalal Bose. Bose's famous linocuts that adorn the Bengali primer written in the poyar meter, *Sahaj Path* (1930), written by Rabindranath Tagore, is referenced here. The high-contrast relief printmaking techniques that Nandalal Bose used to create rustic images of Bengal in the era of modernist artistic awakening is referenced to create a nuanced contemporary vocabulary of climate aesthetics of South Asia.

Ghosh's attempts to render the tale in the established verse metre of oral forms in Bengali, the *dwipodi poyar* meter. This consists of a twenty-four syllable couplets, each line being twelve syllables long and punctuated by a caesura. This retains the oral/lyrical quality of the original composition which continues to be performed in parts of the Sundarbans. As Mousumi Mandal notes that it's difficult to ascertain whether three *Johurnama* texts of bonbibi written in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries by Boinuddin, Munshi Mohammad Khater and Mohammad Munshi were derivates of the performance or vice-versa (Mandal 2024). This 'in-betweenness' of a genre that lies between the realm of the textual and the performative forms the basis of the literary architecture of the text. Ghosh reminds us repeatedly throughout the text that it is the rhythm of the literary that invokes the goddess Bon-bibi and ensures that the order in the forest is restored. He begins the narrative by making an evocative appeal for the literary force that is embedded in the delicate bio-cultural ecosystem of the Sundarbans:

Thus did Bon Bibi create a dispensation,

That brought peace to the beings of the Sundarban;

Every creature had a place, every want was met,

All needs were balanced, like the lines of the couplet. (Ghosh 2021, 6)

Similarly, when Dukkhey confronts the hungry tiger and invokes the Bon-bibi, it is the powerful incantation that is cloaked within the rhythm that ensures that his prayers carry:

The bounded syllables gave wings to his prayer,

To Bon Bibi it went, arrowing through the air.

'What's this I hear?' she said, turning to her brother.

'A fevered cry from a soul about to suffer.

That ever-hungry shadow-stalker must be at large,

hunting some poor soul who is lost in his raj. (Ghosh 2021, 53)

As Shikha Vats has eloquently observed, the "*Jungle Nama* then becomes as much an ode to the *dwipodi-poyar* meter as it is a tribute to the legend of Bon Bibi" (Vats 2024, 183). One could argue that the foregrounding of the literary that attends to a geography sensitive ecological churning corresponds to what Chakravarty would call "forging of new literary vocabularies". In her words, "imagine a world literature where difference is not erased and diversity not 'managed' through strategies of containment is to enter a discourse where heterogeneity demands the forging of new literary vocabularies" (Chakravarty 2021, 23). This vocabulary is accorded a continuous motif of fluidity particularly in use of the 'sea' or water, a salient force that drives his narratives. As Michael points out, "Amitav Ghosh's work, for example, furnishes an exemplary proof text that fore-grounds this experience of being at sea and navigating, however imperfectly, a welter of cultures and languages and contested histories, an experience that has, for those who would think the world and literature today, a theoretical implication" (Michael, 333). The theoretical implication of this framework is also

reflected in the way that Ghosh has deliberated on the transference of knowledge and the birth of a new vocabulary:

> Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. It is not the same
>
> as comprehension, and it does not require an exchange of words: more often than not, we recognize mutely. The first syllable of the word recognition harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness—a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which we behold. Yet this flash cannot appear spontaneously; it cannot disclose itself except in the presence of its lost other. The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not of the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself. (Ghosh, 2015)

Read in terms of the graphic form with reference to his text, it implies the gradual unfolding of what he calls ‘recognition’. One might extend this argument to imply that a multimodal form like the graphic narrative allows for this gradual exchange ‘disclosing’ layers of historical and cultural conflicts that frame out ecological crises. An ecological sensitive space as the Sunderbands, can’t be understood within any singular disciplinary axis. The *Junglenama* subsumes the vegetal, corporeal, visual, mythopoeic, performative and affective axes. Each of these corresponds to a ‘recognition’ making the text operate at varied locations. These recognition and continuous processes of disclosure then allow the narrative to be read across frictional historical planes that demand engagements beyond its immediate geographic axis. These intersections allows for an expansive understanding and horizontal movements through forgotten archives that can translate into a charged reading of ‘world literature’.

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[i] In particular, Viswanathan, Gauri. "The beginnings of English literary study in British India." *Oxford Literary Review* 9.1 (1987): 2-26 and Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary study and British rule in India*. Columbia University Press, 1989. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2008.

[ii] "The term *illumination* originally denoted the embellishment of the text of handwritten books with gold or, more rarely, silver, giving the impression that the page had been literally illuminated. In medieval times, when the art was at its height, specialization within scriptoria or workshops called for differentiation between those who "historiated" (i.e., illustrated texts by relevant paintings) and those who "illuminated" (i.e., supplied the decorative work that embellished initial capital letters and often spilled into margins and borders and that almost invariably introduced gold in either leaf or powdered form)." https://www.britannica.com/art/illuminated-manuscript

[iii] "As Whitney curators Christopher Lew and Ambika Trasi have noted, Toor's project is one that examines 'vulnerability within contemporary public and private life and the notion of community in the context of queer, diasporic identity'." https://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/salman-toor#tab:thumbnails