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"Who's World?... Which Literature?": Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion Behind Canon Formation of World Literature

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Abstract:

The term 'World Literature' ideally includes all the literature, written in all the languages, by all the people all over the world, since time immortal till date. However, for all the practical purposes, such a broad definition and scope of the term becomes unfeasible. Therefore, pragmatism requires formation of a canon of 'World Literature', representative of the literary classics all over the world to be made easily available for the readers anywhere in the world. It brings forth the issues of selection and representation of literary classics; their availability for world readers beyond their source language through translations; and their appreciation, critical evaluation and appropriations / expropriations at a particular temporal and spatial moment. The present paper aims at addressing these issues through specific examples in the Indian context, such as, Charles Wilkins' translation of *The Bhagavat-Geeta* in English as a part of Orientalism; Rabindranath Tagore's own translation of *Gitanjali* in English to transcend the label of a *'mere Bengali poet',* and subsequent winning of the Nobel Prize as a token of recognition as a world poet; Bahinabai Chaudhari's confinement to the position of a mere Marathi poet; and finally, the access of common people to World Literature through translations.

Keywords: World Literature, Canon Formation, Inclusion, Exclusion.

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The term 'World Literature' ideally includes all the literature, written in all the languages, by all the people all over the world, since time immortal till date. However, for all the practical purposes, such a broad definition and scope of the term becomes unfeasible. Therefore, pragmatism requires formation of a canon of 'World Literature', representative of the literary classics all over the world to be made easily available for the readers anywhere in the world. It brings forth the issues of selection and representation of literary classics; their availability for world readers beyond their source language through translations; and their appreciation, critical evaluation and appropriations / expropriations at a particular temporal and spatial moment. The present paper aims at addressing these issues through specific examples in the Indian context, such as, Charles Wilkins' translation of *The Bhagavat-Geeta* in English as a part of Orientalism; Rabindranath Tagore's own translation of *Gitanjali* in English to transcend the label of a *'mere Bengali poet',* and subsequent winning of the Nobel Prize as a token of recognition as a world poet; Bahinabai Chaudhari's confinement to the position of a mere Marathi poet; and finally, the access of common people to World Literature through translations.

Need for the World Literature

Basically, a human being is born as a member of a small local community, at a specific time and place. To live his/her life successfully, s/he acquires the language of that particular community; which through its songs and stories, transmits its practical knowledge for survival, social and moral values, psychological sense of identity and belonging as well as its historical consciousness to the next generation to ensure its cultural continuity. In the pre-modern era, apart from the soldiers, traders and travelers, very few people actually met other people outside their immediate community; and for all practical purposes, their community was their whole world. As a result, local communities, languages and literatures thrived in the relative isolation at various temporal and spatial moments.

However, the European colonization of the world during last five centuries changed this scenario. The geographical discoveries of new lands, the political and economic domination of the 'other' people, the rapid progress in science and technology, and large-scale voluntary relocation / forced displacement of people across the globe, brought more and more people in contact with each other. Such people soon realized that the 'other' languages, communities, and cultures were radically different from their own and therefore incomprehensible. The encounters among such diverse people, though frequently resulted in conflicts, gradually, usured in an understanding of a world larger than their own community and a need to comprehend that larger world for harmony and peace. The easiest way to understand others seemed to be to familiarize with their stories and their underlying worldviews, which would result in better communication. Therefore, a need was felt for a standardized canon of 'World Literature' which can provide a bird's eye view of all the human experiences across time and space in a nutshell.

Interestingly, it was Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the famous German Romantic poet who first coined the term '*Weltliteratur'* as an antidote to the emerging narrow nationalism in Europe during early 19th century and its side-effects in the form of wars. He states, "There has for some time been talk of a Universal World Literature, and indeed not without reason: for all the nations that had been flung together by frightful wars and had then settled down again became aware of having imbibed much that was foreign, and conscious of spiritual needs hitherto unknown." (Qt. Goethe; Pizer) Inspired by his own insights gained through the study of Chinese novels, Persian poetry and Indian drama[1], he realized that the study of literary gems

[1] Max Muller quotes following words of Goethe to highlight his admiration for Kalidasa's play Shakuntala:

"Wilt thou the blossoms of spring and the fruits that are later in season,
Wilt thou have charms and delights, wilt thou have strength and support,
Wilt thou with one short word encompass the earth and the heaven,
All is said if I name only, [Shakuntala], thee."

from other nations and cultures can build bridges of understanding among rival people on the basis of their common humanity. He states, "I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men." (Qt. Goethe; Eckermann 209) Thus, almost for 200 years, the term 'World Literature' has been in circulation and from time to time, scholars have tried to define its canon for the ease of study.

Selection, Representation and Interpretation of Literary Classics in the World Literature

To translate a theoretical vision into a practical solution often proves to be more complex than first imagined. It is especially true for translations of literary classics in World Literature. The first practical issue one encounters is the selection of literary classics. Among the millions of literary pieces written in thousands of languages across time and space, which specific pieces are deemed to be worthy of the label 'classic'. Obviously, it depends on the personal whims and fancies of the individual who selects them for translation; and rather inadvertently, it naturalizes the personal / national / regional / racial / sexual / linguistic / socio-economic / cultural and other biases of such a selector, creating a quite slanted picture of the World Literature with over-representation of a certain type of literature at the expense of under-representation of another.

Let's illustrate this point with a specific example in the Indian context.

In 1785, Charles Wilkins translated *The Bhagavat-Geeta* in English. It was the first sacred Indian text to be translated in English directly from Sanskrit. It set the tone of representative Indian literary classic worthy to be included in the World Literature. This choice of a short, philosophical text over the large voluminous ritualistic texts like *Vedas* was significant as it suited the European notion of Semitic religion: "Central to it are the notions of the Revelation, the Prophet, and the Book… Krishna and his Song Celestial seemed to meet

the Semitic notion of a revealed religion. Here was an incarnation, a saviour who…revealed Himself through His Words. He seemed to fit into the Semitic pattern the Europeans knew of. Krishna became to Hinduism what Jesus was to Christianity, and the Bhagavad *Gita* the Hindu Bible." (Gowda 2-3) As a part of the larger project of Western Orientalism—aimed at political subjugation of the Orient to the Western domination, not just through the military force but also through the practical application of Michael Foucault's famous maxim 'knowledge is power', which in Edward Said's words sought "to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning." (Said 78)—this translation created "a fine, philosophical other-worldly view of the Orient" which Warren Hastings considered "an ideal means of propaganda to make a case for an Indianized administration" (Kothari 12) arguing,

> "Every accumulation of the knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the State …it attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our own countrymen the sense and obligation of benevolence." (Qt. Hastings; Kothari 12)

This contextualization further illuminates the issues of representation and interpretation. The Orientalist preference for Sanskrit over other Indian languages can be traced back to Sir William Jones whose "discovery of India as a nation with a literature, and a literature extending to remote antiquity" (Devy 78), achieved the paradoxical goal of simultaneous idealization and devaluation of India. Through his invention of the Indo-European Language Family, he obliquely sought to legitimize the British rule in India by tricking Indians into accepting their own subjugation as the Western validation of their superiority.

> "William Jones, who had arrived as a judge during Hasting's time as Governor General, pioneered the idea that the ancient classical languages of Sanskrit, Greek,

> Latin and Iranian have a common root. He labelled this family of languages Indo-European. It was his programme to establish the parallels between the languages and introduce the classics of ancient India to Western readers…The label Indo-European (rather than, say, Euro-Indian) had a profound significance on modern Indian perception of itself. The idea that one branch of Indo-Europeans—Aryans as they were called before the Nazis devalued the term—had come to India from somewhere in central Europe while others had gone to Greece gave Indians a claim to cousinhood with their masters. The idea of an Aryan 'invasion' which then settled and ruled over India took hold. Only the discovery in 1926 of the Mohenjo-Daro shook that idea somewhat. But until then the affinity between Sanskrit and Greek / Latin was a point of exclusive pride for many Indians.
>
> The translation of the *Gita* as the first Sanskrit text in English and later in other European languages confirmed its special status. Its compactness commended itself to foreigners as the best short introduction to Brahmanism. It hitched the star of Indian consciousness away from the rest of Asia and towards the West. The reception of *Gita* was part of the process whereby Indians recovered pride in their ancient culture." (Desai 11-12)

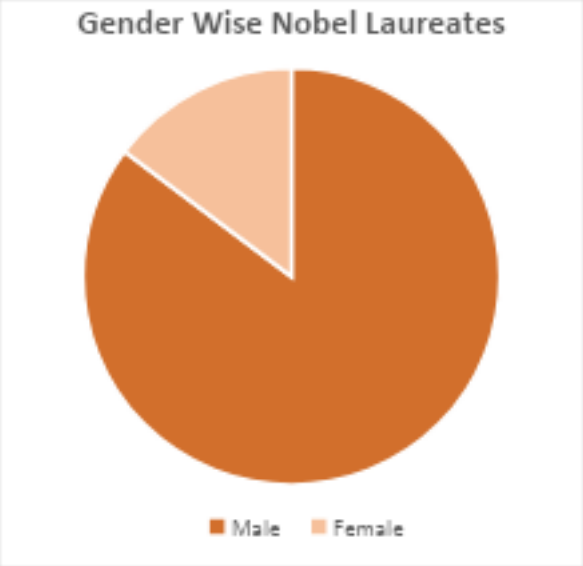
This exclusive Orientalist focus on Sanskrit and its outdated ancient texts representing 'authentic' textual account of India, and the corresponding exclusion of contemporary Indian languages and literatures to the point of deeming them not only 'insignificant' but also 'non-existent', succeeded in the construct of a homogeneous a-temporal, irrational Indian subject against the rational and historical Oriental scholar. It completely ignored the differences of caste, class, language, region, religion, and gender among the Indian subjects and their historicity; thereby facilitating the total erasure of the already marginalized subaltern groups such as tribal or untouchable. Its underlying logic (?) implied that India was great in the past but is despondent in the present; Indians themselves are incapable of appreciating and rejuvenating their rich cultural heritage; and therefore, now it is the responsibility of the superior British scholar-administrators (in Rudyard Kipling's words 'White Man's burden') to restore India's glory by discovering, appreciating, analyzing and propagating the wisdom of

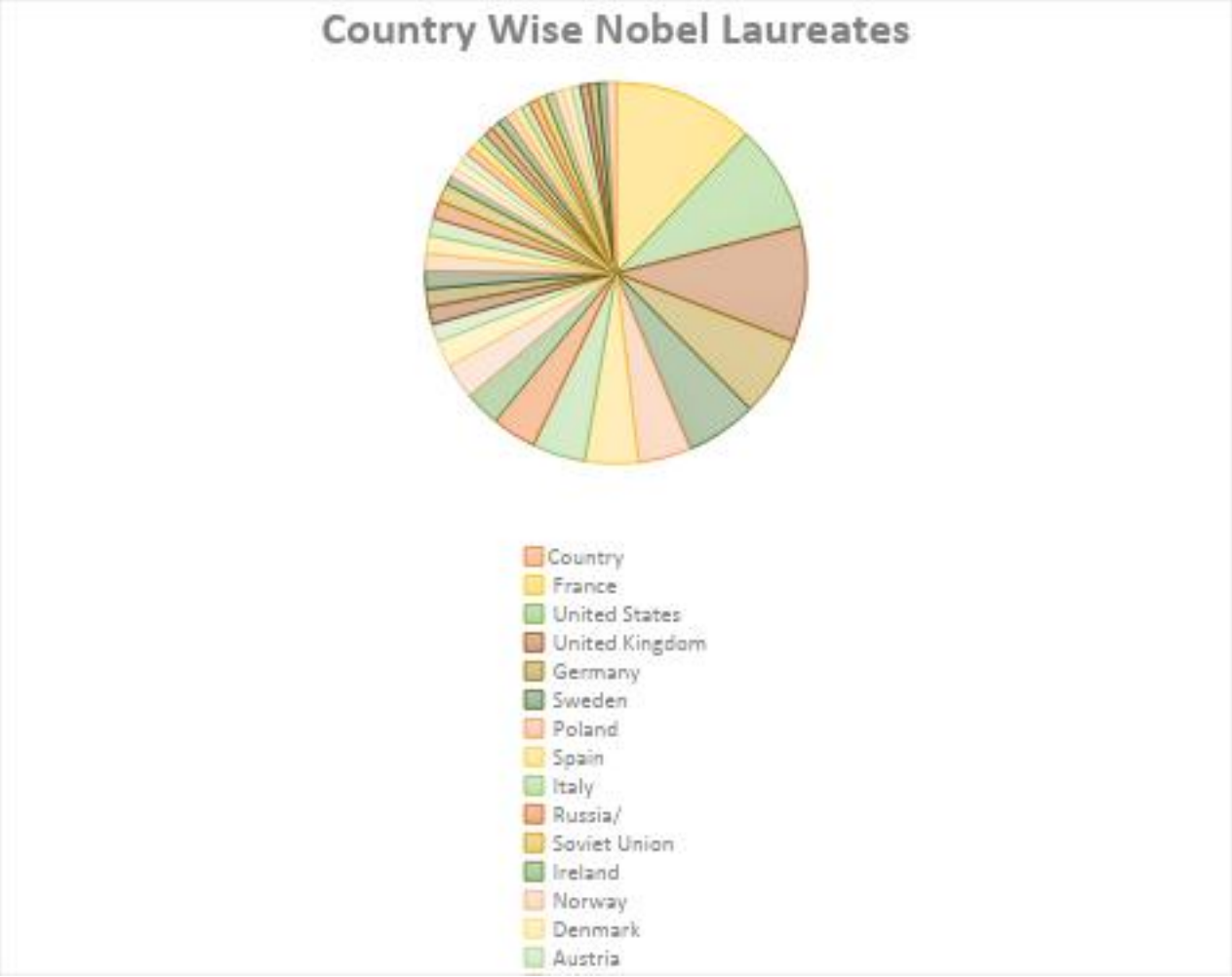
ancient Indian literature as a part and parcel of World Literature. Thus, selection, representation and interpretation of *The Bhagavat-Geeta* as the Hindu Bible by British scholars defined the Indian ethos and pathos for not only the outside world but also the Indians themselves.

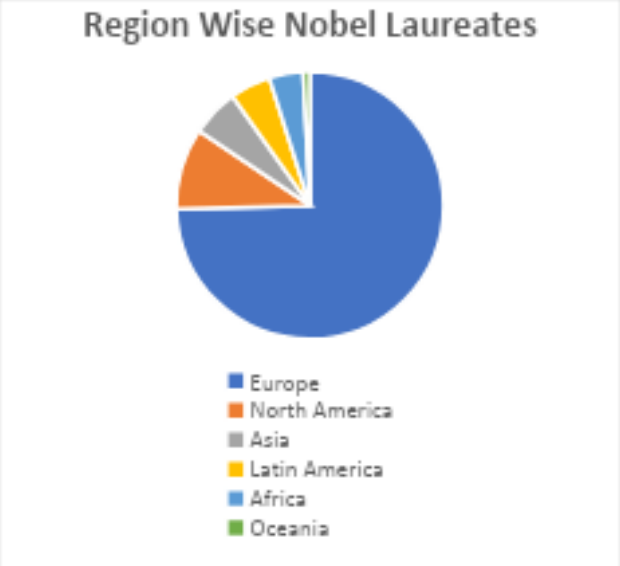
Interestingly, Indians, mostly unaware of the historical context of colonial motivation of the Orientalism, as well as, the genesis of the idea of World Literature, generally perceive the inclusion of *The Bhagavat-Geeta* in the list of literary classics of World Literature as a litmus test of India's glory: "the west began not only to make efforts to understand, but value India and her culture" (Kejriwal 21). This lack of understanding about how subtly the appropriation of an Indian text by Western scholars under the guise of World Literature has tricked Indians to consent to their own political as well as psychological colonization, needs considerable deliberation. It has distorted the perception of Indians about themselves whereby they perceive their own 'Mother Tongues', the regional languages and literatures as local, lesser, or inferior, and not worthy of the title of World Literature. By creating a false hierarchy of languages in their minds—with English at the top of the world, Sanskrit at the top of India, regional Indian languages at the middle, and other oral/local/tribal languages at the bottom; and with other major world languages mostly missing from the whole rubric—Indians marginalize and devalue their own 'Self', languages, literatures and life experiences contained therein. This realization requires the radical redefinition of the term World Literature as well as expanding its horizons to include languages and literatures on the margins.

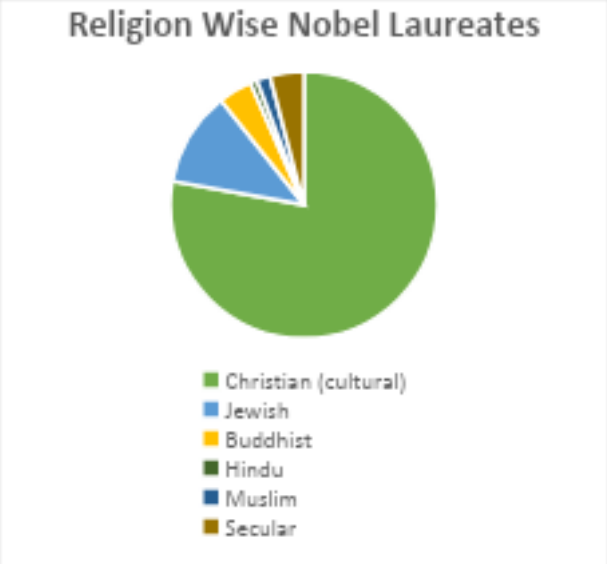
Redefining the Canon of World Literature

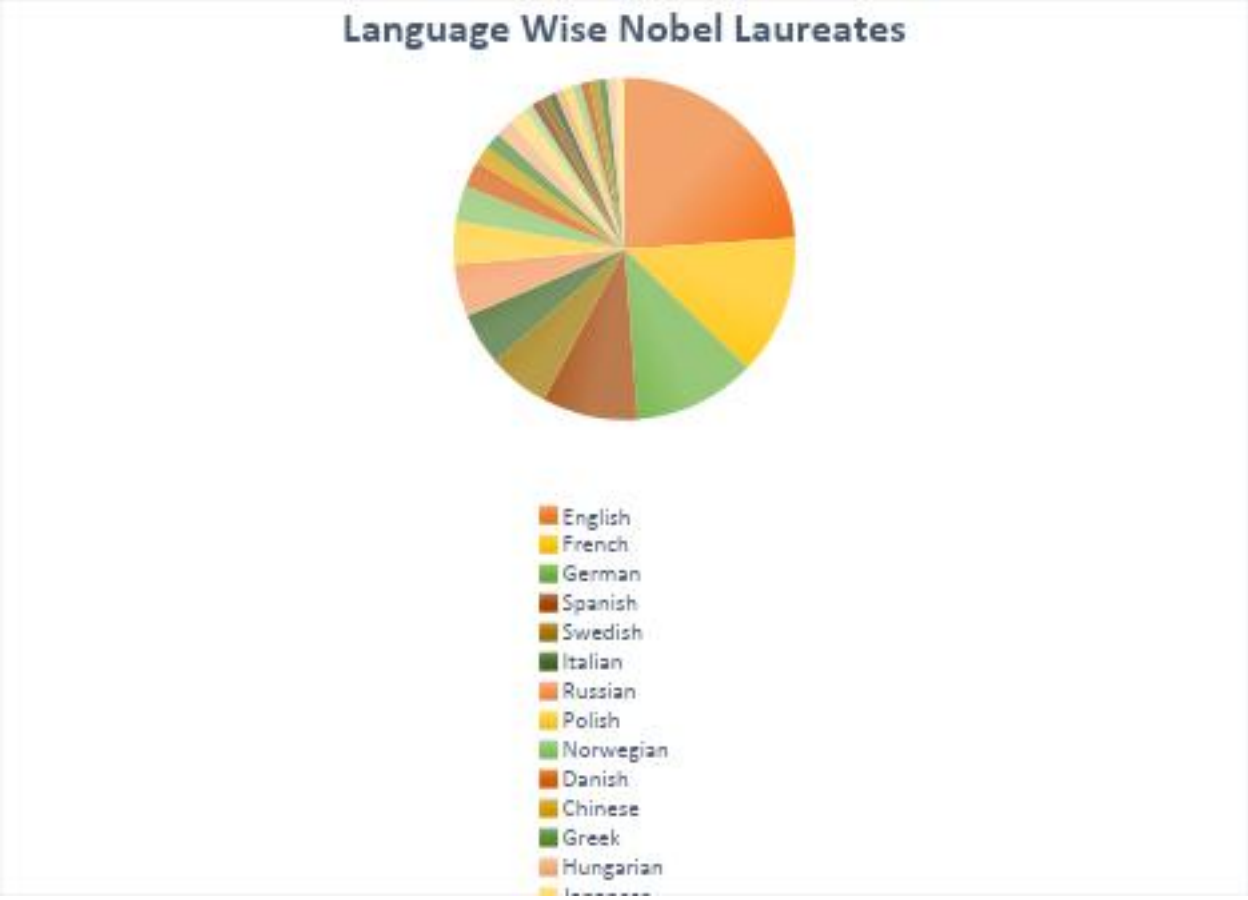
If one considers the Nobel Prize in Literature as a representative list of literary gems in World Literature, the over-representation and under-representation of certain groups reveal the inherent bias in the selection process itself. For instance, out of 122 winners (from 1901 to 2025), 104 are men; 91 are Europeans; 16 are French nationals; 95 are Cultural Christians; and 29 belong to English language group.






Region Wise Nobel Laureates
Europe
North America
Asia
Latin America
Africa
Oceania


Religion Wise Nobel Laureates
Christian (cultural)
Jewish
Buddhist
Hindu
Muslim
Secular



Considering the fact that Asia is the largest populated continent with only seven winners, while Europe with its tiny population has 91 winners; the very nomenclature of 'World Literature' appears to be ridiculous, revealing its true nature as a mere euphemism for Eurocentrism.

In his book *Eurocentrism,* Sameer Amin explains how racism, capitalism and colonialism are integral to the so-called 'modernity' promoted by the western scholars as a desirable global developmental mission, who take for granted its singular and linear nature derived from Europe's recent past and uncritically prescribe it as an ideal goal for the so-called 'developing' nations. Thus, ideologically, as a double-edged sword wielded by the Europe against the rest of the world, it automatically filters out authentic ethnic features of non-European nations as backward on one hand; and on the other, treats their organic modernity and progress as a mere imitative and derivative characteristic, secondary to the original modernity of Europe. In case of World Literature, Eurocentrism remains the unchallenged

norm, with western academia and publishing industry influencing the canon formation through explicit inclusion and implicit exclusion of certain texts and authors from the list of global importance.

The subtle impact of Eurocentrism on non-European authors aspiring for global recognition can be ascertained from the analogous lament for a black man's always-already exclusion from the desired white culture in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks.* Fanon says, "For the black man, there is only one destiny and it is white." (Fanon 12) For Fanon, being colonized by a language has larger implications for one's political consciousness: "To speak...means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 17-18). So, a non-European author writing or translating in a European language for the European audience is automatically coerced into accepting the European collective consciousness, and thereby abandoning or at least significantly compromising his/her own native collective consciousness.

Thus, in stark contrast to Goethe's idealistic vision of World Literature as a bridge of understanding among rival nations to promote peace and harmony; its reality has turned out to be hegemonic in a truly Gramscian sense, used as what Ngugi calls 'the cultural bomb':

> *"*The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves." (Ngugi 3)

Apart from its economic, military and technological domination, Europe has achieved "a predominant influence and power" over the rest of the world by developing and unleashing a weapon as deadly as the nuclear bomb viz. 'the cultural bomb' in the guise of World Literature which has "succeed[ed] in making its ideological view" of the world "so pervasive" that rest of the world has "unwittingly accept[ed] and participate[d] in their own oppression". (Abrams 151)

In this Eurocentric perspective of the World Literature, a tiny group of white protestant heterosexual male writers automatically becomes universal, while all others (people of all non-white shades of color, non-Christians, queer and women) remain confined to their narrow-hyphenated identity. Their literature is called by various names such as black literature, women's literature, queer literature, new literature, postcolonial literature, tribal literature etc. which otherizes them in the very process of acknowledging them as a part (but never the whole) of World Literature. While European (white protestant heterosexual male) authors are acknowledged as 'World Class Writers' in their own language who deserve to be translated in other languages for the betterment of the target audiences; the non-European 'other' writers need to be translated in the European languages to be appreciated, critically evaluated and accepted as the 'World Class Writers' by the target audiences. In other words, European authors become global when they are appreciated by their own local literary circle; but the non-European authors become global only when they are acknowledged as such beyond their local literary circle by the European audience.

This oblique prioritization of European over non-European in World Literature creates a number of logical fallacies. For example, the literature of former colonies of UK is called either Commonwealth Literature (where all the wealth actually belonged to the diverse colonies, and only common factor among them was oppression by the Great Britain), or New Literatures (to suggest amateur/immature literature as opposed to old classical English literature), or Postcolonial Literature (obliquely focusing on their colonial domination by European nations and disregarding their long history before and after colonization). As a result, great Indian poet Kalidasa, who historically lived and died even before Shakespeare was ever born, was referred as India's Shakespeare; yet Shakespeare was never called England's Kalidasa. Similarly, despite being originally written in Bengali, as the finest creation in the long continuous tradition of spiritual and mystical poetry in India, Rabindranath Tagore's

Gitanjali was considered great and worthy of Nobel Prize in 1913 only when he translated it from Bengali to English and then an Irish poet W. B. Yeats considered it to be excellent. Subsequently, as a first non-European Nobel Laureate of Literature, for the Western audience, Tagore became the personification of India, symbolizing the binary dichotomous view between spiritual India and rational West. This image was to a large extent a product of Europe's deliberate disregard of Tagore's political views and an attempt to appropriate him into the stereotypical Oriental discourse. Tagore, well-informed of both the Indian and Western traditions of literature, understood this politics of representation in World Literature, and successfully achieved his rightful place in the tradition of World Literature without losing his individuality as well as Indian identity. Rita Kothari points out the irony precisely in the following words:

> "Tagore himself was not unaware of the damage he had done to his poetry. He confessed, *"When I began this career of falsifying my own coins I did it in play. Now I am becoming frightened of my misdeeds and withdraw into my original vocation as a mere Bengali poet"* (1948:264). Sisir Kumar Das notes how Tagore's desire to translate into English was determined by not wanting to remain a *'mere Bengali poet'*. However, his own effort at translation, was a culmination of well-meaning efforts of personal friends to translate him (see Das, 1994). The turning point took place when Tagore carried his poems to England and W.B. Yeats chanced upon them. The rest, as they say, is history." (Kothari 22)

Regrettably, even today the situation has not improved. The names of Indian writers featuring in the prestigious list of World Literature hardly go beyond the certain renowned writers and their works, representative of certain categories, such as Kalidasa (Classical Sanskrit Literature), Sant Tukaram (Medieval Bhakti Literature), Mirza Ghalib (Late Mughal Persian / Urdu Literature), Rabindranath Tagore (Modern Bengali Nationalist Literature), Munshi Premchand (Hindi Progressive Literature), Saadat Hasan Manto (Urdu Partition Literature), Anna Bhau Sathe (Marathi Dalit Literature), R. K. Narayan (Indian English

Literature), and Mahasweta Devi (Bengali Tribal Literature) etc. This selective representation preemptively excludes those organic writers who's medium of expression is the spontaneous oral utterance in their own local dialects and who lack the privileged access to the academic / literary circles due to their subordinate position in the socio-economic-political-cultural hierarchies. For instance, Bahinabai Chaudhari, an illiterate widowed farmer woman, composed oral songs (Ovi) in her local Khandeshi dialect of Marathi which contained the pragmatic wisdom, gained through the truthful living of rural Indian folks for generations. Posthumously, her poems were published by her son Sopandev which brought to limelight her literary genius which can be compared to the pure gold. Though, today she is recognized as a major Marathi rural poet, and her poems are translated in English; yet, she is still to be accorded a respectful position in the hall of fame of World Literature.

As the other side of the writer / reader coin of World Literature, the majority of Indians who lack the privileged access to the reading culture, due to illiteracy or barriers of caste, class, religion, region, language, gender etc., are not even aware of the idea of World Literature. For them, even in the era of globalization, their world is limited up to their small local circle. Though the innovations in Information and Communication Technology, and a boom in social media platforms like Facebook and What's App, have brought the world in their fist, in the form of smart mobile phones (as promised by Dhirubai Ambani's Reliance Industries' catchy slogan *"Kar Lo Duniya Muthhi Mein…"*); the algorithms of ICT have actually created millions of little social media bubbles, which like a collection of innumerable glass fishbowls containing only a small number of fish each, have created an illusion of transparent broad vision, but in reality, have restricted the horizons of experience of their members to a very limited space. As a result, today we are living in a number of parallel universes simultaneously. It is not very uncommon, to realize that people sharing the same physical space, do not necessarily share the same worldview. For instance, a person traveling by a Mumbai local train may be watching

funny Bollywood reels, while a person sitting next to him might be chanting a holy hymn, and a person sitting opposite to him, might be contemplating on vising a Baba Bangali to solve his existential problems as promised by the poster pasted on the wall of the train compartment. In the meanwhile, a person sitting in the corner, may be quietly reading Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore,* connecting the dots between existential philosophy of Sartre, Camus and Kafka; its influence on Murakami, its relevance or irrelevance to herself and people around her, and the overall futility of the whole exercise. In such a fragmented world, the very concept of World Literature becomes absurd unless and until the person who is actually facing the existential crisis in his/her daily life becomes aware of his/her condition and is able to connect with another such person at the other end of the world through literature. In other words, only if a common person turns to reading books to find solace from the daily struggles of his/her life and finds that the classics of World Literature (and not just English Literature), such as, Leo Tolstoy (Russian), Albert Camus (French), Pablo Neruda (Chilean), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Columbian), Toni Morrison (African American), Leslie Marmon Silko (Native American), Naguib Mahfouz (Egyptian), Chingiz Aytmatov (Kirgiz), Chinua Achebe (Nigerian), Ngugi Wa Thiongo (Kenyan), Mo Yan (Chinese), Han Kang (Korean), Yasunari Kawabata (Japanese), Melissa Lucashenko (Indigenous Australian), to name a few, are easily available in his/her local dialects, that the whole idea of World Literature remains relevant.

Conclusion

So, in a nutshell, it is necessary to redefine and expand the canon of World Literature to make it truly representative of the whole world, by creating a global consciousness which goes beyond Eurocentrism and shifts its focus from center to the margins. In the Indian context, it requires two-way flow of translations from local Indian languages to other major global languages and vice versa. If it can be done directly without the intervention of English, it can become all the more effective. However, the present scenario does not seem to be conducive

to such an idealistic vision at least in the near future. So, one can only hope that the long-term active engagement with World Literature in the form of divergent selection, translation and interpretation of texts will eventually promote and propagate mutual respect, harmony and peace among various nations as originally visualized by Goethe. Till then, the questions must remain burning in one's mind: *"Whose World?... Which Literature?"*

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Appendix 1: Gender Wise Nobel Laureates

Gender	Male	Female
Number of Laureates	**104**	**18**

Appendix 2: Country Wise Nobel Laureates

Country	**Number**
France	16
United States	12
United Kingdom	13
Germany	9
Sweden	8
Poland	6
Spain	6
Italy	6
Russia/ Soviet Union	5
Ireland	4
Norway	4
Denmark	3
Austria	2
Canada	2
Chile	2
Greece	2
Hungary	2
Japan	2
South Africa	2

Country	Number
Switzerland	2
China	2
Australia	1
Belarus	1
Belgium	1
Bulgaria	1
Colombia	1
Czechoslovakia	1
Egypt	1
Finland	1
Guatemala	1
Iceland	1
India	1
Israel	1
Mauritius	1
Mexico	1
Nigeria	1
Peru	1
Portugal	1
Romania	1
Saint Lucia	1
South Korea	1
Tanzania	1
Turkey	1
Yugoslavia	1

Appendix 3: Region Wise Nobel Laureates

Region	Europe	North America	Asia	Latin America	Africa	Oceania
Number of Laureates	91	12	7	6	5	1

Appendix 4: Religion Wise Nobel Laureates

Region	Christian (cultural)	Jewish	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Secular
Number of Laureates	95	14	5	1	2	5

Appendix 5: Language Wise Nobel Laureates

Language	Number of Laureates
English	29
French	16
German	14
Spanish	11
Swedish	7
Italian	6
Russian	6
Polish	5
Norwegian	4
Danish	3
Chinese	2
Greek	2
Hungarian	2
Japanese	2
Arabic	1
Bengali	1
Czech	1
Finnish	1
Hebrew	1
Icelandic	1
Korean	1
Occitan	1
Portuguese	1
Serbo-Croatian	1
Turkish	1
Yiddish	1