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Review of David Damrosch's "*What is World Literature?*"

Reviewed By
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It is widely recognized that the field of world literature continues to generate debate since its coming into being and till today. Jing Tsu, for example, asserted that "till today there is no consensus as to what world literature should be or what it should do for the world (291). David Damrosch in his book "*What is World Literature?*" was mainly concerned about exploring the mode of circulation and clarifying the ways in which works of world literature can best be read. Moreover, his book highlights the issues of translation and focuses on detailed case studies ranging from the Sumerians to the Aztecs and from medieval mysticism to postmodern meta-fiction. In his introduction, Damrosch pointed out that for Goethe and for Marx and Engels as well, "*weltliteratur*" meant the end of national literatures. He used Goethe's concept of "*weltliteratur*" as a starting point to build his own arguments. However, the idea of world literature was confined to certain parts of the world-namely Europe. It was an idea revolving around classics and masterpieces. It was only recently that Eurocentrism was questioned and challenged by a global perspective. Damrosch tells us that literature is transformed and ceases to be national when it crosses borders. He also attempted to provide the reader with his interesting view, as an expert, of what world literature should be.

As for the meaning of the term "World Literature", Damrosch defines it as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in the original language"(4). As he views, the acceleration of globalization has greatly complicated the idea of world literature. Yet he says that "it can continue to mean a subset of the plenum of literature" (4). His definition doesn't delimit world literature to something functional; rather he states that "world literature consists of a huge corpus of works which stem from widely disparate societies, with very different histories, frames of cultural reference and poetics" (5). Indeed, this is the nature of world literature the invariability of which poses problems and challenges for the reader and the critic as well. Damrosch did not subscribe to the idea of "archetypes" or "variants", regarding them as "vague generalities that hold less appeal today (5). For him, the variability of a work of world literature is one of its constitutive features-one of its greatest strength. Though he

didn't explicate it further, I observed that, world literature for Damrosch is not about canon, but rather a mode of circulation and of reading.

Undoubtedly, the major issues regarding world literature today are of translation, circulation and reading. Who decides whether a particular work is to be translated and circulated as world literature? What criteria are used for the inclusion of a work in world literature? If it is a matter of circulation, then only certain works will come into prominence, such as works that win Nobel Prize. The second problem is that of translation. Some countries have less contact with the West, and thus the chance of translation is rare, though one may find works of astonishing beauty and high quality. Damrosch emphasized that "reception of texts has to do with the American interests and needs than with genuine openness to other cultures" (18). Based upon this, the scope of world literature is still restricted, and Damrosch rightly articulated that "foreign works will barely be translated at all unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question" (18). This is one of the strong points that Damrosch presented in his book. Some writers, as it is known, in order to attain international fame, align themselves with western ideologies to achieve their purposes. They sometimes work against the interest of their nations, denouncing their cultures as well as religions in an attempt to attract the western secular view.

Another problem of reception that Damrosch perceived is that of production. As he says, "a growing proportion of works has been produced primarily for foreign consumption" (18). Nowadays publication houses look for and select works that satisfy the demands of their readers. For example, Amazon has created a huge market that one can access from any part of the world. In one sense, I think such enterprises and publication houses would positively facilitate circulation of works of world literature and make them within the reach of everyone regardless of region, race or religion. In another sense, as Damrosch stated in his introduction, the acceleration of globalization complicates the idea of world literature. Despite all this, I think world literature can function as a site for those authors of successful works, for those who have small audiences and also for those who are censored in their countries. This is something valuable, since great authors, particularly from Third World countries, can get a chance to be translated and read in foreign countries. World literature also opens a wide window for those whose works are censored and confiscated. For example, *Cities of Salt*, a novel written by Abdul

Rahman Munif, is still censored in Saudi Arabia though its author died years ago. Also *Hurma* by Ali Al Muqri and *Land of Jasmine* by Wajdi Al Ahada, modern Yemeni novels which revolted against society and exposed the devastating image of women in Yemen, are censored. Such works found world literature as the arena where they can breathe freely. However, Damrosch recognized a lurking devil in such an approach. As he says, “writing for publication abroad can be a heroic act of resistance against censorship and an affirmation of global values against local parochialism; yet it can also be a further stage in the leveling process of a spreading global consumerism”(18).Here Damrosch warns against the commodification of art, which has taken several forms these days.

Damrosch stated that “the works of world literature are windows on different parts of the world” (24). Nonetheless, the problem lies in examining the new life that world literature works take on. We know that most of world literature works are only read in translations. Damrosch emphasized that “we need to look closely at the ways a work becomes reframed in its translations and its new cultural contexts” (24). World literature, according to him, is constituted very differently in different cultures. For example, world literature in Brazil has long been shaped by a different set of forces. As he maintained, “Even a genuinely global perspective remains a perspective from somewhere, and global patterns of the circulation of world literature take shape in their local manifestations” (27). Addressing the issue of translation “what is lost and what is gained”, Damrosch made it clear that “we can gain a work of world literature but lose the author’s soul” (36).However, he later indicated that works gain in translation.

Damrosch brilliantly delineated a picture of one facet of world literature, that of circulation and reception. Despite all his efforts, his idea of “close reading” may not be viable for some. As I think, it is not easy for one to provide a full context for a particular text, especially for those who come from other cultures and speak other languages. Damrosch conceived of world literature not as a canon of works but as matter of circulation and reception. He also proposed that works that thrive as world literature are those that work well and even gain in various ways in translation. Nonetheless, his approach remains tied to close reading of individual works. Reading is not really a sufficient condition for understanding history and calling upon it. Franco Moretti (2010) argued that “the scale of world literature far exceeds what can be grasped by traditional methods of close reading” and he advocated instead what terms “distant reading” that

would look at large-scale patterns as discerned from publication records and national library histories, enabling one to trace the global sweep of forms”(57). Moretti also stresses that “reading more seems to be hardly the solution” (55).

Damrosch gave also positive remarks about world literature. He admitted that “the contemporary world offers an extraordinary vibrant and varied landscape. He examined how works of world literature change when they move from their local context to the global one. He is of the opinion that works of literature gain in translation, as they are affected and shaped by both the local culture as well as the receiving global culture. However, he laments the idea that foreign works often get distorted as they undergo the process of translation and circulation. Damrosch really supported his arguments and made them replete with examples, making his ideas run smoothly throughout the book with persuasive power and intelligent shifts.

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