

TOWARD A DYNAMIC DEFINITION OF WORLD LITERATURE: M. G. VASSANJI'S MOSAIC OF CHANGE

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Abstract. The present paper looks at one of the most widely discussed cases of a writer who comes from the in-between of the colonial relations in Africa, M. G. Vassanji, who is of Asian origin but born and raised in East Africa and educated in the USA to become a Canadian citizen, from the perspective of the current debate on world literature. Although the works of Vassanji devoted to Africa, such as his 2013 novel *The Magic of Saida* and his 2014 memoir *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*, have been discussed by a number of critics (cf. Gurav Desai's *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*, CUP, 2013), the present paper engages the creation of Vassanji's imaginary Africa as part of what David Damrosch in his book *What is World Literature* calls "an understanding of world literature as an elliptical refraction of national literature" (2018: 283). Thus the image of Africa is interpreted in the present paper as partaking of both fields, that of the national/ethnic and the global/world creating in that way loci that are both specific and universal, liminal and cross-overs of cultures and identities.

Keywords: World Literature, M. G. Vassanji, Goethe, Kant, Canada

Галина Аврамова. КЪМ ДИНАМИЧНО ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ НА СВЕТОВНАТА ЛИТЕРАТУРА: М. Г. ВАСАНДЖИ И НЕГОВАТА МОЗАЙКА НА ПРОМЯНАТА

Резюме. Статията разглежда през перспективата на текущия дебат за световната литература, един от най-широко дискутираните писатели с междуколониален африкански произход, М. Г. Васанджи, известен с азиатското си потекло, роден и израснал в Източна Африка и образован в САЩ, за да стане гражданин на Канада. Въпреки че произведенията на Васанджи, посветени на Африка (романът му от 2013 г. „Магията на Сайда“ и мемоарите му от 2014 г. „И домът беше Кариаку: Спомен за Източна Африка“), са обсъждани от редица критици (вж. Търговията на Гурав Дезай с Вселената: Африка, Индия и африканското въображение, CUP, 2013), настоящият текст разглежда създаването на въображаемата Африка на Васанджи като част от

това, което Дейвид Дамрош в книгата си „Какво е световна литература“ нарича „разбиране на световната литература като елиптично пречупване на национална литература“ (2018: 283). По този начин тълкуваме тук образа на Африка: както като част от областта на националното/етническото, така и като част от областта на глобалното/световното, следователно създавайки локуси, които са едновременно специфични и универсални, гранични и пресичащи култури и идентичности.

Ключови думи: световна литература, М. Г. Васанджи, Гьоте, Кант, Канада

The conceptualization of World Literature that drew from the premise of universal globalization as held by Goethe and Kant has fragmented, opening a new frontier from which boundary the diverse perspectives such as those found in Moyez G. Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida* (as well as *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*) have progressed through the liminal space, etching resonance and truth value that forever alters the context of World Literature. Far from being a vision of difference between the perceived objectification of meaning traditionally gained by the colonizer over the lesser that suggests constraints of meaning, Vassanji's voice demands application of Derrida's *différance*, in which the entirety of world literature can only be considered as situated within "the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside" (Derrida, J. 2016, 70). Vassanji demands fresh consideration of this relationship; however, the author forces this consideration through the lens of the other, instead of through the convenient lens grounded and focused upon the assumptions of the colonialist ideal. The result is the profound realization that world literature as such defies convenience in description, requiring instead dynamic reworking, rethinking, and redefinition.

World literature, as a construct, has certainly been a feasible title for the entirety of literature that has been created by authors and enjoyed by readers from the beginning of the written word. Yet the reception of these multiple forms of literature throughout the globe from a critical perspective was solidified in the words of Goethe who used the term *Weltliteratur* to confine the international works of literature and place them alongside the works celebrated in Western Europe. To a certain extent, Goethe's coining of the terminology is in itself a form of colonization: Goethe, as a Western European, lends legitimacy that was previously absent to literature from other nations. As Damrosch reminds in his analysis of Goethe's correspondence with Johann Peter Eckermann, Goethe stated: "I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same" (Damrosch, 1). The view of literature from other nations is not that of an endorsement of the familiar, but as the different: as the creation of the other. This othering is not likely to have been a deliberate act of subordination; however, it is certain that the frame of reference of quality and legitimacy upon which the reception of Damrosch's "foreign" (Damrosch, 1) literature gains favor is in the hands of the colonizer, not the colonized. The extent to which the othering distorts

perceptions or even shapes artificial perceptions of cultural value relies upon the power of the occupying culture to assert or the occupied culture to reject. Given the assertion of rectitude of cultural value that encompasses the process of othering, the legacy may be even of a greater consideration than the assertion or rejection. To a certain extent, rejection and adoption operate dialectically; however, the legacy gains legitimacy of the subordination itself, creating a context within which the literature that emerges from the culture no longer represents the purity of the culture. Instead, the emergent product reflects a new society in which the negotiation of power forms the backdrop of all interrelations.

In this sense, Damrosch claims that Goethe may have seen a value in the literature from other lands, and indicated as much in stating “we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model” (Damrosch, 12) Yet Goethe’s assumption of the value of the Western canon and its foundation afforded by the Greeks in favor of all other forms of literature is certain: “We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Servian, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen; but if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented.” (Damrosch, 12). For Goethe, World literature should be appreciated, but only from the model of Western excellence. Goethe heralded the “epoch of world literature” (Damrosch, 12); however, that epoch will be critically evaluated from the ruler of Western superiority and the inferiority of all “foreign” (Damrosch, 1) texts. This perspective diminishes even equitable juxtaposition of differences and instead endorses a social order that has been nurtured for centuries, all in favor of the dimensions justified by Western traditions. The monolithic power negates legitimacy of ‘other’ forms of literature all the while operating under the pretense of universality.

Goethe’s view of a World literature would seem at first glance to be a revolutionary view tending towards harmonizing of influences from around the globe; however, this very essential sentiment drew heavily on Kant’s conception of the universality of communication of the self as reflected in his *Third Critique*. Lloyd articulating it splendidly in his evaluation of Kant’s critique, confides the central dilemma of the superimposition of the value of “higher culture” (Lloyd, 255) by “defining the political function of aesthetic culture” (Lloyd, 256). Kant recognizes with an idealistic hue the value of other forms of cultural production – as long as it is his own cultural value that determines the relative degree of validity of other cultures. Goethe extends this viewpoint to the specific culture of the written word, yet the foundation value of Kant is unmistakably carved into Goethe’s view of *Weltliteratur*. Goethe did maintain a universality of a *Weltliteratur*, all the while asserting the eminence to the products of cultures as he understood it, or perhaps more emphatically, as far as he had gained awareness of it. For Goethe, parsing the relative value of French vs. German literature did not merit accurate recognition of *Weltliteratur*. To that end, he commanded a revolutionary vision.

Yet in discerning between the cultural products of societies which shared more than they differed, such discernment was incomplete. Goethe may have found his Germans to be lacking in aesthetics in comparison to the English literature and he may have maintained that the increased social intercourse propelled by a discussion of relative equalities of values of different forms of literature could be productive to the formation of even more robust forms. Yet in centering his consideration on a small sphere, his narrowness at once legitimized while unknowingly marginalizing other forms of cultural production from realms unknown and, importantly, outside the clutches of the Western tradition.

Worth remembering in forging a deeper understanding of the difference between the foundation of World literature as established by Goethe through the influence of Kant is that all that requires consideration of Kant's *einförmige* (van Dievoet, 33), or universal, uniform. Kant's adherence to the value of Christianity above all other forms of belief, and his carefully delineated application of reason in connection to liturgy casts considerable shadows on any form of expression that contends with such a world view. This is not to state that the overt discrimination of other forms of literature would be practiced by Goethe. Indeed, the discrimination is so embedded within the very consciousness of the perceiver (critic) of any form of World literature that these diverse forms can only be appreciated in their difference. The difference is always weighed against the Western tradition, confining the very notion of expression that may be found in forms of literature that do not have any alliance with the Western canon. For example, religion is a form of cultural production; however, it is a form of cultural production that resists questions of the legitimacy of *differance*. Instead, with the adoption of a system of faith as fundamental to a culture (as asserted by Kant and Goethe) any production that emerges from a culture that holds different perspectives of faith is always considered as an outsider. Even when considered as an outsider, this process is from a different circle of difference. For instance, Goethe's difference of German aesthetics in comparison to the English still falls within a Western circle, far different from the consideration of a form of cultural production that emerged from a place such as the Near or Far East. Production of literature from these spheres takes on an entirely separate form of difference-making and as a consequence, likely diminishing in value.

Even as the adherence to the eminence of the Western view in favor of other perspectives permeated the critical evaluation of World Literature by Western critics and scholars, the rapid increase of population shifts throughout the world at the end of the 19th century rapidly shifted Eurocentric views to the acknowledgement of multiculturalism as a reality that could not be avoided. The eminence of the Western views initiated by Goethe in terms of how to frame World Literature were certainly still a consistent critical aspect of the appreciation of diverse forms of expression; however, that very reception was increasingly being completed by a

more heterogenous population. Charles Taylor, in his *The Politics of Recognition*, reflects that the reality of a more heterogenous society was that the need for minority groups of people to establish identity and dignity was certain, and that the struggle for this establishment would be characterized by forms of oppression. Yet instead of overt forms of oppression, a more tacit form of oppression would be enforced in the new, more multicultural world. For Taylor, “the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression” (Taylor, 46). From the perspective of the reception of World Literature, Goethe’s notion of unstated superiority of the Greeks would represent such as a “withholding”, from which position Taylor maintains that the “difference-blind” (Taylor, 47) perspective is in and of itself a form of oppression. Derrida’s *differance* may not have been verbalized in the reception and critique of World Literature. This does not mean that it is not potent. The globalized world may have invited the eventual acceptance of multiculturalism; however, from the perspective of World Literature, the assertion of Taylor “for insisting on the universalization of the presumption as a logical extension of the politics of dignity” (Taylor, 16) has remained an ideal. Traditional hegemony has persisted in the way that many scholars and critics in the West have perceived World Literature.

For many nations, such as the United States, the negotiation of status by marginalized groups has been problematized by the promise of social equality endorsed by the government to the reality of inequality practiced by society. Yet in other nations, such as contemporary Canada, the overt recognition of multiculturalism as its governmental policy demands considerable affordance for social endorsement of the value of multiculturalism by the members of a society that is undeniably increasingly multicultural. This presents a very different opportunity for “breaking with the illusion that holds many ‘multiculturalists’—as well as their most bitter opponents in their grip” (Taylor 1994, 73).

One of contemporary Canada’s special strengths is that nationalism, or any assertion of cultural homogeneity—even if under the guise of heterogeneity, as in Goethe’s differentiation between German and English aesthetics—remains impossible. For example, in contemporary Toronto, the notion of what it means to be Canadian requires circumspection that may touch upon the values of the West, but which does not *depend* upon them. This is a gulf of difference in which a liminal space of sorts exists that is not as corrupted as would be the artificially imposed Western-valued liminal space that exists in Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*. In contemporary Canada, what is (and what will be) require an entirely different process of social and cultural negotiation. For Canadians, identity may be Inuit or Metis, Korean or Turkish. These are certainly differences bringing different cultural values distinct from the Western ones which govern expectations of what Goethe considered to be within the scope of *Weltliteratur*. Yet the similarities of the people of today’s Canada are in the different cultures negotiating a status as Canadians that is not fettered by the past, because the past of Canada has always been of the other. Be

it different tribes or different emigrants, the diversity of Canada creates a dynamic recognition of differences not in comparison to some expectation of a shared identity, but instead in comparison to nothing, save the shared state of difference by the people of the nation.

Exemplifying the establishment of what can only be described as a liminal space between what was and what will be in terms of World Literature is the author Moyez G. Vassanji, a Canadian with a decidedly multicultural heritage owing to his Canadian citizenship, Indian origin and migratory status in Tanzania. Vassanji's World Literature negotiates the proximal shore of the liminal space, forcing distance from the remote shore upon which the negotiation of Taylor's "recognition" (Taylor, 46) is negated in favor of the assertion of the establishment of a new form of World Literature whose definition will not be constructed on what was, but instead will be built brick by brick by what has yet to become.

Vassanji's exceptionally identifiable presence as the pioneer of the future of World Literature is in his reliance to locales other than Canada for his narratives, despite his identity as a Canadian. Far from the outsider looking in to the unfamiliar (or of the insider depicting his familiar for the outsider's consumption), Vassanji's work is of the insider sharing a familiar. This sharing forces the other insiders to recognize the status of the former outsider as insider. The discourse is of the imaginary, but it is a shared imaginary that is brought into the liminal space by Vassanji, carving a return to a home identity that never was prior to the return owing to the oppression of the colonizer. It acts as a reminder for the Canada of today and tomorrow, of the new space of multiculturalism within which the disempowering forces of colonialism are artifacts instead of potent practices. Drawing on what is largely unknown to many to reclaim what is known to him, Vassanji makes the familiar novel negotiating a space that typically (as in Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*) assumed a space of value. Certain symbols, certain patterns emerge in allusions to the known, even in an exploration of the thought-to-be unknown. For Vassanji, this pattern-making and symbol-making achieve a space that is not compared to what is known. Instead, the comparison is absent, rendering meaning truthful *and* novel.

In *The Magic of Saida*, Vassanji writes of the protagonist, Kamal Punja, who is a Canadian doctor of Indian origin, whose family migrated to Tanzania at the end of the 19th century. The migration from India led to the marriage of Kamal's father, an Indian, to Kamal's mother, a Tanzanian. A half-breed called a *chotaro*, Kamal is abandoned by his father, only to be purchased by his father's family to raise Kamal in an expatriated community of Indians in East Africa. All this takes place against the backdrop of a nation beset by colonizers from Germany, who attempted to wipe out indigenous practices and beliefs, resulting in considerable bloodshed.

Three threads entwine the narrative: Kamal's return from Canada to his 'home' to come to terms with his identity and heritage; a reflection of Kamal's development

as a child in Tanzania followed by his rupture from his mother and development in an Indian community in Uganda; and finally, the mythlike tale of Kamal's quest to find his one true love from his childhood, Saida, the descendent of Omari bin Tamim, a.k.a. Mzee Omari, a famous poet of Tanzania who earned acclaim among the German colonizers. The threads provide Vassanji the opportunity to explore the historical forces that shaped the numerous societies within which Kamal has to negotiate his status through his childhood, while also giving the author the opportunity to demonstrate the contemporary Canadian context from which the new form of World Literature emerges. The colonizers are the artifact, and while the reflection demonstrates their unfortunate legacy upon Africa, it is in Kamal's ability to form this context as historical. Moreover, it is he who shapes it into a new dynamic development of the individual towards autonomy as a multicultural being instead of a subject of the master or master of the subject. In the same way as Vassanji's Kamal finds his own unique multicultural identity, the author registers a new form of literature that is not bound by the traditional forms of World Literature for Goethe should be viewed against the Greeks. Instead, Vassanji's work is of its own formation — not ignorant of the past, but not bound by it.

The discovery of identity is unbounding and of a new heritage as the multicultural Canadian in Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida* is also reflected in *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*. Yet in the latter, the space of home is the point of discovery for the author as he returns to his native land only to discover that his outsider view of the inside experience of colonization — unique to Vassanji owing to his complex origin and Canadian citizenship — is more concretely establishing the reality of contemporary multicultural Canada. The author reflects: "In Toronto I would ask myself, Am I a real Canadian? What is such a thing? And I would pull out my hyphens" (Vassanji 2016, 174). It is the pulling out of the hyphens and the acknowledgment of the self as Canadian while still Indian and African yet without hyphens that is Vassanji's home. It is also the "recognition" (Taylor, 46) that is perhaps uniquely Canadian, and it is this uniqueness that afford critical appreciation of a new form of World Literature that is unmoored forever from Goethe's assignation. Rather than represent a cultural production forever indebted to a tacit tradition that defines even the new products of a culture, Vassanji's production finds its debt in the present Canada, even while honoring the negotiation of many Canadians who forge their identities—collective and individual—through their experiences in a culture open to diversity instead of reactionary to it.

No single moment of Vassanji's literature registers the declaration of recognition of the multicultural, nor does any moment establish a new boundary for what is World Literature. Instead, it is in the mosaic of the multiple explorations of identity described by the author through which the reader is able to discern a decidedly different perspective of the identity of the multicultural being in a multicultural

world. Goethe saw the Greeks as the standard upon which World Literature would be weighed against for value; however, this luring cannot be sustained in a world in which what was cannot be supported, nor can it pave the way to what will be. Vassanji's explorations beyond the hyphens exemplify that there is value that is not to be weighed against the Greeks, and that the cultural relativity that Taylor decries as oversights by the multiculturalists need not be a final stand from which critics and scholars must view World Literature. Instead, it is the liminal space that provides the context. Perhaps it has always been that. Goethe's inability to appreciate beyond his own experience was a shortcoming that he had to ignore to continue to reinforce the value of the known in fear of the unknown. Yet what is certain is that Vassanji has no such pretense: he has only the exploration of territories that can no longer be defined by the past and can only be considered from a multicultural present. This present represents a truth that cannot exist within Goethe's conception of Weltliteratur, within which the truth is forever balanced against a cultural reproduction of what has been true, rather than what *is*.

The known provides security, not so with the unknown. Vassanji's exploration of the unknown without his dependency on the eminence of the known echoes the exploration of the multicultural being of the past, with both journeys leading to Taylor's recognition beyond the hyphen, but without the erasure of that hyphen. The multicultural being and the multicultural society etch a pattern of expectations for contemporary World Literature within which the imaginary is not bound by readings of the past that are entirely arbitrarily empty of their assertions of political and national superiority. Derrida required that "as soon as there is production, there is fetishism: idealisation, autonomisation and automatisisation, dematerialisation and spectral incorporation" (Derrida 2012, 116), and the fetishism that emerged from the colonizer diminished expressions from the canon of World Literature through the idealization of existent literature from which the society of the West reigned. Vassanji's traverse beyond the liminal space of antiquity and through the liminal space of the present destabilizes World Literature all the while establishing new dimensions for it.

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