

## Role of Translation in the Making of World Literature

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### Abstract

The field of World literature is vast, diversified, multilingual, multicultural, and multinational. As world literature includes the canon of every national literature in and around the globe, the original works in these canons are written in various languages. Even in a single multilingual country like India, literatures are produced in various vernacular languages and the only way to get into the vast field of Indian literature is the translation of those works into English which is the common language to spread literature. On the other hand, it is not at all possible for a reader to learn so many languages to read the original texts written in different languages. This paper aims to study critically how translation plays a vital role in the growth and development of world literature.

**Keywords:** World literature, Indian literature, Translation, Nobel Prize, classic.

The term 'World Literature' was first coined by the famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who used the German word "Weltliteratur" while discussing the idea of World Literature in *Conversations with Eckermann on 'Weltliteratur'* (1827). Goethe asserted in a prophetic tone that "the epoch of world literature is at hand, and each of us must work to hasten its approach" (Damrosch, *World Literature in Theory* 16). Today, World Literature receives serious attention from every corner due to its academic study starting from graduate programmes up to research programmes in almost all universities in and around the globe. Mentioning the fact that the very concept of world literature is very difficult to define, M. R. Thomsen writes in his book *Mapping World Literature*, "World literature is a paradigm that encompasses both the study of internationally canonized literature and the ambition to investigate and to be interested in all kinds of literature" (2). David Damrosch, one of the great theoreticians on this subject, proclaims in his famous book *What is World Literature?* (2003):

“A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin.” (6)

Thus, world literature destroys all linguistic and cultural barriers because it includes the canon of every national literature in and around the globe, the original works in these canons are written in various languages. More often than not, the field of World literature is vast, diversified, multilingual, multicultural, and multinational. David Damrosch further states: “World literature has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as multiple *windows on the world*” (Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* 15). In this process of inclusion in the realm of world literature, a work of masterpiece or classic must be translated into other major languages of the world including English. But, the translation must be standard, authoritative and good. David Damrosch opines “World literature is writing that gains in translation” (*What is World Literature?* 288).

Translation arguably plays a very important role in the growth and evolution of world literature. Almost all remarkable works of world literature we read are fundamentally the translations from their original languages. English is now acquiring the status of an International language due to its large usage in science and technology. English translation of classics and other major works written in different regional languages of various parts of the globe plays a vital role in spreading the popularity of those works among multilingual readers because English is the common language of basic communication.

To understand *Paradise Lost*, one needs to know the story of the *Bible*. The authorized version of the *Bible* is mostly read all over the world in English. But, the *Bible* is a work of translation. The original *Bible* was written in Hebrew. Christian missionaries came to Bengal to preach Christianity during the British rule in India. Eventually, they established Fort William College at Srirampur and from there three missionaries translated selected parts of the *Bible* into Bengali prose and printed small pamphlets. In this way, the *Bible* was first promoted in Bengali through translation in India. Greek literature is regarded as the classical literature. But, very few modern readers know the Greek language. The readers of the world get acquainted with the great plays of Sophocles mostly in English translation. The theory of literature and other branches of knowledge began to flow through Plato and Aristotle whose

original Greek texts are read in English translations. Everyone knows the names of the epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They are also popularised in translation.

Let's take a look at the contemporary situation in the context of literary theory. In this highly flourishing age of research, no thesis of literature is accepted without its proper foregrounding on a relevant literary theory. A discussion of Formalist, Structuralist, Post-Structuralist Poetics, and Linguistics theory begins with the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure. He was a Swiss linguist. His work *Course in General Linguistics* (1951) which is the basis of his theory is currently read in English translation done by Roy Harris. Mikhail Bakhtin originally wrote his notable works in the Russian language. His work *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse* has been translated into English by Michael Holquist. Roland Barthes's major works — '*S/Z*', '*Image-Music-Text*' etc. — all become known in translation after the author's death. Julia Kristeva wrote originally in French. Jacques Derrida, the father of Deconstruction, wrote in French. His name and his theoretical books were not at all recognized before the translation of his works into English. His most famous book *Of Grammatology* was first published in 1967 and became popular in 1976 when Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak published an English translation of this book from Johns Hopkins University Press with a long critical Introduction. His other book, *Writing and Difference* was first published in 1967 and the English translation of it got published in 1978. After the translation into English, however, Jacques Derrida occupied a significant place in the field of literary criticism around the world. This is where translation wins. The classic feminist text *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir is read widely in English translation throughout the world while the original work was in French.

Now let's have a look into the modern literary field. Among the authors who creatively experimented with literature with various new perspectives and successfully contributed to the history of the world literature of the 20th century, the prominent ones are Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, etc.; but, surprisingly, none of them wrote their works in English. However, after the translation of their writings into English, their works spread like sparks of fire all over the world. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was originally written in French and later was translated into English by the playwright. Beckett's play is a seminal text in the history of the theater of the absurd. It is a matter of fact that Beckett, Sartre, and Camus — all three won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

German writer Thomas Mann and French writer Romain Rolland are very noteworthy names in world literature. Both are Nobel Laureates. Thomas Mann's famous novel *Der Tod in Venedig* is translated into English as *Death in Venice*. Thomas Mann took the subject of his *The Transposed Heads* from the Sanskrit *Kathasaritsagar*. Romain Rolland's great works include *Jean-Christophe* (nine volumes), *Ramakrishna's Life* and *Vivekananda's Life* by Romain Rolland were translated from the original French into English by E. F. Malcolm Smith. After the publication of the translated editions of these two works of Rolland, European philosophers became more interested in learning about these two great men of India— Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Hence, translation plays a brilliant role in the transmission of multicultural and multilingual exchange.

Two more recent Nobel laureates of the contemporary era — Gabriel García Márquez and Gunter Grass — are studied at various universities around the globe in the field of New Literature and World Literature, and of course, in English translation in most cases. Marquez's *Cien años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) is a successful novel of magic realism. The novel *Die Blechtrommel* by German writer Gunter Grass is known as *The Tin Drum* in English translation. And, most of the major Russian literature, including Maxim Gorky's *Mother* has long been at the forefront of world literature today in the realm of translation. Among the numerous names in world literature, only a few well-known names are mentioned here to justify the proposition.

Now, let's turn our attention to the homeland. The small anthology of poetry *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*) for which Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 and became well-known in the world is essentially a work translation by the author himself. He translated the Bengali name of the book *Gitanjali* into English as *Song offerings*. As a part of the project of the East India Company and under Frederick Maxmuller's scholarly supervision, the entire Oriental philosophy (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and others) was translated from the original scriptures into English in fifty separate volumes called *Sacred Books of the East*. Consequently, the whole world came to know the ancient knowledge tradition and philosophy of India. *The Sacred Books of the East* is a direct slap on the face of Macaulay who showed abundant disregard for oriental books and knowledge in his notorious *Minutes on Indian Education* in 1835.

Translation is an indispensable mode of communication in a multilingual country like India. The Sahitya Akademi of India is working on translations in twenty-two languages including English. Major works written in regional languages of different states of India are published in English by Sahitya Akademi. In the elite bookstores of big cities, books are arranged in different categories (under genres like fiction, non-fiction, poetry, etc.) and kept open for readers and buyers. The readers pick up titles of English books of their choice to buy. Usually, Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies* (English), Sunil Gangopadhyay's *East-West* (Bangla), Narendranath Chakraborty's *The King without Clothes* (Bangla), Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (English), Sankha Ghosh's *Babur's Prayer* (Bangla), *Godan* (Hindi) by Hindi writer Premchand, *Coolie* (Indian English) by Mulk Raj Anand, Manto's *Stories* (Urdu), Vijay Tendulkar's *Plays* (Marathi) adorn the shelves of Indian Literature in a book store. Interestingly, to an English-speaking reader, all the above names mean the same thing — Indian literature. Here, the dissection between vernacular literature and the original English language literature of India is collapsing, and that becomes possible only through the power of translation. And why English translation matters is answered by David Crystal:

“In *English as a Global Language* (1997), David Crystal analyzes the ongoing spread of English as the second language of choice in many parts of the world. He argues that English has now become, in fact, the first truly global language in history, spoken in over a hundred countries altogether, as a first or more often second or third language.”

(Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* 225)

So far English translation of World literature is concerned, one should remember the words of M. R. Thomsen, “With regard to linguistic barriers, it is obvious that many works must be translated in order for people from other countries to be able to read them, still a very important factor, despite all the talk about the hegemonic role of English” (9).

However, in the history of world literature, there are countless literary masterpieces which have been reborn in translation. The names of these books are regularly seen in the “Best Seller” list. The reader buys the book and finishes reading it continuously due to the literariness of the composition; but at the end of the reading, he does not even want to know in which language it is originally written. Hence, translation, in whatever language it is, is not

to be missed. Translation truly means the rebirth of literature or re-creation. Without translation, the vast field of world literature would not be fulfilled.

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