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GLOBALISM, WORLD LITERATURE AND THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

Beginning as *Weltliteratur* with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German writer World Literature has become the contemporary topic of discussions, debates and contests in the academic world and in the world literati. One of the most important feature of World Literature, according to Goethe and other contemporary WL scholars is a cross cultural understanding benefitted by literary dialogues between nations through their literatures. Creating a common literary space for the purpose is achieved by circulation and reception of texts from cultures beyond their origin and in this process the role of ICT/Internet cannot be underestimated and undermined. The world wide web has been playing an influencing and deciding role in the spreading of literature from one country to another. My essay includes discussions on the concepts of world literature; the debates on the roles, responsibilities and functions of the world wide web in the development of the same; how World Literature objectives are/not fulfilled by technology and how the digital space is creating new literary genres with their allied issues.

Key Words: Weltliteratur, Internet, Canonization, National Literatures, Digital Library, Cognitive Prostheses, Micro fiction, Flash fiction, Cross-cultural Dialogue

German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe famously stated in letters to Johann Eckermann in 1827: "National Literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" and coined the word *Weltliteratur* (Eckermann 132). The term "World Literature" was, thus, first used by Goethe and scholars now urge readers to acknowledge the significance of Goethe's concept of world literature and move beyond his use of the term. Goethe's term *Weltliteratur,* being the beginning of any reference point for World Literature theorization and canonization has undergone interpretations and explanations bringing in newer assumptions. Rene Wellek in his book *A History of Modern Criticism* wrote that for Goethe "the term *world literature* …suggests a historical scheme of the evolution of national literatures in which they will fuse and ultimately melt into a great synthesis" (Wellek 221). Rene Welleck's interpretation of Goethe's concept provides us an uncontested positive view of world literature. Goethe, many interpreters of his concept of world literature maintain, emphasized on a cross-cultural understanding of "nations" through the reading of their literatures. He referred to the dissemination of literature from and to countries across the globe and proposed a framework which was based on the notion of an ongoing literary and cultural dialogue among nations of the world through their representative literatures or literary masterpieces. Damrosch subscribed to the German

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scholar's concept and interpreted world literature as "not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works" but rather as "a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike…" Moreover, world literature is not at all fated to disintegrate into the conflicting multiplicity of separate national traditions…" The circulation of world literature, is beyond the culture of their origin, "either in translation or in their original language" maintained Damrosch supporting Goethe(5). World Literature is, he argued , a process of circulation and reception and emphasized the translatability of a work to thrive as world literary text. Venkat Mani in his essay "World Literature: Theories in the Context of Globalization" echoes and simultaneously adds to Damrosch's idea of the worlding process of world literature when he wrote: "If world literature is to be relevant for us in the twenty-first century, it needs to be understood in the larger public life of literature…One way to achieve this would be to locate world literature in the larger history of media-dissemination" and we need an "interactive" and not an "isolationist" approach (2). Mani's belief and viewpoints mirror Goethe's and also provide new meaning to world literature pointing to the new ways of disseminating books across national boundaries through new media technologies. Goethe expected an opening of world literary space and a literary dialogue among the nations and "inaugurated the metadiscourse" on world literature. We have achieved Goethe's objectives and we certainly have hastened and accelerated the process of reaching to foreign nations in search of literatures; and "world literature" has gained currency in the last two centuries. We are witnessing a World Literature renaissance.

While mixed debates continue on the world literature, its pertinence and limitations as a subject of study, two major developments have made world literature thrive: one, globalism and globalisation and two, globalisation is at work in tandem with Information and Communication Technology. Both globalism and globalization are, to a large extent, determined by the Internet, the World Wide Web, Mass Communication, and Digital Culture and

Communication. The technological advancements that are connecting people worldwide also are the ways through which literary and cultural productions are being circulated in the world. Internet as a new media technology is facilitating globalisation of literary studies by creating public space for transmission of literature from nations. The developments have made it imperative that literatures of the world come to occupy a common space, make passages to places beyond their origin, and assume new meanings and interpretations. "Modern world literature is being created and disseminated in a public sphere, aided by new media technologies and the interconnected nature of the internet and social media"(Mani 3).

The two dimensions, as Mani points out of world literature at present, "creation" and "dissemination" in the public sphere with the help of the digital technology lend themselves to the cyber literature space and the cyber process; in the first, form and content of the literary texts are determined and in the second, the process of circulation, preservation and retrieval of literary texts both old and new from all over the world is included. An example of the cyber/ digital process of preservation, circulation and retrieval can be discussed to unconditionally compliment the technological development. From the last decades of the 20th Century until the present, there have been extensive serious efforts by the publishing houses and survey anthologies in the direction of digitization of literary texts and make them accessible in the World Wide Web to readers. There are many websites providing background information, images and links to resources on authors. The Annenberg Foundation has created an ambitious thirteen-part DVD/web series produced by Boston's public television station WGBH, "Invitation to World Literature." Further examples like The National Digital Library of India, the Internet Archive, World Digital Library, and British Library: Online Gallery, English Broadside Ballad Archive, the Online European Library, the Universal Library, German Digital Library and the Digital Public Library of America are significant ventures in revolutionizing the textual heritage and making it accessible to all through virtual reality. Google Book's digitization of

texts and the previews provide a taste of it for the searchers. The Project Gutenberg with its mission "to encourage the creation and distribution of e-books" has 53000 e-books that include major texts of the world beginning from Richardson's *Pamela* to *The American Missionary* of 1879 to *Great Expectation* by Charles Dickens. Kishari Mohan Ganguly's English Translation of *The Mahabharata* is available in its digital version in Internet Sacred Text Archive. The number of such projects is overwhelming and increasing. The Internet Public Library is a massive collection of literary texts for public access. Projects like the one of The Penguin Random House are going on to create, preserve and distribute the literatures from places across the globe. Commenting on the effects of the phenomenon, Gregory Jusdanis, a Modern Greek Literature Professor writes in a blog of Stanford University:

> The world is text. Mallarmé and Flaubert described this possibility at the end of the nineteenth century and Derrida proclaimed it again more recently. But now we can say that the world is literature. It is turning literary through the Internet. What is taking place today is not, as Oscar Wilde or C. P. Cavafy believed an aestheticization of reality. Claiming that art was superior to nature, they thought that art affected life more than the other way around. Today we are witnessing something new, ethical rather than aesthetic. And the Internet is helping to bring it about. Indeed, there is a remarkable convergence between the powers of the Internet to bring people together and literature's capacity to foster empathic understanding among people… Literature plays with our desire to connect with others…The Internet, of course, fosters such a feeling of connectedness(para 1-3 and 7).

Thus the two-fold benefit of the global circulation of national literatures into the making of world literature i.e. fortifying globalisation and accelerating world literature phenomenon as Goethe would recommend have been reiterated by Thomas O.Beebee in his essay called "World Literature and the Internet" :

> Jonathan Wolfgang von Goethe coined the adjective "velociferisch" (velocitous) in order to describe the ever-increasing rhythm of trade and commerce between the European nations which, so Goethe believed, were bringing with them an increase in literary interconnectivity that would result in *Weltliteratur*. He wrote to A.C.F. Steckfuss on 27 October 1827, requesting news about any foreign literature his correspondent might find worthy of mentioning, because "the products of the various nations now commingle with such velocity, that we need to invent a new modality for learning of and reacting to them." Since the making of public of the Internet in the early 1990s, we appear to be in a time of world literature such as Goethe imagined, though the seeming familiarity of the effects he is describing almost two centuries before the fact may make us suspect a case of plus ça change(304).

The new "modality of learning and reacting" to the new speed and manner of this "commingling" that Goethe urges the world to develop has come to be the criticism of the study of WL and the Internet. The conceptualization of World Literature through the process of circulation and distribution of texts in a digital world system has both an easy and uneasy relationship with the actual trends. There have been contests in this regard and one of them is based on the temporality of the Internet technology. It can be volatile and technical faults can make the internet archive disappear. "The fact that internet writing is infinitely erasable has both advantages and disadvantages. Writers and editors can correct and update their sites at will…to present their texts more effectively. By the very same token, citation of such sites by others needs more vigilance than in the case of print, and there is always the chance that the URL given in a citation will end up as a dead link." A "Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage" was adopted by the 32nd session of the General Conference of

UNESCO in November 2003. UNESCO set up a commission to study the issue of the fragility of information on the internet... The report noted the considerable obstacles to anything resembling an archiving of the internet. These include the fact that many pages linked to other pages located on other servers, the sheer volume of material, and copyright issues concerning the software for viewing the items" (Beebee304).

UNESCO's concerns are the possible disadvantages of the world literature's existence on the web. The "sheer volume of the material", as the report says, the innumerable literary texts from so many cultures hold an overwhelming amount of information to be processed by a reader. In his book *The Circle* , David Eggers's character Mae makes a statement that echoes the question of many readers: "the volume of information, of data, of judgments, of measurements, was too much, and there were too many people, and too many desires of too many people and too many opinions of too many people, and too much pain…and having all of it constantly collated, collected, added and aggregated, and presented to her as if that all made it tidier and more manageable-it was too much…" (Ciabattari). Readers have similar experiences, like Mae, of being bewildered by the magnitude of this technological change. Way back, William Gibson coined the word "cyberspace" in his 1982 short story *Burning Chrome* and alerted us about the immersive and alluring nature of the Internet and its "universal takeover"(Ciabattari). We are reminded of John Steinbeck's lines in chapter 15 of *East of Eden*: "There wasn't any limit, no boundary at all, to the future. And it would be so a man wouldn't have room to store his happiness." David S. Miall in his paper "The Library versus the Internet: Literary Studies under Siege" writes that the "promise of the new medium has led to inflationary claims, suggesting that the human species is about to burst from its chrysalis into an information utopia." He goes on to quote Pierre Lévy: "The development of digitally controlled cognitive prostheses" is "transforming our intellectual capabilities as clearly as the mutations of our genetic heritage" (1405). The lure of the Internet technology and its monopoly, as mentioned by Levy and Miall, has

transformed the literary landscape in an inescapable way and therefore provoke scholars of World Literature ask many pertinent questions on the public medium.

The other dimension of this huge phenomenon, logically, is that it has given birth to new literary forms, new writing communities and new generation of readers. Citing Philippe Lejeune, Beebee writes how Lejeune summarizes the transformative qualities of the Internet: "The Internet is revolutionary in that it allows anyone to publish instantly and as often as they like; to attain virtual world wide publication; and to have potential interactivity. A person can either be thrilled by the possibilities, or realize, on second thought that they are the total opposite of the conditions that led to the development of the personal diary, which is based on a different notion in time …"(301). It is not difficult to agree with world literature scholars that the direct impact of the Internet is more visible in short fiction forms. Micro and Flash fictions, Twitter Fiction, Email and Cellphone Novels, Haiku Poetry are the emerging new forms that have come to dominate the internet literary space. Literary Hub or www.lithub.com, for example, is one such portal that flaunts all new-genre writings of the Internet. Frederick Barthelme's *New World Writing* is one of the first literary magazines on the web specializing in flash and micro fiction. In the 14 December issue "Neuropathy Trilogy" by Joan Wilking is an excellent example. Claire Polders, who is an author of four novels already, features in the 10 February issue of *New World Writing* and her stories called "Four Micro Fictions" in which the stories are of the length of a middle size paragraph. *Electric Literature* was the first literary magazine created specifically for the iPhone and iPad. Rick Moody, the American Novelist and Short Story writer famous for his 1994 novel *The Ice Storm*, published his short story *Some Contemporary Characters*, in 153 tweets. Jennifer Egan, the American Pulitzer winner novelist and short story writer of the *A Visit from the Goon Squad* fame got her story "Black Box" tweeted in *The New Yorker* in 10 installments in 2012.The website *Words Without Borders* offers a wide selection of fiction and poetry from around the world which houses micro, flash and regular fictions. Globally oriented

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authors themselves are increasingly creating work for the internet. The Serbian experimentalist Milorad Pavić, novelist, poet, short story writer and historian was an early proponent of the possibilities of electronic modes of creation and reading. Emphasizing on the advantages of using the iUniverse site, a publishing company for self publishing, Kenneth Jost wrote: "Publishers and booksellers may be able to save the cost of printing, shipping and returning unsold books. And out-of-print books can be brought back to life once they have been digitized" (6).The internet specific literary work portals list is again long. To name a few: *Lost Magazine*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *The Literarian*, *100 WordStory* and *Long Island Noir*.

Internet and its wide access, its international distributions, its literary archives, its own literatures and its heralding a renaissance of literature are not sufficient conditions for attributing work to world literature. The decisive factor is an exemplary artistic value. Hypermedia, collection and collage of information, Cyberspace and Cyber Society, Twitter Fiction, Face Book Literature: among these dizzying realities, how does a reader distinguish between serious and pulp, good literature and entertainment, classical and popular writing? How are we to address the risk of losing faith in something called "good writing"? World Literature to be called so must possess universal literary value, not culture specific attitude towards reading and writing. Contesting this, Elif Shafak, Turkey's award winning novelist says "I have difficulty understanding the widely held criticism among the literati that the Internet is a fake world which novelists and poets should refrain from if they want to preserve their intellectual depth, focus, and integrity."She reflects on both the dark and bright side of the internet and the responsibilities and role of writers and readers in this chaos:

> The most fundamental criticism directed against social media is its "fakeness." Friends on Facebook are not real friends; we are reminded by the critics, who then ask: "Are we the person on our Facebook page?" But there is no single answer. We are and we are not. The Self is not composed of a single voice. Not even of a

few voices. We are a different Self when we speak to our husband or wife, much different when we talk to our children or to our co-workers or to our boss or to a stranger on the metro or to a lover in secret. It is a different side of us that comes to the fore each time. The duality between the public persona and the private self is a duality forged by the false assumption that the Self is a monolithic—at least a consistent—whole.

This is not to deny that the Internet is full of serious problems. Social media resembles the moon. It might have a bright side, but it also has a dark one. Technology runs at full gallop, while international law and ethics remain too slow to catch up… The Internet is home to extremisms of all kinds… It is also a dangerous distraction for those who want to focus on one area…The chasm between knowledge and wisdom has never been greater.

Writers need to protect their inner space. That's where our stories come from. We ought to be selective and careful about the amount of time we spend on the Internet. ..I write about books, ideas, culture, art, politics, and women. It makes me happy to see a follower from a remote town in Anatolia respond to another follower from Quebec or Delhi or Edinburgh.

At the same time, I am bothered by the uncontrolled and chaotic nature of the Internet. ..Using the Internet with a critical eye and a conscious mind is a challenge we manage well sometimes, fail badly at other times. But rejecting social media for being shallow or fake or insignificant is something else altogether. For who can know better than us storytellers that the best truths are found in illusionary worlds? (para 13-16)

We find further recommendations when Ciabattari continues her BBC report quoting *Electric Literature* editor Halimah Marcus: "Fiction is obliged not only to reflect society but to interpret it, and today's great writers are already solving this

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problem in interesting and surprising ways" (para 14). As the experimentation continues, we can follow these writers and others, including AM Homes, AJ Aronstein, Bennett Sims, Jason Porter, and Alex Epstein, all of whom have recent work in *Electric Literature's* weekly Tumblr-based series, *Recommended Reading.* William Gibson's 2014 book *The Peripheral* isn't "set in the future," as he tweeted, "it's set in two of them." Notwithstanding what Shafak and other scholars recommend to readers and writers on the internet, determining the literary value of a work is difficult when literary texts pour in online. The conservative publishing houses with an eye for quality are missing in the crowd. The current scenario of world literature and the Internet is more complicated and complex than Gibson's latest dystopic novel and one comfortably agrees with the BBC Culture Columnist.

However, the internet has given the world many new advantages over traditional texts, their preservation, circulation and response. World literature today exists in symbiosis with national literatures, enabling writers in small countries to reach out to global audiences, and helping readers around the world gain a better sense of the world around them as it has been reflected and refracted in the world's literatures over the past five millennia. The Internet's significant role in this whole process cannot be overestimated. But the challenge remains on the universal agreement on deciding the value of a work to be called serious world literature.

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