
A (Re) Reading of Literature: Ancient Indian Literature as quintessential World literature.

Abhisek Mekap

Research Scholar,Ravenshaw University

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Abstract

The birth of the concept of World Literature by general assent is credited to the German polymath and writer Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, and his concept of 'Weltliteratur' and it got its impetus from the widespread phenomena of Colonialisation during Early Modern or The Age of Discovery period, as well as concepts like globalization and the global village, But well before that India as a civilization always believed in the concept of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" or "The world is one family" is derived from Maha Upanishad. According to David Damrosch, "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" By these two parameters, Indian Civilisation has been practicing the concept of World Literature for a very long, long time. It is interesting that Goethe, who is the Pioneer of this canon was heavily influenced by Indian Literature in translation, especially the translated version of Kalidas's "Shakuntala" by Sir William Jones. Most of the theorists including Damrosch, considers Translation to be an important instrument for world literature,and Ancient Indian Literature, including great epics like "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata"have been since time immemorial in circulation across languages with cultural adaptations and change in versions not only in the subcontinent of India but also in faraway places like Indonesia (Kakawin Ramayana).This paper aims to study how India has been the forerunner of this canon and to establish some important ancient Indian works as quintessential World Literature.

Keyword:World literature, Ramayana, Panchatantra, Indian Literature

Introduction

In the general consensus, the beginning or at least the coinage of the term World literature dates back to the early 19th century. Prolific German writer and one of the initiators of Romanticism, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, gave the concept of World Literature or *Weltliteratur*. "The age of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach." This is what Goethe famously said to Eckermann in 1827 after he was influenced

by writings from different parts of the globe, especially non-European national literature. This canon was later on more effectively and efficiently worked upon in the 21st century by the eminent professor and litterateur David Damrosch with the publication of his book 'What Is World Literature?' in 2003 and the setting up of 'The Institute for World Literature' in 2010.

Frontline theorist Edward Said divides the world into two parts: Orient and Occident, and throughout this conflict of Eurocentric or West Occident vs Non-West Orient, the Occident always looked down upon the Orient. The Orient "was rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined" (Said 207). This Eurocentric mentality enabled bigots like Macaulay to pronounce that "...a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Despite the good intentions, most of the scholars of World literature and their views remain Eurocentric, as one always hears almost everyone, including Indians, pronouncing that "Kalidas is Shakespeare of India" unanimously, but hardly find anyone questioning that proposition or vice versa, i.e., "Shakespeare is the Kalidas of Europe."

India and Indian Literature have a long long history, even before the arrival of Angles who gave their name to England, Indian Literature was already a mature and ripe literature. Sanskrit Literature being in the forefront along with Tamil Sangam literature. Ancient Indians produced a plethora of treatise not only on Literature but also on various fields including Science, Astronomy, Astrology etc.

David Damrosch states, "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."

This means that literature that transgresses the boundary of its own origin becomes World Literature. He adds that world literature is something that "gains in translation." This proposition may sound very simple and abnormal because the loss in translation is inevitable, but it stands true because he adds that world literature is "always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture."

Ancient Indian Literature is filled with myriads of texts that can be taken into consideration for being acknowledged as World Literature. Many of them are in the forms of Epics, Puranas, Vedas, and Upanishads as they do not talk of or on regionality but about humanity as a whole as a community, and when translated, they transgress national and cultural boundaries easily because they echo the powerful yet simple phrase that is the soul of Indic culture "Vasudeva Kutumbakam." Apart from those ancient Indian literary texts like

the short story Collections *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesh* or Dramas of Bhasa, Sudraka and especially the works of Kalidas are some of the very prominent works that may be considered to be read befittingly as World Literature. The above-mentioned texts were not only translated into many languages but were widely accepted throughout the globe; some of them were already World Literature before even something or some concept like "World Literature" existed. It is impossible to mention all those works that were produced in ancient India that should be considered World literature, but in this paper, a few distinguished works will be discussed.

1. Ramayana

Ramayana is one of the most acclaimed epics not only in India but also in the whole world. The great epic weaves the central story of great and judicious king Ram and his battle against the abductor of his wife, the evil King Ravan, along with the story of his sufferings and actions filled with virtues amidst adversities in his life. Many scholars advocate that Ramayana was composed between 500 BCE and 300 BCE. Even though it remains a matter of controversy overlooking the controversial particular time period, it's one of the oldest epics without an iota of doubt; originally written in Sanskrit this epic was not limited to Sanskrit and was vivaciously and voraciously translated not only into many languages but as much different cultures with their own regionality assimilated in the universal story of the victory of Good over evil, with less or more plot twist. Ramayana traveled from India to many different countries, including China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, Mongolia, and many other faraway places. Apart from the Indonesian *Kakawin Ramayana*, Thai *Ramakein*, and many other national versions of the Ramayana, In India itself, it was translated with small nuances or major changes into many other different languages like 12th-century Tamil language '*Ramavataram*,' 12th-century Kannada '*Ramachandra Charitapurana*' or '*Pampa Ramayana*' by Nagachandra, 13th-century Telugu language '*Sri Ranganatha Ramayanam*,' 16th-century Awadhi language *Ramcharitmanas*, etc. It was also translated into English by Ralph T.H. Griffith. Ramayan was accepted wherever it was adopted throughout history. It has never been a meager piece of literature, but it has also served as a repository of universal wisdom and lessons. So, it Adheres to all the prerequisites put forth by Damrosch for literature to be read as world literature long before even Damrosch Tagore or even Goethe had conceived the idea of World Literature. Ramayan, as literature, is universal in nature and can not be delimited to the geography of India. Ramayan has the universal themes of Love, war, jealousy, the victory of good over evil, and the importance of friendship; it teaches us through the character of Ram the virtues of obedience, justice, perseverance, and patience; the story of Sita tells the tale of womanhood and the oppression. Interestingly, each version of Ramayan has some uniqueness to it, like Tulsidas's version has

fewer characters than Valmiki's, and Kamban's Ramayan gives more emphasis to the portrayal of women (Preeti 760-61)

2.Abhijnana Sakuntalam

Kalidas is undoubtedly one of the greatest classical writers of India. His works are in different genres, but all of them are vibrant and brilliant. He masters the depiction of nature and human emotions in an excellent manner that relives aesthetic relish or what in Indian Aesthetic called "Rasa ."Among his works, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* enjoys wide recognition and acclaim. This play derives its plot from Mahabharat, a mythological love story between King Dushyant and Sakuntala, their union separation, and then reunion at the end when the King, who had forgotten about Sakuntala, remembers everything after recognizing the lost ring he had presented to Sakuntala. It would be blatant ignorance if we ignore the fact that *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* has transgressed national and cultural boundaries. *Sacontalá* or *The Fatal Ring*, Sir William Jones's translation of Kālidāsa's play, was first published in Calcutta, followed by European republications in 1790, 1792, and 1796 thus, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* was introduced to the West. In fact, Goethe himself was a huge admirer of this work, so much so that he published an epigram about Sakuntala in 1791, and also some theatrical conventions of his 'Faust' was inspired by the prologue of this play. This play, in the second half of the 19th century and Early 20th century, enjoyed a global reputation, going through various translations and adaptations into different genres, including Opera, in the West. This timeless classic of Love portrays how prolific writer Kālidāsa handled the depiction of nature very minutely, and this can be taught in universities as a befitting text to teach Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism. This interesting story of Love that is forgotten and followed by recognition is a rich interplay between Literature and nature. This work is a masterpiece that deals with the intricate theme of fate.

3. Panchatantra

Panchatantra is one of the most famous animal fables not only in India but all across the Globe. It is estimated to have been written in 200 BCE. The author, Vishnu Sharma, tells didactic fables to three princes of Amarasakti. *Panchatantra* is divided into five books, which then again contain a frame story underneath and, subsequently, many more other stories. This ancient text was first translated into Pahlavi (Middle Persian) by the Persian royal apothecary Burzoe in the 6th century, but it is now lost. Further, it was translated into Syriac version titled *Kalilag and Damrag* and Arabic and the Arabic version *Ibn al-Muqaffa* (d. AD 760), known as *Kalīlah wa Dimnah*. It is one of the most translated literary works from India. One version is believed to have reached Europe in the 11th century. It is believed to have been translated into 50 languages and 200 versions around the world.

To quote Franklin Edgerton (1924), Panchatantra is,

Certainly, the most frequently translated literary product of India, and these stories are among the most widely known in the world...there are recorded over two hundred different versions known to exist in more than fifty languages, and three-fourths of these languages are extra-Indian. As early as the 11th century, this work reached Europe, and before 1600, it existed in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German, English, Old Slavonic, Czech, and perhaps other Slavonic languages.

Panchatantra as a fable story is not merely a tale for children but filled with rich allusions this allegorical tale covers almost all the virtues and vices as its themes in the substories. This story within a story work caters the need of readers in different ways at different junctures as and when read by the readers in different stages of life.

The discussions and readings of the above-mentioned literature again prove that World literature was in practice since the early centuries of the first millennia because this work transgressed geographical and cultural boundaries even during those times when printing as a tool for ease of transgression was not available. All the above-mentioned tales were told in different spatial and temporal confluences in different ways; some places adapted, some mimicked, and some adapted these tales and curated them with certain changes that were suitable for their respective environment and culture in the chronology of time. This happened a lot before either Goethe or Damrosch institutionalized world literature and defined what world literature is.

Conclusion

Now let me, last but not least, reintroduce the title of this paper and explain the title, "Ancient Indian Literature as Quintessential World Literature." Now, what is the need to reintroduce the title, which comes first in chronology? The reason is that the main essence and take-home message lies in the inference of the title. Now, World literature may have been a well-established canon of Literature, but the conundrum is whether World literature is really literature that transgresses cultural boundaries and gains in translation or something that gets ratified by the West or the Occidental approval. The first part of the title includes a general connotation of finding out something after divulging the past, but the second part argues that Ancient Indian Literature is a quintessential example; now, the term 'quintessential' means "perfectly typical or representative of a particular kind of person or thing." Now the question arises: Why is Advocating Indian Literature as quintessential World Literature? Is it because of the perfect amalgamation of Arrogance and Pride? Or because of affective fallacy? Certainly not. It is the anguish of being overlooked. When we speak of World literature, the first thing that comes to our mind is Goethe, Damrosch, or literature like the Tragedy of Shakespeare but rarely has Indian Literature come to our mind, whereas Indian Literature has been practicing this concept of World Literature or

Tagore's terminology "Vishwa Sahitya" since time immemorial. By giving logical arguments, I have proven how the above-mentioned ancient literature fulfills all the criteria laid down for a work to be included in the canon of world literature. It is high time for this part of the world to preserve, claim, and proclaim its own identity instead of being the other of the West and the East here in this specifically India; an ancient civilization must create its own identity and become one of the centers instead of remaining a periphery, the empire should write back and claim its own lost long heritage of glory and the ancient cultural and literary tradition lost in the clutch of colonialization.

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