

CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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The current approach to pedagogy of World Literature in North America needs to be critiqued and modified as it concentrates heavily on picking up texts from different parts of the world and reading them in English translation. While reading world literature in translation is a crucial strategy for understanding the canons of literatures from different traditions, the practice falls short in accommodating alternative perspectives and regional pluralities. It also overlooks the numerous issues of other traditions, regions, and societies, only to gloss them over with the values of the metropolitan centers. While shaping the canons and interpretive practices, the approach treats different literatures, societies, and cultures with the same world view.

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The approach parallels what governments and corporate businesses have been doing in the age of globalization: amassing and analyzing huge wires and data that range from personal preferences to business communications from all over the world. The analysis of meta-data and the study of the meta-canons share similar rhetoric and the same historical contexts with the rise of what can be called an American empire. As symptoms of globalization, anthologies of world literature in English translations—and at times, mistranslations—present museum-like surveys of representative literatures from around the world in an accessible and easily consumable format. Indeed, the method is ingenuous in its accretion and expansion of the territory of world literature. However, it cannot bring a systematic change that would redefine the boundaries of comparative literature. A methodology that depends on finding the equivalences in one particular language, in this case, English, has a high functional value, but it can hardly preserve the differences, linguistic or otherwise, that are essential for respecting equality.

Moreover, the regions at the margins of the global centers have their own dominants, peripheries, and literary polysystems that correspond to the hierarchies in

regional levels. Reading world literature in English adds a layer to the system but is largely oblivious to the literary polysystems at the fringes of the regional margins. It serves the purpose of general communicability but cannot address the problems of representation and inclusion.

To repair this, we need to borrow the insights of critical regionalism. A critical regionalist perspective of comparative literature can help bring together the regional literatures in an organized way to encounter the dominants in global or regional literary systems. As the margins also have other margins, critical regionalist perspectives allow the literatures at the furthest end to create an alliance in order to enter the networks of representational and literary polysystems. For example, within the South Asian region, the peripheral literary systems from countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan can create cross-connections to balance the power of the regional dominant, India. With such strategies, comparative literature can achieve the goals of bringing marginal literatures and languages to the
202 network of exchange. Critical regionalism can supplement comparative literature to balance the power of the dominants in the current practices of teaching and learning world literatures.