

World Literature: Towards an Alternative

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Auritro Majumder's recent work, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*, is a significant intellectual intervention in the long history of world literature studies, in which South Asian literature features as a mere empirical variable. Majumder, in his pioneering study of Indian literatures written in Bengali, English, translation of literature from the Soviet Union, and the political contributions of M. N. Roy, proposes a new critical framework to understand world literature from the perspective of South Asia and other marginalized histories and societies. His notion of "peripheral internationalism" is an innovative theoretical injunction to the world literature debate. Peripheral internationalism, Majumder writes, "pitted intellectuals and writers not only against the ex-imperial West but also against their burgeoning national elites. In a sense, these writers marginalized the West and placed the non-Western peripheries in a new center" (ix). Majumder further asserts that "Unlike the Anglo-American emphasis on a post-national globalisation, *Insurgent Imaginations* argues for humanism and revolutionary internationalism as the determinate bases of world literature" (n.p.). In this short comment on *Insurgent Imaginations*, I wish to expand on a few significant (and relevant) instances and translation culture of Bangla to emphasise Majumder's arguments and to showcase the intellectual heritage which has consciously resisted imperialism, globalisation and national elites.

The writer Hemanga Biswas (1982-1987), along with many other authors, political thinkers, and cultural activists of Bengal, has worked to create an intellectual culture of peripheral internationalism from the beginning of 20th century onward. As a Communist activist, lyricist, singer, composer and author, Hemanga Biswas was one of the key figures to popularise *Ganasaangeet*, (people's songs), in Bengal. Goutam Bhadra, in a television show in Bengali devoted to

Hemanga Biswas to commemorate his birth centenary called *Ujan Gang Baiya* (2013) stated:

The translation theory of Hemanga Biswas is quite transparent, that is, *lok* (folk) cannot be claimed simply *lok*; *lok* has to be brought through the *anchalik* (regional) and it has to be turned into *antarjatic* (international). What is the intervention? - *deshaprem* (patriotism) and *lokaprem* (love towards the people). So, when it meets with *antarjaticata*, keeping all the spirits of *anchalikata*, it becomes a translation of Ganasangeet. This was Hemanga Biswas's definition [translation mine].

The revolutionary poet and a full-timer of the Communist Party of India (CPI), Subhash Mukhopadhyay, renowned for his deep attachment and commitment to the people's movement across the world, once asserted that we have won the battle in Vietnam and will also win the battle in the (1971) Bangladesh Liberation War (Mukhopadhyay 2917, 407). This 'we' in the imagination of the poet may be read as the 'we' of the oppressed people of the world fighting to save their basic human rights, dignity, and freedom. Besides his strong opinions on the Vietnam and Bangladesh War, Mukhopadhyay's creative writings and translations also reflect his political stance. True to his internationalist solidarity, Mukhopadhyay translated Nazim Hikmet and Pablo Neruda into Bangla. During his time, and during and after the Vietnam War, a significant number of literary works from Vietnam were translated into Bengali and a few other Indian languages. This was also a time when the streets of Kolkata were mired in the slogan, 'Tomar Naam Amar Naam / Vietnam Vietnam', (Your name, my name / Vietnam, Vietnam), in protest against imperialism and fascism.

Among other internationalists, Satyajit Ray, in his 1970 film *Pratidwandwi* (Adversary), featured an arresting scene of the protagonist Siddhartha expressing solidarity with the Vietnam war. When Siddhartha, an angry, and a politically conscious young man whose younger brother is involved with Bengal's Naxalite movement, appears for a job interview, the interviewer asks, "What would you regard as the most outstanding and significant event of the last decade?" Siddhartha pauses for a few seconds and replies, "the war in Vietnam, sir."

INTERVIEWER: More significant than the landing on the moon?

SIDDHARTHA: I think so sir.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell us why you think so?

SIDDHARTHA: Because the moon-landing! You see we were not entirely unprepared for the moon-landing, we knew it had to come some time, we knew about the space flights, the great advances in space technology, so we knew it had to happen. I am not saying it was not a remarkable achievement but it was not entirely unpredictable given the fact that the previous missions did land on the moon.

INTERVIEWER: Vietnam was unpredictable?

SIDDHARTHA: Not the war itself, but what it revealed about the people – about their extraordinary power of resistance. Ordinary people, peasants, and no one knew they had it in them. And this is not a matter of technology. It is [...] it is just clean human courage and it takes your breath away.

INTERVIEWER: Are you a Communist?

SIDDHARTHA: I [...] I don't think one needs to be a communist in order to admire Vietnam, sir.

INTERVIEWER: That does not answer my question, however! (*Pratidwandi*)

Siddhartha fails to get the job, but Ray's depiction of the 'angry young man' protagonist, Siddhartha, is representative of the progressive middle class of Bengal in particular and India in general. Such crumpled dreams of the Indian youth at the onset of India's Independence are salient features of Hemanga Biswas's "Mountbatten MangalKavya" and Guru Dutt's Hindi film "Pyaasa" (1957), including the songs composed for this movie by Sahir Ludhianvi.

The progressive movements in literature, theatre and music also connected the authors of the Indian sub-continent with the authors around the world. Soviet and Chinese literature translated into various Indian languages contributed significantly to developing progressive ideology among the Bengali public. It also reshaped the Bengali literary canon and inspired a new consciousness which is unlike the consciousness that emerged in 19th century India. Majumder rightly underscores these political developments and their influences among the authors and artists of Bengal, and their contributions to aesthetics and ideology of peripheral internationalism. These developments brought significant changes in the life and thought of people including both the intellectual and the common. The literary texts which were perceived as a source of progressive epistemology have inspired various people's movements throughout the history of the modern world.

It may serve us well here to heed Vivek Chibber's cautious remark on postcolonial theory "...is not that it insists on 'Provincializing Europe', but that, in the name of this project, it relentlessly promotes Eurocentrism. ... It should be obvious that, in the name of displacing Eurocentrism, postcolonial theory ends up resurrecting it with a ferocious intensity" (291). Therefore, the critique of postcolonialism made by Chibber offers a space to contextualize progressive ideology and its literature in Indian or South Asian context, that helps to think literature beyond the colonial-postcolonial dichotomy. So, for instance, since the 1970s, with the emergence of the Dalit Panther Movement – a political, philosophical and literary interaction between Black Panther Movement and critical studies on caste – Dalit literature in various Indian languages and English has opened new horizons of literary and philosophical imagination. Critical studies on literature and the continuous reshaping of the canon highlight the emergence of multiple new centres of literature which are sometimes parallel to

one another and sometimes intersect along the same lines. Such literary intersections, distinct from the previous generation of the canon, remain connected yet different. World literature is a continuous conversation across generations of cross-border literatures. Majumder, in the preface of his book, rightly mentions, “This is vital for correcting the assumption that the colonized were always responding, or writing back, to their former masters. In a sense, these writers were marginalizing the center and placing the periphery in a new center” (ix). Dalit literature is one such literary category primed to challenge the Brahminical system that has been the source of historical oppression of the Indian Dalits.

Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938), a renowned Indian author, has framed his idea of world literature within the context of this caste/class dialectic: “In this cursed country of endless sorrow, when we forget to value our individual dignity and can move our pen towards downtrodden people of the society and can stand with them in the mid of their happiness-sorrow-agony like Russian literature, that day our literary exercises will not be acknowledged only in Swadesh (India) but it will receive its position in Bishwa Sahitya (World literature)” (Hazra 13). The Biswa/Visva imagined by Sharatchandra was essentially the visva or the world of the oppressed and the literature where they spoke or are spoken. In the second chapter of *Insurgent Imaginations*, Majumder identifies a similar move in the works of M. N. Roy and his intellectual contribution to Marxist discourse, which has been visibly neglected in Indian academia. Majumder’s reading of M. N. Roy is a compelling example of re-locating literary internationalism – one that is both peripheral and polycentric – within and across 20th century India, particularly in connection with the United States of America and Latin America.

Jihee Han, a Korean comparatist, critiques (2013) *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* and *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, by proclaiming that “this unilinear typology of world literature” means “the polychronic literatures of minor countries and people have had little chance to be properly represented” (viii). By the term ‘minor’, she refers to, “less sophisticated, and regional non-Western literatures” (viii). In doing so, Han goes beyond the binary of the West and non-West and motivates herself to make “an attempt to meditate on the role of new humanists confronting the challenges of the capitalist world economy system” (Han, viii). Now, India, as a non-Western region has, ‘the polychronic literatures of minor’ or marginal communities. Marginal communities may be understood in different terms, depending on different structures of power imbalances. India is a land of many languages, where a great deal of literature has been produced in oral form. India is always imagined through the languages acknowledged in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and, more powerfully, it is imagined through the state’s official languages. However, different communities have their own notion of *Desh* and the world, with their own cross boundary practices and imagination.

Partition and the refugee crises also connected Indian literature with the discursive framework of global literature addressing various issues concerning refugees and displacement on a global scale. *Mangalkavya* (16th-18th century), a medieval Bengali literary genre of narrative poems, was also shaped by the migration of the people from present-day Bangladesh to Myanmar. In mediaeval times, Burma or Brahmadesh also produced a significant number of cultural texts in Bangla. The last century was a time of massive human migration in various South Asian countries, including the Indian sub-continent, Burma and Sri Lanka. Subsequently, it saw the emergence of refugee literature in various Indian languages. This is how an alternative imagination of geo-political and spatial realities can be observed in Indian/South Asian literature, crossing the boundaries of defined modern post-colonial states and nations.

There are multiple instances of literary centres in the world which are internationally connected with each other. For example, the reception of Tamil Kamban Ramayana in South-East Asia, especially in Thailand's *Ramakien*, or the travel of Buddhist *Charyapada* (8th-12th century) from Bengal to Nepal and its cultural life in Nepal reflects a unique understanding of the cross-border and international worldview within in the region. The connection of Kerala with the Arab world and the birth of Arabic Malayalam tell a different story of human mobility and cross-border international imagination. Majumder's argument of replacing world literature with peripheral internationalism highlights an important reality and provides a framework for understanding the various Indian cultures with their cross-border experiences.

T.C.A Raghavan, in his short piece, entitled, "Luminous Minds: A Forgotten Scholarship" (2020) commented that

Certainly in the early decades of the 20th century, the sense of fraternity in India with Asia was possibly stronger than ever before or after. That was a period of great intellectual ferment in India. Emergent nationalism combined with a belief in the re-emergence of Asia with Japan's military victory over Russia in 1905. (4).

This is well in-tune with "what Dutch and French archaeologists and linguists were revealing about India's deep connections with the history of territories that now comprise Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and so on (Ibid.). Raghavan's historical views may also be established through the translational relation between South-East Asia, East Asia and ASEAN. Since the 19th century, Bengalis have translated literature from the languages of these countries. Collections of stories and fairy tales have been translated into Bengali. Besides this, there are several travel accounts in Bengali about South East and East Asia, written by authors like Umraprasad Mukhopadhyay, Sarala Debi Choudhurani and Ramnath Biswas, to name a few. Suniti Kumar Chatterji in his "*Bharat Sanskriti O Brihattara Bharat*" (1943) deals with India's cultural and spiritual mission to the entire region of South-East Asia, ASEAN, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and the Arab world. According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1983),

India pursued a cultural and spiritual civilizing mission in different countries of Asia, and only China was comparable in contributing equally to Asian culture. Chatterji particularly emphasizes India's literary and philosophical influences on the culture and thinking of Asian countries at large. As a linguist, Chatterji also established India-Southeast Asia cultural dialogues through the study of comparative philology. His experience of travelling to these places with Tagore is recorded in his book *Rabindrasangame Dwipamay Bharat O Shyamadesh* (1964). Tagore's path to the world is also of new interest to the Bengalis who want to follow him to discover the literature of those places. In this way, in Tagore's work, literary relations with China, Japan, Korea, South-East Asia and Latin America have been re-established.

In 2024, Mallarika Singha Roy wrote an article as a post editorial piece in a renowned Indian daily – *Anandabazar Patrika* – discussing the translation of Kalidasa's *natak* (play) *Abhijnansakuntalam* into English and German and its appreciation by the legendary German writer Goethe. Curiously, Mallarika claimed that this "Sakuntala Era" is not only important to Orientalism but is a departure point in the World Literature movement. Such claims situate these texts as pivotal in shaping the discipline and open new argumentative perspectives and turns in the discipline. A significant achievement of Majumder's book, besides its comprehensive survey of Bengali and other Indian literature, film and music, has been its ability to locate aesthetic experiences that have emerged from within India and connecting these with geo-cultural areas of the world understood as ex-colonies or global south. A further trajectory of Majumder's engagement with the Bengali language, non-Bollywood films, Bengali authors, and their responses and receptions across national boundaries has been the historicization of world literature through the South Asian literary lens.

In sum, Majumder's recent work on World Literature in *Insurgent Imagination: World Literature and Periphery* is an extremely important one from an Indian perspective. It is a work that is deeply committed to the advancement of a non-Euro/America-centric understanding of the discipline and emphasizing the historicisation of world literature over a century. His idea of peripheral internationalism is not only a literary reality but a way of recapturing that reality in Indian politics, culture, and beyond.

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