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World Literature: Concept, Evolution, Criteria, and Critical Perspectives

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Abstract. *This study examines the term "world literature," a contested concept in comparative literary studies. It traces the concept's development, identifies the criteria used to classify literary works as world literature, and distinguishes world literature from related terms such as national literature, comparative literature, and the universality of literature. The study also compares Western and Arab critical perspectives, including those of René Étiemble, Paul Van Tieghem, Mohammed Ghenimi Hellal, and Fouad Merai. The findings show that world literature is generally understood as literature that transcends national and linguistic boundaries, is translated and widely received, and retains humanistic, intellectual, and artistic value. However, definitions remain multiple and are shaped by the critic's school of thought, cultural context, and ideological orientation.*

Keywords: *world literature, universality of literature, comparative literature, national boundaries, transcendence*

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Dünya ədəbiyyatı: anlayış, təkamül, meyarlar və tənqidi yanaşmalar

Nadjat Mous

Xülasə. *Bu tədqiqat müqayisəli ədəbiyyatşünaslıqda mübahisəli bir anlayış olan "dünya ədəbiyyatı" terminini araşdırır. Bu konsepsiyanın inkişafını izləyir, ədəbi əsərləri dünya ədəbiyyatı kimi təsnif etmək üçün istifadə olunan meyarları müəyyən edir və dünya ədəbiyyatını milli ədəbiyyat, müqayisəli ədəbiyyat və ədəbiyyatın universallığı kimi əlaqəli terminlərdən fərqləndirir. Tədqiqat həmçinin René Étiemble, Paul Van Tieghem, Mohammed Ghenimi Hellal və Fouad Merai də daxil olmaqla Qərb və ərəb tənqidi baxışlarını müqayisə edir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, dünya ədəbiyyatı ümumiyyətlə milli və dil sərhədlərini aşan, tərcümə olunan və geniş şəkildə qəbul edilən, humanist, intellektual və bədii dəyəri qoruyan ədəbiyyat kimi başa düşülür. Lakin tərifl ər çoxsaylı olaraq qalır və tənqidçinin düşüncə məktəbi, mədəni kontekst və ideoloji istiqaməti ilə formalaşır.*

Açar sözlər: *dünya ədəbiyyatı, ədəbiyyatın universallığı, müqayisəli ədəbiyyat, milli sərhədlər, transsendensiya*

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1. Introduction

Comparative literature, like other fields, relies on a set of tools, methodologies, and terms used by critics and researchers to study literary works. Among the most prominent terms in comparative studies is "world literature," which sparked intense debates worldwide in the 1920s. Critics differed over the criteria and standards for defining a literary work as "universal," thereby granting it the quality of universality and distinguishing it from other works. Universality is used as a measure of a work's success, elevating it beyond national confines to a broader, more comprehensive scope. This distinction aims to select the finest works produced by human creativity throughout history.

This study clarifies the nature of world literature by presenting diverse perspectives on the concept and tracing its evolution from its inception to the present day. It also examines the criteria for classifying creative works within world literature and addresses terminology associated with comparative studies, including comparative literature, national literature, and the universality of literature. Since every researcher has their own perspective on this term, the study presents the viewpoints of selected Western and Arab researchers.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following questions:
1. How has the concept of world literature evolved?
2. What criteria determine whether a literary work belongs to world literature?
3. How does world literature differ from comparative literature, national literature, and the universality of literature?
4. How do Western and Arab critics define and evaluate world literature?

2. Methods

This study is a qualitative, conceptual, and comparative textual analysis. It does not employ experimental or statistical methods. Instead, it examines definitions, historical accounts, critical essays, and theoretical discussions related to world literature and comparative literature.

The corpus includes dictionaries of literary terms, histories of comparative literature, theoretical monographs, journal articles, translated works, and conference papers. Key sources include Allouche's (1987) Dictionary of Literary Terms, Makki's (1987) Comparative Literature: Its Origins, Development, and Methods, Hellal's (2008) Comparative Literature, Van Tieghem's (n.d.) Comparative Literature, and articles by Boukhalfa (2019) and others.

The analytical procedure involved five steps:
1. Identifying definitions and conceptual dimensions of world literature (Allouche, 1987, p. 33).
2. Tracing the historical emergence of the term from eighteenth-century Germany to twentieth-century global criticism (Makki, 1987, pp. 634–636).
3. Comparing criteria used to classify works as world literature (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 78).
4. Distinguishing world literature from related terms in comparative studies (Hellal, 2008, p. 93).
5. Contrasting Western and Arab critical perspectives (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 86; Hellal, 2008, p. 93; Merai, 1982, p. 64).

The study is interpretive and relies on secondary sources. Its limitation is that it does not measure the reception or influence of specific literary works empirically; rather, it synthesizes existing critical discourse.

3. Results

3.1. Definitions and Conceptual Scope

The term "world literature" encompasses several definitions. According to Allouche's (1987) Dictionary of Literary Terms, world literature is "any literature that has managed to transcend its geographical and national boundaries to embrace universal human visions" (p. 33). In this sense, world literature is literature that has moved beyond its national borders to reach other nations.

The study identifies multiple meanings of the term:
- The quantitative sum of national literatures of all peoples throughout human history, regardless of artistic or aesthetic level.
- The collection of selected creative models produced by humanity.
- The process of mutual influence and enrichment among national literatures, emerging at an advanced stage of human civilization.
- The general characteristics that define the development of literatures of different peoples and regions throughout history.

Maxim Gorky referred to world literature in this last sense. He stated that there is no world literature because no common language exists among all peoples. Still, the literary works of all writers are imbued with a unity of general human feelings, thoughts, and opinions (as cited in Pageaux, n.d., p. 29).

Hellal (2008) affirms that world literature is that which has transcended linguistic and national boundaries and been translated into other world languages because of its high literary quality (p. 93). Therefore, it is read extensively, its works spread widely, and it is received with enthusiasm. The criteria for universality are widespread dissemination, high readership, and positive reception (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 78).

3.2. Historical Beginnings

The first attempts in this field began in Germany, particularly from the eighteenth century onward (Makki, 1987, p. 634). These attempts involved summarizing the history of literature in general or at least the history of European literature from the Middle Ages onward. This early effort bore no relation to what is now known as world literature (Makki, 1987, p. 634).

Examples include:

- The Italian priest Denina's Revolutions of Ancient and Modern Literature, published in Turin in 1760 (Makki, 1987, p. 634).
- Madame de Staël's Literature in its Relations with Social Systems, published in 1800, which connected literature with social phenomena and drew examples from various European literatures (Makki, 1987, p. 634).
- Friedrich Bouterwek's History of Poetry and Eloquence from the End of the Thirteenth Century, published in 12 volumes between 1801 and 1819 (Makki, 1987, p. 635).
- Sismondi's The Literature of Southern Europe, published in 4 volumes in 1813, which studied medieval literature, beginning with the Arabs, then Provençal and Old French works, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese literature (Makki, 1987, p. 635).
- Friedrich Schlegel's History of Ancient and Modern Literature, published in 1815 (Makki, 1987, p. 635).

These works are considered summaries of the histories of literature for particular nationalities.
Later, works bearing the term "world literature" appeared, such as De Gubernatis's History of World Literature, published in Italian in 1883, and August Wilhelm Schlegel's Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, which appeared in 1811 (Makki, 1987, p. 636).

3.3. Goethe and Post-Goethean Development

The German poet Goethe first used the term "world literature" in 1827, in his commentary on the French translation of his play Tasso (Makki, 1987, p. 636). Goethe proposed a historical study of the development of national literatures, suggesting that differences between them would disappear, leading to a unified whole in which each nation plays its part within the human community (Makki, 1987, p. 636). However, he realized the impossibility of this idea and tempered his enthusiasm. He stated:

I repeat, the point is not that nations should think in the same way, but that they should learn to understand one another. If mutual love is not their goal, then at least they should learn to tolerate one another. (as cited in Makki, 1987, p. 637).

Goethe aimed for tolerance among different peoples to produce a refined, humane literature.
Many writers and critics embraced the concept of world literature after Goethe. Friedrich Schlegel drew inspiration from Herder and called for transcending personal favoritism and blind prejudice (Makki, 1987, p. 637). Madame de Staël believed each nation should guide innovation and that all nations should welcome foreign ideas (Makki, 1987, p. 637).

While scholars of the nineteenth and pre-mid-twentieth centuries aspired to literary unity for Europe alone, the end of the colonial era forced thinkers to reconsider many literary, scientific, and social assumptions (Makki, 1987, p. 638). The trend that made Europe the sole possessor of all human values began to decline. Consequently, literary works translated into other languages became those that could reach a horizon transcending the boundaries of the language in which they were written. Thus they were considered part of world literature (Makki, 1987, p. 638).

3.4. Contemporary World Literature: Writers, Themes, and Criteria

The concept of world literature has changed since Goethe. Some understand world literature as a call to preserve timeless literary works as the product and heritage of all humanity by translating, explaining, and facilitating their circulation (Makki, 1987, pp. 639–640). Examples include the works of Dante, the

Mu'allaqat, Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, al-Mutanabbi, Shakespeare, Goethe, and others whose fame has transcended all boundaries. The term has come to be associated with timeless works published under titles such as Masterpieces of World Literature, Immortals, Nobel Prize Winners, and Heritage of Humanity (Makki, 1987, pp. 639–640).

Contemporary world literature also encompasses the period between the two world wars. Criticism, particularly by Arab scholars, has focused on works by James Joyce, Lawrence, Hemingway, Bernard Shaw, Eliot, Victor Hugo, and other international writers who left a clear mark on literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, up until the outbreak of World War II (Raghib, 1990, p. 56).

The themes of contemporary world literature include:

- Crystallizing modern man's perspective on the universe and its concerns.
- The alienation of man in this world and the choice of his moral responsibility, as exemplified by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.
- The mystery of the universe: modern man has lost all possible explanations for the mystery of the universe. He has not found a moral law to deliver him from absurdity and ambiguity. This is reflected in the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco.

The criteria of world literature include:

- The literary work embodies timeless values.
- Addressing ideas and values that provoke reflection and debate across time.
- The relevance of themes to different eras.
- Possessing high literary quality.
- Widespread dissemination, high readership, and positive reception (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 78).

3.5. Related Terms: Comparative, National, and Universal Literature

Comparative literature differs from world literature in its functions. Comparative literature is the discipline that studies literature beyond the borders of a single country and compares it with the literature of another country, or with a group of literatures from other countries, by examining the history of exchange and influence to reveal similarities and differences (Makki, 1987, p. 642). World literature, on the other hand, is the sum of all literatures created by humanity that have spread to most countries of the world. Comparative literature studies and compares these literatures (Makki, 1987, p. 642).

World literature differs from national literature in two ways:

- Its connection to the elements it focuses on.
- The way these elements are organized (Makki, 1987, p. 642).

In comparative literature, "national literature" refers to literature concerned with the national struggles of a particular people, while "world literature" refers to humanistic literature that addresses universal human issues (Makki, 1987, p. 643). In terms of dissemination, "national literature" refers to a people's literature based on its influence and spread within its national context, whereas "world literature" refers to its influence and spread beyond that context (Makki, 1987, p. 643).

The term "universality of literature" is used in several senses: sometimes it refers to writers who have transcended the boundaries of their national cultures and achieved international recognition, and sometimes to themes or movements that constitute a common element across world literatures (Al-Andalusi, 2012).

Hellal (2008) defines universality as the departure of literature from the realm of the language in which it was written to the literature of other languages or literatures. This universality is a common phenomenon among literatures in certain eras, and it is required by literature influenced by other cultures in some periods due to specific factors that drive it to transcend its national boundaries, either to influence other literatures or to keep pace with the global literary movement. (p. 93)

The universality of literature is based on several principles:

- Selecting literature influenced by other literatures to enrich and elevate national literature (Hellal, 2008, p. 94).
- Originality: beneficial influence and fruitful, rational imitation, avoiding mere mimicry (Hellal, 2008, p. 94).
- The elite of talented individuals: preserving talent while following global intellectual and artistic movements (Hellal, 2008, p. 95).
- Considering literary influence as a movement of revival and guidance (Hellal, 2008, p. 95).
- The availability of a suitable environment for reception (Hellal, 2008, pp. 96–97).

Factors contributing to the universality of literature include:

- A feeling of inadequacy in national literature.
- Migrations and wars.
- Exposure to books and translations across different literatures.
- Newspapers and magazines (Hellal, 2008, pp. 96–97).

3.6. Western and Arab Critical Perspectives

Western Critics

René Étiemble called for a reconsideration of what scholars do who monitor and enumerate major literary works (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 86). He called for including forgotten literatures from other continents that were omitted because scholars disregarded their literary and artistic value (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 86). He questioned the neglect of immortal literary works that have gained widespread popularity beyond their national borders, such as Tales of One Thousand and One Nights, Maqamat al-Hariri, and the novels of Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 86). The contemporary Russian critic Bakhtin presented the role of the Arab mind in the development of world literature (Boukhalfa, 2019, p. 86). Étiemble stressed the need to pay attention to literatures forgotten because of ignorance or disregard, especially those from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Todorov, 2007, p. 144). Ignoring any national literature within the realm of world literature for reasons unrelated to literature itself will leave a distorted picture of human thought.

Étiemble also emphasized the need to move beyond Eurocentrism, calling for openness to other human literatures (Madani, 2003, p. 48). He attacked French centrism and Eurocentrism in comparative literature studies. He urged comparatists to rid themselves of chauvinism and break free from the narrow confines of European literature, emphasizing engagement with other global centers of civilization, such as Arabic and Far Eastern cultures like Chinese and Japanese (Madani, 2003, p. 48). In his view, world literature is broader than European literature (Marino, n.d., p. 6).

Paul Van Tieghem, in his book History of World Literatures, advocated for literary models that achieved popularity and fame and then influenced other literatures, such as the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and others (Van Tieghem, n.d., p. 111). Van Tieghem emphasized the need for researchers

to be meticulous and trace intellectual and artistic values to ascertain originality and identify aspects of influence and interaction between literatures (Van Tieghem, n.d., p. 111). Artistic quality is among the most important criteria for world literature, but this does not negate the fact that some literary works achieve temporary success, and that this success is increasingly global. He states, "We see that success—temporary—is growing, often accompanied by a global influence" (Van Tieghem, n.d., p. 111). This global influence may result from factors such as winning prestigious international awards like the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Arab Critics

Mohammed Ghenimi Hellal discussed the universality of literature and explained its factors. He dedicated a chapter of his book Comparative Literature to the universality of literature and its factors, rejecting the concept of "world literature" as impossible (Hellal, 2008, p. 93).

He states:
The idea of world literature, in our view, is impossible to realize, because literature is, first and foremost, a response to the intellectual and social needs of the homeland and the nation, and its subject is to nourish these needs; it is primarily local and objective (Hellal, 2008, p. 93).

These local themes also carry universal aims, expressed through national issues, hopes, and pains. He distinguishes between world literature and the universality of literature. In his view, world literature is an impossible concept, as every literature has its own nationality and local identity. The universality of literature, however, "is the transcendence of literatures within their national boundaries, in pursuit of all that is new," with the aim of intellectual and artistic collaboration (Hellal, 2008, p. 94).

Fouad Merai, in a paper presented in 1986 at the Second Conference on Comparative Literature, began with Marxist literary theory, which links the development of literature to that of society (Merai, 1982, p. 64). Merai criticized the Eurocentric bias that dominated the concept of world literature. He believed that adopting such a concept hinders the study of Arabic literature beyond its national boundaries, whereas the Marxist concept facilitates it (Merai, 1982, p. 64). In his view, world literature is not the sum of great works, but rather "the sum of all literatures in the world." Therefore, the comparatist's role is not to discover aspects of influence and being influenced, but to build a history of world literature on a scientific basis grounded in the unity of humanity's developmental history (Merai, 1982, p. 64).

4. Discussion

The findings show that "world literature" is not a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept. Instead, it is a contested term whose meaning shifts according to historical period, critical school, and cultural perspective. The study identifies two broad orientations. The first emphasizes transcendence, translation, dissemination, and reception: a work becomes world literature when it moves beyond its national and linguistic boundaries and is read widely in other languages. The second emphasizes national and local roots: literature begins as a response to national needs and social realities, and its universality emerges from the sincerity and depth of that national consciousness.

Goethe's use of the term in 1827 marks a key moment, but his vision was not simply to erase national differences. Rather, he called for mutual understanding and tolerance among nations. Later critics expanded, revised, or rejected this vision. Étiemble and Van Tieghem represent moderate Western positions: Étiemble calls for including neglected literatures and ending Eurocentrism, while Van

Tieghem focuses on literary models that achieve popularity and influence. Both reject the narrow, hard-line Eurocentrism of some earlier historical schools.

Arab critics contribute a distinct perspective. Hellal (2008) rejects the idea of world literature as impossible, arguing that literature is primarily local and national (p. 93). For him, universality is not the same as world literature; it is the transcendence of national boundaries in pursuit of novelty and intellectual-artistic collaboration (p. 94). Merai (1982), influenced by Marxist theory, treats world literature as the sum of all literatures and links it to societal development (p. 64). He criticizes Eurocentrism for hindering the study of Arabic literature beyond its national boundaries (p. 64).

The study also clarifies important terminological distinctions. Comparative literature is a discipline that studies literature across national borders. National literature reflects a people's local and national context. World literature consists of works that have transcended their national boundaries, been translated, and achieved widespread fame while retaining humanistic, intellectual, and artistic value. The universality of literature refers to literature's movement beyond its national boundaries in pursuit of novelty and intellectual-artistic collaboration.

The criteria for world literature combine aesthetic quality, timeless values, cross-temporal relevance, and broad reception. However, these criteria are not purely objective. Power relations, translation flows, publishing industries, international awards, and critical gatekeeping shape them. This is why Étiemble's call to include forgotten and neglected literatures remains important: excluding literatures for reasons unrelated to their artistic value distorts our picture of human thought.

This study has significant implications for comparative literature. Comparatists should avoid chauvinism and Eurocentrism, remain open to diverse literary traditions, and recognize that universality does not require erasing national identity. Translation is central to world literature because it enables works to reach readers beyond their original language. At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations: it is a conceptual and interpretive synthesis rather than an empirical analysis of reception, translation rates, or canon formation.

5. Conclusion

This research concludes the following points:

- Goethe was the first to use the term "world literature" in the sense of openness to the literatures of other nations.
- Eurocentrism dominated the selection of world literary works, especially in the French school, at the beginning of the term's establishment.
- Some critics, such as René Étiemble, called for the inclusion and study of literatures of forgotten nations, as they may become part of world literature due to their intellectual and artistic value.
- The term "world literature" has acquired several meanings depending on the currents and schools of thought adopted by each researcher.
- It is necessary to distinguish between comparative literature, national literature, and the universality of literature.
- Despite multiple definitions, the prevailing concept remains: certain works transcend their national boundaries, are disseminated among other peoples, achieve widespread fame after translation, and retain their humanistic, intellectual, and artistic values.
- The universality of literature has foundations that determine its course and direction.

- Expressing human issues in a creative, original, and aesthetically pleasing style ensures their enduring presence throughout the ages, thus classifying them as world literature.
- The concept of world literature has taken on multiple meanings among Western and Arab critics, depending on each critic's thought and orientation.

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