

## **World literature in the age of globalization: Reflections on an anthology**

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

Hassan exposes the Western bias inherent in the idea of a "World Literature," as it emphasizes synthesis, integration and sameness rather than acknowledging the difference inherent between cultures. He points out the Eurocentrism at the center of "The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces."

### **Full Text** (4911 words)

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Since the early nineteenth century, Weltliteratur (world literature) has been one of the great Western humanistic ideas. Like many such ideas, it has both reproduced and reinforced a specifically Western worldview. For a long time, "world literature" was synonymous with European literature, but with the vigorous interrogation from a number of perspectives of the primacy of the Western canon, the rise to global celebrity of scores of non-Western writers (including several Nobel laureates and others equally canonized by the Western literary-critical establishment), and the increasing availability of English translations, the teacher of a world literature course today faces an unprecedented abundance of texts from which to choose. Yet this situation is fraught with difficulties of its own, for even as the "globalization of literary studies" emerges as the topic of the hour, the selective inclusion of non-Western texts in critical and pedagogical cadres often reveals new configurations of power and domination. I shall be arguing in this essay that the pedagogical application of the concept of "world literature" in the United States since WWII has developed in step with the political, economic, and strategic remapping of global relations, sometimes in subtle ways that tend to mask its affiliations with power.

The globalization of literary studies is articulated in several interrelated domains-- critical, curricular, pedagogical--all of which I cannot adequately address within the scope of this essay. I would like, however, to limit my discussion to one aspect of pedagogy, namely the evolution of the single most authoritative and widely used textbook in world literature courses in the United States, The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces. I shall begin by revisiting the notion of "world literature" itself by way of setting up the following question: Has the Norton Anthology provided those of us who are committed to the teaching of world literature from non-Eurocentric perspectives with a useful tool, or does the anthology more subtly than ever reproduce the

canon's ideological underpinnings? My attempt to answer this question, in turn, leads to a consideration of the extent to which the new notion of the "globalization of literary studies" departs from older concepts of "world literature" and whether multiculturalism has contributed something to this globalization that the Eurocentric assumptions of the traditional canon precluded. These issues, I believe, are central to any consideration of the teaching of world literature.

When Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur* in 1827, he was envisioning a future state rather than naming a contemporary canon. As Rene Wellek writes, 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" (221). For Goethe, that ideal future was to be marked by open dialogue between "nations"-in Herder's sense of a nation as a collective cultural and linguistic community with a distinctive spiritual essence, or a *Volksgeist*. In this dialogue, each nation would be represented by its major writers, whose works would continue to reflect each nation's *Volksgeist* while achieving, as a result of the increased cross-cultural understanding fostered by reading foreign literatures, such breadth of vision as to express the universality of the human experience. In that sense, world literature was for Goethe an opportunity, not for the imposition of cultural hegemony by one nation over others, but rather for greater understanding of one's neighbors and of oneself that would foster harmony and lead to reducing conflict (Lawall, "Introduction" 13). Goethe's optimism about the future of humanity may not have permitted him to articulate the notion of world literature in the context of contemporary historical forces shaping Europe's imperialist expansion throughout the globe. His idealistic notion of *Weltliteratur* was a far cry from the cultural imperialism of Macaulay's grimly pragmatic program (advocated a few years later in the infamous "Indian Education: Minute of the 2nd of February, 1835 ") for the re-education of Indian youth in English literature on the grounds of its "intrinsic superiority" to the literatures of the "Orient" (722).

Rooted as it is in Enlightenment universalism, the concept of *Weltliteratur* was also in a sense Goethe's response to the greatly increased volume of trade and communication occasioned by the Industrial Revolution (Aldridge 9). Goethe's notion of world literature, therefore, is linked in an important way to the internationalization of culture that resulted from the emergence of capitalism as the dominant mode of production in modern Europe. Similarly, our contemporary notion of the globalization of literary studies is affiliated with the globalization of capital, or late capitalism in the post-Cold War era. This new paradigm for literary studies is articulated along the various trajectories of postmodernism, the poststructuralist critique of universalism and foundational philosophy, and the multiculturalist interrogation of the traditional Eurocentric canon from Third World, feminist, minority, and class perspectives. This kind of globalization encompasses a wide range of neoliberal and oppositional projects, all of which I cannot hope to discuss here. However, I wish to emphasize that they are far from being uniform either in their histories or in their content and that, in fact, considerable ambivalence and contradiction exist between them and the parallel-sometimes enabling-movement of corporate globalization. For example, the multiple and distinct histories of national liberation worldwide, women's movements, and Civil Rights struggles may have converged with poststructuralism in their interrogation of the Eurocentric bias of enlightenment universalism, but at the same time their projects may conflict in profound ways with postmodernism when it is understood, in Fredric Jameson's compelling argument, as "the cultural logic of late capitalism."

What I do want to identify on this wide spectrum of positions is the tendency, in the sphere of culture in general and literary pedagogy in particular, of some strands of globalization to reproduce uncritically the logic of global capitalism as the latest form of imperialism while at the same time posing as counter-hegemonic projects. This tendency often results in idealized notions of multiculturalism that superficially celebrate difference and diversity while commodifying cultural production. There are, however, other non-hegemonic conceptions of difference that self-consciously historicize their understanding of world cultures and literatures while maintaining "critical vigilance" (to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's term) toward their own affiliations with power. Such conceptions should, in my view, inform our efforts to construct a framework for the interpretation of culture and for teaching world literature that resists cultural imperialism, whether of Macaulay's or of the more subtle, late capitalist variety.

The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces lacks such a framework. A brief history of the anthology's eight editions will show how its Eurocentric definition of "world literature" itself has come to embody some of the most problematic aspects of multiculturalism. W W Norton's dozen or so anthologies are the most widely used textbooks in introductory and survey literature courses in American universities. Those anthologies are expertly edited by teams of highly distinguished scholars whose decisions are often informed by questionnaires sent out to hundreds of professors regarding what they teach and how they do so. The often excellent introductions, helpful footnotes, and useful "Instructor's Guides" all contribute to making Norton's anthologies by far the most convenient textbooks available, and, therefore, the most concrete embodiment of the canon.

The World Masterpieces anthology, under the general editorship of Maynard Mack, first appeared in two volumes in 1956, then in successive editions in 1965, 1973, 1979, 1985, 1992, 1995 (the "Expanded Edition" of the sixth), and most recently 1999 (with Sarah Lawall succeeding Mack as general editor). On the title page of all seven regular editions (but not the "Expanded Edition"), the subtitle "Literature of Western Culture" (emphasis added) tellingly sports the Eurocentric bias of the collection: Not only is "world literature" fully coterminous with "Western" literature, but the unabashed proclamation in the subtitle, reiterated in the preface of each edition, demonstrates just how normalized that Eurocentrism has been. Not surprisingly, those seven editions have followed the standard periodization of Western literature—classical, medieval, Renaissance, and so on—and contained, in the first four editions, other than extracts from the Old Testament, no non-Western works. Curiously, however, the third (1973), fourth (1979), and fifth (1985) editions announced inside the front cover that a "companion volume" entitled *Masterpieces of the Orient* was available as a supplement to the main anthology. This appendage to the 4,000-page anthology was advertised as conveniently available in an abridged version of 379 pages and an enlarged version of 834 pages. Even more than the subtitle of the anthology itself, this strange, optional supplement at an additional cost uneasily, and grudgingly, acknowledged the Eurocentrism of the anthology. At the same time, this supplement revealed the uneven division of world literature into mainly Western, housed in the main anthology, and Oriental, available upon request in two "convenient" sizes. Shopper suit thyself.

Nor was that all. The fifth edition of 1985 listed the Indian R. K. Narayan, the Japanese Mishima Yukio, and the Nigerian Wole Soyinka—not in the "Companion Volume," as one would expect, but in the main anthology under the heading "Contemporary Explorations." It is not clear why

these three writers were placed in the main anthology and not in the companion volume, nor is it clear why these three particular writers, and no others, were thus Westernized by association. Even more interestingly, and with no explanation, the sixth edition of 1992 dropped all three, adding in their place the Nigerian Chinua Achebe and the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz. The sixth edition also included the epic of Gilgamesh in the "Ancient World" section and a selection from the Qur'an in the "Middle Ages" section (note here the problematic positing of a transcultural medievalism: the period from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries C.E., which witnessed the emergence of Arab civilization, is subsumed in the Norton Anthology under the rubric of what became known in Europe as the Dark Ages). The most recent, seventh edition (1999) has maintained the non-Western selections of the sixth, adding three short Arabic "medieval" lyrics and a selection from *The Thousand and One Nights*. (Meanwhile, the seventh edition has grown to include some 600 pages of works by Western women writers.) In this way, Gilgamesh, the Qur'an, *The Thousand and One Nights*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Mahfouz's "Zabalaawi" simply become Western texts.

Obviously, this confusion would not have occurred had Norton avoided the universalist pretensions of the title "World Masterpieces," and named its anthology for what it is: a library of Western literature. Yet the editors explain in the preface to the sixth edition that "for a very long time we have been experimenting with ways to expand this anthology into a collection of 'world' masterpieces in the fullest contemporary sense" (1992, xviii; emphasis added). One cannot help but wonder at the increasing elasticity of Norton's notion of "world." Short of a Copernican revolution in literary studies, which is yet to come, what logic justifies the need for periodical revision of the definition of "'world' literature," or for including or excluding this or that foreign text, other than that of market trends? Consequently, the experience of reading becomes truly a "contemporary exploration" for the reader-tourist-consumer with a short attention span and thirst for exotic commodities. Reading and teaching world literature become a leisurely stroll in a global literary mall that is structured at once to satisfy and to reinforce Western modes of consumption and interpretation: Western periodization, Western thematics, and Western postmodern sensibilities.

Nevertheless, to market its anthology successfully, Norton must walk the fine line between pleasing both the "advocates of 'canonicity' and 'multiculturalism.'" This means assuring the former that the sixth and subsequent editions "will continue as in the past to evolve and grow, responding to the needs and preferences of those who wish to stress in the limited time at their disposal the Judaic-Greek-Roman-European-American traditions of thought and feeling" (1992, xviii), a promise that the seventh edition of 1999 has honored. As for the multiculturalists, the editors announced a new "expanded edition," which was published in 1995 and contained the entire sixth edition plus 2,000 pages of non-Western works. Here, finally, is globalization at work: no fundamental structural changes reflecting a new vision of global reality, but simply "expansion" (the term unambiguously implying territorial "colonization" or "annexation") by adding more and more foreign "masterpieces" to a consolidated Western canon. Yet this increase is emphatically, even apologetically, presented as only an option: Norton is happy to offer to each his or her own preferred version of the world.

In this "expanded edition," the editors removed the categories of European literary history from the major section headings within the anthology and used instead a temporal scheme within

which literary movements are clearly marked as culturespecific (e.g., "India's Heroic Age" or "China's Middle Period"). Nevertheless, it will be noticed that the temporal scheme itself (Vol. 1: Beginning to A.D. 100, 100 to 1500, 1500 to 1650; Vol. 2: 1650 to 1800, 1800 to 1900, and the twentieth century) coincides with the standard periodization used in structuring literature curricula in most Western literature departments in the United States: classical, medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, the editors felt that some justification was necessary when this temporal framework failed, for example, to showcase more than a handful of non-Western works, totaling 390 pages, in the sections covering 1500-1900 C.E., which consist of 1400 pages of Western literature. This is, of course, the period when the world was rapidly being subjugated by the colonial powers of Europe on an unprecedented scale in history, so that by the end of World War I Europe not only dominated about 85% of the earth's surface, but also imposed its languages and curricula in ways that permanently changed countless non-Western cultures. Yet this unpleasant fact is not mentioned by the editors, who simply state that "selections from non-Western literature diminish [in those sections] because in any culture the upwellings of creativity that produce works of great stature obey no time schedule" (1995). Whose time schedule, one might ask, and whose criteria determine whether, which, and when such "works of great stature" ("timeless masterpieces") are produced? Without questioning the sincere efforts of the editors, who seem to be trying their best to amend an old and embarrassing notion of the canon, update their anthology in the light of new knowledge, and also sell their product, I cannot help detecting in that statement the implicit logic of the argument that colonialism affected peoples who were not simply weaker militarily than the European colonizers, but who were culturally bankrupt.

Obviously, no single course can ever hope to incorporate all of the contents of the anthology, or even a single volume of it, but the point is that the anthology authoritatively manufactures and imposes a fundamentally slanted vision of world literature that has always obeyed the logic of imperialism. As Kristin Ross argues, "[w]hen we speak about breaking out of a Western bourgeois model in our teaching, we cannot speak merely of adding on or integrating cultures ... into a better, more representative totality, a fuller globe. For we will then merely reproduce what is essentially a Western bourgeois sociology of culture: Western civilization as world civilization" (670). This is precisely the paradigm of "expansion" that Norton used in the 1995 expanded edition. Furthermore, the evolutionary trajectory of the anthology in its successive editions, with its reverential treatment of the Western canon and random inclusion and exclusion of non-Western writers, parallels the historical trajectory of Western European and North American enunciations of global relations. Thus the "world" of "world literature," as represented in the early editions of the anthology, was coterminous with the "West," while the so-called "Orient" and its cultural production occupied an ancillary status, only slightly more ambivalent than Macaulay allowed. Then the category of "Third World Literature" emerged in the 1960s as a sort of alternative canon (Ahmad 78-86), the mere existence of which begins, two decades later, to be tacitly conceded by the Norton Anthology. At the height of decolonization movements and the Cold War, the Three Worlds Theory—at least insofar as it opposed First World to Third World—could be seen retrospectively as the new model for this institutionalized split between Western and non-Western literatures in the curriculum. With the end of the Cold War and the advent of what George Bush celebrated as a "New World Order," heralded by the dramatic affirmation of U.S. military supremacy in the Gulf War, the horizon of late-capitalist global market economy expands freely, aided by a hegemonic form of multiculturalism that has

informed the anthology's development in the 1990s.

What does this symptomatic development tell us, then, about multiculturalism, the controversial movement cited by the Norton editors as the spur for "expanding" the anthology? Leftist analyses and critiques of multiculturalism (Zizek, San Juan, Gates, and others), postmodernism (Jameson), and globalization (Sivanandan, San Juan, Lazarus, Dirlik)-notwithstanding the sometimes radically distinct specificity of their positionalities-distinguish themselves from neoliberalism by stressing the continuities between the hegemonic tendency of global capitalism and its cultural cognates, postmodernism and multiculturalism. The argument goes like this: "If imperialism is the latest stage of capitalism, globalism is the latest stage of imperialism" (Sivanandan 5). Postmodernism, then, is described as the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson), and multiculturalism as the "positive guise" of the "cultural fragmentation" precipitated by global capitalism (Dirlik 30). The most radical form of this critique describes multiculturalism as a new kind of racism. In an essay with strong Jamesonian echoes entitled "Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," Zizek's argues that

the ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism is multiculturalism ... [which] is a disavowed, inverted self-referential form of racism, a "racism with a distance"-it "respects" the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed "authentic" community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the particular values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged empty point of universality from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures-the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority. (44)

The multiculturalist, in other words, is one who has "transcended" or "moved beyond" racial prejudice and into a privileged realm of late capitalist development that no longer depends on older forms of exploitation based on race; the multiculturalist has "left behind" those (mostly in parts of the world which have not attained complete capitalist development) who are still mired in ethnic, racial, and religious strife. The implicit reference here is to the history of capitalism, which depended in an earlier phase on colonial expansion, which in turn spurred the development of post-Enlightenment racial theory, Orientalism, and similar discourses on Europe's Others. Now, in a late phase of capitalism that depends on globalization rather than colonial expansion, racism accordingly assumes a more subtle form.

Taken together with its professed model, Jameson's reading of postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism," Zizek's critique places multiculturalism squarely within the imperialist project of multinational capitalism; paradoxically, multiculturalism's professed anti-racism and acknowledgment of the validity of other cultural values and norms itself becomes an efficient vehicle for undermining the integrity of other cultures and a new form of racism. What enables this sleight of hand is capitalism's drive toward maximizing profit by any means necessary, so that the new racism is not so much directed by one ethnic group against another, but by global capitalism (as an "empty point of universality") against its victims. In a slightly different but related argument, Dirlik writes that "the apparent end of Eurocentrism is an illusion, because

capitalist culture as it has taken shape has Eurocentrism built into the very structure of its narrative, which may explain why even as Europe and the United States lose their domination of the capitalist world economy, culturally European and American values retain their domination" (30). Thus, if not strictly racist in the conventional sense, multiculturalism as the cultural logic of the globalization of capital is fundamentally Eurocentric and exploitative, despite its claims to the contrary.

To illustrate, take the billboard multiculturalism of "The United Colors of Benetton" and MCI's claim to have built a "seamless global network" of business communication. Benetton manufactures a kind of multiculturalist chic (translated into images of groups of stylish multiracial youngsters) designed to appeal to liberal-minded youth who can afford Benetton's expensive garments. Multiculturalism here mobilizes notions of racial equality that exist only in the eye of the beholder (and consumer), masking not only the social and global realities of inequality but also the very mechanism by which capitalist culture depends on exploitation and inequality. The MCI example articulates a utopian vision of global capitalism in a series of television advertisements featuring Sam Neill as a corporate mogul standing in a grayish, metallic, high-walled enclosure that appears to be an abstract rendition of a corporate boardroom. He peeps stealthily through a small aperture in the wall-not a keyhole, he assures us in one of the commercials-but apparently some sort of cyper-panopticon from which he spies at one time on robotic, expressionless corporate employees dancing in a (vicious?) circle. "They seem rather happy," says Neill with confident authority. Both the claustrophobic abstract setting and the dehumanized state of the otherwise privileged employees ironically underscore the viciousness of this vision of homogenized global culture (in another advertisement, dozens of men uniformly clad in spotless white suits and hats, who ostensibly represent "local carriers and international carriers," exchange briefcases as they march mechanically in circles). In such a world of streamlined communications and global capitalist access, there is simply no place for the "unhappy": the poor, the women and children shamefully exploited in Third World sweatshops, and the underprivileged masses who constitute the functional waste of the "seamless global network." Within this New World Order, "four-- fifths of the global population ... are simply marginalized" (Dirlik 32).

Such representations by MCI and Benetton reveal the depoliticizing, homogenizing, and idealizing dynamics of global capitalism. In much the same way, Norton has been idealizing and depoliticizing the globalized canon, in which the unpleasant realities of colonial history and exploitation are sanitized within an ever-expanding pantheon of "timeless masterpieces."

This is not the place to restate the argument for multiculturalism. From Rush Limbaugh to Dinesh D'Souza and their ilk, the Right has been busy demonizing and stereotyping multiculturalism, which it sees, with reason, as a menace to its parochialism. The project of multiculturalism is unquestionably valid, important, and ethical insofar as it challenges both the realities and the philosophical justifications (from Platonic monism to Enlightenment universalism) of cultural, racial, religious, sexual, class, and other forms of hegemony. The pressing question that, to my mind, Zizek's compelling argument forces us to confront, is this: How and when does multiculturalism turn into a superficial celebration of diversity that sanitizes difference and effectively co-opts it into the "seamless global network" ideal for corporate expansion? To tackle the issue from this angle, I think, is to begin to clear a space for an

alternative model for the globalization of literary studies that carries within it the recognition that the world is a closely knit, although extremely diverse, human community that superficial forms of multiculturalism tend to homogenize and that the dynamics of global capitalism attempt to transform into a seamless global supermarket built on Eurocentric assumptions, norms, and attitudes.

As Aijaz Ahmad observes, "Internationalism... has been one of the constitutive traditions of the Left, but in this age of late capitalism it is best to recognize that certain kinds of internationalism also arise more or less spontaneously out of circuits of imperialist capital itself, and the lines between the internationalism of the Left and the globalism of capitalist circuits must always be demarcated as rigorously as possible" (45). This distinction, also implicit in Zizek's critique of multiculturalism, is more critically important today than ever before and will become, I suspect, more so in the future.

I would like to conclude by offering a few suggestions to those who, like myself, find themselves forced to use the Norton Anthology in their world literature courses for lack of a viable alternative, since it is the only anthology available that attempts, however unsatisfactorily, the admittedly daunting task of bridging Western and nonWestern literatures. (I am emphatically not saying that one should ignore Western literature.) Other anthologies either focus exclusively on the West (Wilkie and Hurt) or on Asia, Africa, and Latin America combined (Barnstone and Barnstone).<sup>2</sup> The challenge one faces, therefore, involves not only balancing the content of the course, but also correcting the Eurocentric image of the world which the Norton Anthology suggests to the students who so much as read its table of contents.

One obvious solution to the shortcomings of this, or any, anthology is to supplement it with other texts and to devise creative ways of structuring a course. More important, I think, is that we engage our students in discussing the history of the anthology, its affiliation with imperialist discourses on the non-Western world, and the cultural and political implications today of reproducing their logic. Further, let us make explicit to our students our philosophies of teaching something as formidably vast as world literature. Let us also explain to them that, since we could not possibly, in the space of one or two semesters, introduce them to a tiny fraction of four millenia of world literature, we are offering them a particular selection that, while it cannot hope to represent, at least it could begin to suggest the infinite, irreducible diversity of the world in which we all live.<sup>3</sup>

**[Footnote]**

NOTES

**[Footnote]**

1. For an extended treatment of the politics of Benetton's brand of multiculturalism, see Giroux.
2. Prentice Hall's new anthology, *The World of Literature*, edited by Louise Westling et al., was published in 1999, after this article was completed. This anthology offers a more balanced selection of Asian,

**[Footnote]**

African, European, and North and South American texts than the Norton while avoiding the

latter's Eurocentric periodization, thus promising to be a valuable textbook. I have also learned that at least two other anthologies are in preparation at Macmillan and Bedford.

3. I am indebted to many people who have generously offered encouragement or valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article: Stephanie Hilger, Jonathan Hunt, James Hurt, Thomas Joswick, R. S. Krishnan, Michael Palencia-Roth, Zohreh Sullivan, Ronald Walker, and the anonymous reviewers at College English. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2nd Annual Red River Conference on World Literature held at North Dakota State University in April 1999 and appeared in its proceedings.

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