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**JFLC**

ON COMPARATIVE WORLD LITERATURE, BIOFICTION, TRANSLATION, AND OTHER ISSUES

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**Introductory Remarks**

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In the last twenty-five years or so, the study of world literature has invigorated literary studies in general, and comparative literature in particular. World literature offers an excellent opportunity for non-Western and even “minor” European literary traditions to have their best works translated, introduced, and known beyond their cultures of origin to become part of world literature. The scope of literary studies has expanded to include more works from the world’s different literary traditions and bring them to theoretically sophisticated and insightful discussions. In this issue of the *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, we are happy to have several fine essays written by some of the leading scholars as well as younger scholars on a variety of topics in comparative and world literature that demonstrate the rich opportunities of literary studies in a global context.

Though different in much of the 19th and the 20th centuries, world literature and comparative literature now have such a close interrelationship that they can be understood, as Theo D’haen puts it, as “comparative world literature.” Traditional comparative literature laid emphasis on working with literary works in the original languages, which were limited, however, to a few major European languages only; world literature, on the other hand, has included translation in the very conceptualization from the beginning, even when Wolfgang von Goethe spoke of *Weltliteratur* in the late 1820s. D’haen provides a highly informative and useful discussion of Goethe’s idea in the German context of Goethe’s time, also translation studies as a separate discipline in the 1970s till the 2000s, and finally points out some new and exciting possibilities for comparative world literature with the significance of translation considered in the context of both the originating and the receiving cultures.

E. V. Ramakrishnan’s essay dovetails very well with D’haen’s by presenting translation as negotiating differences and playing important roles in shaping the local language and literary expressions. He makes the case with concrete examples of the Malayalam translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1925-1927) and the English translation of the Malayalam novel, S. Hareesh’s *Moustache* (2020), which was in turn inspired by Latin American magical realism, particularly Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The essay gives a clear account and penetrating analysis of many aspects of the interconnections of these works in the context of Eurocentrism, colonial modernity, decolonization, translation, and world literature.

Another fine essay by Lucia Boldrini, an eminent comparatist and currently President of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), brings together four contemporary novels for discussion: Melania Mazzucco's *Vita* (2003, English trans. Virginia Jewiss, 2005), Vona Groarke's *Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara* (2022), Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed's *Timira: Romanzo Meticcio* (2012, *Timira: A Mestizo Novel*, no English trans.), and Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006, English trans. Richard Philcox as *Victoire: My Mother's Mother*, 2010). These novels belong to what Boldrini calls "biofiction," a fluid genre combining elements of biography, autobiography, and fictional narratives, integrating historical archival materials and creative imagination and, through the reconstruction of the lives of these writer-narrators' ancestors and their "ghostly past," aiming to question and rethink the foundations of the modern nation-state with regard to individuals of very different lived experiences.

Helena Buescu's essay calls for a reconceptualization of comparative world literature outside "world literature in English," and more specifically examining works written in Portuguese by authors not only in Portugal, but also in Portuguese-speaking countries in South America (Brazil) and Africa (Angola, Mozambique, etc.). She calls this an effort to "read otherwise," and reminds us of the possibility of forming a quite different view from the dominance of literary works written in English and thereby presenting the world and world literature in a more pluralistic and cosmopolitan perspective. This is an important argument that makes us conscious of the power of language and the necessity of including great literary works in languages other than English to make world literature truly global.

In some ways, both Buescu and Stefan Helgesson discuss the complex issues of colonialism, colonization, and decolonization. Helgesson questions the simplistic notion of decolonization presented as some sort of morally superior position; he argues instead in a more detailed manner that decolonization is not a clear-cut issue of right or wrong ways of knowledge production. By examining the South African poet Mazisi Kunene's epic, *Emperor Shaka the Great* (1979), Helgesson shows with theoretical sophistication and interpretive brilliance the contradictions and complexities of the issue of decolonization, its external and internal hierarchical structures, and its challenge to the study of world literature.

Finally, Wen Jin's essay revisits 18th-century Enlightenment universalism and many European writers' Oriental tales based on, or pretending to be, translations from the East. The blurred boundary of translation and original creation is historically, theoretically, and methodologically interesting, and the pre-colonial European attitude towards the East offers valuable lessons especially relevant to the geopolitical situation in our world today. Having just gone through the tremendous social changes during the Renaissance and the Reformation, the task for the Enlightenment was to set up a modern secular state in Europe out of the shadow of the medieval dominance of the Church, and Enlightenment philosophers learned, from the reports and translations by Jesuit missionaries in China, that in the Far East, particularly in China, there was good governance without religious institutions like the Christian Church, and therefore the image of China in 17th and 18th-century Europe became idealized and extremely positive. Given

the current geopolitical situation under the threat of the so-called “Thucydides’ trap,” it is very important to look back at the different East-West relationship before the 19th century with the European expansion, colonialism, and imperialism, and learn some valuable lessons for the future of our world.

When we look at the reality of the world today, much of the world’s literature still remains unknown, untranslated, and unappreciated outside its original linguistic and cultural environments. How to address the imbalance of knowledge and influence between the West and the non-West, the major and the minor? How to discover the yet-unknown world literature, i.e., the best works of non-Western and even the “minor” European literatures? In the post-war world, English has become the *de facto* lingua franca for international communication and thus translation into English is the most effective way to make a work better known and more widely circulating in the world. And yet, some scholars and critics argue against the “hegemony” of English and put emphasis on the “untranslatability” of literary works, especially non-Western works. What is the nature of literary translation? What is the theoretical basis of the concept of “untranslatability”? How does that concept affect the practice of comparative literature beyond the usual European literary comparisons? If non-Western literary works are untranslatable, how can the currently circulating canon of world literature, which remains to be the canon of major Western literature, be expanded to include non-Western and “minor” European literatures? How to respond to the challenge of “untranslatability” and the claim that world literature is translating everything into one monotonous and flat global English? What role can translation play in the formation of a world literature true to its name? These are all important issues waiting to be further explored and debated in comparative world literature today. We hope this group of essays will be stimulating and provocative, and that we shall have more contributions to this journal to discuss further such important issues in the years ahead.