

# **Study Materials on Comparative Literature - 3**

**II MA English Literature  
(2017 Regulations)**

**Topic:  
Graham Huggan's "The Trouble with World Literature"**

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## **The Trouble with World Literature**

Graham Huggan

Graham Huggan in his “Trouble with World Literature” considers the interchangeability of the labels, ‘world literature’ and ‘comparative literature’ and discusses the problems in this interrelationship. He feels, rather than embracing world literature as such, comparative literature needs to question and expose the contested aspects of world literature. Through this essay, Huggan seems to draw attention to the politics behind the efforts to globalize literature initiated by world literature, thus examining the extent to which such a project affects the prospects of comparative literature. The essay is divided into five sections apart from the introductory part. They are what is World Literature? “Doing” World Literature, Where is World Literature?, and Conclusion: Toward a New Comparative Literature.

He begins the essay by suggesting that ‘world literature’ has been under attack for its global ambitions and its tendencies to exclude the majority of the world. That is while celebrating cosmopolitan forms of consciousness; world literature does not acknowledge the global inequalities that drive them.

Some of the key questions that Huggan addresses in this essay include What *is* World Literature and who gets to decide what it is; what are the procedures for its study; and *where* is it; is it a north American liberal arts phenomenon; or should it rather be seen as a broad-based product of the very globalizing forces it seeks, consciously or unconsciously, to suppress?

Huggan makes two main arguments here: first, the debates around *World Literature* are often simultaneously debated around the future of *Comparative Literature*; and, second, *World Literature* institutionally supports what it claims ideologically to oppose. In other words, *World Literature* represents the cultural politics of globalization disguised as a “worldly” cosmopolitanism of reading or a transnational study of form. In both cases, what is at stake is “the old/new question of comparison in literary studies”. The question of comparison in literary studies is both formal and ideological, presenting *Comparative Literature* as “a basis for the politics of cosmopolitan democratic individualism” and/or a way of promoting broad-based “cultural citizenship in an increasingly globalized world.”

According to Huggan, *World Literature*, however, represents as much a departure from as a continuation of earlier models of *Comparative Literature*, a departure seen most visibly in its self-serving commitment to the translatability of cultures and its tacit acceptance of “the

imperialism of English [and] the diminishment of language-based criticism in favour of a monolingual master scheme". That is, world literature maintains the imperial domination of English and wants all literature to be translated into it, thus making the monolingualism of English to dominate. Thus, Graham Huggan does not think that World Literature is a step in the right direction for Comparative Literature in a global era defined as much by the political fragmentation as the economic integration of the planet. Therefore, he feels that that world literature does not succeed in reconciling cultural aspirations of "worldliness". Huggan considers this as one of the troubles with world literature.

The other trouble with world literature in Huggan's opinion is that world literature displays symptoms of profoundly anti-democratic and neo-imperialist tendencies within globalization. In his view, an appropriately "global" Comparative Literature should contest such tendencies.

### **What is World Literature?**

In this section, Huggan discusses two major critics – David Damrosch and Franco Moretti - who defined the main preoccupations of world literature as a discipline. According to Huggan, the most concerted definition of world literature was given by David Damrosch. In his, *is World Literature?* Damrosch defines the program for World Literature as: "(i) "less a set of works than a network" in which literature "circulate[s] beyond [its] culture of origin, either in [its original language] or in translation" and (ii) a particular way of reading literature informed by "worldly" and/or cosmopolitan principles and directly or indirectly opposed to nation-based approaches to the comparative study of literary texts. (Damrosch, 2003: p. 4).

Damrosch clarifies that World Literature is precisely not "all the literatures in the world," nor is it even necessarily global; rather, it is a mode of *reading* literature that involves a critically detached but socially responsible engagement with worlds that exist beyond our own time and place. For him World Literature exists on "two planes at once: present in our world, it also brings us into a world very different from ours and its particular power comes from our doubled experiences of both registers together." Huggan explains that "this vision of intersecting worlds is neither historical nor anthropological; rather, it is an effect of the "worldliness" of the *critic*, whose decisions on what counts or not as World Literature are motivated by a desire to promote a particular worldview inspired by the socially and culturally educative value of literary texts."

The concept of 'worldliness' as the quality possessed by the scholar or student of world literature according to Huggan was also insisted originally by Edward Said. Said opined that "Criticism is worldly and in the world". Further, Said approaches criticism thus: "as long as it opposes monocentrism, a concept I understand as working in conjunction with ethnocentrism, which licenses a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others". Said's vision was probably formed in the context of postcolonial criticism of Eurocentric domination of literature. His ideas were thus "informed by anti-authoritarian principles, a fundamental belief in the social responsibility of the intellectual, and a commitment to the horizon-broadening capacity of literary and other cultural texts.

Quoting Edward Said, Graham Huggan clarifies that, like cosmopolitanism, "worldliness" is defined by openness to the world and the civic responsibility that comes with it but, to a greater extent than cosmopolitanism; it is also characterized by vigilance to "the realities of power and authority... that make texts possible and deliver them to their readers: a combination of openness and vigilance that Said calls critical consciousness..."

Huggan considers Damrosch's model of World Literature as a form of applied transnational humanism that lessens the very cultural differences it insists upon by assimilating them into a loosely defined world system that assumes their cultural translatability to and for the West. Whereas Moretti identifies World Literature as a problem by "scientifically" analyzing the disparities within a literary world system that is simultaneously "one and unequal" with a readily identifiable periphery and an equally recognizable core. According to Huggan, Moretti favours an economic approach that looks for explanatory patterns of "literary evolution" within an overarching context of global capitalism in which what he mysteriously calls the "destiny of cultures of the periphery" is inevitably interrupted, sometimes irreversibly altered, by "cultures of the core". Instead of the close reading of texts from across the world that Damrosch insists on, Moretti proposes "distant reading". Distant reading is "a new method for the comparative analysis of literature within an unevenly developed world system, and its progeny, World Literature" It is a "study of the struggle for symbolic hegemony across the world. Moretti suggests a mode of comparative literature as a suitable way to study world literature. According to Huggan, what is progressive about the model of World Literature offered by Moretti is his opposition to the possibility of equality of the works compared and the peaceful coexistence of literature from different parts of the world.

## “Doing” World Literature

In this section, quoting Moretti, Huggan suggests that there is no real need to define World Literature before engaging in a practice of World Literature as a discipline. For him, the practice makes literature. In other words, World Literature is one name among others for a theory of comparative analysis that reflects on the impossibilities of its own practice. It confronts “the expansion of the impossibility of either “knowing everything” or “reading enough”. Moretti’s answer to this problem is to employ the science of comparative morphology, which lies at the heart of his part cultural-historical, part literary - sociological approach. Moretti’s ambition, broadly conceived, is to uncover the laws of “ literary evolution ” that underlie the relationship between local forms and global markets – laws as much intuited as instantiated through a combination of empirical data and imaginative wager that justifies a series of historical experiments in transcultural literary form. As stated earlier, Moretti proposes a detached engagement or ‘distant reading of texts under World Literature. According to Huggan, “Moretti’s supposedly scientific conception of “distant reading,” Which hovers energetically but enigmatically between qualitative -philological and quantitative - sociological understandings of the historical properties and spatial distribution of literary texts.”

There are a number of problems in using numerous problems in Moretti’s particular brand of sociological formalism. For Christopher Prendergast, Moretti’s method “makes a rhetorical appeal to scientific method but without committing itself to scientific c principles.” He further argues that Moretti’s application of evolutionary concepts to literary history is not meant *literally*; literature is not a biological organism.”

Emily Apter considers philology as playing an important role in the development of comparative literature and suggests it as a practice for world literature. Philology “stands as a counterweight to Moretti’s narrative-based paradigms of distant reading. If distant reading privileges outsized categories of cultural comparison ... philology affords its micrological counterpart as close reading with a worldview: word histories as world histories; stylistics and metrics in the diaspora.”

Another central activity in World Literature is translation. According to Huggan Translation as practised in World Literature has two problems. They are, “the rule of English and the assumption of translatability. By the rule of English, he means, the “unavowed imperialism” of a contemporary discipline (World Literature) in which the value of language-based criticism is

increasingly diminished, and English, as the privileged medium of global culture dominates. This “Anglo-globalism” capitalizes on English as both world language and world literature, with Anglophone writers now routinely “triangulating among the local, the international, and the personal landscapes of their worlds.”

### **Where is World Literature?**

Huggan sees some changes in the way world literature is practised in North America and Europe. According to Huggan the former (America) is more likely to include global components following the principles of liberal arts in humanities. For this, they use broad-based anthologies. According to Huggan, “in such anthologies, identity politics are writ large in keeping with US liberal - arts paradigms of intercultural dialogue and individual achievement, while the engagement with a difference is framed in terms that popularize cultural translation processes through the production of simultaneously mobile (“transcultural”) and iconic (“culturally representative”) texts.”

### **Where is World Literature?**

Another contested issue in World Literature is its approach to globalization. Although World Literature as practised in North America exploits the consumer culture that globalization has provided, the theoretical works on world literature find fault with the issue of inequality in the age of globalization. Therefore comparisons between equals were not considered significant in such studies. Many of the theoreticians of World Literature use terminology that replaces globalization. For example, Damrosch uses the term ‘worldliness’ and Moretti uses “planetary system” probably to address the question of dealing with an unequal world.

### **Conclusion: Toward a New Comparative Literature**

Despite the rumours of the death of Comparative Literature have been abroad for some time now, with even the most dedicated of comparatists given to talking apocalyptically about a “dying discipline” even as they busy themselves plotting the coordinates of its rebirth” as Spivak stated. Huggan Suggests that the prevalence of several debates on the World Literature and Comparative Literature indicates that the discipline is heading for a rebirth, although in a renewed manner.

### **Points to Remember:**

1. Through this essay, Huggan seems to draw attention to the politics behind the efforts to globalize literature initiated by world literature, thus examining the extent to which such a project affects the prospects of comparative literature.
2. The essay is divided into five sections apart from the introductory part. They are What is World Literature?, “Doing” World Literature, Where is World Literature?, and Conclusion: Toward a New Comparative Literature.
3. World Literature has been under attack because while celebrating cosmopolitan forms of consciousness, world literature does not acknowledge the global inequalities that drive them.
4. Huggan makes two main arguments here: first, the debates around *World Literature* are often simultaneously debated around the future of *Comparative Literature*; and, second, World Literature institutionally supports what it claims ideologically to oppose.
5. World Literature represents the cultural politics of globalization disguised as a “worldly” cosmopolitanism of reading or a transnational study of form. In both cases, what is at stake is “the old/new question of comparison in literary studies”.
6. The question of comparison in literary studies is both formal and ideological, presenting Comparative Literature as “a basis for the politics of cosmopolitan democratic individualism” and/or a way of promoting broad-based “cultural citizenship in an increasingly globalized world.”
7. Damrosch defines the program for World Literature as: “(i) “ less a set of works than a network ” in which literature “ circulate[s] beyond [its] culture of origin, either in [its original language] or in translation; ” and (ii) a particular way of reading literature informed by “ worldly ” and/or cosmopolitan principles and directly or indirectly opposed to nation-based approaches to the comparative study of literary texts.
8. According to Huggan, the “vision of intersecting worlds is neither historical nor anthropological; rather, it is an effect of the “worldliness” of the *critic*, whose decisions on what counts or not as World Literature are motivated by a desire to promote a particular worldview inspired by the socially and culturally educative value of literary texts.
9. Moretti identifies World Literature as a problem by “scientifically” analyzing the disparities within a literary world system that is simultaneously “one and unequal ” with a readily identifiable periphery and an equally recognizable core.

10. Moretti favours an economic approach that looks for explanatory patterns of “literary evolution” within an overarching context of global capitalism in which what he mysteriously calls the “destiny of cultures of the periphery” is inevitably interrupted, sometimes irreversibly altered, by “cultures of the core”.
11. Quoting Moretti, Huggan suggests that there is no real need to define World Literature before engaging in a practice of World Literature as a discipline. For him, it is the practice that makes literature.
12. Moretti proposes to employ the science of comparative morphology, which lies at the heart of his part cultural-historical, part literary - sociological approach, in studying World Literature.
13. Emily Apter considers philology as playing an important role in the development of comparative literature and suggests it as a practice for world literature.
14. According to Huggan Translation as practised in World Literature has two problems. They are, “the rule of English and the assumption of translatability.
15. There are differences in the way World Literature is taught in North America and Europe.
16. Despite the predictions of the death of the discipline, comparative literature and world literature are on the path of a revival.