



Register Number:

Date: 11-01-2020

St Joseph's College (Autonomous)

I Semester MA (English)

End Semester Examination- January 2021

ENDE 7418 WORLD LITERATURE - I

Time: 2 hours 30 minutes

Max Marks: 70

This question paper contains FOUR printed pages and THREE sections.

SECTION A

Read the following excerpt from a research paper entitled "World Literature and Literary Value: Is "Global" The New "Lowbrow?" by Karolina Watroba (Published online by Cambridge University Press: 27 November 2017) and answer any **ONE** of the questions that follow in about 250 words: **(1x 20 = 20)**

What an exciting time for a literary taxonomist: apparently, a new genre has been born, and it is rapidly taking over the world. Its undisputed master is supposed to be Haruki Murakami, and among the several competing names that have already been coined for it, one is particularly endearing: "the dull new global novel." The texts that belong to this new genre have two characteristic features. They are written by non-Western authors, but become very successful on the Western literary market. That is because, the story goes, these books are "eminently translatable:" they "eschew the idiosyncrasy of the local for the interchangeability of the global." In other words, the authors of "the dull new global novel" choose to write in a neutral style that is easier to render in translation rather than engaging creatively with the resources of their native languages. Moreover, they avoid references to the intricacies of their own cultures and local literary traditions, and instead use motifs and narrative strategies familiar to the Western reader. The central argument in the critical debate surrounding this new phenomenon is that this literature is written for export, and therefore participates in the processes of capitalist cultural hegemony. In the globalized world, the West—and in particular the United States—exerts a powerful influence on non-Western cultures, and at the same time is an overwhelming competitor on the local markets. As a consequence, it is more economically viable for a non-Western writer to make a successful career in the West rather than in her country of origin. To this end, she must cater to the Western tastes, and because her own culture is already affected by the aggressive expansion of US-American culture, she knows how to do it. This prevalent critique of "the dull new global novel" sounds like a classic materialist argument.

I would like to challenge this master narrative. A closer analysis of the evaluative terms used in the debate about contemporary global novels sheds new light on its underlying motivations. The two critical terms that play the crucial role in this context are “the global” and its supposed opposite, “the local”: the new globally oriented literature versus local literary traditions. The way in which these two terms are deployed in discussions of contemporary literature written by non-Westerners, but commercially successful in the West, suggests that what in fact bothers many critics about these books is less the way in which they negotiate the politically fraught situation in which local traditions are pitted against a global appeal, but rather their perceived low aesthetic value. Upon closer observation, an undercurrent of elitism is revealed in an ostensibly materialist argument: “the local” and “the global” start to sound like code words for “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” and, seen in this light, the whole critical debate about the new global novel appears as an attempt to sidestep a direct engagement with the ever-elusive question of literary value.

The phrase “the dull new global novel” was coined in 2010 by Tim Parks, an English writer and literary critic for *The New York Review of Books*, and has been taken up—or contested—by many others ever since. The two authors most frequently placed in this category are Haruki Murakami and Orhan Pamuk. They also have their counterparts in other forms of art: the poet Bei Dao, the filmmaker Park Chan-wook, and so on. Since I wrote the first version of this paper in January 2016, I have been seeing two new names repeatedly discussed in similar terms—Elena Ferrante and Han Kang. The inclusion of Ferrante on this list shows that the category of non-Western literature is flexible. A recent short book by Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*, discusses Murakami, Pamuk, and Ferrante alongside Mohsin Hamid, Roberto Bolaño, Chimamanda Adichie, Margaret Atwood, and Michel Houellebecq. In an essay review of Kirsch’s book, Siddhartha Deb wonders whether “global” has become a catchall term “ultimately defined by whatever the United States”—and Great Britain, I would add—“is not.” The fact that English-speaking writers also make it to compilations like this is particularly significant as it has consequences for the argument about the supposed easy translatability of global novels; I will return to this issue later.

But first let us focus on books written by Murakami, Pamuk, Ferrante, Kang, and other authors who purportedly belong in the same category of literature, which has been described, according to a catalog of recurring invectives put together by David Damrosch and Jonathan Culler, as “new globally directed works all too easy to understand”; “works produced primarily for foreign consumption;” airport novels or “romans de gare,” that is, mass-market paperbacks sold to travelers at airport or train station newsstands; “global babble;” testament to the “Disneyfication” or “McDonaldization of the globe;” “market realism;” and “contemporary world literature [that] isn’t worth the effort it doesn’t require.” What all these names and descriptions have in common is the emphasis on the complicity of those books with capitalistic modes of production and consumption in the globalized world. On this account, the new global novel is a depressing testimony to the crushing power of US-American cultural hegemony. Under the thin veneer of superficial diversity—the nationality of the authors of these books ranges from Japanese to Turkish—the new global novel in fact serves to solidify the existing inequalities in the cultural field. In other words, the popularity of these texts testifies to the “instrumentalizing [of] the literatures of the world as objects of neo-colonial usurpation and imperial subsumption” rather than to the diversification of Western literary tastes. At its core, the cultural hegemony argument seems to be a moral argument: it condemns globalization on moral grounds and disapproves of the new global novel as its product.

On this account, the generic features of the new global novel—the absence of cultural idiosyncrasy and the lack of engagement with non-Western artistic techniques, whose place is taken by tropes and literary devices familiar to the Western reader—are explained according to “a familiar scenario of asymmetry in international power [. . . :] a culture of the periphery is intersected and altered by another culture from the core that completely ignores it.” Non-Western cultures are transformed by the Western culture, but this process is deeply one-sided: the West remains ignorant about the cultural heritage of the cultures it engulfs in the process of globalization. Gayatri Spivak has memorably argued that “in spite of the fact that the effects of globalization can be felt all over the world, that there are satellite dishes in Nepalese villages, the opposite is never true. The everyday cultural detail, condition and effect of sedimented cultural idiom, does not come up into satellite country.” This argument becomes problematic, however, when it is applied to literary production. Pankaj Mishra, a contemporary Indian novelist, has warned that “the homogenising and depoliticising effects of the ‘global novel’ can also be exaggerated, to the point where every writer of non-western origin seems to be vending a consumable—rather than a challenging—cultural otherness.” Mishra goes on to discuss several instances of works written by authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who develop challenging visions of cultural otherness. His article is fashioned as a response to two critics of “the dull new global novel”—as it happens, two white British novelists: Tim Parks and Philip Hensher. Even though Mishra does not defend any specific writers that Parks and Hensher classify as the representatives of “the dull new global novel,” he argues that non-Western authors cannot write outside of the process of globalization for the simple reason that their local cultures have already been altered by this very process.

- 1) From your own reading about the category called World Literature, which of the two mutually opposed positions outlined here do you side with and why?
- 2) What are your views on the dependency of World Literature on translations and the challenges this poses?

SECTION B

Answer any **FOUR** of the following in about 150 to 200 words each: **(4x 10 =40)**

- 3) Analyse any one episode from the *Odyssey* in terms of: a) what particular set of values from ancient Greece it illustrates and b) the artistry of the narrative.
- 4) It is said of Tolstoy that as he aged, the moralist in him became stronger than the artist in him. However, in *Anna Karenina*, written in his middle period, there is a strained equilibrium between the two. Respond to this observation using relevant instances from the novel.
- 5) Discuss the theme of the struggle to remain human in the midst of the forces of dehumanisation as allegorized in Kafka’s story, ‘The Metamorphosis’.

- 6) The citation issued by the Nobel committee states that Wislawa Szymborska was being awarded the 1996 Nobel Prize for "poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality." Discuss any one of her poems in the light of this observation.
- 7) What lessons do you find in Kundera's *The Joke* that are worth learning for both citizens and states in contemporary democracies?
- 8) If you were to choose just one text from the self-reading component of this semester's World Literature course which would it be? What would you consider as the most significant takeaway from it?

SECTION C

9) Respond critically, in about 150 words, to the following poem by Martin Niemöller. He was a German pastor and theologian, born in Germany in 1892. Originally a supporter of Hitler's policies, he eventually opposed them. He was arrested and eventually confined in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps. He was liberated by the allies in 1945 and continued his career in Germany as a clergyman and as a noted pacifist. In your response compare this with other insights you have gained from your reading on the Holocaust and add a note on its relevance for us in the present day. (1x10=10)

"First They Came For The Jews"

Martin Niemöller

First they came for the Jews

and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists

and I did not speak out

because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists

and I did not speak out

because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me

and there was no one left to speak out for me.

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