

Ian Almond, *World Literature Decentered: Beyond the 'West' through Turkey, Mexico and Bengal* (New York: Routledge, 2021). 262 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-68337-5, hardback £145.00, paperback, £38.99, ebook £29.94.

Postcolonial studies have been the arena for contemporary critical discussion on how Western hegemony has successfully reproduced itself in a non-Western generation. Lately the conversation has been taken to another level: the convergence of globalization and literature in the last two decades have witnessed a rising interest in world literary studies. David Damrosch's work on reading texts comparatively has focused on the cosmopolitan nature of literary texts and on circulation across time and culture. The dust has not settled ever since Franco Moretti came from the semi-periphery (Italy) to the core of contemporary American academia to criticize the academy's insistence on textual meaning and propose his scientific distant reading method. His work has been criticized for its lack of specialized knowledge and has been deemed quantitative formalism. The Warwick Research Collective's effort to understand world literature in the context of Trotsky's combined and uneven development has generated interest in reading globalization and culture.

So, here we are, reading global literatures in translation, thinking transnationally, and teaching/writing/studying comparatively. Ian Almond's most recent work, *World Literature Decentered: Beyond the 'West' through Turkey, Mexico and Bengal* shares many affinities with each of these concepts. It is a unique attempt that invites us to think about subverting the dominant ways of thinking about world literature and re-provincializing the West.

'Still, in a sick, sad world, it's hard not to be suspicious of anything as wholesome as World Literature' (p. 1). The epigraph to the introductory chapter of this work captures its innovative spirit. Almond's book zooms in on the critique against the nebulous entity called World Literature. What 'world' entails in this concept has been made an explicit concern by numerous scholars in world literature studies who tackle issues of canonicity. Almond challenges some foundational currents in world literary theory (such as David Damrosch's), and proposes 'a usefully provocative alternative' (p. 15), one that involves abandoning the West as a point of reference in discussions of World Literature. This is a timely methodological attempt that offers applied models of how we should begin to provincialize the West when thinking about and

theorizing literature. The tendency to compare peripheral literatures with their Western counterparts is abandoned in favour of a solid periphery-to-periphery comparison approach which aims at a more inclusive global literary conversation. To this end, Almond proposes to create a separated 'performative' space, not Butlerian or Austinian, but one through which claims of Western hegemony could be exposed and made invalid and irrelevant (p. 13). This seems to be the only viable option in understanding the thought experiment Almond proposes as 'World Literature Fantasy', that is, removing power and history from how literature is thought about, circulated and understood.

Almond reveals this space via six chapters. Each chapter is designed to generate discussion that aims at reading and criticizing world literature from a reverse angle, not in terms of influence in a single direction, but one which is multidirectional. Literatures of Turkey, Mexico and Bengal are taken as three non-Western regions to construct a framework that can effectively address and move beyond the 'West' as an anchoring point of comparison. In doing that Almond seems to be aware of the potential challenges of working across these regions, whose local historical contexts not only have been subjected to Western hegemony, but have also been hardened by it to such a degree that it even becomes impossible to imagine a critical discussion that can be freed from ideology.

The first chapter is titled 'The Ghost story: Hayalet, Fantasma, Bhut', in which ghost stories are taken to be the starting point for comparison. Almond's usage of words in their original language is a significant act because in doing so, Almond not only hints at the irreducible differences among the three cultures (siding with Emily Apter), but also gives the reader the consistency needed in 'reading [the selected works] comparatively without reading Eurocentrically' (p. 28). Novels by Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Banerji, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, Peyami Safa and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar are analysed with a focus on spectrality and the relationship between the past (the haunter) and the present (the haunted), informing the presence of Empire through its absence, albeit with its 'defunct/bygone' power.

The second chapter continues to refract the past through an analysis of hotels in works of Mani Mukherjee Sankar, Yusuf Atılgan and Guillermo Fadanelli. It is titled as 'The Hotel-Narrative: Anayurt, Shahjahan, Isabel'. For Almond, hotel narratives seem to illuminate the ways in which colonialism and modernity coincide. Traditionally hotels are seen as those sites that allow transgression and immorality. Death, melancholy and misogyny are the motifs that show the ways in which the project of

modernity permeates national histories, yet in a very subtle and oblique way. In writing that, however, Almond also admits 'rising above the local to consider more theoretical, overarching approaches, the path forks' (p. 62), pointing at the potential drawback of oscillating between psychoanalysis and historicism in his criticism. Almond proposes that hotels in non-Western narratives (like their counterparts in Western narratives) can also be used 'creatively' to build spaces of writing that can be alienated from the rest of the community.

In the third chapter 'Femicide Narratives: Mujer, Mohile, Kadın', Almond works with the literal or metaphorical destruction of a female subject. At the epicentre of this chapter lies the question of agency and power. The texts by female authors, Rosario Castellanos, Mahasweta Devi and İnci Aral, supply context for a more detailed scrutiny of diverse but overlapping subaltern positions. Subalternity has a precarious relationship with history and modernity. Almond continues to reinforce the idea of what it means to be modern and how historical processes and contingencies create gendered subaltern classes.

The fourth chapter, 'Retelling Myth: Mitho, Katha, Efsane' tackles a comparative analysis of myth in the works of Alfonso Reyes, playwright Carballido, poet Gilberto Owen, Sri Aurobindo, Nirendranath Chakraborty, Amit Chaudhuri, Nazlı Eray, Murathan Mungan, and Nihal Atsız. This section is concerned with the ways in which the three regions rework their own myths, demythologize them, and it demonstrates the recurrence of similar mechanisms (such as parody, self-conscious anachronism, nationalistic appropriation) in the process. In bringing diverse authors and literary traditions into contact, Almond acknowledges the centrality of time and the issues pertaining to how time gets to be comprehended differently in different cultures.

The fifth chapter, 'Melancholy: Monmora, Melancolia, Hüzün' takes melancholia as its focus in the texts by Nirad Chaudhuri, Amitav Gosh, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Orhan Pamuk, Alvaró Enrique and Octavio Paz. Melancholy is overdetermined with political possibilities, and capitalism and literary melancholy converge and culminate in the loss of sense in the face of neoliberalism.

The sixth and final chapter of the book, 'The Orient: Şark, Prachi, Oriente', focuses on the theme of Orient, evoking Imagology studies and Orientalism in the works by Octavio Paz, Nirad Chaudhuri and Orhan Pamuk. Almond explores to what extent world-making arguments of postcolonial and comparative literature theorists (such as Apter, Mufti and Said) come to be reproduced in non-Western Orientalist discourses.

In this chapter, Almond revisits Mufti's and Apter's arguments to pave the way for his concluding chapter, 'The Ten Percenters'.

The six themes Almond's work dwells on should be read as circuitous indicators of how the uneven spread of capitalism creates ambiguous zones in which highly modernized elements simultaneously coexist with elements deriving from non-capitalist social orders, as seen in the cases of Mexico, Bengal and Turkey. As Fredric Jameson contends,

Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the 'simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous', the 'synchronicity of the nonsynchronous' (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*), the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history – handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance.¹

These zones of clashing timeframes correspond to the semi-periphery of the world-system because they are subject to both modernizing tendencies and host residual formations. By identifying elements belonging to different historical orders in the three literary traditions, Almond brilliantly shows how the example texts variously register, describe and engage with the 'uneven' condition of the semi-periphery. Indeed, most of the texts that are analysed in the book are marked by the clashing and admixture of distinct historical orders and the political possibilities inherent in it.

In conclusion, there is much to admire in Almond's recent book. It is a powerful intervention in world literary studies, one that not only criticizes an Eurocentric version of World Literature but also offers viable alternatives by way of its highly relevant case analyses in non-Western literatures. In doing so, the book does away with the existing version of world literary history and proposes that in this new world literary system 'different vectors, different axes, different points of reference and control' should be in motion.

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DOI: 10.3366/ccs.2023.0473

NOTE

1 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 307.