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Comrades in Discontinuity: The Makers of the Other World Literature

By Omid Azadibougar | May 19, 2023

World Literature has been conceived in terms of translation and textual mobility and its allure is a utopia of literary *inclusion* where everything worth reading will be present. But reading practices are not independent of the material conditions that ensue from the asymmetrical structures of global capitalism, a condition exacerbated by the history of colonialism of the past centuries and the neocolonialism of the present. Moreover, as an institutional idea, World Literature is as much about inclusion as it is about *exclusion*: it aligns and re-aligns the world's texts in favorable ways by eliminating the "undesirable." But what happens to the texts written on the margins of this world and denied representation? Are they doomed to be interrupted and forgotten forever?

In *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics* (2020), J. Daniel Elam takes up these urgent questions and theorizes World Literature, with reference to colonial India, in a radical way that accommodates lost manuscripts, overlooked ideas, interrupted journeys, and cultural discontinuities in the context of anticolonial struggles for egalitarianism. This "other" World Literature was shaped by thinkers who fought with bare hands against the opulent machinery of the British Empire, which was armed by a sophisticated bureaucratic system that made its cultural logic sound more relevant, more efficient, and even more humane.

To advance this reading of World Literature, Elam deploys comparative philology in conjunction with the political aesthetics of anticolonialism and antiauthoritarianism to re-conceptualize reading and writing – the foundations of literature – under conditions of political strife. As such, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* joins a conversation in recent debates in the cultural sociology of reading (e.g. Thumala Olave 2022), and cultivates comparative literary studies beyond forms of postcolonial Eurocentrism that negate the diversity of colonized contexts (Alejandro 2017; Pino-Díaz 2022), or deem texts from colonized contexts suitable for study only when they can be successfully juxtaposed with colonial models.

In four chapters, the book delivers detailed analyses of the legacies of four revolutionary thinkers who, in their struggles against British colonialism, imagined the world otherwise: Lala Har Dayal, an advocate of armed rebellion; B.R. Ambedkar, an anti-caste activist; M.K. Gandhi, the leader of the Indian national independence; and Bhagat Singh, a key figure in "the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army" (7). In their revolutionary struggles the only certainty that any of these thinkers possessed was the uncertain nature of the world they imagined; how is it possible to think of the impossible in incertitude?

Reconnecting politics and aesthetics, Elam displaces the unsettling asymmetry of the global

distribution of literature and begins reading from a corner that has heretofore appeared as insignificant and has been oftentimes erased from literary history. Instead of thinking World Literature as an institution, “we might recuperate a ‘world literature’ of destitution (and of de-institution)” (17). In other words, reading from the position of the excluded departs “from a clean history of ideas, and on behalf of an anti-canon of literary thought” (8), to radically rethink World Literature as an unsatisfactory object that essentially “reproduces the very logic of imperial control” (17). Under “aesthetic imperialism,” in the words of Fløistad (2007), when thinking is always already constricted by the architecture of possibility, developed and disseminated from the centers of global colonial capitalism, this idea of World Literature is a revolutionary project.

Reading Inconsequentially

The revolution begins from the text and one’s relationship with it. Reading is, in fact, an ideological act determined by the material conditions of the reader’s position. There are two distinct and diametrically opposite ideas of reading: one initiates the reader into a hierarchical system where the promise of egalitarianism is subjected to the norms and rules of the dominant structure – academic and non-academic – that is sharply tilted in favor of authority. Here, the idea of expertise looms large because the structure is founded on authority as the location of, and the gate to, knowledge. Individuals initiated into this system maintain it and justify its authority. This is, in Elam’s reading, “consequential reading” and sustains the status quo: persons educated in the colonial system were privileged with access to institutions, and benefited from the perpetuation of forms of colonial institutionalized reading; the system in turn rewarded them with degrees and awards, prizes and memberships, authority and status. Hence, the key role of educational institutions in the colonial project because they sought to foster the rites of initiation and recruit as many “readers” as possible. In fact, T.B. Macaulay, in his famous “Minute on Indian Education” (1835), had this specific function for reading in mind: to position readers as “mimic men” in order to galvanize the status and authority of colonial power through consequential reading; needless to say, this kind of reading relies heavily on the canon.

Reading can also be a revolutionary act. For those positioned outside the system, reading was characterized by bold defiance, rejecting, through reading “for the sake of reading – that is, for its inconsequence” (ix), placement into the structures of colonial authority. Anticolonial thinkers, writes Elam, perpetually refused the “expertise” offered by the colonial power to expose “the hierarchical and anti-egalitarian norms at the heart of British liberalism and the European nation-state” (x). They resisted mimicking the British, but the revolutionary future they imagined, to be free from colonial dominance, could not materialize immediately; this meant “inconsequential reading” would remain outside educational institutions, the domain of colonial power. Therefore, in this kind of reading – defiantly bypassing authority and challenging the status quo – the intellectual base was the library, the open landscape of knowledge uncharted by the authority; the library “promoted a revolutionary inconsequentialism in the face of the imperial demand for practical knowledge” (xii). “Inconsequential reading” was founded upon a completely different set of norms and assumptions about the world, and how it should operate.

What purpose would inconsequential reading serve? The anticolonial antiauthoritarian reader was not a member of a class – the colonial bourgeois class – that consumed texts to

consistently renew class membership but “an ideal figure for ethical and political practices” (ix). Reading against authority and, naturally, expertise, the reader would rely on other communities and networks to cultivate “the possibility of egalitarian emancipation” (ix). If this was the ultimate goal, then the moment of revolution emerged when inconsequential reading occurred, “precisely because it urged readers to refuse the calls of authorship, and, relatedly, authority” (xii).

A true revolution would begin by negating the authority of the oppressor, embodied in the concept of expertise. In his analysis, Elam deploys comparative philology because it remains true to the emancipative ideals of anticolonial antiauthoritarianism as it “barricades against the temptations of scholarly expertise and mastery” (12) and “names not an object of study but rather a method of study, an orientation toward reading, and an orientation toward authority” (12-13). Hence the beginning of a project that reimagines World Literature in substance, in premise, and in method. Besides challenging institutionalized reading as World Literature, comparative philology is helpful in taking a big step away from Eurocentric literary studies and towards a wider space where the *world* is met. First, normative disciplinary knowledge is abandoned because acts of inconsequential reading sever the discipline from its “exclusive” structure and open a larger and global space: World Literature becomes “a struggle, even if inconsequential, against the forces of isolation, autonomy, insuperable difference, and incommensurability” (13); this powerfully facilitates solidarity between marginal positions across time and space.

Second, comparative philology mobilizes the world of anticolonial thinkers and resurrects reading-as-critique against Eurocentric post-critique ideas (Latour 2004; Felski 2015). Rita Felski, for instance, has called for the end of critique (“suspicious reading” in her words) and the recognition of forms of reading that include attachment and enchantment (2015, 2-17). At the core of this proposal is the separation of aesthetics and politics as if colonialism has truly ended, authoritarianism does not exist, and propaganda is a thing of the past. Elam, however, makes reading-as-critique relevant again. By revisiting the work of anticolonial thinkers who “unequivocally refused to think politics and aesthetics as separate” (9), a significant goal is achieved: Eurocentric theory has tended to construct the anticolonial thinker vis-à-vis itself; but “it is historically inaccurate and theoretically inadequate to suggest that anticolonial thought was either ‘for’ or ‘against’ liberalism” (14). The emancipative potentials of de-coupling the colonial context from the colonial power through inconsequentiality is immense: it removes the methodological impediments to doing comparative studies of “southern” contexts without the mediation of Europe.

Unknown/Unknowable Writing

If reading is conceptualized this way, then writing must change, too, but this leads to an acute sense of contradiction for authors who live under authoritarian rule. If inconsequential reading dismisses the position of the author, then it poses the permanent temptation of giving up on writing – on being an author, a counter-authority. The angst is rooted in the impossibility of political change which renders writing inconsequential, and tends to become self-destructive. What, then, does it mean to write under political strife and how can this problem be tackled?

We are so used to contemporary ideas of reading and writing that it is easy to forget why

poets and writers wrote before the rise of the market as the regulating principle of literature, or why, even today, others keep imagining and creating worlds even though their work rarely reaches beyond a limited audience. Writing today, it seems, is tied to values of practicality offered by capital or prestige; outside and beyond that, it has become increasingly impossible to think of writing for its own sake, or for thinking about the world as otherwise. In fact, the expansion of literary markets has ironically shrunk possibilities: is there any value in writing that is not for institutional World Literature?

Just as anticolonial reading bypasses authority, the "colonial" expert reading of a text from a colonized context can disrupt the authority of anticolonial writer. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Elam argues, has been overshadowed by Sartre's preface. This is one of the intellectual tensions in anticolonial struggles: Fanon's text is open to be read, understood, and appreciated by a global audience, but the desire for the institutionalization of a particular reading through authority confines the open text. By placing the white French man as the primary, perhaps exclusive, audience of the book (2), Sartre unwittingly claims exclusive authority over the text's following interpretations: if Fanon was not speaking to the world, then the world was not in the position to interpret his text, hence ironically removing Fanon from World Literature.

This, however, is precisely how writing becomes a resistance strategy: "we might celebrate Fanon's ability to speak to his fellow anticolonial comrades while remaining largely unintelligible to his colonizer" (2). Writing on the fringes of any Empire is characterized by its own *unknowing* status (it will not inhabit the future it imagines) as well as its *unknowability* (it will not be understood by the dominant position). In both, inconsequentiality is key because revolutionary writing "demand[s] that we reconsider our impulse toward evaluation on the grounds of political 'recognition,' 'success' (or 'failure'), 'sustainability,' and 'consequentiality'" (14). The kind of literature that aspires for recognition as such will ultimately fail to counter the hegemonic oppressive system. Only texts that are misunderstood – are unknown and unknowable – by the dominant position are worth celebrating in anticolonial political aesthetics.

Elam takes this revolutionary idea of writing without a consequence to the wider world. The world is, after all, the only thing the revolutionary thinker has: in the conclusion to his work, Fanon writes "now is the time to decide to change sides" and calls upon his comrades to "leave this Europe" and "look for something else" (Fanon 2004 [1963], 235, 236). The margins of European Empires might have been characterized by *unknowing* and *unknowability*, but they are not doomed to insignificance. Writing in the periphery becomes a potent hub of resistance where critique shifts its place to emerge in the figure of the exile, the emigre, the refugee, the displaced thinker whose life – resisting absorption in the dominant structure – leaves the present for other discoveries and new displacements. Stop and leave: disrupt and continue.

Empires tend to project an image of their own continuity through displays of permanence – monuments, institutions, and cultural products. However, writing capable of true critique with revolutionary potentials emerges not in the moment of translation and mobility – as World Literature theories often assume – but in the moment of "Stopping, quitting, leaving, and exiting" (124). This is, once again, where aesthetics and politics are merged to describe the way writing outside the networks of imperial World Literature functions: its consequence is

not in achieving “success” that the liberal structure provides, but in establishing the trajectory for imagining the world as otherwise. Beyond the world of literature, revolutionary historical figures – Moses, Mohammad, Salman the Persian, James Baldwin, among many others – also built on “‘the virtues of exit’ as a mode of political refusal and a demand for politics to be otherwise” (124).

And this is a clue to the other World Literature: refusing to read the colonized context in relation to the colonizer, writing becomes valuable not for the glory it might gain in the established normalized order created from a center but for its ability to offer alternative views of the world. The world of the wretched of the earth is not defined by continuity but rather by a discontinuity that is integral to colonial capitalism: “Anticolonial thought was written in exile, on deathbeds, in abjection, or in the face of ‘declined experience’” (3-4). But under these circumstances writing is valuable because in the absence of the possibility of political action, it gives meaning to imagination where a different world brews. The impermanence of anticolonial writing is “not accountable to regimes of recognition but rather to the time being, the passing moment, and the final instance” (119). Revolutionary thinking, writes Elam, is therefore anti-nihilistic, because it is defiant in the face of the circumstances, and anti-future, because it will not see the future it imagines, a future that may or may never arrive.

Defiant Texts

Under extreme political strife, only imagination remains: the most subversive act of a revolutionary thinker, writing from the periphery of a power structure, is to envision a future they will probably never see. Revolutionary writers who are denied existence in World Literature – or even national literature – dare imagine “*impossibility* and *inconsequentiality* as rubrics for antiauthoritarian projects” (8). Writing from a specifically Iranian perspective, I find Elam’s conceptualization of writing profoundly inspiring: it responds to the question of whether there is value in writing under colonial authoritarianism, and whether marginal authors are destined to be forgotten by the opulence and glory created to systematically and deliberately deny them due recognition.

One of the most powerful statements about the value of writing under extreme political strife is embodied in the figure of Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944). He kept writing poetry as he was fearlessly facing his end in Auschwitz, refusing to submit to the bureaucratized regime of fear and murder. The discovery of his notebook years later in a mass grave is testimony to what Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) wrote in *Master and Margarita* – another text published decades after the author’s death – that “manuscripts don’t burn” (1967, 344). To write poetry when one is subjected to political brutality is to remain faithful in a future one may never see: this idea of writing, and reading, is utterly different from institutionalized forms in which the acts are prized if they serve particular ends in the present. Similarly, when Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) wrote *Tup-e Morvari* (*The Peal Cannon*) – written in 1948 and published posthumously in 1978 for the first time – he knew that its publication would be impossible: writing against the grain of Eurocentric nationalism and authoritarianism, the novel challenges European narratives of world history through parodic historical narratives to expose the inhumanity of their “conquests” and demystify the legacies of colonial empires. The makers of the other World Literature, therefore, always know that their audience is waiting in the future.

World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics, therefore, presents "the other" World Literature and enters the history of ideas along with anticolonial thinkers it discusses. Visiting the work of revolutionary thinkers, an idea of world literature is set in motion that boldly disrupts institutionalized literariness to make reading-as-critique relevant; it shifts the focus of World Literature from the moment of translation and transfer to the moment of defiance and refusal to be coopted into the system; and it challenges postcolonial theory – and its inherent Eurocentrism – by merging politics and aesthetics in analysis, resisting expert authority through comparative philology, a mode of reading that gives access to the wider world without subjecting the reader to authority.

And here is the added value: inconsequential reading and writing might seem something of the past, but in a time dubbed the "Asian century," it activates critique and renders an impossibility possible: the de-institutionalized World Literature creates a space for its re-institutionalization, outside the Eurocentric history of ideas, along with new possibilities for an emerging intellectual tradition that will be, like Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkte*, a starting moment for us to meet our new challenges. Anticolonial writing could not end by the establishment of national independence as authoritarianism had to be actively challenged. It is now time to move beyond the postcolonial world to reflect on emancipation from forthcoming homogenizing and oppressive forces – national, regional, and global – in the present century. The revolution and the quest for emancipation has not ended for comrades in discontinuity.

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