GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

What Do You Do After Revolution?

By J. Daniel Elam | May 19, 2023

In April 1959, the University of Wisconsin-Madison hosted one of the first conferences on world literature after World War II, though it was hardly among the first wave of conferences after World War II that focused on world literature. In other words, the implicit claim of the conference was that "world literature after World War II" named a new intellectual project, only superficially related to the various previous projects dubbed "world literature" (Block 1960).

The title of the conference – "The Teaching of World Literature" – reveals the basis of the revised endeavour: world literature was now pedagogical, not philological. Investigations into the philology of world literature were possible in the comparative literature departments of elite, private, and coastal American universities. Public universities, and especially those disproportionately tasked with the mission to democratize higher education, needed to articulate the pedagogical vision, value, and methods of world literature after World War II.

Unlike Columbia's Great Books or Harvard's Classics, World Literature was charged with the mission of introducing middle-class Americans to a world they could likely never afford to visit. The accuracy of its representation of foreign and exotic lands was secondary to the cultivation of an affective and sentimental cosmopolitanism. In the wake of World War II, the stakes were high. Cosmopolitan sympathy from partial knowledge warded off two much more disastrous options: xenophobic isolationism at one end and omniscient *Realpolitik* at the other.

Werner Friederich, a professor from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, opens the conference with what we now might associate with the standard criticisms: every text will need to be in English translation; no course could honestly claim to cover the "world" of literature; anthologies of world literature would reproduce global hierarchies; and the implicit claim that a literature of a culture represents its inherent spirit is quaint at best. Stuck between the rigor of comparative literature and the dilettantism of a university freshman, world literature was doomed to occupy the undergraduate survey/service course.

For Friederich (the co-founder, in 1949, of the journal *Comparative Literature*) it is the shameful insufficiency of world literature that makes it a necessary part of the post-World War II public university curriculum. The catalogue of inadequacies reveals the basis for world literature's "integrity." And no better place for such a project than the US, whose history of migration and multiculturalism posed significant problems to hobbling together a "national literature"; and whose universities had been recently staffed by exiles from European fascism. The determinedly dilettantish design of "world literature" was necessary to counteract the doggedly dogmatic demand for expertise required by area studies: better to read and appreciate Confucius in English translation than to mine him for political tactics in

the original Chinese.

Anticolonial Burnout

Insufficiency and urgency – or impossibility and necessity – are the critical conditions of revolutionary anticolonialism in *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth.* It is absolutely urgent to act on behalf of a world without colonialism, but without regard to rubrics of sufficiency, success, or mastery. Anticolonial politics is an art of the impossible, which makes it all the more necessary for those whose lives will most likely end before the colonial world does. My book is doggedly recalcitrant: it takes two deeply nationalist projects – *Weltliteratur* and anticolonialism – and refuses their nationalism. It reads manifestos as tentative and academic scholarship as inexpert. The book charts the frenetic pessimistic utopianism of a firecracker.

This is not the same type of urgency, necessity, insufficiency, and impossibility we see at Madison in 1959. There is certainly excitement (with equal parts anxiety) around the democratisation of the American university, catalysed by the GI Bill in 1944. Unlike previous projects of world literature – energized by imagining literature conducive for a world after totalitarianism – "The Teaching of World Literature" is the task that remains in a world which, for some reason, insists on existing after nominal and partial defeat of fascism and colonialism. The thinkers and critics that populate the pages of *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* race headfirst into the impossibility of their projects. The critics that attend the 1959 UW-Madison conference slouch towards the necessity of theirs: there was poetry after Auschwitz, and a growing student body to learn it.

If Comparative Literaturewas a *Lonely Planet* guide, World Literature after World War II was *Eat, Pray, Love.* The former tells you how to navigate a brand-new world as it unfolds before you, the latter recounts a route of reconstruction after compromise and catastrophe. "The Teaching of World Literature" and *Eat, Pray, Love* both sit at the porous boundaries between despair and hope, between expertise and dilettantism, between elite prudence and mass-market indulgence, between rationality and sentimentality. But most importantly, the two texts share a particular combination of pathos and pragmatism necessary for self-cultivation and worldmaking (in under a year and on a predetermined budget) after devastation.

Postcolonial state-building in the mid-twentieth century required a similar combination of pathos and pragmatism. The world that anticolonial activism brought into existence only vaguely resembled the world it had endeavoured to create; national independence was the bare minimum of anticolonialism's demands. The great decolonial wave that swelled across the Global South left newly independent countries beached on the shores of the Cold War. For Fanon, the post-independence world was no less "Manichean" than the colonial world. History repeated itself, first as empires, then as blocs.

Decolonial Tedium

The nominally successful revolutions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much like the two centuries' victorious wars and battles, produced a world whose distance from utopia could be measured not by its insufficiency but rather by its mere sufficiency. Our pessimistic commitment to the nominal success of anticolonial and anti-fascist causes reveals itself to be

merely the nominal failure of one iteration of colonialism and fascism. B.R. Ambedkar drafted a utopian constitution for India and despaired as it was dismantled clause by clause. Theodor Adorno's minimal ethics, and Victor Klemperer's philology chronicled what it was like not only to live after Third Reich but what it felt like to live after the end of the world itself.[1] In 2023 there are few remaining signs of the possible revolutions of our times. An artist in Hong Kong painted two hundred portraits of birds killed by teargas in 2019. An artist in Beirut created hundreds of vases out of the broken glass that covered the city in August 2020. In Tehran, the protesters have persisted – almost enough to give cause for optimism. But like the mid-twentieth-century decolonial movements, even the most successful revolutions involve catastrophe and heartbreak. And boredom: what is there to do after a revolution, a student recently asked me, besides watch television?

Perhaps he could read *Eat, Pray, Love*. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* is about being personally heartbroken in the wake of global catastrophe; *Eat, Pray, Love* is about being globally heartbroken in the wake of personal catastrophe (Gilbert 2006). World Literature after World War II, much like independence after colonialism, is both. We might trace a major strain of post-independence political theory which tries to reconcile a cautious optimism with catastrophe and heartbreak, tinged with disappointment with the tedium that accompanies ostensible anticolonial success. The independence of the Third World was cheapened – or entirely undermined – by the cruelty of international debt and global antipathy. The democratic promises of the GI Bill were cheapened – or entirely undermined – by the ultimate inflexible exclusivity of the American university.

What I am attempting to trace here is a hazy outline of affects that form the basis of comparative literature and postcolonial thought – distinct from the contours of the projects of philology and anticolonial thought that I attempted to describe in *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*. The project of world-making after empire, and world-lit-making after fascism, is nearly debilitated by paradoxic forces: the necessary dilettantism and pragmatic tedium required to build a nation from scratch; the naïve optimism and wary scepticism that a vision for egalitarianism demands; and a disillusioned intractability necessary for facing the Cold War world.

Take, for example, Kwame Nkrumah's speech on Ghanian independence, in 1957, or Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on Indian independence a decade earlier.[2] After the trysts and battles comes "incessant striving," not unconditional freedom. The optimism of Nehru's and Nkrumah's speeches are overshadowed by the necessity of "hard work" – a phrase that tempers "the new age" and "the new Africa" the orations otherwise occasion. The utopia envisioned by anticolonialism became a freedom to-be-accrued, not-yet-accrued.

After the empire stopped "stretching the tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of empire" (in Benedict Anderson's memorable phrase), post-independence political leaders had to figure out what to do with all those ungainly folds that the bunched-up, stretched skin left behind (to paraphrase Isabel Hofmeyr's brilliant response) (Anderson 1981; Hofmeyr 2014). The project of teaching World Literature, similarly, was trying to figure out exactly what to do with the same burden. Despite their shared vision for a *world*, both postcolonial thinkers and world literature professors found themselves stuck with the intransigent unit of the 'nation.'

The cosmopolitan egalitarianism promised by the conjoined missions of the GI Bill and World

Literature curricula relied upon university reading. The paradox that Omid, Ramsey, and Dilip brilliantly identify in different ways in this collection – that reading is simultaneously an invitation to egalitarianism and an initiation into hierarchical systems – is a paradox that continues to undergird the institution of academia. The university it has produced can promise neither egalitarianism nor exclusivity.

Many post-independence political thinkers continued to imagine political communities beyond the nation, even as they realised the nation was the only political community the First and Second Worlds would recognise. Consequently, many of the same post-independence political thinkers simultaneously relied on the dangerous sentimentality of nationalism. But the egalitarianism proffered by the nation-state relied on the exclusivity of nationalist protectionism. The nation-states this alliance has produced (much like the nation-states it sought to replicate) offers neither egalitarianism nor protection. (Unlike the university, it doesn't pretend to.)

Postcolonial Middlebrow

In other words: "around 1948" there seems to be a decisive, if not radical, shift in the definition of, and approach to egalitarianism, in aesthetic and political theory (Gandhi and Nelson 2014). Visions for egalitarianism don't disappear in the 1950s, but they start to look like fun-house-mirror versions of their previous incarnations. In his essay, Ramsey draws our attention to Fanon's drearily correct prediction: the decolonised world might only be "a society of individuals… whose only wealth is individual thought." In the guise of raising everyone up, the equalising force propelled the world down. Anglophone education in the British Raj aspired to create "mimic men," the menacing class of the imperial world. Anglophone world literature education in post-war American universities aspired to create "mimic men," the managerial class of the corporate world. Impossible ethical schemes have become impossible Excel spreadsheets.

My goal here is not to malign post-imperial world-making or post-war world literature, but rather to inventory its restraints and constitutive disappointments. What are the politics and aesthetics conducive for a world produced by revolutions whose demands were only superficially met? How do we account for the diminished utopianism of a sort-of-maybe-technically-speaking postcolonial or post-fascist world? What forms of political belonging are available to those living in the uncharted abyss between the world we wanted and the world we got? What does critique look like in a world only partly altered by the revolution of our times? What isthe *World Literature for the Men in the Grey Flannel Suits*?

Allow me to humbly propose, then, the following: mid-twentieth-century post-independence political thought, like contemporaneous world literature pedagogy, is middlebrow critique. It is no longer utopian, but aspirational. It longs for the optimism of a resuscitated past while stuck in debt *ad infinitum*. Freedom has become an investment whose return we will likely not see. Nation-building requires a Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism. If Auerbach's philology imagined an egalitarian world for friends who won't live to see it, "The Teaching of World Literature" imagines an egalitarian world for students who can't afford to see it.

Eat, Pray, Love offers the clearest articulation of this altered worldview, which is worth

quoting in full:

> I was beginning to sense that – even though my life still looked like a multivehicle accident on the New Jersey turnpike during holiday traffic – I was tottering on the brink of becoming a self-governing individual. When I wasn't feeling suicidal about my divorce, or suicidal about my drama with David, I was actually feeling kind of delighted about all the compartments of time and space that were appearing in my days, during which I could ask myself the radical new question: 'What do *you* want to do, Liz?' (Gilbert 2006, 36)

This is a stunning encapsulation of European liberal political theory in the age of its post-imperial decay. As the British and French maliciously discarded their imperial holdings, new nations found themselves tottering on the brink of becoming self-governing, oscillating between self-destruction and self-determination.

Postcolonial theory is undoubtedly the benefactor of anticolonial thought, but to imagine it as a proper bequeathing is, at best, romanticising its trajectory. The form it takes is more like a cheap promissory note rather than a formal inheritance. To imagine critique in a world after the formal end of European empires requires us to reconcile our celebration of decolonialisation with our dour (and correct) insistence that empires live long after their formal ends. Middlebrow postcolonial theory – much like the middlebrow pedagogical project of World Literature – is a makeshift egalitarianism for the world still "in the meantime," stuck on the New Jersey turnpike on the way to its holiday utopia.

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[1] See *The Collected Works of B.R. Ambedkar* published by the Maharashtrian State Archives; Adorno [1951] 2020; Klemperer [1947] 2020.

[2] Nkrumah, Kwame. “Independence Day Speech” (accessible at: https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Your-country-is-free-forever-Kwame-Nkrumah-s-famous-Independence-Day-speech-782738); Nehru, Jawaharlal. “Independence Day Speech” (accessible at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125396/1154_trystnehru.pdf)

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