

WORLD LITERATURE DECENTERED

Ian Almond talks with Jane Clark about a more inclusive approach to comparative literature, and the cultural traditions of Turkey, Mexico and Bengal



Professor Ian Almond teaches World Literature at Georgetown University in Qatar, and is the author of six books looking at cross-cultural relationships, including *Sufism and Deconstruction: Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida* [1] and *Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims Marched with Christians Across Europe's Battlegrounds* [2]. In his latest book, *World Literature Decentered*, [3] published in July 2021, he takes on the status quo of world literature, arguing that the standard canon over-emphasises Western authors and marginalises large portions of the global population. To counter this, he pioneers a new comparative approach to what he calls 'global literary conversations' by exploring common themes in the novels of three non-Western cultures: Turkey, Bengal and Mexico.

Jane: The central tenet that you develop in your book is that although we have a concept of 'world literature' which is taught in universities around the world, the canon is actually dominated by writers from Europe and America, which make up only about 10 per cent of the world's population. The other 90 per cent of the world is effectively marginalised.

Ian: Really what European countries – and particularly the UK, France and America – have done very successfully is build on a series of self-mythologising narratives that have been installed over the past 200 years as part of the colonisation process. Names like Shakespeare and Dante, and places like New York and Paris, have come to have a ubiquitous presence, so we talk endlessly about a very small portion of the planet.

I teach in the Gulf, in Qatar, and sometimes I show some Egyptian films to my students. But they find it much harder now to relate to these compared to, say, things that are on Netflix, even though many of them come from Arabic-speaking countries. One of the things that's going to happen in the next 10, 20, 30 years, I think, is that streaming services are going to do the job of what music and cinema has already done, and propagate a very western set of references that become central to people wherever they live. Whether they are in Latin America, Africa or Asia, they will grow up with these references installed.

A few years ago there was the big concern that as English became a kind of universal language, people would forget their own languages and just speak English. That's not actually happening, but as one scholar has pointed out, the influence of Western countries is not really linguistic: it's genre. So genres are conquering other cultures – detective stories, for instance, thrillers, rom-coms, horror films.

Unity and Diversity

Jane: It seems to me that there are two aspects to this homogenisation. One is that it could be a movement towards the whole world having some sort of common cultural reference point, leading to us becoming more united and able to talk to each other. But on the other hand, as you say, it could lead to a loss of diversity. What's more, in your book you point out that the particular canon that has developed has an agenda, or at least, unspoken assumptions. It's not a neutral message that's being propagated, and so there are certain values and certain voices that are really not being expressed within it.

Ian: I think we have to ask ourselves – what do we ultimately want? Do we want to live in a world where everyone's culture is equally accessible to us and our culture is accessible to everybody else? What would that mean for diversity? Diversity has to include the fact that some people's works are just never going to be understood by everyone. Some books we will never really enjoy, some poetry will never really touch us, because we simply cannot relate to them, so we should learn to draw a line instead of wanting to experience every single viewpoint on the planet. We should learn to recognise the parameters of our own cultural finitude.

But then, as you've already suggested, we also have to ask – what are the origins of that worldwide cultural community? If it comes about through a whole host of very different cultures contributing equally, it might be OK. But it isn't like that; our experience of other people's cultures is very often mediated through a colonial lens, or the lens of first world countries. In India, for example, when Gujaratis or Tamils read Bangla literature, they read English translations of Bengali writers. In Mexico, Spanish has a similar role. There are 59 indigenous languages in Mexico and the different peoples don't communicate directly: they use Spanish. So this kind of unity comes from a certain direction, and if it comes from a certain direction, it also has a trajectory.

Jane: You point out that the agenda that's embodied in this Westernised canon is often so implicit that we don't see the assumptions being made about people, about history, about race, about economics, etc. It seems to me that there is a parallel here with religious traditions; we can ask whether there is a need for religious diversity and why – even if we are committed to a particular faith – there is value at looking at other belief systems. Well, one answer is because it helps us to see the implicit assumptions – the invisible limitations – of our own point of view.

Ian: It's an interesting parallel which I had not really thought about before. But in the case of world spirituality, there is still this idea that there must be a sort of central truth that we are moving towards. Whereas in world literature I don't know if that is necessarily true. The idea of world literature is about 150 years old, and there's a lot of baggage behind the word. Since the last decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, it has really become Americanised. There is a history, right up to the present, of hundreds of anthologies and collections, selling hundreds of thousands of copies, which attempt to tell a vast tale of epic landmarks – classics of world literature – from Plato to Tennyson. But as we have said, they are all Western in their parameters and in their selection of texts, even though they include elements of Chinese medieval poetry, something from Japanese literature, and of course, the *Arabian Nights*.

Jane: In your book you analyse the content of some of the most popular anthologies, and postulate that if it was determined by the populations of the different countries, the section devoted to Indian and Chinese works would take up about 30 per cent. But in the best-selling *Norton Anthology*,^[4] they make up about 1.5 per cent, whilst the UK alone is given 10 per cent and Goethe gets as many pages as the whole of Africa.

Ian: The situation is actually very ironic, because these days, especially in the US, the academic elites that are making these choices are very multicultural. On the *Norton Anthology*, for instance, there is hardly a WASP name on the board of editors. This suggests to me that the problem is not one of explicit prejudice or ignorance: it is more systemic.

I am not actually suggesting that we should be allocating space in these collections on the basis of population – there are lots of considerations when choosing a canon of literature – but the situation at the moment is so far the other way that it is ridiculous. There are vast swathes of the planet – hundreds of millions of people – who are barely represented by a single name. It's not that people like Shakespeare or Walt Whitman or Goethe are not excellent, but the balance – or rather, the lack of balance – worries me.

Unacknowledged Influences

Jane: Part of the self-mythologising of European/American culture is that we tend to see modernity and all its associated phenomena, like the novel, as having originated in the Christian West and being kind of exported to other cultures. We don't acknowledge that there has also been movement the other way. For example, the influence of Islamic culture upon figures like Dante, who was almost certainly familiar with Islamic *mirāj* literature and adopted its structure for *The Divine Comedy*; or Cervantes with *The Arabian Nights*, or Goethe's relationship with the Persian poet, Hāfiz (see the [article in Beshara Magazine](#)). More recently, you quote the critic Berna Moran, who claims that the genre of stream of consciousness quite possibly originated in the 19th century Ottoman novel.^[5]

Ian: Absolutely. Of course when it comes to innovation in literature, it's not really a competition, but at the same time there is a far wider array of origins than those normally discussed when we teach the history of the novel. As far as Arab influence goes, in the late 18th

century there was a much greater awareness of this. I'm talking about Germany from the 1770s up until the middle of the 19th century with people like Hegel and Goethe, when there was a much greater knowledge about Arab culture and the non-European influence on the troubadours and the vernacular literature of Boccaccio and Chaucer. But in recent years, this awareness has dropped out of our collective memory and an amnesia has returned. It's not that we never knew it. So I guess for me this is a lesson in the fact that knowledge doesn't necessarily stay within a society. It requires performance and exercise to remember – and if we don't perform the exercise, we forget.

This goes against the modern lazy, liberal idea that as time goes on we become more and more open and tolerant. I don't think that's true. In Europe, there is a kind of self-love that generates a sort of narcissism and solipsism, and there is real danger today that we are beginning to only read ourselves. This means that we fossilise certain ways of looking at the world and just don't register anything that falls outside those parameters. And I think that this goes all the way back to the idea of Europe – the ideal of Europe – which began about 350 years ago. The fact that we had Arabs and Muslims living in Europe for centuries is just being airbrushed out of our collective memory and it doesn't seem to matter how much evidence is put in front of our eyes, we are not willing to see it. This is true of England as well, where there is a great tendency to see the Islamic world as 'other'. But in fact, the first Anglo-Saxon coins had Arabic characters on them!

Jane: Do you think that this amnesia is particularly prevalent when we talk about the novel, which we tend to see as a specifically European achievement, rather than, say, epic poetry.

Ian: Indeed. When Milan Kundera accepted the Israel Writers Award in 1985, one of his lectures, later collected in *The Art of the Novel*,^[6] put forward the idea that the novel is actually **synonymous** with Europe, and with democracy. So he lumped together the terms 'novel', 'Europe' and 'democracy'. Whereas the writer I like is Italo Calvino, who projects an opposite view. *If on a Winters Night A Traveller* ^[7] is an incredible novel made up of 12 chapters from 12 different cultures. It's a little bit Orientalist – I'm not saying it doesn't have flaws – but it shows much greater, perhaps more honest awareness of the non-European origins of the novel.

Jane: Nevertheless, it does seem to be true that the novel as a literary form has emerged specifically in the modern era, and you are not shy of connecting it to capitalism as an economic and political force.

Ian: Yes, capitalism is really one of the main underlying themes in this book. And the idea doesn't necessarily have to be negative. When writing the book, I found a great deal of resonance in the work of the Warwick Research Collective,^[8] which is a group of world literature scholars who have been looking at the way capitalism is involved in world literature, and even suggesting that there's something about the way modern literature has been produced which encodes capitalism in the subject.

I am really interested in this idea that the modern subject, as it has developed from the 18th century onwards, has emerged from within the capitalist system. This means that capitalism goes hand-in-hand with the kind of fiction and the kind of poetry we are reading today, as opposed to pre-modern literature and ballads, and pre-modern ethics, which belong to fundamentally different modes and formats. In the novel we have a subject telling a story with other subjects in the form of a plot – so, really, it has the form almost of a miniature universe, a kind of empire in which the author plays the hegemon and controls the world. And the novel as a literary structure has the capacity to reflect both what's going on in the individual subject and also politically, externally.

Circumventing the West

Jane: What I most enjoyed about your book is that it opened up completely new perspectives for me, as – proving your point, I suppose – I know very little about the literature of the three cultures you have chosen: Turkey, Bengal and Mexico. And I certainly found the central innovation of your book – developing a comparative methodology which does not go via the Western canon as an intermediary – very refreshing. Circumventing the West, as you put it.

Ian: As I explain in the book, I did not choose these three cultures because I think they have any special role in redefining world literature: I chose them because I thought they had potential to provide an interesting alternative example of how we could conduct global literary conversations.

Jane: I don't know much about Bengali literature, so I looked it up and found that Bangla is spoken by 228 million people in Northern India and Bangladesh, making it the seventh most spoken language in the world. Spanish is the fourth, and just to get the complete picture, I found that Turkish has about 70–80 million speakers. So you are talking about really significant populations of readers. I must say that I am very impressed by your ability to read in all three languages, as some of the works you discuss are not in translation.

Ian: I'm only actually fluent in three languages apart from English: Turkish, German and Italian. Then there are a few, like Arabic and Hindi, where I am sort of middle/intermediate level. I was able to read the Turkish and Spanish texts fairly easily, but the Bengali was a struggle. This was partly because Bangla has two registers; there's the ordinary level which I can read fairly well because there are lots of assimilated Perso-Arabic words. But then there's the pure literary Bengali which is very, very hard. I was arrogant enough to feel that I could have a go, but it turned out to be quite a challenge.

Jane: In each of these cultures, there is at least one major figure who is very established on the international scene and widely translated: in Mexico, Carlos Fuentes; in Turkey Orhan Pamuk, and in Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore and Amitav Ghosh. But you point out that there are a whole host of other writers who are extremely popular at home but virtually unknown outside their own country. What happens here? Why Amitav Ghosh and not Mahasweta Devi? Why Fuentes rather than Juan Rulfo, whose *Pedro Páramo* [9] is actually the most widely read book in Mexico itself?

Ian: Well, I want to begin by emphasising that Fuentes and Rulfo are both equally good writers; it's not a question of excellence. In the case of the writers you mention, there are specific reasons why Western readers flock to them. With Fuentes, there was a lot of the US involved in his own biography. He lived there for about eight years as a child; he had a long affair with the Hollywood actor Jean Seberg; one of his novels, *The Old Gringo*, (10) was made into a Hollywood film with Gregory Peck. His books intelligently and creatively interrogate landscapes of Mexico which are fairly accessible to non-Mexican readers – he's got Gothic houses; he's interested in the whole idea of Mayan sacrifice and plays with myth, etc. It's the kind of thing which non-Mexican readers do not find overwhelming to read.

This is unlike the work of other great Mexican writers like Rosario Castellanos and José Emilio Pacheco, or Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. That's a really dark book with themes of incest, trauma, family trauma – it's a deeply personal book which deals with the internal struggles of Mexicans. I think when you read it as an outsider it takes a while to understand it. I like the book, but even now I don't fully understand (because I'm not Mexican) why it is still such a successful text within Mexico.

Jane: You think that a similar situation exists in Turkey with the works of Orhan Pamuk and Ahmet Tanpınar.

Ian: I really like Pamuk, but I think it is fair to say that in some of his books, at least *My Name is Red* [11] or *The White Castle*, [12] he avoids themes and landscapes that would be challenging for a non-Turkish reader. Whereas Tanpınar's *A Mind at Peace*, [13] which I think is a really great work, requires the reader to know something about the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the Turkish republic – the idea of starting again and getting rid of Ottoman script, for instance. If you don't know about these things, it is a hard novel to understand and get gratification from.

Jane: So do you think it is inevitable that there will always be works which are inaccessible to an international audience?

Ian: What tends to happen in many countries is that two canons develop: one for a domestic audience and another for an international market. And I am OK with that. But there is a problem when one group of people – one region, one country – is wealthier and more economically and militarily powerful than the other. Then writers are tempted to start writing like those people who are successful internationally. Therefore the presence of an international market starts to change the domestic culture. We've seen this in the past. There are lots of examples where things that we think of as typically Indian or Turkish were actually products which were made for a colonial market because people heard that the Europeans liked them. But they are not real; they are products created from our own desires and fantasies.

For example, a lot of the Oriental architecture in Istanbul consists of Moorish-style arches, which is the way that Arabian Nights fantasies influenced Turkish architecture of the 19th century. My concern is that we're going to find a literary version of that more and more.

Jane: So the outcome could be that uncomfortable aspects of what is happening in a country – exploitation or injustice, or just things that do not fit into the Western liberal paradigm – do not get written about, and this means that large sections of the population are deprived of a voice?

Ian: Yes, you could say that, but if you wanted to be postmodern or deconstructive, you could equally say that they are just being given a different voice. The argument would be that we all grow as national subjects and as societies; we are going to remember some things and selectively forget others as we move through time. But for me, it's fundamentally important that a society grows from inside, and that it does not get manipulated or overwhelmed by powerful outside influences so that it ends up forgetting what it is. This happens even in wealthy first world countries like the UK, where I think most people are quite unaware of how much the country has been Americanised since the end of World War II. But it is much more of a problem in places which are subject to massively unequal economic pressures.

Ghosts of Empire

Jane: In terms of specific themes, you identify six through which to compare the literatures of your three regions: The Ghost Story; The Hotel Narrative; Femicide; Retelling Myth; Melancholy and The Orient. But there are some underlying themes which run through all of these. For instance, you point out that because of the dominance of Western capitalism in the world now, every single writer, no matter what country they are from, is going to be grappling with issues of domination, economics, inequality, freedom, etc. related to this.

But in your three cultures, there are also memories of other empires, other periods of colonisation, which still reverberate today. Bengal came under the Moghul Empire, whilst both

Turkey and Mexico were centres of great empires in their own right. I was very interested in your insight that Mexico has the added dimension of having been conquered by Spaniards who still carried the imprint of the Muslim occupation, and this has forged an unexpected connection, at least geographically, with the Arab world.

Ian: This is one of the reasons why I did not go for what has become known as ‘post-colonial literature’, because this only connects texts back to the West. Whereas in some of these other countries, we could be talking about two, three or more waves of conquest and this is a different experience.

Jane: This matter of empire comes out particularly in the chapter on the ghost story. If I could just try to sum up your basic view on the latter: you see ghosts as ways in which repressed memories and past cultures are kind of seeping into the present.

Ian: Yes, absolutely. In the case of the two ghost stories I talk about by Bengali writers, both of them are Hindu, so their immediate memory of conquest is not only British, as one might assume. Tagore’s *The Hungry Stones* [14] is about a man who enters into an old Moghul palace and becomes deranged by the ghostly visions he sees of empires past; he starts wearing Islamic dress, for example. It actually brings in two layers of colonisation, as the story is interrupted at the end by the arrival of a train with an Englishman inside.

My challenge in this section was working out how to read non-Western ghost stories and understand them on their own terms – to try to see what is universal, or at least transcultural, in them. And my very cautious conclusion is that they are essentially about trauma – personal or social – and about repression, things that we don’t want to talk about. This explains the curiously Christian feel of some of the ghosts in the Turkish stories, which is obviously arising out of the fact that there are no Christians to speak of anymore in Turkish society today. And I notice how, even in the USA, lots of the ghost stories like *Twilight* [15] or Stephen King novels have a Native American connection; there’s a Native American cemetery somewhere or there’s a Native American in the proximity. This is because we don’t want to talk about the violence that we did to these peoples, but nevertheless, the ghosts of it persist. I think is an interesting and very psychoanalytical reality.

The Future

Jane: Yes; in fact I found that your methodology of doing direct comparisons between these literatures threw up all sorts of fascinating new insights, and we could say a great deal about the other themes. But given the limited space of this interview, can we skip to the matter of the future? How do you see things developing? Or how would you like them to develop?

Ian: If the question is whether I think that the Eurocentric emphasis will change? – well, at the end of the day, the material economics of the world could do the job for us. Another power could arise, and the most obvious candidate is China. Then, if, as seems to be the case, cultural domination follows economic power, over a period of time we will start to get a Sino-centric view of the world instead of a Western-centred one. I don’t know whether this would be a better situation, but it would certainly be different.

But ideally, the alternative is that we start to get more cross-cultural exchange which is not mediated by the West or any other dominant power. In fact, this has already been happening. Aamir Mufti, in his book *Forget English!*, [16] questions – as his title indicates – the global influence of English, even though it is now the most widely spoken language in the world. He reminds us that during the Soviet era, there were congresses in Moscow where Ethiopian and

Chilean writers were meeting writers from Kenya and Hong Kong, and people were sharing their ideas without necessarily feeling they had to go to London and New York. I'm not suggesting a Warsaw Pact version of literature now, but it would be nice if there were more recognition of these kinds of inter-cultural exchanges which happened outside the parameters of the Western world.

Jane: You've already mentioned Southern Asia, and it does seem to me that in terms of global influence, this region, and Japan particularly, is quite important. You have also mentioned the changes that are coming about through streaming. Whilst Netflix may have a very long reach, surely there is also the potential for a greater democratisation coming about because the web is so open? TikTok for instance is not at all Western-based – although maybe that is more a harbinger of the future role of China.

Ian: I agree that Japan is really interesting. Japanese *manga* and *anime* are incredibly popular now with the kids in Qatar, as well as in South East Asia and Pakistan/India, and there is a lot of translation going on. Japanese fiction is important too: Haruki Murakami is **really** big. I think one of the reasons Arab and Pakistani kids like Japanese culture so much is there isn't the same colonial baggage that comes with liking American or French or British things, and that allows a clearer space for a relationship to take place. It is not the same, obviously, between Japan and China, or Japan and South Korea. But even Korea is showing signs of being forgiving and there have been two or three very interesting South Korean film adaptations of Murakami's stories recently. There is a particularly good one called *Burning* [1] by the director Lee Chang-dong, based on a short story in *The Elephant Vanishes*, [17] which is almost an anti-capitalist ghost story.

Jane: So, one final question: what impact do you think it would have if we start to have these more inclusive conversations?

Ian: Well, we live in a world which is terribly unequal and divided, and when I argue for a more equitable world literature, of course the subtext is that I want a more equitable world. But I don't actually think that literature will change things in any kind of fundamental way. I think we have to sort out the politics and economics first, and this is no longer just a matter of the ridiculous concentration of wealth that has accumulated in Western countries; it is also about tackling the accumulation of wealth by elites **within** those countries.

So I am quite pessimistic about what will happen on this front. But at the same time, I am also quite excited wondering where literature is going to go in the 21st century. Is the novel a format that will continue? I ask because we are to some extent at the mercy of material mechanisms. For example, one of the consequences of the shrinking attention span of the 21st century is an explosion in short story writing. The genre is having an extraordinary rebirth; there are quite possibly a thousand short story magazines on the web based in the US alone at the moment, and it is proving to be **the** market for this generation. So it's interesting how something as basic as electronic devices have changed the way we read. I am fascinated to see what other changes will happen over the next decades.

Image Sources

Banner: The Kolkata Literary Festival, part of Kolkata International Book Fair, 2015. This is the largest non-trade book fair in the world, and the most attended, attracting around 2.5 million visitors every winter. It takes a different country as its theme each year, and in 2015, this was Great Britain.

Image: mapsofworld.com

Other Sources

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- [4] MARTIN PUCHNER (ed), *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (Shorter Third Edition, W. W. Norton, 2013).
- [5] BERNA MORAN, in reference to Reza Zadeh Ekrem's novel *Araba Sevdasi*, cited in H. ADAK, 'Exiles at Home: Questions for Turkish and Global Literary Studies' (*PMLA* 123:1 (2008)) p. 24.
- [6] MILAN KUNDERA, *The Art of the Novel* (1986: Faber & Faber, 2005).
- [7] ITALO CALVINO, *If on a Winter's Night A Traveller*, translated by William Weaver (1979: Vintage Classics, 1992).
- [8] See, for example, WARWICK RESEARCH COLLECTIVE, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool University Press, 2015).
- [9] JUAN RULFO, *Pedro Párama*, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden (1997: Serpent's Tail, 2014).
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- [17] HARUKI MURAKAMI, 'Barn Burning' in *The Elephant Vanishes*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin (Knopf, 1993).