

## Understanding world literature

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### Abstract

World Literature is becoming popular day by day. Many universities have included the World Literature as a subject of the syllabus of the department of English literature. Some of the universities like Perk university, China, Islamic university, Turkey and Harvard University, London is offering special summer course on the World Literature. This is because the World Literature is attracting more and more people due to its universal themes and human emotions. Different scholars like David Damrosch, Mani B Venkat, H.M. Posnett etc. have different opinions regarding world literature and interpreted it differently. Some of them have discussed the features of the world literature, some have defined the world literature and even some of them have raised their fingers on the validity of the world literature. Apart from all these the process of the understanding of the world literature is also very important. In this paper we propose to study the various ways and process of the understanding of the world literature which will help equally the teachers, students as well as the general scholars who intend to study and understand the world literature.

**Keywords:** - Definition, Features, Understanding, Validity, Universal, World literature.

### 1. Introduction

When a piece of literature written in a country and its popularity, due to its humanistic themes, crosses the borders and is equally becomes popular in other countries, and then this work of literature is included into the category of world literature. So, world literature is a vast compass that covers almost all the literary genres like plays, novels, poetry or short stories which are written in a country and spreads in other countries other than the country of its origin. In fact, the world literature does not know any boundary of the country where it is originated due to its human values and universal and relevant themes. David Damrosch has rightly said, "A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin". In literature we find that there are many pieces of literary works which were written a long before but they are still read with great enthusiasm. There are some classical pieces in literature which are called the great literature of the world and that great literature is taught everywhere in the world and all the scholars of the world, studying them all around the world from the time of their writing till date. Some of the examples of the world great literary works are The Odyssey, Illiad, Divine Comedy etc. To conclude we can say that any type of literature, written in any language or by anyone is, however, literature. But it is called World Literature to differentiate from other literary works because its range is very vast and so its writers are. Moreover, the world literature deals with the universal human emotions which can appeal any one of any country. So, written in any country and in any language the literature having universal themes and human emotions in it, naturally attracts the attention of the people and they become curious to know about the books and so they want to read that literary work. As a result, that literary works are translated into different languages so that the audience may be acquainted with it and thus the book becomes the part of the world literature. Some classics of world literature include The Odyssey, Things Fall Apart, A Doll's House, and The Recognition of Sakuntala. Each of these works discuss humanity, adventure, love, civilization, life, inequality, and other topics that are still widely relevant in today's society.



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## 2. Benefits of Studying World Literature

By studying world literature one can explore the humanistic themes, human values and human experience of the other countries of the world having different cultures and traditions. When we study and analyze a literary text, we come to know the cultural and literary tradition of the country of its origin. The first condition of a literary work in the form of a text to be leveled as a world literature is that it must deal with the human values and human experience which are generally of universal nature. Human values and experiences are, more or less, are the same of all the countries of the world and so, when a foreigner reads a text of literature written in other than his country, he relates himself with the human values and experiences mentioned in that text and has a feeling that it is all happening with him and in his own country. Moreover, he comes to know about the culture and tradition of a foreign country and compares his tradition and culture and in this way some of the best and beneficial aspects of other culture may be adopted by the reader which in the comparative study of the culture and traditions of the different countries. This brings the whole world together and plays a very important role in the formation of a global village. Thus, the world literature is playing a very important role in connecting people throughout the world.

Most of the world literatures are in the form of translation. When a literary work becomes popular in the country of its origin and the publisher receives feedback from the readers, they are translated into many languages and are circulated to audience of other countries. It is the boon of translation that at least we become aware of the literary works of universal importance thematically or in other ways even in translation. But sometimes, if the translator is not well qualified and experienced, he may kill the soul of the original work. So, while selecting a text in translation, we must be very careful. We must prefer an authentic translation.

## 3. Literature Reviews

To think that the world literature is a new concept is wrong. World literature there since the literary works started being produced. In the beginning they were shipped from one country to another. Homer's Illiad and Odyssey in this way reached all over the world. But to ship a book to other countries was time taking and the books reached their destination after a long time. Due to this the readers got it after a very long time and so a lot of good literary works did not find opportunity to be translated and circulated among the readers. Due to this reason the number of literary works worth leveling world literature was less and for a separate branch of study the world literature present in translation was not sufficient. Otherwise, people are always interested in good literary works written in any language or by anyone. But after the advent of media and internet, it became very easy to reach the literary works in the form of translation in every corner of the world. On the very day of its publication, we find scholarly reviews on it on net which increases our interest in that and very soon those works are available on line on net and very soon their hard copies are made available in the market in the form of translation. So I think that internet has made it easy to spread the world literature and thus it has contributed a lot in the circulation and popularity of the world literature. This is the reason that world literature has become so popular these days that every scholar and students are interested in world literature in order to know the culture and traditions of their other countries. On the other hand, the world literature has played a major role in making the world a global village. In modern world the world literature has become a kind of information transfer with the development of printing press and internet downloading. Mani, B. Venkat has rightly said that the "worlding" of literature is brought about by "information transfer" largely generated by developments in print culture. Because of the advent of the library, "publishers and booksellers who print and sell affordable books, literate citizens who acquire these books available to those who cannot afford to buy them collectively play a very important role in the "making" of world literature".

Apart from its appraisal, world literature has also been the target of criticism. There are many scholars and critics who do not believe in the originality of the world literature. They believe that world literature in translation destroys the richness of the original language in which it was written. Other scholars strongly suggest that world literature should be studied with close attention to original language and context. Anyhow today world literature is developing day by day in the whole world. World literature series are being published in China and Estonia which shows the high graph of the popularity of the world literature.

There are some classical pieces in literature which are called the great literature of the world and that great literature is taught everywhere in the world and all the scholars of the world are studying them from the time of their writing till date. It is true that most of the great literature came from ancient empire of Rome and from Roman and Greek empires it gradually spread throughout the world. H.M. Posnett has rightly argued in this connection that "world literature first arose in ancient empires, such as the Roman Empire, long before the rise of the modern national literature. Today world literature is understood to encompass classical works from all periods, including contemporary literature that is written for a global audience". In the past only Western European literature was prepared and was called the masterpiece of Western European literature. The literary masterpiece of other nations and regions were neglected. But in modern day the internet and the other sources of communication have made it easy to approach masterpiece of literature written in any country or in any language. If it is worth, automatically it becomes popular and someone or some agency translates it into English and thus that literary work reaches to every reader of literature in the world. So, today there is no boundary for a literary work to



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become a world literature. Any worthy piece of literature can be included into world literature if the piece of work touches or deals with those values which are important for human beings in this world. This is the reason that today we find literary masterpieces of almost every country in the list of world literature. The canvas of the world literature has become very wide and so the world literature now is not a limited collection of literary books rather it includes the best literary works of every country. It makes our concept clear and more emphatic that when we are reading world literature, it means we are reading the best literary works of the world.

#### 4. Origin of World Literature

The term, world literature was for the first time used by a great German poet, playwright and novelist of the 19th century, Johann Wolfgang Goethe. In his different literary essays, he often used the term Welt literature in German language which means world literature in English. Goethe's intention was the international circulation and reception of literary works in Europe, including works that have been written in non-western countries like Japan, China, etc. The concept achieved wide currency after his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann published a collection of conversations with Goethe in 1835. [ Goethe spoke with Eckermann about the excitement of reading Chinese Novels and Persian and Serbian poetry as well as of his fascination with seeing how his own works were translated and discussed abroad, especially in France.

He made a famous statement in January 1827, predicting that world literature would replace the national literature as the major mode of literary creativity in the future:

I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. ... I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.

The field of world literature continues to generate debate, with critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak arguing that too often the study of world literature in translation smooths out both the linguistic richness of the original and the political force a work can have in its original context. Other scholars, on the contrary, emphasize that world literature can and should be studied with close attention to original languages and contexts, even as works take on new dimensions and new meanings abroad.

World literature series are now being published in China and in Estonia, and a new Institute for World Literature, offering month-long summer sessions on theory and pedagogy, had its inaugural session at Peking University in 2011, with its next sessions at Istanbul Bilgi University in 2012 and at Harvard University in 2013. Since the middle of the first decade of the new century, a steady stream of works has provided materials for the study of the history of world literature and the current debates.

#### 4.1 Types of World Literature

The World literature is generally divided into two parts—Contemporary world literature and Global classic world literature. The Contemporary world literature is that which deals with the issues and problems of the modern societies of the world. It deals with the modern time tradition and customs prevalent in the modern society of our time. On the contrary, the Global classical world literature is that which deals multiple traditions of old age. It deals with those issues which were very common during the old age. Generally, the Global classic world literature deals with the old civilizations which were dominant during the pre-modern civilization. Most of the Global classic deals with the regional literature and civilization of Eurasia including the Chinese, Indian, Greco-Roman, Euro Christian and Muslim.

#### 4.2 Representatives of World Literature

There are some authors in the different part of the world who are studied in all over the world. These authors are the real representatives of the world literature. Their works of literature have crossed the boundary of their country of origin due to the humanistic issues raised in those works and so they have become the part of world literature. Followings are the famous world literature authors:

Homer - (ca. 700 BC), The Iliad, The Odyssey, Greece

The author of Beowulf (ca. 1000 BC), England

Chinua Achebe - (b. 1930), Things Fall Apart, Nigeria

Dante Alighieri - (1265-1321) The Divine Comedy, Italy

Fyodor Dostoyevsky - (1821-1881), Crime and Punishment, Russia

Henrik Ibsen - (1828-1906), A Doll's House, Norway

The works of literature named above are some of the most widely studied works of world literature due to their topics of heroism, love, the human condition, and power. These are only a few of the many works of world literature that are studied today by scholars and students around the world.

Some classics of world literature include The Odyssey, Things Fall Apart, A Doll's House, and The Recognition of Sakuntala. Each of these works discuss humanity, adventure, love, civilization, life, inequality, and other topics that are still widely relevant in today's society.



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### 4.3 Features of World Literature

World literature deals with the customs and traditions of the different countries of the world which are the topics of international importance. The study of culture and traditions in the world literature makes the study a comparative study of the culture and traditions of the different countries and time. In fact, world literature is like History which tells us the events and happenings in the past of different countries having different cultures. Thus, the study of world literature increases our knowledge of the history and culture of the world during the different time. The main feature of the world literature is that it deals with the human condition which is of international importance. Human condition is such a topic which cannot be avoided by any society of the world. The other important feature of the world literature is the discussion on humanity's origin, power, heroism and love. All these topics are common for everybody living in any part of the world. The most important feature of the world literature is that it can be understood thematically by the people of different countries, culture and time. In world literature we also find folklore, legends, fables and mythology. These features inspect the humanity which is valuable in all periods and cultures. Moreover, great world literature does not know borders or boundaries. It is read beyond the borders of its origin, where it has been written.

World literature helps us to understand our neighbors, their traditions and culture which increase our knowledge and we can make our life better by adopting their good habits, customs and traditions. The study of world literature increases our critical thinking ability about the world. It also increases our compassion and wisdom. It increases our knowledge of nation, cultures and worldviews beyond our own borders.

Due to the development of science and technology, literature also has undergone a dramatic change during the 20th and 21st century. Literature, in many parts of the world, has been influenced by the world wars I and II. During this period literature took a dark turn. Writers of the world were influenced, rather shocked by the death and destruction of the humanity during the wars. They started expressing personal grieves in their writings which became dark literature and was mostly written on the side effect of the world wars. These writings on the themes of humanities got popularity all over the world by transcending the boarders of their origin. Unlike before not only European writings became popular but the writers from other continents also wrote literature on the theme of human emotion that attracted the international attention.

After the World War II, there was a rapid development of technology and communication. So, the writers of the different parts of the world found opportunity to share new ideas and expressed themselves more than ever. Writers of the different countries came into contact with ideas from the other cultures and thus they found more opportunities to experiment in their writings. This is the reason why the modern world literature is called a fusion of literature like fusion of music.

World literature makes history and geography of countries known to people of other countries. By studying world literature, we come to know about the history and cultures of the country of that literary works. In the old age this facility was not available to people of the other countries. If somebody wanted to know the history, geography and culture of an alien country, he himself had to travel to that country. There were no other ways. We know in the history that many travelers like Ibn Batuta, Hsuan Tsang, Christopher Columbus, Marc Polo, Vasco da Gama etc. travelled to different countries in order to know the history, geography, cultures and customs of those countries because that time world literature did not exist because of the lack of the circulation of the masterpieces of the literature due to non- existence of the printing press. Moreover, the world literature popularizes the foreign languages. When we come to know the merit of a literary works which are available to us in translation, we become interested about the original language of the literary work and as a natural consequence we try to learn that foreign language. In this way an unknown language gets prominence and thus become popular in the world.

### 5. Conclusion

Thus, the advantage of world literature is that we become familiar with the location, history and culture of places we study but may not have personal experience with. When we read a literary works, we actually travel through all the places of the setting of that literary work and we become well acquainted with those places, the persons living there and cultures and custom of those places and also become interested in their local and original languages. Thus, we see that world literature is also a boon for the development of a language which is unknown to the world.

This is the true spirit of the world literature because it easily fits and contributes in our global- Village, that is the whole world which has been constricted into a small village where everyone knows everyone including their language, culture, custom and habit. In fact, the world literature has brought all the literate people of the world on a single platform where they share their feelings, problems and try to solve them together.

As we know that these days we are living in a global village where it has become very easy to bring our preference and choice to the public with the help of the media. Our stories of sufferings develop compassion and empathy among the people of those foreign countries which have good relationship with us.

When we have ample knowledge of history, traditions, geography and culture of a foreign country through the world literature, we become more able to think deeply about our own problems in the light of theirs. We compare our problems and difficulties with the problems and difficulties faced by a concerned country in a better way to find the solution of our



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problems and difficulties. So, the world literature, in many cases, is a problem solving that paves the ways of the solution. This is the quality of the world literature which incites us to study the world literature.

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