
Aamir R. Mufti. *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures*.
Harvard UP, 2016. Pp. xii, 292. US\$22.95.

The emergence of world literature as a crucial academic discourse in recent decades has transformed scholarly discussions in postcolonial literary studies and comparative literature. It has substantially impacted the study of various (typically European) national literatures in the Euro-American academy and has thus led to lively discussions about how the category should be conceptualized. For some scholars, world literature is a canon of texts that travel beyond their places of origin (Damrosch); others argue that it gestures toward a “World Republic of Letters” (Casanova); and yet others understand it as the literary registration of the one and unequal capitalist world-system (Warwick Research Collective). Scholars also debate how world literature transforms extant protocols of reading. Franco Moretti, for instance, suggests that world literature requires a move away from close to “distant” reading—that is, more computational approaches to textual exegesis—while Emily Apter calls for re-examining the politics of translation. This churning of the intellectual ocean has made non-Western literary traditions a little more visible in the Euro-American academy.

Aamir Mufti’s *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* is a timely and important intervention in this discursive arena. An ambitious book that

is expansive in scope, it re-conceptualizes the category of world literature and interrogates the accepted genealogy of the term. While popular conceptions of world literature suggest a kind of liberal one-world-ness that transcends all boundaries, Mufti argues that the category functions in quite the opposite manner—as a kind of “border regime” that polices the im/mobility of these texts (9). Complicit in this process is English—the global literary vernacular—which serves as world literature’s condition of possibility while also mystifying its own structuring role in the process. And English’s role as the vanishing mediator provides the book with its titular conceit: “forget English” is both an imperative as well as a comment on the present historical conjuncture that enables world literature to be.

Moving away from normative accounts of world literature as emerging from Goethe’s comment on *weltliteratur*, Mufti suggests instead that the category originates in colonial power structures and the project of Orientalism, which he understands succinctly as the “cultural logic of colonial rule” (22). Mufti develops this argument with nuance and intellectual dexterity over the book’s chapters. The first chapter contends that world literature “pays scant attention to the very historical process that is its condition of possibility,” namely “the assimilation of vastly dispersed and heterogenous writing practices and traditions into the space of ‘literature’” (57). To support this claim, Mufti provides a powerful critique of Pascale Casanova’s delineation of the emergence of the global literary field in her *World Republic of Letters*. Casanova, building on the work of Benedict Anderson, outlines this process along three key axes: the appearance of vernaculars in Europe; the “philological-lexicographical revolution” that shaped the development of various national cultures; and eventually, the expansion of this literary space worldwide in the mid-twentieth century owing to decolonization (57). However, Mufti contends, this outline is misconceived because non-Western literary traditions were visible in Europe much earlier—since the “discovery” of Eastern classical languages. The constitution of the literary field was not, as Casanova proposes, a *European* phenomenon but a planetary one, which eventually brought into being an international literary space as well as the category of world literature. Mufti’s intervention illuminates, once again, the centrality of the “other”—the Orient—in Europe’s self-definition, thus providing a crucial corrective to the unthinking Eurocentrism that permeates even some of the best conjectures on world literature.

The next section of the first chapter engages with the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to take up the imbricated roles of colonialism, capitalism, and the world market in constituting world literature. Mufti reads Marx’s writings on India to demonstrate a tension between Anglicist and Orientalist

positions, suggesting that Marx anticipates issues that would subsequently be central to post/colonial societies and lives, namely the “crisis of tradition, alienation from historically received forms, and exilic relation to that which nevertheless appears to be one’s own, the inability to mourn properly that which is both present and gone” (87). Mufti argues that in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels see world literature as the “site of a contradiction and a struggle, but complicit in the emergence of a world market and pointing towards a distinctly *human* emancipation” (87; emphasis in original). This section is particularly interesting because Mufti returns to a question that has been a faultline in theoretical debates within postcolonial studies since its inception: Was Marx an Orientalist? This question was first raised—and answered in the affirmative—by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, and his somewhat tendentious readings of Marx were subsequently critiqued by Aijaz Ahmad. Said’s comments on Marx and Ahmad’s rebuttal transformed the conceptual issue into a contentious one. Mufti’s handling of this thorny issue is thoughtful and even-handed. He acknowledges that Said’s “treatment of Marx as simply and fully another ‘Orientalist’ . . . is not only erroneous but unfortunate as well” (85). But he also notes that Said’s “uncharacteristically ham-handed reading of Marx” has led to an equally incorrect view, propagated by critics such as Gilbert Achcar, that Said was an “essentialist” who held monolithic views of the Orient and Occident and gave “succor to those in Arab society, namely, the ‘ultranationalists or the religious fundamentalists’” (Mufti 85).

The second chapter engages extensively with Orientalist scholars such as William Jones to highlight the role of Orientalism in forming world literature and Indian literature. The third chapter takes up the category of global English to understand how it defines itself against its others. In this chapter, Mufti illuminates the development of English in the colonies through a planetary lens while focusing on specific literary forms, including the Anglophone novel in South Asia and the ghazal. The final (and in some ways the most remarkable) chapter takes up the work of Erich Auerbach, especially his essay “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” and places him in the context of recent debates on world literature. Mufti’s motivation for discussing Auerbach’s work is clear: despite Auerbach’s attempt to rethink “the entire history of the concept and practice of world literature[,] . . . major contributions to the contemporary debate do not seem to rely in any significant way on this work” (204). He argues that for Auerbach, world literature is a unifying category that also retains, rather than overcomes, national specificity. This tension between “nation” and “world” informs the animating questions of the chapter: What does it mean to be a philologist—typically associated with national-linguistic

specificity—of *world* literature? And what does Auerbach have in mind in his enigmatic formulation that “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation” (17)? For Mufti, Auerbach appears to suggest a philological perspective on world literature that is fashioned by struggling against the particularism of one’s heritage. This exilic perspective is predicated on “a *gain* in perspective that is also a profound *loss*” (223; emphasis in original) and gestures toward a fundamentally homeless and restless philology. While impressive throughout, Mufti’s book would have benefited from a gloss on the valences of the term “historicism,” and greater editorial care would have helped avoid the embarrassment of mistakenly calling Vivek Chibber by the name Pradeep (244). That said, *Forget English!* is a compelling—and successful—intellectual meditation that brings a formidable non-Western perspective to bear on contemporary debates about world literature.

Sandeep Banerjee

Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory*. Verso, 1994.
- Apter, Emily. *Against Translation: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. Verso, 2013.
- Auerbach, Erich. “Philology and *Weltliteratur*.” Translated by Maire Said and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1969, pp. 1–17.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise, Harvard UP, 2007.
- Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton UP, 2003.
- Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. Verso, 2013.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1978.
- Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool UP, 2015.