

Minor Literature, Small Literatures, Literature in Small Nations

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Re-telling the Story: Mainstreams and Margins

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In the story of world literature, how should we include cultures that have been deemed minor? In responding to that question, I will focus on the importance of narrative technique in the work of comparatists.

Let us consider three ways in which scholars have related the marginal to the canonical mainstream of world cultural history. In the first, comparatists show how peripheries were parts of a larger system of world literary production. In the second, comparatists reveal how the 'peripheral' had a greater impact on the 'mainstream' than is now remembered. Sometimes, scholars describe the prominence that such individuals achieved in their lifetimes and beyond. Sometimes, scholars describe how the modern Western canon depends on earlier, historic literatures far more than has been acknowledged (for example, the impact of Sanskrit writings on the nineteenth-century United States). Third, scholars show how a neglected or marginalized literature ought to be of large significance to us now: they explain its forgotten value and importance.

The last of these three ways both includes and exceeds the other two. All three assert the value of including what was deemed minor within their re-telling of the story of the world literature. However, the first two ways share a limitation: they only tell the story of the 'marginal' insofar as it is within the dominant system of literary production and dissemination. Truly to assert the value of the marginalized is to assert the importance of telling its story as part of literary history, irrespective of the impact that it had (or did not have) on the dominant system. Comparatists must therefore create narrative techniques that tell the story of what is of value in literature across the world so as to reactivate its potential.