

What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature

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Pheng Cheah is a postcolonial philosopher and theorist who has been publishing successfully since his significant volume *Cosmopolitics* (1998). In this new book, Cheah develops an investigation into the philosophical concepts around the notion of “world.” He then explains how postcolonial literature enacts worldliness and may be deemed world literature. In this study, philosophical notions of “world” and postcolonial literature reside at the heart of what gives life meaning, including understanding the political ramifications of spatiality, temporality, global capitalism, and hierarchies of difference. Cheah strategically broadens the notion of world literature beyond its most common reference points, which too often constrain literatures and the worlds they offer to their spatial geographies and global circulations. Cheah suggests that much scholarship of world literature reproduces these paradigmatic limitations.

The first seven chapters are focused on engaging classical Greek and recent Western European existential philosophies of “world” and being in the world. The philosophical backdrop enables a better understanding of the literary act of “worlding,” that is, creating a world that is temporally and spatially connected to an imagined reality. Cheah reserves literary applications and examples for the final three chapters, which focus primarily on three main authors’ works of fiction: Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, and Nuruddin Farah’s *Gifts*, and briefly in the Conclusion, Ninotchka Rosca’s *State of War* and Timothy Mo’s *Renegade or Halo*.

Cheah engages ideas from philosophers and critics who often inspire world literature specialists, including Aristotle, Goethe, Heidegger, Hegel, Kant, Casanova, Arendt, Wallerstein, Harvey, Chatterjee, Spivak, Moretti, and Damrosch. According to Cheah, Damrosch’s view of “world” is “merely an extension on a global scale” beyond literature’s generally nationalist parameters (26). Damrosch is a leader in contemporary World Literature studies, and according to Cheah, those holding similar views inevitably create a problematic perspective of postcolonial literature as merely derivative of social reality. Yet there are other challenges: for instance, Goethe’s vision of world literature is Eurocentric. Cheah suggests how with Goethe, “world literature always involves relations of power and inequality” (43), rather than campaigns for a transformation of those relations.

Cheah’s comments on the flaws of a simplified understanding of Marx’s writing are also quite significant: “Because theories of world

literature have relied on a very partial interpretation of Marx, they fail to see that global capitalism's power to make a world is temporal, namely, the ability to remove temporal barriers to capital's endless circulation and self-actualization" (69). Indeed, to focus merely on Marx's description of the spatial expansion of local and national economies into global markets leaves out Marx's understanding about how the global circulation of commodities serve as a "normative force" in the world, and how the world creates and maintains itself based on bourgeois cultural values. Cheah therefore attempts to "convert" Marx's theory of the world market into a historical-materialist theory of world literature, while reworking some of its emphasis. For instance, Marx's formulations do not fully take into account the context of how the global world order has manifested into a center-periphery model, which holds structural inequalities within the capitalist world system (78). In turn, Cheah regards Wallerstein's model of Western world order with its "later phase" of colonial expansion (from 1733 to 1817) that incorporated "violence, domination, and struggle" as "crucial to any materialist conception of the world" (79). This worlding phase of expansionism brought into the orbit of Western European societies those regions of the world external to it, yet that still remained separate entities from it. When there is a "circulation" of literature that does not privilege the process of circulation within an uneven center-periphery model, then one may "subvert the hierarchies" embedded in the old system (80). Indeed, the flows of literary influence do not only move from metropolitan centers to the peripheries (80).

By contrast, the philosophies surrounding the notion of "world" that Cheah critiques are generally reliant on varying themes of "inclusion/exclusion" (192), which degrade inter-connectedness/dependency. With the arrival of anti-colonial and postcolonial writers, one sees a shift in narrative discourse, as colonized writers initially wrote back to the center, and later, postcolonial authors made their case for general inclusion on the world stage as equal players. Cheah may have done well to include a reference to *Globalectics*, a recent collection of philosophical essays by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The latter argues, still within a geo-spatial dynamic, that postcolonial literature is a global literature, which is comparable to Cheah's notion of the world. Ngũgĩ suggests that postcolonial literature should be "liberated from the straightjackets of nationalism," with the emphasis that "any point is equally a center" (Ngũgĩ 8). Yet Cheah engages other acclaimed postcolonial writers' critical contributions to global postcolonial literary theory and culture. He notes the significant contributions of CLR James, who lauds Nkrumah's leadership in Ghana's quest for independence using Marxist and Leninist thought (197). Frantz Fanon writes about the Algerian war of independence, and Partha Chatterjee takes issue with Benedict Anderson's Western European understanding of "Asian and African anticolonial nationalisms" (201). According to Cheah, "National culture is the first alternative modernity that arises in resistance to Western colonial modernity" (202). This opening up of the world to new perspectives by

colonized and formerly colonized people is an opening of a new *temporal* presence in the world.

Yet in a surprising twist against openness and inclusion, Cheah creates significant limiting factors when he introduces four specific criteria by which postcolonial literature may be deemed world literature (210-12). First, the literature must engage “processes of globalization,” with specific concerns relating to global capitalism as one of its main themes, to suggest how “a given society is situated on the world-system” (210). Second, it must consider how migrancy affects the nation, but not allow this to devolve into mere cosmopolitanism. In essence, “we can count as world literature in the robust sense activist literature that is about the nation as part of the world” (211). Cheah suggests that this must also account for how “the nation is interminably dislocated and reconstituted by various global flows” (211). The first two criteria have a clear affinity with Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, a highly regarded book of cultural anthropology, which contains influential notions about interdependent landscapes of global cultural flows, such as the ethnoscape, ideoscape, financescape, technoscape, and mediascape (Appadurai 27-47). The ethnoscape, in particular, helps explain how contemporary migrancy affects nations to an astoundingly unprecedented degree.

Third, it must be reflective of the fact that a nation is made up of multiple “dynamic contestations of national and regional sites” (211). Here Cheah borrows from Derrida’s notions of a text in general: “A limitless field of conflicting forces that are brought into relation and that overlap and flow onto each other without return because each force, as part of a world, is necessarily opened up to what lies outside” (211). Fourth, it should enact “a process that keeps alive the force that opens another world. [. . .] What is indicated is a principle of radical transformation” (212). The text should incorporate a sense of “urgent precipitation of a ‘perhaps’ or ‘otherwise’ that sets temporalization in motion” (212). Cheah has thus expanded Appadurai’s vision of modernity into what I view as Cheah’s invocation of a sixth element of global cultural flows, an alternative *temporal-scape*.

One may have reasonable concerns about postcolonial literature that does not meet one or more of the four criteria: would that work be deemed of less inherent value in the *world* of world literature? The criteria appear to be useful but too strict, as they repeat the very limitations of inclusion/exclusion which Cheah argues against as a form of “unworlding.” Still, when Cheah adeptly illustrates these strategic criteria in representative literary texts by Cliff, Ghosh, Farah, Rosca, and Mo, his analyses hold insightful revelations about the possibilities of what postcolonial literature has to offer the world. For instance, in reviewing Farah’s *Gifts*, a novel about Somalia and Western aid programs, Cheah asserts, “literature’s vocation is to understand the nation’s crisis in a scenario where the larger world has become part of the problem” (282). Somalia’s recent history has been otherwise narrated through a Western lens of what some have termed “disaster pornography” (286-7). While in *Gifts*, readers view the

“corrosive force of world marketization . . . in NGO practices” (283), Farah’s novel also privileges native cultural perspectives and traditions of gift giving and receiving. Postcolonial literature, Cheah concludes, is an “active force for the emergence of new subjects in the world,” through the summoning of “revolutionary time and worldly ethics” (330).

What Is a World? verifies that postcolonial literature, framed within our contemporary neo-colonial reality, indeed offers new and distinct visions of the world, making it a unique participant in the “worlding” of fiction. As Cheah suggests, postcolonial literature offers alternatives to Western global modernity, which enable readers to envision being in this world with a sense of newness that may, in time, further inspire real world change.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. Columbia UP, 2012.