

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Faculty of Slavic Studies

Department of Literary Theory

Dissertation topic:

***Is the Nobel Prize an Award for World Literature?***

for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science"

Professional Field 2.1 Philology (*Literary Theory*)

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The defence of the dissertation will take place on ..... .. at  
..... in .....

The dissertation consists of three chapters, conclusions, an appendix and bibliography.

The work is 270 pages long.

The paper focuses on the concept of world literature – a key subject in contemporary literary studies, especially in the context of English’s dominance. It examines the current state of world literature while most of the studies on the issue present only the history of the concept. The paper takes a look at Goethe’s and Auerbach’s tradition but its main idea is to examine the state of world literature today with the emphasis being put on the concept’s transformation during the nearly 200-year-old debate. This is the first of the three major ideas explored in the dissertation.

The second focuses on the concept of world literature in the context of the world literary awards – the Nobel Prize in particular. Only a small number of leading studies in the field examine the relation between world literature and literary awards and when they do it is not into great detail. It can be argued that only Pascale Casanova, in her seminal work “The World Republic of Literature”, discusses the aforementioned relationship in depth.

The dissertation examines closely the present, the modern tendencies in literature and literary studies, as well as the link between the latter and the political and cultural demands after the September 11 attacks, the media environment and the market. This is the third leading idea of the paper since the current tendencies and the belief that the humanities should give answers to the questions posed by the individual today are central to the dissertation.

The first part, titled “World Literature at the Beginning of the 21st Century”, outlines the context against which the concept of world literature is presented. It aims to explore the various definitions of the concept while also offering the author’s personal understanding of the notion. This chapter of the dissertation also reveals the influence which the most important world literary awards such as the Nobel prize, the Booker prize, the Prix Goncourt, the Prix Renaudot and the Strega prize exert on the term “world literature”.

The analysis of the most recently published works focused on the concept of world literature reveals that they belong mainly to the comparative literature and the postcolonial

studies. As Rey Chow notes, today the term "comparative" is used simultaneously with notions such as "global", "diversity", "international" and "transnational" in order to define the broad framework of literary research to which world literature belongs as well. Therefore some of the ideas in the dissertation are presented namely in relation to these perceptions.

Modern comparative literary studies have come a long way over the last few decades. Once centred on Europe, North America and the West in general, they have begun to unfold by covering other cultures and literatures thus giving priority to the peripheries. Cultural and postcolonial researches have an important contribution to this reversal: they gradually swap the positions of the center and the periphery, start to examine closely the uses of literature, and, above all, some major problems such as the literary canon, translation, etc. From Rene Wellek to Jonathan Culler the dissertation follows theoreticians' views on the changing subject of comparative literature and the process which sees world literature becoming its focal point.

Since the beginning of the new century the interest in world literature as a concept has soared. This can be attributed not only to the new tendencies in contemporary comparative studies, but also to the new paradigms of literary study in the United States, as Theo D'Haen observes. In addition, there has been increasing interest in the field in the United States and Europe, as well as East and South Asia. In fact the International Comparative Literature Association at 90-s gives an opportunity to scholars from around the world to work together thus encouraging the publishing of literary studies beyond particular languages and cultures.

In 1993 the Charles Bernheimer ACLA committee published a report which marked the changes in comparative literature and manifested the belief that more literatures from more parts of the world need to be studied. It also encouraged the process of learning more languages: not only the "major" ones and not only the languages of Europe. And last but not least, the report put emphasis on the increasing demand for translations: a message which has played a decisive role in the development of comparative studies. Since then

translation has been regarded as one of the long-awaited tools of comparative studies for examining the new global sphere. It could be said that the discipline faces two directions: on the one hand is the move from Europeanism to globalisation with a focus on the comparison between western and non-western cultures, on the other hand is the broadening of its subject from literature to cultural products and discourses of all kinds: a process which is taking place under the direct impact of the cultural studies which see literature as an invitation to discuss everything else, including economy and cultural industries.

The talk about contemporary comparative studies does not ignore the recurring question about the crisis in the discipline. However, when discussed, it is made clear that the crisis, which Rene Wellek foretold as early as 1958 stating that comparative literature had no clear subject and specific methodology, has been in fact a crisis affecting the humanities in general.

In the 21st century both comparative literature and postcolonial studies have been among the disciplines which demonstrate strong interest in the link between "national" and "global", in the act of transcending country borders, in the crossings, the mergers and the frontiers. Homi K. Bhabha, for instance, is drawn by Goethe's "World Literature" paradigm which allows him to undermine the principles of national cultures in order to argue that the transnational stories of all groups which have been marginalised, oppressed or displaced as a result of colonialism now could be regarded as world literature's true subject. That is why studying world literature is seen as an opportunity to examine the way in which cultures recognise themselves and come into contact with their own projections of otherness.

As a result stories about migrants, refugees and residents of former colonies now form the ground of contemporary world literature. The new aspect which postcolonial writers add to the subject matter of world literature includes stories of flexible and transgressive global identities that have escaped from the holistic or homogeneous concepts what "national" means and that inhabit the creative spaces lying somewhere in-between. Or they add stories

by and about the so-called "translated men", a term coined by Salman Rushdie, one of the leading new figures in world literature.

The dissertation examines some of the literary canon theories, especially the ideas of David Damrosch who sees the canon of world literature as a three-tier system. Also discussed in the paper are the ideas about the exclusions from the canon and its purposeful expansion, all seen through the answers of the following questions: is world literature dependent on the literary canons and to what extent and does it work to transform them. The paper also sheds light on the role of readers' comments on canonical texts which nowadays can transform the perception of a canonical work.

We lay special emphasis on the changes triggered by the September 11 attacks and the role of translation in the construction of the concept of world literature. The attacks raised the question of the need for mutual understanding among cultures and, as Theo D'haen points out, world literature could be seen as the means of communication and access to world culture. The reliance on Gisèle Sapiro's formula – the more dominant a culture is, the more it exports and the less it imports – is regarded as becoming more and more problematic. Nowadays the supporters of modern comparative studies try to rethink precisely this formula and to underline the need for a wider variety of imports even in British and American culture. Translatability, not only from language to language, but also from culture to culture, becomes a necessity, as well as a reason to consider more often the need for a world literature reduced to existential categories such as contact, dialogue, mutual recognition and understanding. The percentage of translated books in the United States has not increased sharply in recent years (Martin Puchner talks about the provincialism of the metropolis and points out that the share of translated books in the US is three percent): this is far less than the percentage of translated titles in Italy, Spain or France. But many authors coming from "unfamiliar" literatures and cultures have started writing in English thus increasing the share of the so-called migrant literature. In this way, through the English language again, these works become more easily accessible. In many cases these are authors coming from India, Afghanistan or Pakistan, but one can name some Syrian and Iraqi writers as well. Sherko Fatah, for instance, is of Iraqi origin and is among the leading

names in German literature. More and more Arabic writers are coming to prominence on the French literary scene too. Camel Daoud has been one of the most notable figures in recent years. The wave of writers who talk about the roots of terrorism and whose voice never fails to be recognised includes the names of authors such as Khaled Hosseini and Mohsin Hamid.

Therefore one of the leading research topics recently has been the connection between world literature and translation. Even Goethe took interest in that link. As Pascale Casanova points out in her work *The World Republic of Letters*, according to Goethe the translator is the main figure on the world literary market. The translator is seen not only as a mediator, but also as a creator of literary value. The translator is the mediator who makes international communication possible and who makes world literature accessible to the masses. This concept has remained relatively unchanged for almost two centuries. In the 1990s George Steiner claimed that the most specific feature of comparative literature was language and that it depended on the diversity of national languages meaning the discipline was in the post-Babylon era. Among the researchers who have explored world literature's connection to translation and who have been presented at length in the dissertation are Emily Apter, Susan Bassett, Lawrence Venuti and David Damrosch.

The paper also presents the views of many researchers who have attempted to define the concept of world literature but the focus is on the theories of Casanova, Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Tim Parks and Michel Le Bris. Still, the term "world literature" is too broad. In this respect it resembles the term "globalisation" which can be substituted by "hybridisation", "glocalisation", etc. According to Frederick Jamison we should rather talk about "global literature", while Gayatri Spivak prefers the term "literary transnationalism".

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen uses "transnational" and "postnational literature" as a synonym for world literature. Vilashini Cooppan looks at world literature through the prism of reading practices, claiming it is an epistemology, a way of reading that regularly puts readers in situations where an unordinary text is partially familiar to them while a familiar canonical text is perceived as a bit odd. Milan Kundera sees world literature as an antidote

to provincialism. Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha are among the scholars dealing with comparative postcolonial research and diaspora studies. According to Bhabha studying world literature can be reduced to exploring the way in which cultures recognise each other, especially through the images of otherness.

In this part of the work we look back at the Bulgarian contribution to defining the concept of world literature in articles by Tsvetan Stoyanov, Boyan Nichev and Nikola Georgiev. According to the definition embraced in the dissertation language is viewed in terms of the world it models: it is of no importance whether it is original or translated. We believe that modern world literature should be able to articulate the dilemmas, the fears and the hopes of the individual, meaning it should be a reliable and understandable discourse that keeps away from prejudice and is open to discussion. This takes us back to the existential aspects of "world literature" as a concept; this is of great importance nowadays because when literature pretends to be self-sufficient and fails to give answers, it becomes less sought after. Such a view may seem anachronistic, but if this is our stance on literature, it will have a future. And last but not least, world literature (again according to the definition given by David Damrosch) should be pluralistic – one should be able hear in it intertwined voices, to see cultures of different origin and various attitudes to the world.

At the end of this first chapter we present a broad selection of authors awarded with prestigious prizes; we try to prove that the prizes in question inevitably become institutions of world literature.

The second chapter, titled "The Nobel Prize", aims to present the principles behind its history and to focus on today's changes. According to Kjell Espmark, one of the major researchers of this subject matter who is also a member of the Academy, the Nobel Committee has followed the criteria listed below throughout the years:

- “A lofty and sound idealism” (1901-1912)
- “A policy of neutrality” (World War I)
- “The great style” (the 1920s)
- “Universal interest” (the 1930s)
- “The pioneers” (1946-)



- “Attention to unknown masters” (1978 -)
- “The literature of the whole world” (1986-)

Since the 1990s the Nobel Prize has taken into account the vast range of definitions related to the concept of world literature. It aims to encompass literatures from former colonies, from China and Japan, from small European literatures, which weren't considered for the prize in the past. The representatives of the Committee claim that the winners aren't subject to any geographic or quota criteria. Per Westerberg maintains that "countries, gender, religions do not matter" and adds that geography is not their field. But the situation is actually quite different. Behind every individuals who receives the prize there stand nations, cultures, gender...

This chapter also analyzes many Nobel prize acceptance speeches that directly address the concept of "world literature" and its relationship with the media and the market.

The third part, titled "World Literature Today – Worlds, Messages, Expectations", focuses on texts that we relate to different aspects of contemporary world literature. Among the selected authors are V. S. Naipaul, J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, Herman Koch, Don DeLillo, Kate Atkinson.

In Chapter Three we analyse contemporary world literature as seen through the prism of the novel. There are many reasons behind this choice. All theories concerning world literature are based on it: it boasts the largest number of readers; it is the most influential genre; it has the best presentation in the field of translation (the statistics show that international translation programs support mainly translations of novels); most of the prestigious prizes, apart from the Nobel Prize, are awards for novels. Still, even the Nobel Prize distinguishes mainly authors of novels. And last but not least, contemporary world problems are most likely to be explored by this genre, which is more interested in the world (with its global problems and political issues) than poetry, for example, which prefers to look into the depths of the human soul.

As far as the selection of the concrete works is concerned, it follows the trajectory of the world problems, and figuratively speaking, illustrates the theme of trauma, both personal and social, which seems to dominate the new world writing.

One of the most serious studies of contemporary world literature and the novel in particular is Rebecca Walkowitz's book "Born Translated" in which she observes that nowadays many novels can be regarded as works of world literature because they are published simultaneously in several languages. This happens within few months and in some cases we witness world premieres in dozens of countries at the same time. Even Bulgaria is already part of this global market with world premieres of John Grisham, Joanne Rowling and Elizabeth Kostova. According to Walkowitz the novel is the most international genre. In the past the most important works of world literature were translated, of course, but at the time this process took years while now we talk about a "new speed" (Paul Virilio). Another important tendency is the publishing of a novel written in Spanish in many Spanish-speaking countries, or of a novel written in English which, in addition to the UK and the United States, also appears in the bookstores in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

While examining contemporary world literature, Walkowitz highlights several different cases. On the one hand, we have novels that are written to be translated, which she calls "born translated." Some of them can rely on convertibility and globality, while for others the translation functions on a thematic, structural and even typographic level. These types of novels discussed in the dissertation are books by Coetzee and Ishiguro, but we could add to them "A Heart So White" by Javier Marias, "Windows on the World" by Frederic Beigbeder and the novels of Amelie Nothomb. On the other hand we have authors who are not contented with translations and start writing in one of the big languages – Milan Kundera (in French) and Elif Shafak (in English). Rebecca Walkowitz gives as an example Nancy Houston, who, like Beckett, writes her texts in French and English, and sees both versions as original texts; or Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who publishes his novels in one of the local languages but also translates his texts himself in English. It is clear that

writers whose works are published in some of the big languages have better access to awards and have a new, global audience.

Examining the world literature from the perspective of translation means that we need to have knowledge not only of the literature written in English or Spanish, but also of the so-called "small" literatures. We come across world writers who write in less widely spoken languages and become famous through translations. Such authors are Orhan Pamuk, Dutch writer Herman Koch, and even Bulgarian Georgi Gospodinov who has been nominated for various awards throughout his career including the Strega Prize for foreign authors.

The appendix is dedicated to the Bulgarian literary scene and the debate whether Elias Canetti can be considered a Bulgarian Nobel laureate or not. The Bulgarian nominees for the prize and their fate has been a subject of interest not only for the literary historians, but for the media as well. However, the dissertation offers only a brief overview of the Bulgarian candidates because more often than not the debate focuses on the national psychology rather than the qualities and the merits of the candidates or the national literary tradition. Therefore the paper concentrates on the state of contemporary Bulgarian literature with regard to world literature and contemplates whether a Bulgarian writer stands a chance to become a Nobel laureate.

After looking into novels written in Bulgarian by Bulgarian writers who live in Bulgaria, we can safely argue that they follow the same tendencies as the novels published around the world but the themes behind these tendencies (with a handful of exceptions) are more local and less tempted to look at the events that mark our lives as citizens of Europe and the world. This is not so much a result of the inferiority complex of a small literature, but rather the complex of a society which has spent almost half a century in insolation behind the Iron Curtain and which has been taught to look mainly at itself. At the same time writers such as Teodora Dimova, Emilia Dvoryanova, Kristin Dimitrova and Georgi Gospodinov who explore more universal themes guarantee that Bulgarian literature will be getting more and more interested in things happening beyond its geographic boundaries in the future. And then its chances for a Nobel Prize will increase significantly.

### **Contributions of the dissertation to the research area:**

1. The subject has not been examined in contemporary Bulgarian literary studies, although it is among the key issues in humanities worldwide.
2. The approach that has been chosen is relatively innovative: instead of following the history of the concept the study focuses solely on the contemporary state of world literature.
3. The newly formulated definition is innovative since it acknowledges the impact of the Nobel Prize on the concept of world literature.
4. The dissertation seeks to explore how the new definition could be applied to the analysis of concrete literary works.
5. The current state of contemporary Bulgarian literature is examined within the context of world literature.

### **Publications on the topic of the dissertation:**

1. "Nobelat na Gabriela Mistral, ili edin zaslužen probiv" – v: "Prevodat – most mezhdu ezitsi i kulturi. Izsledvania v chest na prof. Lyudmila Ilieva", sast. Petar Mollov, UI "Sv. Kl. Ohridski", S., 2015.
2. "Ponyatiето za svetovna literatura v nachaloto na XXI vek" – v: "Kultura, identichnosti, samnenia. Sbornik v chest na prof. dfn Nikolay Aretov", sast. N. Danova i dr., Izdatelstvo na BAN, S., 2016.
3. "Svyat i slovo v svetovnata literatura" – v: "Svetat e slovo, slovoto e svyat. Sbornik ot yubileynata mezhdunarodna konferentsia na Filologicheskia fakultet – 25 godini filologia", sast. Magdalena Kostova-Panayotova i dr., UI "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, 2016.
4. "Filologia i svetovna literatura. Vazgledite na Erih Auerbah" – v: "Filologicheski proekt – krizi i perspektivi", sast. N. Chernokozhev i dr., izd. "Faber", Veliko Tarnovo, 2016.
5. "Filologia i sravnitelno literaturoznanie" – V. "Ezikov svyat", YuZU, Blagoevgrad, 2018, tom 16, kn. 2.

6. "Does Bulgarian Literature have a place in World Literature" – In: "Bulgarian Literature as World Literature", Ed. Mihaela P. Harper, D. Kambourov, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (in print).