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Reviews

Mani, B. Venkat. *Recoding World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books*. New York: Fordham University, 2017, 344 p.

The recent book *Recoding World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books* is a “book about books”, says the author in the prologue. It deals with the migration of books that entails their acceptance into what we call today “world literature”. The research questions this study aims to answer are: How do books travel? How do they find shelf space in the libraries of new readers? Why do some books travel and others do not? How did world literature emerged as a part of a globalizing power politics?

The author is a professor and director of the Global Studies Center at University of Wisconsin-Madison. His mother tongue is Hindi and he recalls his first encounter with “world literature” books he bought from a Soviet travelling bookstore arrived into his hometown Hidwar in northern India in 1984. Afterwards, as a student in literature, with literacy in three foreign languages, he developed a keen interest in libraries. While conducting a project as a researcher in Berlin, he was struck by the great number of original 19th c manuscripts in Arabic, Farsi, Hindustani, Persian, Sanscrit etc. to be found at the Staatsbibliothek. Asking himself questions about the ways they got there, Venkat Mani realized books are “hardly innocent bearers of stories” and he understood the great importance of libraries in the acquisition and material circulation of books, as it still has nowadays in the digital circulation of books in the globalized world. (p.4) As a Humboldt Experienced Research Scholar at the University of Leipzig in 2011-2012, the author kept the same interest in world literature and libraries’ catalogues, with a specific focus on the special case of Germany, where the proclivity for books and translating books explains why this country is the world’s first publishing nation, with a share of 10% of the global translation market. If Germany wasn’t a colonial power, it “emerged as an empire of books”, the author states. (p. 6)

The introduction, “World Literature as a Pact with Books”, going beyond Goethe’s term of *Weltliteratur*, defines the concept of *bibliomigrancy*, the author’s coinage: “the physical and virtual migration of literature as books from one part of the world to another” and this creates the worldwide readership – an idea that proves to be the claim of Mani’s book. Readers are not only recipients of bibliomigrancy, they also shape it and inform it along with translators, publishers, librarians, editors... Books that are coded (ie identified) as part of a national literature are recoded as world literature (ie

given a second identity) through bibliomigrancy. (p.10) And libraries play a crucial part in this process of (re)coding.

The first chapter, “Of Masters and Masterpieces: An Empire of Books, a Mythic European Library”, attempts to demonstrate “the connections between German constructions of *Weltliteratur* and British colonialism” (p. 52) and it also gives examples of German scholarly Orientalism, focusing on the activity of Goethe and Macaulay, who set the idea of a “mythic European library”. (p. 66) The author challenges labels such as “masters and masterpieces”, “great works of world literature,” and contends the term “masterpiece” is nowadays a debatable category, opposing to the grand canon of world literature a more democratic category of “literatures of the world”. The second chapter “Half Epic, Half Drastic: From a Parliament of Letters to a National Library” considers the ways “world literature becomes more politically charged” and the “national political representation through literature” (p. 94), giving the example of Heine’s *Welthülfsliteratur* and Aloys Sprenger’s contribution to the German Orientalism.

The third chapter, “The Shadow of Empty Shelves: Two World Wars and the Rise and Fall of World Literature”, approaches questions such as: “What was the face of world literature in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century? How did the pre- and interwar periods correspond to an awareness of books and world literature? (...) To what extent was literature and literary recognition renationalized by the Nazis? What role did the Nazi policies on institutions of disseminating world literature—books, libraries, publishers, and the translation enterprise—play in transforming the shape of world literature from the beginning of the twentieth century to the third and fourth decades?” (p. 132-133) Famous book collectors’ reflections are discussed: in “Unpacking My Library”, Walter Benjamin states that a book collector liberates books, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelf, and in *Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur*, Hermann Hesse took book collection for private libraries to the next level by linking it directly to world literature. The end of the third chapter reminds the readers of the famous Monument in Memory of the Burning of Books that commemorates the Nazi book burnings of works by Jewish intellectuals, liberals, and communists on May 10, 1933: a library with empty shelves, an insightful metaphor of a world empty of its freedom and its humanity. The fourth chapter, “Windows on the Berlin Wall: Unfinished Histories of World Literature in a Divided Germany”, shows how the politicization of literature and books shaped and defined the course of world literature in the two German states between 1949 and 1989 and how the United States and the Soviet Union, subsidizers of the initial phase of cultural politics in the two respective German states—influenced book production and circulation, translations, and library acquisition. Mani deals with topics such as Auerbach’s revisitation of the concept of world literature, the German book industry after World War II, the separate cases of East and West Germany and the activity of the most important publishing houses, Reclam and Volk und Welt. The author briefly discusses the importance of the public libraries in the creation of readership both in GDR and in FRG before and after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. The last chapter of the book, “Libraries without Walls? World Literature in the Digital Century”, deals with the relationship among world literature, migration, and digital media, the ever-expanding offerings of the worldwide web related to the expansion of the world literary space and the essential features of this “virtual” world literary space. It also explores various ways

this virtual space is transformed by its “inhabitants” and possible ways of measuring the transformation. Many data and facts derive from an impressive amount of documents - eg the data about the virtual libraries TEL and the EDL between national representation and cosmopolitan consumption and the information about the issue of “world literature(s) beyond the digital” rely on solid evidence concerning migration and postcolonial literatures. Additionally, the author makes illuminating literary references. It is a pattern he uses in each chapter, making the reading very appealing for the readers with philological interests.

Thus at the end of the book he cites Kemal Kurt’s novel *Ja, Sagt Molly*, a book of all books, reuniting in its fictional universe an impressive number of characters of the most renowned novels and short stories of world literature. What European Digital Library Project only aspires to do, says Mani, Kurt accomplished in his novel: a bibliographic inventory encompassing the history of the 20th century, bearing marks of both human migration and bibliomigrancy, a story consisting of “multiple stories of creation and innovation, interrogation through reformulation, and local disposition and worldly orientation (...) The thousandfold librarian is a virtual reality today, recoding the world literary catalog for the twenty-first century.” (p. 241)

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