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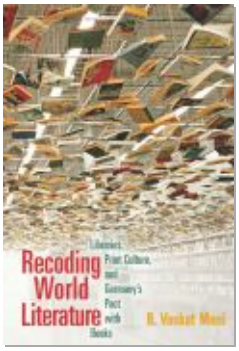
Prologue



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Prologue

When a citizen of a future age shall look back upon the present era of German history, he will see more books than men. . . . The meditative German nation, devoted to the exercise of its intellectual and imaginative faculties, has always time for writing. It invented the printing press for itself, and now keeps indefatigably the great machine at work.

—WOLFGANG MENZEL, "The Mass of Literature" (1828)[1]

You will certainly fancy, my dear child, that I am very fond of books. . . . But you would be quite mistaken. I am a machine, condemned to devour them and then, throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history. A rather dreary task, too.

—KARL MARX, "Letter to Laura Lafargue" (1868)[2]

This is a book about books. It focuses on literary works that migrate to different parts of the world, often as books, and gain recognition as world literature. How do books travel? How do they become vessels of stories and migrate from one geographical area to another? How do they find shelf space in libraries of new readers? Why do some books travel and others do not? These questions are at the heart of the book you have in your hand, or, depending on the medium, on the screen of your electronic reading device. These questions have somehow informed my childlike curiosity about stories from elsewhere carried by books, even before I found the right words to formulate them. In many ways, this book is a result of my return to questions I asked of literature a long time ago.

Before I acquired formal training in literature and literary criticism, became acquainted with terms such as *world literature* and *history of the book*, and knew how to engage with or stage these terms—indeed long before I coined the conduit *Bibliomigrancy* to understand the movement of books—my first interaction with stories that were written down and printed (rather than told from memory or read to me) was at the point when I had acquired literacy in Hindi, my first language.

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My first exposure to *viśva sāhitya* (world literature) was through a children's magazine called *Nandan*. In the early 1980s, the magazine carried a series called "Viśva kī Mahān Kritiyān" (Great creations of the world), which featured abridged versions of ancient epics as well as novels and short stories from modern literatures of the world. The first page had the title of the story and a colored illustration. On the second page, the top right column carried a short biographical blurb about the author or something about the work. As a child I was more interested in the story—the plot—than the biographical blurb, which I would read only after I had finished reading the story. At one point, slowly, I became aware that along with *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Shakuntala*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the *Odyssey* were great creations of the world. I realized that along with Indian classical authors (such as Valmiki, Vyasa, and Kalidasa) and modern authors (such as Rabindranath Tagore, Munshi Premchand, Mahadevi Varma, and Nirmal Varma), authors from other parts of the world (Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, Anton Chekhov, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Maxim Gorki, Omar Khayyam, Nasrettin Khoja, Guy de Maupassant, Sheikh Sa'adi, William Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy among others) also belonged to the group of "great writers" of the world, who produced "great literature."

Of course, it was a very canonical exposure to world literature, but as a child, the canon was the least of my concerns. My criterion for greatness of a work was simply based on two simple factors: the plot and the characters. The fact that the works I read were translated and abridged did not matter; questions concerning why specific texts were selected for the *Nandan* series were beyond my approach. However, the interest created by the magazine continued over the years through school textbooks. English textbooks carried excerpts of works mostly from British but also from some American and Indian-English authors; Hindi textbooks, along with works of most famous Hindi authors, occasionally included translations of authors from other Indian languages. A sense of the multilingual creation of literature in various parts of India and the world was one of the greatest lessons of this early engagement with literature. This was for me the beginning of my own personal pact with books.

And then one day, in November 1984, the Soviet bookmobile—a traveling bookstore, not a lending library—arrived in Haridwar, my hometown. The off-white minibus (a Bajaj Matador) had the Soviet flag hanging from the railing of the rooftop carrier; a white banner in loud red Hindi font bearing the inscription "Soviyata Pustaka Pradarśanī" (Soviet Book Exhibition)—bracketed by hammer and sickle, also in red—hung

high above the minivan, the two ends of the banner tied to bamboo poles freshly dug just for them. The table set in front of the minivan had a veritable smorgasbord for the hungry small town readers: along with colorful pop-up books with Soviet folktales, books on science and technology, and biographies of Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev (both in Hindi and in English), the bookmobile also carried Russian literature in Hindi and English translation. This was where I bought the first Russian novel I ever read: *Aparādha aura Daṇḍa*, a Hindi translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. I had no idea who Dostoevsky was, or what this work was about. All I could see was a beautiful book with some black-and-white illustrations and eight hundred pages available for very little money: ten rupees. In a lower-middle-class Indian household, the cost of books mattered. The Soviet bookmobile may have provided the image that led me to think about *bibliomigrancy*.

In a world without computers, the Internet, or online vendors such as Amazon, in a small town in northern India where the municipal public library only existed on paper, magazines like *Nandan* and vendors like the Soviet bookmobile and the A. H. Wheeler's book kiosk at the local train station became sources of glimpses to a larger world of literature, and a larger world per se.

My conscious interest in libraries as spaces developed perhaps during my undergraduate years at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. The JNU library, a ten-story brick building that stands at the center of the campus, was my emotional refugee camp during the transitional period from my late teens to early twenties. The library introduced me to many European literary traditions in English and Hindi translation, alongside German literature in translation, and slowly, as my knowledge of German expanded, in the original. Off-campus, in the city center, the Soviet Cultural Center was no longer active (I started college in 1990). However, the British Council, the American Center, and the Max Müller Bhavan (Goethe Institute) libraries, which were all on the same street, were the prime sources of classical and contemporary literatures from the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Countries, North America, and Germany, much as the great Sahitya Akademi Library was a source of Indian literatures in approximately twenty languages. Access to literature, especially at a subsidized rate, was crucial to my formative years as a student of literature. Even with literacy in three languages and speaking competence in four more, translations into Hindi and English, and later into German, were some of the most important sources of access to literary texts from elsewhere.

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Many years later, in the fall of 2008, after my first book on Turkish-German literature was published, I found myself (again) in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin State Library–Prussian Cultural Heritage). I was looking into some sources on Indian revolutionaries in Berlin in the early twentieth century. The search term *Germany-India* led me, among other things, to the Aloys Sprenger Collection at the Staatsbibliothek, which, as I would later find out, was the largest and one of the most expensive acquisitions of Arabic, Farsi, and Hindustani books and manuscripts by a German library in the late nineteenth century. Outside of the Sprenger Collection, long catalogs of manuscripts and printed volumes of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Sanskrit works in the Staatsbibliothek (and other German libraries) made me forget the research that I originally intended to conduct. Why were these books and manuscripts in Germany? How did they get there? What were they doing in German libraries? Was there a large readership for these works? After all, many of them were translated into German and published in German cities such as Leipzig, Berlin, and Munich, among others—long before Germany was unified as a nation in 1871.

As I pursued these questions, it slowly became clear to me that books are hardly innocent bearers of stories. No translation, no transmission of stories happens in a historical-political vacuum. As a reader with questions, I was as much located in a historical moment, as were the books and, more importantly, the libraries that accumulated, classified, and then dispersed them to their readers. Suddenly, the spaces where I found the materials became as interesting as the materials themselves. The role of libraries in acquiring, amassing, and circulating world literary artifacts—whether or not they were classified under that rubric—was hard to overlook.

This early research period coincided with my interest in a different kind of library: the European Digital Library. While Google Books, the Hathi Trust, and other digital collections were slowly becoming everyday research tools, I had never envisioned a transcontinental library that was a conglomeration of many "national" libraries and acted as their digital surrogate. Was the "national" library of any European nation, whose acquisitions reached far beyond the political boundaries of a nation-state, necessarily *national*? There seemed to be a clash between the materials contained within the four walls of a library and the self-image of the library in a virtual space. Material considerations seemed as important as political factors; the transformation of the book from a physical, palpable entity to a pixilated one and the recirculation of old manuscripts through digitization simply could not be overlooked.

These encounters with the material and digital circulation of books formed one important personal strand in the making of this book; the second came through an engagement with the term *world literature*. In 2007, I was offered the directorship of the Global Studies Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. This seemed to be the perfect opportunity to start a dialogue among colleagues and graduate students concerning discussions and debates about historical and contemporary world literature. UW–Madison was a prime center for debates on comparative and world literatures after World War II; one of the first conferences on the topic, "Teaching of World Literature," was organized here in 1959. To revive this tradition, with support and collaboration from colleagues in the departments of English, Spanish and Portuguese, and French and Italian, I organized a fiftieth anniversary conference on the topic in 2009, which culminated in the publication of "What Counts as World Literature?" a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* (June 2013), which I coedited with my colleague and friend Caroline Levine.

In these discussions and debates, I learned how criticisms of world literature were usually organized around the politics implicit in the formation of *conceptual collections* of world literary works: canonical European literatures, postcolonial literatures, regional and vernacular literatures, to name just a few. Little attention was paid to the actual materiality of these collections, and when it did happen, for example in criticisms of world literary anthologies in translation, the term *world literature* was considered to be a manifestation of current economic globalization, a neoliberal venture, as Emily Apter and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have argued.[3] Their ideas about the "power politics" of literatures in translation are illuminating, but they seemed too lodged in presentist concerns of globalization and the purported cultural homogeneity that comes with it. Using *power imbalance* as a blanket term to define all developments in the history of world literary ideas seemed as reductive as urging for a replacement of Goethe's *Weltliteratur* with Rabindranath Tagore's *Bissho Shahitto*.

How did world literature emerge as part of a globalizing power politics of the world? How did literary works circulate from one part of the world to another? Why did they circulate and under what circumstances? It seemed to me more important to pursue these questions, rather than offering another argument against reading in translation.

These two lines of inquiry—about the material circulation of books on the one hand, and world literature on the other—came together organically during my tenure as an Alexander von Humboldt Experienced Research Scholar (2011–2012) at the Leipziger Buchwissenschaft, University

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of Leipzig, where I learned interesting ways of looking at German book history. But it was at the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (German National Library) and its Buch- und Schriftmuseum (Museum of Script and Writing), as well as the University of Leipzig's Bibliotheca Albertina that I had a confirmation of what Wolfgang Menzel once wrote about Germany's passion for books. It was in these libraries where it became clear how many German authors, including Marx, had devoured books like machines; how the German proclivity for books and for translating literary works from other languages created conditions for the inception and proliferation of the term *Weltliteratur*. To think of this proclivity for books merely as a love for knowledge would be entirely wrong; in the absence of a colonial empire, Germany emerged as an empire of books, at least in that period.

Even today, Germany is the world's leading publishing nation; according to UNESCO's *Index Translationum*, German has a share of 10 percent of the global translation market. This might be considered low compared to English: 55 to 60 percent of translated works in the world are originally written in English. However, only 2 to 4 percent of books published in the United States and United Kingdom are translated from other languages. Comparatively, the share of translated literature into German is rather high at 12 to 18 percent per year.[4]

But the empire of books and the empire of translation are not the only phrases that define circulation of world literature in Germany. World literature as a function of Germany's pact with books underwent many changes over the course of two centuries. It faced challenges in times of heightened nationalism, such as in the late nineteenth century and during the National Socialist period. Furthermore, the forty years of two German states witnessed a clear ideological orientation of world literature and book production. The tensions between the image of Germany as a reading nation (*Lesenation*) and a book market (*Büchermarkt*) found new manifestations in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In each historical moment, world literature was coded and recoded differently, thus unfolding multiple meanings of the term. But to claim that Germany was, or is, the center for world literary production and circulation would be a mistake. Germany remains an important node in the world literary network, in spite of, and at times because of, its complicated pact with books, which in turn is fraught with the burden of its turbulent past.

In short, my initial curiosity about books and libraries became enriched with discoveries of multiple stories of creation of world literature in Germany.

The nineteenth-century British poet and grammarian William Barnes once wrote:

> Books in long dead tongues that stirred
> Loving hearts in other climes;
> Telling to my eyes, unheard,
> Glorious deeds of olden times.[5]

Writing this book has taught me that a book—whether in a tongue living or dead—must go a long way before it manages to stir a loving heart in other climes. To feel that stirring in translation is the beginning of a recoding of world literary works and their worldwide readers.


Lübeck
Cologne
Berlin
Brussels
Leipzig
London
Moscow
Dresden
Paris
Prague
Belgrade
Frankfurt
Weimar
Istanbul
Madison
New Haven
Sarajevo
Hattusa
Rome
Samarkand
Washington DC
New York
Ninevah
Alcalá de Guadaira
Granada
Athens
Baghdad
Ghazni
Tucson
Kurukshetra
Charleston
Isfahan
Lucknow
Alexandria
Nippur
New Delhi
Ayodhya
Agra
Allahabad
Macau
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Calcutta
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