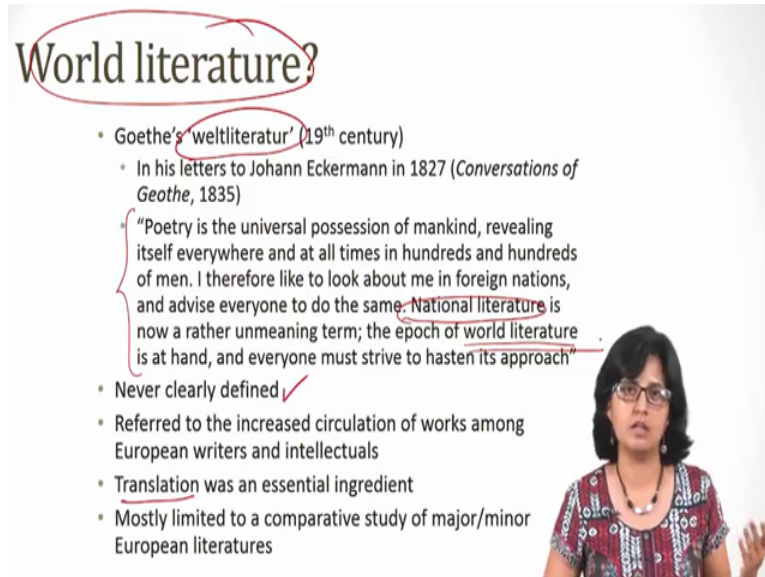


**Introduction to World Literature**  
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**Lecture 01**  
**Reading World Literature**

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**World literature?**

- Goethe's 'weltliteratur' (19<sup>th</sup> century)
  - In his letters to Johann Eckermann in 1827 (*Conversations of Goethe*, 1835)
    - "Poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach"
- Never clearly defined ✓
- Referred to the increased circulation of works among European writers and intellectuals
- Translation was an essential ingredient
- Mostly limited to a comparative study of major/minor European literatures

Hello everyone. I am happy to welcome you to yet another session of the NPTEL course, Reading World Literature. At the outset it is important to pay some attention to this term, World Literature. How do we define and understand world literature and what is the context, what is the historical context within which this term is placed? Without much preparatory remarks let me introduce you to the term, weltliteratur. It is the German term introduced by the renowned German writer, Goethe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

And much of the discussions about world literature and the historical context about it, it became discussing with Goethe's idea of weltliteratur. This was not a formal treatise that Goethe wrote about World Literature. In fact this was part of his letters to his disciple Johann Eckermann in 1827 and this was later compiled and published in 1835 by Eckermann as *Conversations of Goethe*. In this Goethe, as part of general discussion on literature, he writes to Eckermann about the importance of moving away from national literature towards an idea of world literature.

I read from this extensive quote, "Poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. I therefore, like to look about me in foreign nations and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach." It is generally said that this is the first discourse on world literature or weltliteratur as Goethe puts it.


Nevertheless it is important to remember, it is important to note that Goethe never clearly define this term. There is no definition, no proper definition that Goethe let gets to this term other than this brief indication from move away from national literature towards world literature. If you look at the context of this discussion, the context in which this letter was written, Goethe was referring to the increased circulation of works among European writers and intellectuals. He was also a cosmopolitan, right in that sense he did enjoy a fine reputation across Europe during his own lifetime and is quite pleased with the way in which texts and works were getting circulated and received in languages which in which it was not originally written.

So he was also referring in a very positive way about the need to have no such works in translation, in circulation across the nationalist borders. And here we also realize that when Goethe is talking about circulation about texts, he is also referring to translation. But however his reference was mostly limited to a comparative study of major and minor European literatures. He did not have any non-European texts or contexts in mind when he was talking about the impending arrival of world literature. His world was very limited. It was very European to say so.

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## Questions and concerns

- What does it really mean to speak of a 'world literature'?
  - Or the literatures of the world?
- Which literature, whose world?
  - No single idea
- What relation to the national literatures whose production continued unabated?
  - The nation and its literatures – 'autobiography of a nation' (Hudson)
- What new relations between:
  - Western Europe and the rest of the globe
  - Antiquity and modernity
- The nascent mass culture and elite productions



So having said that there are certain questions and concerns that need to be raised before we set out to understand what world literature exactly is and also look at the many ways in which it has been defined and is continuing to be defined. So what does it really mean to speak of world literature or do we have to rephrase this and say literatures of the world, is that even possible to concede something about your writing and label it as world literature?

And even if we label it world literature, which literature are we talking about and whose world? In the contemporary it is all the more evident that it is impossible to talk about a single idea of literature or a single idea of the world itself. There are many literatures and multiple worlds. And these worlds are not necessarily demarcated on the basis of linguistic communities, on the basis of nationalist borders. There could be many worlds which are inhabited within the same nation itself.

So how do we address these different dichotomies and the valences? And what is the relation of the national literatures whose production continue to be unabated? And this is quite contrary to what Goethe expected, that the time of national literatures would cease to be relevant and there is a nominal move towards world literature which he thought would eventually overshadow the prominence of national literatures.

We also know that especially in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards the idea of the nation and its literatures have become all the more important and it is very prevalent

notion even today. Hudson, one of the historians of English Literature even refers to a nation's literature as the autobiography of nation because that is one way of personally expressing what the nation has been going through. And what these new relations which are being explored, the relation between Western Europe and rest of the globe or for example, the relation between antiquity and modernity. Because there are different kinds of literature based on the locations which produce these works and also based on the time period that separate these worlds.

Because the world order as we know in the ancient times has not remained the same. In the modern century after the period of modernity we do have a different world order altogether. So how do we address these multiple concerns? How do we engage with these many differences? And alongside these many basic questions we also have the idea of nascent mass culture and elite productions. So these are the many things that need to be taken into account when we speak of world literature. It is not an easy task to define world literature as a set of works produced in the world.

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## Anticipating World Literature

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climates. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

—Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

(Stoop) if you are abcedminded, to this claybook, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed! Can you red (since We and Thou had it out already) its world?

—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*



Some historians and some current thinkers are of the opinion that in many contexts, many thinkers began to anticipate the emergence of world literature. And one of the oft quoted, most quoted instances from the communist manifesto by Marx and Engels, David Damrosch in his important work, what is world literature, he begins by referring to these two passages from Marx

and Engels, and also from James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*. In Marx and Engels, in their *Communist Manifesto*, they briefly talk about literature.

And I read you to this excerpt in place of the old ones, satisfied by the productions of the country. We have new wants requiring for their satisfaction, the products of distant lands and climates. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction. Universally interdependence of nations and as in material, so also an intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property.

National one-sidedness and narrow mindedness become more and more impossible. And from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises world literature. So there is a way in which Marx and Engels are also anticipating the emergence of world literature because there is a need to move away from the local, from the national and they also define an economic angle to it, a political angle to it and showing us how these are all interconnected. And in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* we have a different way in which the idea of the world is introduced, the idea of the world is talked about in the context of literature.

Stoop, if you are abcedreminded to this claybook, what curious of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed! Can you read since we and thou had it out already? It is world. Here he is playing with the terms world and word, he refers to literature itself as the world, the book itself as the world. So there are many ways in which world literature was anticipated and also various ways in which we can continue to situate it as well.

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## Defining world literature

- Totality of ALL works of literature in the world – Past and present
  - How viable?
  - Scant (or even no) attention to developments outside Europe
  - Disproportionate space for other national literatures
- As the canon of world's literary masterpieces
  - Confined to European works
  - Aesthetic criteria for selection of canon – Humanism - (Goethe also influenced by Humanism)
- An inherent Eurocentric nature – European and American universities - as a world author in the English speaking world
- Are all literatures / languages part of the World Literature curricula?
- World literature vs. National literature



Moving onto the task of defining world literature, it is certainly a daunting task. Some are of the opinion in the early stages that world literature means the totality of all works of literature in the world. This includes past and present and all kinds of literary creations which were produced in the world. How viable is this definition? When we talk about literature, do we talk about literature in front, literature which is now available in circulation? Do we also take into account the many oral traditions of the past?

What are the definitions within which we are willing to operate? And even if we are willing to consider that this is a viable option, this is a viable definition, there are certain limitations to this. There is very little attention paid to the developments outside Europe, that has been very Eurocentric. The totality of all works of literature produced mainly in Europe, that is how limited the working definition was, the practical definition was. And we also find that disproportionate space was allocated to national literatures.

And the another kind of definition was based on a canon of world's literary masterpieces to counter the many charges of omission, the many charges of exclusions. A set of editors, writers and compilers came together and wondered whether it is possible to bring together the canon of world's literary masterpieces. But again the same kind of limitations surprisingly and rather predictively continued. But the most important one being the Euro-centric nature of this entire process. And the other thing which challenged this process of compiling the canon was that the

aesthetic criteria for the selection of canon was based on the principles of Humanism, which believed in the universal idea of literature, which believed in the timeless value of literature but also had at its, as its central aim the goodness of the individual, the goodness of human beings.

And we do not have much time to go into details of the ideas of liberal humanism which dominated the study of literature for a long time. We shall perhaps try and come back to this at later point. And Goethe who first coined this term, *weltliteratur*, has also heavily, was also heavily influenced by the ideas of humanism, not to say that that was an unbecoming tendency. But I hope to be able to illustrate in one of the later lectures, how the tenants of liberal humanism were also found to be wanting especially when it came to the inclusion of marginalized communities, marginalized writers and the value systems which were not invoked for whatsoever reasons.

And this Euro-centric nature, this Euro-centric approach in compiling the works, compiling canon was also found to be reflected in the European and American universities. For example, Decant was world author in the English speaking world but in a non-English speaking world presenting Decant as world author may not be very relevant, may not be very apt. And when we talk about world literature, when we talk about bringing together a select canon, are world literatures and languages part of this world literature curricula? So when we are addressing these questions, we also need to ask certain questions, certain uncomfortable questions about translations.

How about the works which are not available, not in circulation in languages other than English? How about works which have been translated into certain national languages but not being made available in English? This also brings us to one of the central concerns and questions about world literature versus national literature. How do we begin defining national literature and also world literature and at the same time accommodating all kinds of canonical and non-canonical works which are perhaps not well represented within the idea of the world or within the idea of the nation.

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## World Literature Today

- 1970s and 1990s – Almost dead and buried
- A revival of interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
  - The (re)turn of world literature – Theo D'haen in *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (2012)
  - *Reading World Literature: Theory, History, Practice* (ed. Sarah Lawall, 1994)
  - “Conjectures on World Literature” by Franco Moretti (*New Left Review*, 1999)
    - World literature “is not an object, it’s a problem”
  - *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* – 6 vols, 8 editors



Bearing in mind the continued nature of these discussions and these debates, we also need to see where world literature stands today. In the 1970s and 1990s, it was argued that world literature as a distinct discipline it was almost dead and buried. It was also part of the many studies related to comparative literature. But however we find that there was a revival of interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Theo D'haen in his *Routledge Concise History of World Literature*, which was published in 2012 and this was also an important work in trying to theorize world literature and trying to situate world literature in an academic context.

So in this work, Theo spoke about the return of world literature. And there was another work by Sarah Lawall in 1994, *Reading World Literature: Theory, History, and Practice*. And we find number of such works emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And one important essay which also sparked lot of debates was by Franco Moretti. This appeared in the *New Left Review* in 1999. The essay was titled ‘Conjectures on World Literature’. Moretti argued that world literature is not an object but it is a problem.

What kind of a problem it is and what kind of other problems it poses is something that we would reserve for a latter discussion. And there was also *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* which came out in 6 volumes and it was the collective efforts of 6 editors and number of scholars and writers from different parts of the world. Hundreds of scholars, they had come together for this project. So we find a very steady renewal happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where




there is an active interest being taken to compile world literature, to present the body of work in labeled MS-World Literature.

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## What is world literature?

- A new paradigm for the study of literature – a number of works
- Refers to:
  - Literary works that are translated into multiple languages and circulated to an audience outside their country of origin
  - Works that travel across national boundaries
- Also linked to Globalization

Emily Apter: *On the Politics of Untranslatability* – literature rarely flows freely across periods



And it also led to the emergence of a new paradigm for the study of literature where they began to refer to in terms of world literature. To literary works that are translated into multiple languages and circulated to an audience outside their country of origin. So in that sense a reference was to works that would travel across national boundaries which meant that they were translated not in one or two languages but into many other languages and there was a circulation of these texts which were made possible as well.

So just mentioned earlier, this also meant that this had an added political and economic aspect to this. It was also a reference to a literary market which is thriving today. In such a way when we look at it, there is an inevitable link to globalization. So world literature in today's terms when we look at the kind of works which are being translated and is circulated and the kind of works which managed to travel across national boundaries, they are the ones who are also capable of making it big in the literary market.

As and when we discuss through various texts that are labeled as world literature, you would begin to notice that there is dominance of prose fiction and there is less of an interest, less of focus on say genres such as poetry, epic, drama. We find this overt focus on prose fiction as one

of the recent critics also point out it is also because of the thriving market value that prose fiction has today in comparison with other genres.

So coming back to this point of literature travelling across borders, we need not be neigh even to assume that all literatures are possible, all literatures are capable of travelling across, traversing across borders. One of the recent works were Emily Apter, titled On the Politics of Untranslatability. She talks about a situation where literature rarely flows freely across periods. She also extends this argument in one of his, one of her other books to argue that it was this entire challenge of untranslatability which even led to the rise of terrorism and rise of many such tragic and unfortunate incidents in the contemporary.

So one need not be too neigh to assume that all literatures can freely travel across periods and across borders and across languages. There is also an inherent political, economic and the kinds of dimensions to it. It is not an entirely literary effect.

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David Damrosch (2003)



- Understanding world literature as an elliptical refraction of national literatures
  - Refraction – double in nature
  - Works received ~~into~~ the space of a foreign culture
  - Much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture
- As a writing that is ~~lost~~ gains in translation
  - Transformed when the work crosses the border
- Not a set canon of texts – but a mode of reading, a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time
  - Acquires new meanings in a different cultural setting

More about modes of circulation and reception

David Damrosch is one of the critics that we would keep referring to. In his work, What is World Literature published in 2003, he attempts to provide a contemporary kind of definition for world literature. He does not attempt to give one line definition; he lists out series of features which he thinks would better describe the idea of world literature. He in that context spoke about understanding world literature as an elliptical refraction of national literatures.

And this refraction was also doubled in nature because in terms of world literature when we talk about world literature, we are talking about a set of works which are received into the space of foreign culture. So when we are trying to read that kind of literature, when we are trying to read world literature, it is much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture. For example, if we are trying to read a work which is translated from Japanese to English, when we receive the work as a reader, when we try to discuss that work as an academic, we realize that we are informed by one, the traditions in which we are trained, the literary traditions and the historical context that we are familiar with.

But we are also being trained to see and understand how that specific work needs to be situated in the Japanese literary context, in the Japanese cultural context. So just coming together of two different things, in terms of elliptical refraction of national literatures and in this case it would be the Indian literature, it is coming together of Indian literary traditions and Japanese literary traditions because the source culture is Japanese and the host culture is Indian.

So this could be applied to most readings of world literature. David Damrosch also argues that as form of writing, world literature is kind of work that gains a translation. The usual dictum is to argue that much is lost in translation. But here we have Damrosch talking about world literature as a kind of writing that would gain much in translation. It is again linked to the first point that he makes. That is, a work gets transformed, it becomes a different work altogether the moment it crosses the border.

The meaning of the work rests in the mind and in the process of the reader as well. So it is a coming together of the source culture and the host culture. And it is impossible and almost impractical to talk about a set of canon of texts for world literature. This canon, the process of compiling a set of works, it in fact not rests in a body of work, in a set of works, but on the contrary we need to find this in the mode of reading which also entails a form of detached engagement with the worlds beyond our own place and time.

So again linking the three points together we find that when we are reading world literature we find that the text acquires a new meaning in a different cultural setting. So going by this line of argument, it is possible to say that world literature, the circulation of it, the reception of it, the reading of it, the understanding of it, it is more or less about the modes of circulation and

reception. Because if a work is unavailable to us in terms of translation, in terms of circulation, then there is no possibility of even talking about that work because we do not have it with us.

And in today's terms with the increased digitization of, the increased process of digitization we find that it is easier to circulate texts, it is easier to translate. But at the same time one also needs to be aware of these many limitations which are still inherent about the untranslatability of certain genres or certain languages and about the inability for certain kinds of texts and ideas to cross over to another culture, to another language or to another region.

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## The Epic of Gilgamesh

- The first true work of world literature ✓
- Began to be circulated widely as early as 1000 BC
- Translated into several languages of the region
- The actual account of a Sumerian King Gilgamesh – earliest known epic narrative
- Often read as a timeless tale of friendship, adventure and a quest for immortality
- Very much a work of its time ✓
- the product of imperial ambitions – a prize find for the British in the 19th century rivalry with France, Russia and the Ottoman Empire – dug up in Iraq in mid-19th century – ruins of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh



The Epic of Gilgamesh is generally understood as the first true work of world literature. It began to be circulated widely as early as 1000 BC. It is this process of circulation and its translation into several languages in the region that qualified the Epic of Gilgamesh, to become the first true work of world literature. It was about the actual account of a Sumerian King Gilgamesh and it is also considered as the earliest known epic narrative.

It is often read as a timeless tale of friendship, adventure and a quest for immortality which is also the reason why many argue that there is a timelessness and universality and universal quality to all kinds of good literature which is something which again can be contested from different perspectives and from different critical traditions. Coming back to Epic of Gilgamesh, it was very much a work of its time.

It is relevant to understand about the times of, times in which it was written. But at the same time there is a different context within which the Epic of Gilgamesh can be read, it was a product also of imperial ambitions because this was dug up in Iraq in the mid-19th century. So there is this time gap that one needs to be attentive to. So this work, the digging of the manuscripts or the surviving copies of Epic of Gilgamesh was considered as price find for the British because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the mid-19th century, it did a lot for British supremacy in assuring their prominent status, vis-à-vis France, Russia and the Ottoman Empire with whom they were engaged in imperial rivalry.

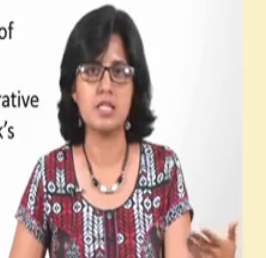
This was also found in the ruins of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. So more than the idea of the Epic of Gilgamesh, being the first work of world literature or being the first work which was widely circulated and translated into several languages, what is also important in this context is the fact that it is possible to see the work of, see this work, the Epic of Gilgamesh as a product which is alleviated to this current state of the first work of world literature as a result of the imperial ambitions and the imperial rivalry.

So the context and the historical setting is extremely important, not just to understand the times during which the work is produced but also to understand the times which reinstate this work into canon or reinstate this work into a certain literary tradition.

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## The challenge

- “Recent developments have challenged some of the premises of area studies itself. The notion, for example, that the world can be divided into knowable, self-contained ‘areas’ has come into question as more attention has been paid to movements between areas. Demographic shifts, diasporas, labor migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization have encouraged a more subtle and sensitive reading of areas’ identity and composition”
- From an account of the transformation of comparative literary studies by Toby Volkman – quoted in Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline* (2003)



There are certain challenges inherent in all this process. Spivak’s recent work, *Death of a Discipline* published in 2003, it talks about some of the challenges which are inherent in the area of comparative studies. She also quotes extensively from an account of the transformation of comparative literary studies which was from a very radically written pamphlet by Toby Volkman. I read to you an excerpt from this pamphlet which Spivak quotes:

Recent developments have challenged some of the premises of area studies itself. The notion, for example, that the world can be divided into knowable, self-contained areas has come into question as more attention has been paid to movements between areas. Demographic shifts, diasporas, labor migrations, the movements of global capital and media, the processes of cultural circulation hybridization have encouraged a more subtle and sensitive reading of areas identity and composition.

This is the challenge which we need to address as well. In our discussions of world literature which some of those literatures also double up as national literatures and local literatures, it is important to know that it is not always possible to divide the world into knowable segments, there could be certain things which are as Toby Volkman reminds us, there could be certain things which are there between these knowable areas. The movements across these areas also needs much attention as far as a critical study, a critical survey is concerned.

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## The course intends to cover:

- Poetry
- Drama
- Short story
- Novel
- Essay

The scope is daunting!

- Different periods and literary traditions
- English and translations
- Canonical + lesser known
- Global and local periods



Keeping this in mind this course intends to cover a fairly vast literary ground. We shall be engaging with different genres ranging from poetry, drama, short story, novel, essay and also certain kinds of newer emergent genres which do not fit into any of these conventional categories. For example, graphic fiction, if we would like to name one of the recent things. We shall also be focusing on different periods in literary traditions. We will be looking at works written originally in English as well as works translated from other languages to English.

We will be looking at canonical works as far as regional or national literature is concerned. We will also be looking at lesson on works, obscure writers and obscure writings which did not rise into prominence for one reason or the other. We will be looking at global and local works. We will be looking at different time periods which are spread across centuries or sometimes across decades. So the scope of this course in that sense is quite daunting but nevertheless we hope to be able to give some kind of a framework and some kind of rational outline to the way in which it is designed.

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## Reading World Literature

- Start with more familiar traditions/periods
- Work outward to achieve a broader view
- To be critically aware of literary assumptions in different literary cultures; the translator's biases
- How to read across time, across cultures?



And one of the guiding principles which we will be using in this course is this work by David Damrosch, titled *How to Read World Literature*. So in the introduction he gives this useful tip to start with more familiar areas, more familiar literary traditions and familiar literary periods and then work outward to achieve a broader view. So we will be attempting the same in this course as well. The first few sets of text that we focus will be from, will be more canonical in nature, diacritical approaches of which you would be more familiar with. And then we would work outward to bring in more texts from less familiar literary traditions or less or no literary traditions.

And throughout this course, throughout a discussion it is important to be critically aware of the literary assumptions in different literary cultures and this critical awareness, this critical intent would also help us to guard ourselves from certain limitations such as translator's biases or the distance of a text in terms of time, in terms of distance. Because it is also important to know how to read across time and across cultures. Reading a text today in 2008 would be radically different from reading it 50 years from now or even 500 years before.

So these are some of the differences that we need to be attentive in order to appreciate this body of writing that we call world literature. It is also important to realize that it is not possible to bring in a set of texts which will represent the whole world. What we would try to do perhaps is engage with the set of texts which would introduce you to different cultures, different traditions



and different periods so that you yourself can work your way outward to achieve a broader view and to cover a broader literary ground even outside the framework of this entire course. With this we wrap up today's session. I look forward to seeing you in the next class. Thank you for listening.