

Sociology and World Literature

11th IWL session

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The colloquium “Sociology and World Literature” brought together ten researchers of undergraduate and graduate level around the world. Over the four meetings each paper touched upon an interdisciplinary topic and theoretical approach at the intersection of sociology and world literature.

The colloquium focused on four themes:

- 1- Identity construction and navigation through literature and other narrative forms
- 2- The relationship between the external world and its literary representation
- 3- Literature of climate crisis and posthuman sensibilities
- 4- Modern Literary readings from the Esoteric and Islamicate Religious Traditions

Accordingly, during the first and second weeks, presentations and discussions focused on the first and second themes interrelatedly. Remo Verdict presented about the novelist and human right activist James Baldwin, and how his works on racial discrimination has been considered as a heuristic tool for sociological analyses. During the discussion this question came up: to what extent the work of fiction or other narrative forms can provide a plausible analysis of social issues such as racial discriminations? In what ways a narrative form can be understood as a social theory?

We faced with the fundamental question of the possibility of drawing a direct link between sociology and literature. The commentor (Kurosh Amoui) suggested that in order to respond to such inquiry, we may need to consider the existence of different sociological approaches and traditions. Moreover, the boundary of literature can also be negotiated. For example, can we think of the Baldwin’s essays as a work of literature or not?

The conclusion that I could get from such discussion was that the response is always a kind of compromise by blurring the boundaries between the two realms. At the same time, there might be issues that remain irreconcilable between sociology and literature. For example, normally, we cannot accept contradictions in an academic work of sociology but in case of fiction or literary texts it is allowed, or it might even be a part of the aesthetical value of the work.

Next, we had Ioana Enache’s presentation who introduced us to the notion of narrative identity, which is one’s life story as she/he gradually develops and internalizes it. Her hypothesis was that fiction can help people to have more say in the direction that they want their identity formation or perceptions from life lead to. When asked about the sociological aspect of her work, she talked about her future endeavors which involves a project to persuade people to become more interested in educating themselves and develop their narrative identity through reading.

While Ioana’s focus on the individual aspect of self-understanding was very interesting, Xinyue Yang’s intervention enriched our discussion. She said that there is always a communal identity which is being made in parallel with our personal identity, and so education is not an innocent concept. Moreover, literary works have long been appropriated as a propaganda tool, at times functioning as authoritarian interferences rather than a product of our own choice.

The third presentation by Ana Laguna Martínez questioned the transparency and the realistic weight that is usually given to photograph by looking into fictional and intermedial works such as photomontages and photo-epigrams in pieces by three authors from different generations, all linked by the German history. Showing that photographs are also signs different from their referents, she explained how her work goes beyond the study of literature and art and focuses on the link between the history of the reception of literary works and changes in the approaches to the work of art that is a product of social change.

The question of literary representation of the social world and authenticity of such representation was brought about again during the second meeting. We listened to two presentations about the modern Chinese literature which approached the issue in two different ways. Xinyue Yang talked about a Chinese novel by Yang Mo written about the process of modern national identity formation in China in the 1930s: “Overriding Class and Gender: Nationalism in *The Song of Youth*”. The novel depicts the transformation of the social and intellectual values with the triumph of the communist revolution through the life narrative of a young petty bourgeois woman. Xinyue argued that becoming a qualified revolutionary citizen demanded the main character to adhere to a degenderized identity that belongs to a unified class and subsequently a unified revolutionary nation. The other presentation by Lingyi Tao inquired about a Novel that narrates the tale of a Chinese ethnic minority written by an author who belongs to the majority Han ethnic group. She approached the question of authenticity and otherness within such narrative while engaging with the aesthetical aspects of the work. Lingyi’s conclusion was particularly interesting, as she went beyond categorizing the work as authentic or unauthentic, by stating that while there are insurmountable boundaries between the cultures, outsider narratives are also legitimate and inevitable part of a legacy of a community. Leslie Ivette Quezada shared with the group the abstract of her PhD project. Like Lingyi, her research also explored the sense of otherness within the narrative, although from a different point of view and in another geographical context. Her presentation dealt with the literary narratives related to the first-generation immigrants from three countries in the US and suggested that beside the theories of *hybridity* and *the third space*, an alternative theoretical understanding might be needed to analyze the formation of the new consciousness that develops from migrants’ prior identities transforming through their American experience. We concluded the two first meetings by thinking about different approaches to the reality, identity construction and its representation and reception.

Global climate crisis and the posthuman sphere were at the heart of our third meeting. Both presentations also reflected on the intersection between sociology and literature by relating their subject of analysis to social constructs and issues such as class, race and dystopic politics, and through incorporating sociological theories to analyze pieces of literature and film. Monika Zaleska focused on the works of the Nobel Prize winning Polish novelist, Olga Tokarczuk, who has considered in her literary world and critical pieces a postnational and possibility posthuman worldview. Monika engaged in a critical discussion of Tokarczuk’s works in relation to the works of several social theorists who discuss the ecological issue outside the field of literature. The second presentation of our third meeting by Raina Bhagat, focused on Bong Joon-ho’s movie *Snowpiercer*, a post-apocalyptic narrative which takes place in a train creating a closed ecosystem, where the original climate crises expand to include other aspects of living under despotic conditions. Discussing her PhD project, Raina explained how she aims to add structuralist and materialistic critique to the scope of climate fiction, by analyzing the evolution of the survivor of ecological disasters in science-fiction with regards to fantasies of racial harmony.

Finally, our last panel, was fully dedicated to two papers that addressed the relationship between the Islamic mystical and esoteric traditions and world literature, presented by Kurosh Amoui and me. My presentation investigated the evolution of the intellectual discourse on secularism in the post 1979 revolution Iran through the lenses of literature, while Kurosh's talk introduced us to his PhD project which compares the works of four authors from three different continents whose works meet at the intersections of esotericism and the Islamicate culture. In my presentation, I focused on the works of a prominent secular Iranian writer (Hushang Golshiri) and tried to show how his post revolution writings falls within a local and context-oriented narrative of modernity and secularism. Kurosh's presentation encompassed a wider geographical area; and used the metaphor of "an organic constellation" to describe his case study. He argued that such inquires of the reception and circulation of the works, can contribute to understanding the existing relationship between the literatures of the world within the traditions of esotericism to romanticism.

Beyond all that has been said so far, I would like to emphasize the rich engagements of most papers with sociological theories and methodologies for the analysis of literary texts. From Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, and Homi Bhabha's concept of Hybridity, each of the members tried to expand our understandings of the interconnectedness of the two disciplines in creative and imaginative ways.