



**Review of**  
**Aamir R. Mufti,**  
***Forget English!:***  
***Orientalisms and***  
***World Literatures***

Nicholas O. Pagan

*Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

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**Aamir R. Mufti. *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. xii + 292 pp. ISBN: 978-0-674-73477-7.**

Aamir R. Mufti's latest book belongs in the company of ground-breaking recent efforts to rethink Goethe's call for *Weltliteratur* by attempting to move away from Western-centrism and by redefining "world literature" as a space prone to assimilating a great variety of non-Western forms of literature, culture, and language. These efforts include David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003), Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* (2007), and Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013). These works all imply that as a distinctive academic domain, "world literature" is growing in momentum; and they help us to appreciate why in his Preface, Mufti even suggests that as a discipline, world literature may be about to occupy the space once reserved for "comparative literature" (10).

Despite the bold declaration in the title, Mufti quickly acknowledges that on the world stage English can never be forgotten, especially because as a language it is so intimately tied to "Orientalism" and "the origins and structures of "colonial power" (19). Indeed, according to Mufti, as it is impossible to ignore English, it makes more sense to "insist on the necessity and possibility of thinking past, around, and about it" (ibid). At the same time, Mufti also wants to reach out to "so-called Third World" readers, to help them to recognize what Edward Said had labelled "the formidable structure of cultural domination, and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon another" (24). Mufti also indicates that although Said was right to describe this structure as Christian in origin, the form of criticism that can be derived from Said's corpus is rigorously secular in line with the work of Erich Auerbach.

In Chapter 1, "Where in the World is World Literature?," Mufti singles out thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder and Thomas Carlyle for being forerunners of the notion of "nation-thinking." Herder believed quite simply that because people tended to express themselves most effectively in their own language, the nations to which they belong should celebrate their own poets. Carlyle maintained that the word "nation" itself implies the existence of a "national literature." Peoples' attachment to and drawing attention to their own distinctive national literatures would then lead to the gradual incorporation of what Mufti calls "non-Western textual traditions" into "the international literary space that had emerged in early modern times in Europe" (58). Again Mufti singles out Said as one of the key figures responsible for drawing attention to inter-cultural spaces and the need for European or American thinkers to reach out to non-Western, especially Oriental, cultures and literatures.

Mufti, however, finds fault with Said's one-sided critique of Karl Marx's writings about colonialism. Of course Marx sometimes wrote with a "Western European," "Anglicist" or (to use Said's term) "Orientalist" bias; but Mufti deftly portrays him as remarkably prophetic concerning "a range of crucial and inescapable motifs and issues in colonial and postcolonial societies" (87). Mufti also credits Marx for early recognition of plausible links between the emergence of a site for world literature and "the Western European bourgeoisie's drive to create a world market" (87).

Mufti draws attention to "Bandung," the Indonesian setting for the first congress of Afro-Asian states and also now a term generally recognized as denoting "attempts worldwide to reimagine the life of humanity from the perspective of peoples just emerging from the racialized denigration of colonial subjugation" (91). This

congress led to a plethora of publications and related conferences and collaborations all over the world; but Mufti moves toward a note of caution concerning definitions of “world literature.” Is it some sort of “conceptual organization,” simply “a problem for research,” or something more profound?

Another chapter deals with Indian literature as an institution, identifying different phases in its development, including one represented by the Fort William Project. In opposition to this project, which involved collaboration of, for instance professors from Europe and local *munshis* (scribes), Mufti highlights Inshallah Khan Insha’s *The Tale of Queen Ketaki and Prince Uday Bhan*. This formidable tale, according to Mufti, “was shaped [...] by the effort to assure the prestige of elite language practises [both Hindi and Urdu] against subaltern, rustic, or popular ones” (125). Here Mufti writes at some length about Hindu and Urdu as well as Indo-Persian literary history and questions the ideal lying behind any idealized bourgeois conception of a world literature that can involve “free and equal interchange and communication.”

In “Global English and Its Others” Mufti confronts Salman Rushdie’s eye-catching assertion that “Indo-Anglian” or “prose writing by Indian writers working in English” is far better than the writing of Indians using “vernacular language” (154-55) by questioning definitions of “vernacular.” For Mufti, it is difficult to draw a clear line between the English mentioned by Rushdie and the Indian vernacular languages because “the ‘vernacular’ [...] is itself implicated in a colonial genealogy and cannot sustain its claim to an authentic position uncontaminated by the colonial process” (157). In great detail Mufti backs up this assertion by looking very closely at some of the poems written by Agha Shahid Ali who had a predilection for the traditional *ghazal*, dealing especially with themes related to love, desire, devotion, and flirtation. Mufti clearly shows how in the poems “Tonight” and the aptly-named “Beyond English,” Shahid had recourse to a mixture of English and Urdu; and he goes on to demonstrate how the poems point to the genre’s subtle “transformation from a premodern and precolonial [...] form to a postcolonial and fundamentally *nonnational* one” (emphasis in original, 194). Mufti also argues that the ideal reading of such poems would rely not only on knowledge of at least one of English’s “Others” but also some familiarity with “exilic philology” (ibid).

Chapter 4 is a substantially revised version of work that appeared in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2012). Here Mufti begins by re-examining Auerbach’s essay “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” and some of Auerbach’s letters in order to draw attention to the links between philology and loss of home. For Auerbach, a key issue becomes: how to reconcile philology and world literature while at the same time emphasizing one’s “own nation’s culture and language” (223). Mufti pits Auerbach’s “European-modernist homelessness” against Said’s “worldly” critical consciousness, which relies on “a ‘contrapuntal’ imagination and the practice of philological criticism” (240). Eventually, according to Mufti, Said in his later works embraced a form of humanism very compatible with Auerbach’s “proper love for the world” (241).

*Forget English!* is a challenging book which will be of interest mostly to those already well-grounded in debates about Orientalism(s) and world literature(s). It can help readers to appreciate the forces that operate to blur the boundaries between the global and the local, claims for universality on the one hand and pride in one’s vernacular on the other. Readers will certainly come away from the book less inclined to tie any work of literature down to one nation or language. Mufti fully endorses and gives many examples of how world literature functions as what Moretti has called “a planetary system made up of hundreds of languages and literatures” (94). His book encourages us not to be intimidated by this vastness, but to reach out to and become involved in a field of inquiry that seems both quite new and very familiar.