

Robin Truth Goodman, *Feminism as World Literature*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, ISBN 978-1-5013-7118-9, 310 p.

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The field of World Literature has been shaped by a sustained interrogation of its own disciplinary instruments and frameworks in the last decades, a self-reflexivity engendered by the significant contributions of scholars such as Gayatri Spivak in her seminal “Death of a Discipline” and Edward Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism. This continued practice of disciplinary introspection has inspired a wide range of responses, from interdisciplinary syntheses to reconfigurations of literary analytical instruments. Robin Truth Goodman’s 2023 edited volume, *Feminism as World Literature*, epitomizes this self-reflexive stance and the widespread aim of contemporary World Literature studies to redesign the discipline’s heuristic instruments, in this case by bringing to the fore the contributions of feminist thinkers to the self-(re)defining gestures of World Literature. Far from framing the intersection between World Literature and feminism as a novelty in literary studies, Goodman makes visible the historical marginality of feminism in relation to the genealogy of World Literature’s redefining moments (from Goethe all the way to contemporary distant reading and world systems theory). Rejecting feminism’s peripheral status in relation to World Literature, Goodman grounds her engagement in an ethical and political urgency: without the instruments and frameworks that feminism can galvanize towards reworking the mechanisms of World Literature “from within,” democracy is in peril, she argues. Although this provocative statement could make it seem like Goodman is overstating the significance of rethinking literary studies in this manner, as the contributors of this volume demonstrate, feminist inquiries and rewritings amount to nuanced conceptualizations that go against abstractive and universalizing Western

mechanisms of thinking about gender, race, ecology, or translation. As Goodman argues, along with this feminist reimagining, which is by no means homogeneous:

[d]emocracy could be less about securing a state of the world based on violence, homogeneous rights and identities, legitimising tactics, and the nation-state in a constant state of emergency, and, instead, about an ethico-political relation toward the nonidentical other, with her own aporetic language of difference, whose future, like her present, is made insecure and precarious in its essential politicalness. (16)

In her introduction, Goodman discusses the marginalized position of feminist studies in relation to World Literature, tracing this marginality back to the historical association between femininity and corporeality, contingency, locality, and particularity, as opposed to the transcendent and expansive values that have characterized World Literature across the centuries. She scrutinizes this correlation by highlighting that contestatory gestures of “detachment and disassociation” (3), strategies that have already been employed by feminist thinkers such as Virginia Woolf and Mary Wollstonecraft, are being reconceptualized and expanded upon by the contributors of this volume. Situating this volume in relation to multiple cardinal contemporary debates surrounding, among others, postcolonial literary studies and the state of theory and criticism, Goodman explores the affordances of a feminist-oriented World Literature. “With feminist inflections,” she writes, “World Literature ... plays at the limits of national languages and their security in their supposedly universalizable categorical and canonical systems, calling out toward a difference that cannot be represented in those terms” (8). As the chapters in this collective volume perform multiple methodological renegotiations, the contributors actively stray away from framing feminism or feminist literary studies as ancillary to World Literature paradigms, nor do they employ instruments subsumed under a World Literature framework in feminist contexts, avoiding what Goodman describes as “an identity that seeks recognition as a repetition within an already established and categorized literary sphere” (17). Rather, their focus is on galvanizing the liberatory and democratic impetuses of feminist theory in order to dismantle the Orientalist and Eurocentric dimensions that can underpin a universalist view of World Literature.

The first section, entitled *Genres*, engages with women writers' strategies of expanding the modalities and scopes of "authorized conventions" (17), by tracing both the conversions and transmutations operated by women writers in the development of different genres and the limitations of their engagement. In this sense, Marie Ostby analyzes Lady Mary Sheil's travelogue *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (1856) and reveals the complex and often complicitous insertion of a woman writer into a product of cross-cultural representation that was already established by the second half of the 19th century. Ostby examines the ways in which Sheil, the first European woman to write a travelogue about Iran, "sets a precedent for a troubled, paradoxical genre that nonetheless continued to dominate cross-cultural representation into the twentieth century" (24) by both altering imperialist conceptualizations—redefining the notion of women's freedom "in terms of speech, religion, and nonreproductive modes of female sociality" (26)—and reinforcing racialized formulas (in downright racist passages that describe the rural peoples of Iran). Ostby concludes that Sheil's travelogue "[opens up] the genre beyond its culturally and epistemically violent roots" (27), expanding it towards "multi-perspectival nuance" (38-39), an advancement that the author, who was the first travelogue writer to have access to the *andarun* (women's quarters) and to more intimate dimensions of women's lives in Iran, was herself aware of and believed would bring a change of perspective in the representation of Persian society in Britain.

Announcing the fundamental aims of the chapters in this section, Caren Irr explores feminist contributions to the genre of desmodystopia, a subgenre "explicitly concerned with prospects for the human species as a collectivity" (41), typically imagining future societies depleted of natural resources. By analyzing numerous works, she highlights three elements that recur in feminist desmodystopias: (1) nomadism—they typify liberation as freedom of movement from a homogenized, authoritarian enclave to a presumably heterogeneous outside (45) that reveals itself to be, in feminist conceptualizations of the genre, depleted and negative; (2) what she calls "fetishistic displacements," that is, child substitutes in worlds that suffer from demographic crises of one form or another; and (3) hyperliteracy. This thematic introduction and examination of the state of feminist desmodystopias is followed by an analysis of two works by Nnedi Okorafor and Diane Cook that dismantle the aforementioned tropes and adopt formulas that gesture towards the "vitality of the form and the creativity of

feminisms capable of looking past individualist premises and toward a world in which multiple reproductive ideals coexist alongside multispecies relationships and varying forms of literacy” (54). This chapter, which synthesizes the most salient methodological strategies of the section, highlights not only women’s historical contributions to the development of multiple genres such as dystopia, sci-fi, or hip-hop (most poignant in the case of Lady Mary Sheil discussed in chapter 1, but also Margaret Atwood in Irr’s chapter and Octavia Butler in chapter 2), but also how reworkings of forms in feminist contexts can create more salient and complex meanings surrounding issues like labor, reproduction, and sexuality.

The second part, entitled *Strategies*, explores how hermeneutic practices can be challenged and transformed within feminist (re)evaluations. The chapter that opens this section is Keya Ganguly’s *Bonds of Labor: Mahasweta Devi, Feminism, Leninism*, which aims to question the abstract and universalizing implications of World Literature paradigms, being paradigmatic for the scopes of the section as a whole. Ganguly’s rigorous analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s linguistic architecture in her novel *Dhowli* is coupled with a complex consideration of the normative and generalizing reflexes of scholarship oriented towards peripheral literatures, underscoring Devi’s liberatory strategies in her novel and in her immediate reality as an activist. The complex linguistic interplay within the novel, moving between Bengali and a local dialect, accentuates the marginalization of the tribal vernacular “within official nationalist discourse” (103). Not only are the effects of this interplay untranslatable to an English-speaking readership, but the intersections between the multiple forms of oppression in the novel (the oppression of workers, the exploitation of women for their sexual labor, racism) and their framing in Devi’s radicalism are largely untranslatable too. As Ganguly writes, Devi’s “reception in Anglo-American circuits of literary influence was complicated by the difficulty in making fine-grained distinctions about left thinking, especially outside the West” (106). Devi’s leftist radicalism, an engaged, organic, and practical enterprise, cannot be understood, contends Ganguly, in terms of intersectionality or interrelatedness, because it disregards what Ganguly describes as Western “[m]etropolitan sensitivities about ‘speaking for the other’ (often regarded as arrogant, condescending, or misguided)” (106). In her activism and writing, Devi subverts Western leftist discursive expectations and opens up space for complex analyses of the

relationship between social and economic class, gender, and corporeality. Her declamatory refusal of being labeled a “feminist” writer, which could be reprimanded or (at least) met with skepticism in the Western world, becomes, in Ganguly’s analysis, a radical expression of Devi’s redefinition of the relationship between gender and class. Her rejection of the label “feminist writer” stems “not from a dogmatic rejection of feminism’s project but precisely out of a supple understanding of social existence—that gender and other axes of oppression are overlaid on the fundamental contradiction of class, particularly when it comes to global realities” (113).

The third section, entitled *Themes*, explores how World Literature subjects are reconceptualized and reworked through feminist considerations. These chapters explore the nuances and complexities that themes like environmentalism, decolonization, terrorism, or resistance acquire when approached within feminist investigations. The acquisitions of these chapters become especially salient when they dismantle binary modalities of representation and interpretation, revealing complex and refined understandings of interrelatedness and interdependency that underpin these subjects. Karen Thornber’s chapter, “Intertwining Feminisms, Environmentalisms, and World Literature in Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*”, opens with the affirmation that scholarship oriented towards the intersection between feminist studies, ecocriticism, and World Literature suffers from a lack of representation and addresses this scholarly blind spot by analyzing Japanese North American writer and filmmaker Ruth Ozeki’s novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). In emphasizing the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings, effacing nation-state borders towards visions of planetary interdependency and circulation, and exposing the ways in which environmental crises are bound up with issues of (Indigenous and nonhuman) oppression and dispossession, Thornber’s chapter underscores “the fragility of story and in particular the precariousness of women’s histories and literatures, in short, the inadequacy of current structures of validation and remembrance—including structures of World Literature—that disproportionately safeguard the histories and the literatures of privileged men” (197). Thornber foregrounds this methodological inquiry in an intertextual and multifocal narrative that contends with Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* in order to call attention to “the silencing of women’s histories and literatures—by readers, by the market, by scholars, by family, and by women writers and

activists themselves” (201-202), concluding that the stories that are disappearing “[give] life to other stories in powerful and unexpected ways and in turn creating new possibilities for other marginalized voices” (202). The multilevel construction of the novel highlights how the effacement of women writers’ works dovetails the oppression of marginalized others, like Indigenous peoples, their ecosystems, and nonhuman animals, giving way to reflections of biotechnological intermingling, like the image of the internet as a Great Garbage Patch (203). The narrative, dictated by two women writers, examines both the endangered and marginalized condition of women writers’ legacies and the circulation of their work in the global market and insertion into the canon while offering portraits of nonhuman resilience. Drawing on the novel’s intertextual underpinnings, Thornber concludes that *A Tale for the Time Being* is precisely this, a tale for the Time Being—a time both with new possibilities for women’s and other formerly marginalized voices within and beyond World Literature and with continued social and environmental challenges and crises” (206).

In another chapter from this section, Nicole Simek analyzes Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé’s novel *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana* (2017). Her analysis is centered on the intermingling of the contingent realities of marginalized others, on the one hand, and the “overdetermining gendered and racialized structures shaping global currents on the other” (209). Simek treads the line between “the political dimension of the personal, and also the personal dimension of the political” (209). In her analysis, Simek brings to the fore Maryse Condé’s strategies of disrupting the hermeneutical instruments that characterize the Western world (in this case, the homogenizing and monolithic majoritarian views of white, secular French society) to show how race functions as a sociopolitical category that reproduces processes of dehumanization. Analyzing Condé’s dexterous narrative engagement with terrorism, radicalization, and neocolonialism with attention to both content and form, Simek contends that the novel challenges us to imagine “humanity otherwise, as at once humane, inhumane, and irreducible to predictable psychic or historical forces” (218), emphasizing that the novel’s “caustic and sanguine demonstration of the persistence of race and gender formations is twinned with an indomitable drive to reshape the horizons of this world” (220).

In conclusion, the contributors of *Feminism as World Literature* highlight the transformative potential of feminist methodologies in the field of World Literature. By rejecting the supplementary condition of feminist studies in relation to World Literature, the contributors illuminate the powerful renegotiations and transfigurations that feminist studies can perform in relation to this field. Through the reassessment of traditional literary canons and heuristic paradigms, the contributors confront the hierarchies and binaries that underpin literary studies, redefining not only World Literature scholarship but also highlighting the power of feminist reconceptualizations to imagine worlds beyond these paradigms.