

**Burcu Alkan and Çimen Günay-Erkol, Editors. *Turkish Literature as World Literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 264. ISBN 978-1-5013-5803-6.**

In his programmatic book *What is World Literature?* (2003), David Damrosch asks a very pertinent – and frequently cited – question: “Which literature, whose world?” (1), thus highlighting the difficulty of defining a term, which has been around for more than two hundred years but has gained particular prominence within the present-day context of widening globalization and rising transnationalism. Arriving at a definition is difficult indeed: on the one hand, factors such as globalization and transnationalism have not done away with inherited distinctions between “centres” and “peripheries,” and so the “world” in “world literature” inevitably “resolves into a *variety* of worlds” (Damrosch 12). On the other hand, “the tremendous variability in what has counted as literature from one place to another and one era to another” (Damrosch 14) renders the meaning of the second word in the term extremely problematic.

Despite theoretical snags of one kind or another, Damrosch does provide a definition: for him, world literature “encompass[es] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). The editors of *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature* (2018) identify this as one of (at least) three possible definitions of the term; in their view, given the differences in its understanding, world literature is “a *problematic*, not a stable object of study” (Etherington and Zimmler 2). Significantly, such a perception of world literature informs most of the volumes of the series *Literatures as World Literature*, which Bloomsbury Academic has been publishing over the last seven years or so.

Arguments over the definition and scope of world literature, as well as over its relationship to national literatures, also play an important role in both the editors’ Introduction and the constituent chapters of *Turkish Literature as World Literature*, which is my object of analysis in this review. Provocatively entitled “‘Turkish Literature as World Literature?’ What Is in a Preposition?,” the Introduction sets the general tone of the volume. The editors Burcu Alkan and Çimen Günay-Erkol begin by posing a number of questions which they correctly describe as “seemingly simple” (1); one of these is: “Is not Turkish literature naturally a world literature?” (1). A question that follows from the first one is: “What is this ‘world literature’ that changes the perception of a national literature, and is itself redefined as they interact?” (1). Both questions highlight an important concern that the editors of most of the other volumes in the series also seem to share: how do you read “a ‘national’ literature in its ‘world literary-ness’?” (Alkan and Günay-Erkol 1). It appears that such readings can be beneficial insofar as they may challenge received perceptions of the development of national literatures. Thus, to the view of modern Turkish literature as the product of western influence, the editors and the contributors to the volume under consideration oppose a vision of Turkish literature’s impact on “literatures and cultures of the world on both the ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ side of the threshold” (Alkan and Günay-Erkol 2). The editors believe that such a “reverse perspective” may also problematize “prevalent discourses on world literature” in which the west is still assigned the role of a privileged centre.

Alkan and Günay-Erkol further remark on the contradictions implicit in the singling out of “the sphere of translated works as a fundamental access point to ‘world literature’” (2). The choice of such works is often market-oriented, and such an orientation may result in the exclusion of texts deemed “foundational” in a particular national literary context on account of their not being of interest to a global audience (2). The editors stress “the impact of global capitalism on the publication and (translation) industry” (2). While admitting that the global book market provides access to different voices, they argue that it does so in accordance with certain ideological patterns that show that the decision-making process is not always shaped by “idealistic intellectual and literary drives” (3). Given this, only a limited number of texts “make it through the gateway of the world literary sphere” (3).

Despite their justified scepticism, Alkan and Günay-Erkol pay due attention to the role of translation in making Turkish texts internationally visible. They single out the 1970s as the threshold decade

when Turkish literature “crossed national boundaries” thanks to the concerted efforts of “translators, critics, and academics” (7). Another important period that is given is 2005–9 when “2,389 works were translated and published” with the support of the TEDA Project (Translation and Publication Grant Program of Turkey) (7).

While not disavowing the importance of translated texts in shaping international perceptions of Turkish literature, the volume’s editors identify as their focus the “post-interlingual movement of [that] literature into the hierarchies of today’s globalized world” (8) with the idea of “examin[ing] its multifaceted dynamics” (8). The volume does not aim at presenting a history of Turkish literature on the world stage but instead sets itself the task of analysing the “process” of its “worlding” by “look[ing] closely at writers who had a global impact” (8).

The volume consists of three parts which illuminate Turkish literature’s transition from starting as a post-imperial “peripheral” body of writing through making a claim for occupying a solid role as a regional force with far-reaching influence to being an incontestable world phenomenon with its authors translated into multiple languages. Part I, “Breathing Turkish in the World State,” includes chapters that offer insights into the core-periphery dynamics typical of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. The chapters also touch on the negotiation between religion and secularism. The transition from the Arabic to the Latin script is likewise paid due attention.

Part II, “Turkish Literature in Transnational Waters,” offers the routes of influence irradiating from Turkish literature not only to the west, but also to the north as represented by the Soviet Union, and the east – India and the Arab world (11). Of special interest is the presentation of the cultural dynamics between Britain and Turkey. The prominent place in Turkish literature of Nâzim Hikmet is well reflected in three chapters which complement one another, analysing different aspects of his literary, cultural, and political influence on writers, politicians, and intellectuals from other countries. Again, the translations of his works and their significance are examined.

Part III, “Contemporary Forms and Cosmopolitanism,” deals with contemporary literary figures in the world of mass media, addressing recent developments in world literature. The attention is turned to Orhan Pamuk and his very special status in Turkish and World Literature as the Nobel Laureate of 2006. Pamuk’s perceived “denationalizing” of history and culture is examined. One of the most internationally successful novels by Pamuk has also found its place in this discussion – *The Museum of Innocence*. Another major international writer presented is Elif Şafak, and the symbolic role of the Turkish woman writer for the overall perception of Turkey as a state receives due attention.

The compressed content information presented above attests to the high critical merits of the volume. Turkish literature is revealed as multifaceted, fascinating, and open to a remarkably large scope of topics and points of interaction with other literatures and languages. The volume’s strongest traits are the vivid, intriguing presentations of World Literature celebrities, the detailed descriptions and poignant discussions of the processes at work in Turkish literature, and finally, its decolonizing appeal which challenges the Eurocentric conception of influential (western) literatures. Revealing insights of the transformation and functioning of Turkish literature as World Literature intersperse all the chapters. I will examine some of them in what follows.

In Part I, Chapter 1, “The Entangled History of Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism in Modern Turkish Literature,” by Fatih Altuğ, we learn that after the 1870s “the novel became the dominant genre in the different literatures of the Ottoman people” (19). Significantly, Armenian, Greek, and Arabic scripts were used in novels published in Istanbul, thus attesting to the city’s position as a multi-ethnic and multicultural hub. According to Altuğ, it was in the Ottoman capital that the first Armenian and Bulgarian novels were published (19). I feel that this needs some correction: while Istanbul’s unique atmosphere certainly contributed to the rise and development of Bulgarian journalism, literary criticism, and translation prior to the establishment of an autonomous Bulgarian state in 1878 (see, *inter alia*, Keta Mircheva’s contribution to vol. 4, no 1 (2020) of the present journal), the first Bulgarian novel, *Under the Yoke*, by Ivan Vazov, was initially serialized in a Sofia-based periodical, sponsored by the Bulgarian Principality’s Ministry of Education (see Perfanova). Altuğ should have checked his facts more carefully. However, this error does not detract from the merits of his chapter seriously. He makes a number of

valuable points that shed much needed light on cultural developments in the whole of the Balkan region which used to be part of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, Altuğ demonstrates that the birth of modern Turkish literature resulted in the obliteration of “the literary space for other languages and alphabets, as well as the marks of classical Ottoman literature” (21). The birth of a new Turkish state on the foundations of the crumbling empire involved the building of a new Turkish identity and a literature in what came to be perceived as the *national* language. Altuğ discusses the nation-centred and cosmopolitan elements in modern Turkish literature at considerable length. It is very much to his credit that he pays due attention to the achievements of women writers, such as Nigar Nanim and Fatma Aliye, and acknowledges the important role that translation played in the development of Turkish belles-lettres. For instance, novels by the Romanian Queen Elisabeth of Wied, who wrote under the pseudonym of Carmen Sylva, were translated into Turkish alongside with quite a lot of other texts by European writers. The formation of the national spirit of modern Turkish literature, as indicated by Altuğ, came with an important realization: “Good literature, it was argued, was naturally national in character; but literary efforts that aimed primarily to be national often made poor literature” (31).

Chapter 3, Part I, “Translating Yunus Emre, Translating the Self, Translating Islam: Zefer Şenocak’s Turkish-German Path to Modernity” by Joseph Twist, examines the key element of translation as part of the mechanism that transforms Turkish literature into World Literature. Twist’s chapter opens with an epigraph noting that while Turkish writers are well versed in European culture and literature, the same could not be said about their European counterparts (55). According to the author, an important approach has been established in translation practice – that of “foreignizing” the translated text “as a more ethical method” (57). With “foreignized” texts “the translator is visible, and readers experience a destabilizing encounter with the foreign, rather than having their own values affirmed” (57). Twist quotes Lawrence Venuti to explain the effects of the promotion of Turkish literature and culture through translation: obviously, the kind of translation that is “more than an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language culture values” (57). Twist, however, also suggests that the foreignizing or the domesticating of a translation must be negotiated with each text and target language (58) but foreignizing plays another very important role: that of “challeng[ing] Orientalist assumptions about Turkish culture” (59), resulting in disarrangement of domestic cultural hierarchies, “defamiliarization, [and] cannon reformation” (59).

With the translations of Nâzım Hikmet’s texts into over “fifty languages” (Göbenli 112), Turkey got its own world-famous poet. I will next examine Mediha Göbenli’s contribution to the volume, entitled “Nâzım Hikmet’s Reception as a World Poet” (112–128). The critic begins by reflecting on the vast and diverse references to Hikmet by literary dignitaries, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Pablo Neruda, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Tzara, also appearing in novels and poetry collections (112). Then the numerous European countries where Hikmet was published in his lifetime are mentioned (113). It is pointed out that the Turkish poet “shared many similarities with poets and authors who fought for social justice and freedom worldwide” (113). Also, it is indicated that “poets like Nâzım Hikmet established themselves as spokesmen and advocates of humanity, resisting the rule of ‘dark times’ [fascism]” (114). Neruda is quoted to have said: “Why have you died Nazim? And how?/ What will we do without your songs?” (114). Naturally, being a committed Marxist, like Panait Istrati or Nikos Kazantzakis, Hikmet had a large international audience. Like a true freedom fighter, he also spent time in prison, the longest period being between 1938 and 1950, and then “his poems were smuggled out of prison and published in France” (115). In 1950 he “shared the Nobel Prize with Robeson and Neruda” (115) but since he could not receive it personally, it was received by Neruda on his behalf (115). Finally, Göbenli makes mentions of the universal appeal of his poetry and the generous praise it received, its having been found to be “vital,” “original,” and “deeply moving” (118). Known as a “romantic communist” or a “romantic revolutionary,” Hikmet lived in different countries and with different women, he meant different things to different people but out of Göbenli’s presentation he comes out as a person and a poet who was larger than life – a quality that he shared with other great personalities who chose to resist adverse circumstances.

Chapter 9, “Orhan Pamuk and Juan Goytisolo,” Part III, takes us to (arguably!) the most recognizable household name of Turkish literature, a writer everyone has heard of, if not read in translation:

Orhan Pamuk. Başak Çandar, the author of the essay, explores Goytisolo's qualification of Pamuk as a "de-cons-tan-ti-no-po-li-zer" (171) – a writer who not only deconstructs Constantinople (Istanbul), but fragments it into bits and pieces and then defragments it into a new city seeped in personal memory – lived or imagined – Pamuk's own Istanbul as we know it from *Istanbul*, *The Black Book*, and *The Museum of Innocence*. A major point in the offered critique is the fragmented term itself given by Goytisolo in a review of Pamuk's *El libro negro (The Black Book)*. Çandar, however, indicates the true points of the comparison consist in "undoing nationalist myths" (173) in the work of both Pamuk and Goytisolo. She builds a thesis around Pamuk's perceived reconceptualization of the city "through a non-nationalist framework" (173), comparable to what Goytisolo does with "a singular, monolithic Spain" (173). In her chapter, Çandar attempts to present a defragmented image of Pamuk himself, who is praised abroad for "narrating his nation into being" (174), while at home he is "vilified for doing exactly the opposite and supposedly writing for the West at the expense of his nation" (174). So, she concludes, "[i]n this sense, Pamuk is perhaps Turkey's most and least national writer" (174). In analysing the complementariness of the contradictory claims, Çandar examines Pamuk's high international visibility and asks a key question:

It is worth considering whether Pamuk would be as vilified in Turkey had he not been as successful in garnering international attention, or whether he would have become as successful internationally if his fiction was less specific, less focused on Turkish culture and history. (174)

Naturally, in this critical home perception of Pamuk one can find his dissident voice – when he called for Turkey's recognition of the Armenian genocide and the trial against him that had to be aborted when he was awarded the Nobel Prize. The essay under consideration explores, through Pamuk, possible answers to the questions put by Alkan and Günay-Erkol since the editors feel that they can analyse a specific phenomenon: that of Turkish literature *functioning* as World Literature, not simply a national literature that aspires to promote certain of its literary works to this elitist sphere. Çandar ventures an explanation of Pamuk's "global canonization" (183) which she links to "Turkey's position, both geopolitically and within the world literature imaginary" (183). She continues: "Conceptualized incessantly as 'the bridge' between East and West, Turkish literature is repeatedly pushed into the role of narrating this in-betweenness that takes the terms of East/West binary for granted" (183). The critic's relating of Pamuk's success to his country's immanent attraction to the "wonderful bridge" between two stereotyped antipodes would give Turkey a long-term subscription to World Literature, but again Damrosch's question "Whose world?" is brought up with intensity! By comparing a major writer of the World Literature canon to a less known name but with several translated works to his credit, Çandar allows some of Pamuk's shine to fall onto Goytisolo, which prompts us to ask yet another question: if they have done things in a similar manner, why is not the Spanish writer as internationally famous as Pamuk? The geographical position of Spain as a country in the far southwest of Europe could hardly be an answer; after all that was where *Don Quixote* was born.

No discussion of Turkish literature as World Literature could aspire to completeness without a look at Elif Şafak's work, and the volume under consideration does it through Simla Doğangün's chapter in Part III, entitled "Elif Şafak and Her Fiction: Cultural Commodities of the Global Capital" (204–220). A Turkish-British novelist and academic, outstripped in worldwide popularity only by Pamuk and Hikmet as far as representatives of Turkish literature go, with her novels "translated into forty languages" (Doğangün 204), Şafak has earned her place in World Literature. Daughter of a Turkish diplomat and born abroad (Strasbourg, France), like Münevver Andaç, having received both Turkish and an international education – in Madrid, Spain, "she moved to the United States where she held teaching positions; she currently lives in the UK, and writes in both English and Turkish" (Doğangün 204). The critic's mention of this autobiographical information about Şafak is unquestionably related to the writer's situating herself as "a world citizen" (204). Doğangün stresses Şafak's universal appeal, but also the specific concerns of her works: "multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and multiple belongings" (205). She proceeds by examining how these are revealed in her novels and concludes that Damrosch's tentative definition "can be rethought by way of Şafak's thematic choices" (207). By way of an example, she cites

*The Forty Rules of Love* and argues that love enables the novel's characters "to move beyond their given identities and localities" (208). The critic also examines the challenges that globalization poses to a writer who identifies as "a world citizen" (212), but Şafak's universal appeal appears to be based on her projection of her country at the expense of herself (213). Perhaps here lies the biggest difference between Şafak and Pamuk. While the former becomes the vehicle of an emancipated projection of her country in a rather schematic presentation of her characters, writing mainly novels of ideas, the latter *personalizes* objects and settings, thus offering a much more intimate experience of place, location, event, and self. Doğangün concludes: "there is no one way to characterize 'good' or 'correct' world literature. The link between Şafak's fiction and world literature can be seen in her continued re-positioning in the face of global issues, particularly ones related to belonging" (218).

Overall, this volume is an impressive study of Turkish literature as a recognized World Literature. It is indeed an excellent collection of essays which offers insights into significant processes of development and change within Turkey as well as beyond its borders.

#### Works Cited

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**Department of English Philology  
University of Shumen**

**Hristo Boev**

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**CORRESPONDENCE:** Assoc. Prof. Hristo Boev, PhD, Department of English Philology, Shumen University "Bishop Konstantin of Preslav," 22 Cherveni Eskadroni St., Shumen 9 700, Bulgaria. @ h.boev@shu.bg

