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The Political Projection of Weltliteratur from the Three Worlds Theory to the Global South

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of Weltliteratur through its historical transformation in connection with political and economic classifications. Initially articulated by Goethe in 1827, Weltliteratur re-emerged as a politically charged concept during the Cold War, reflecting broader geopolitical divides. The literary field, like institutions and societies, is shaped by political history and generates its own hierarchies. Although presented as a universal category, world literature has long been embedded in hierarchical structures tied to political ideologies and economic conditions. The alleged shift from national literatures to a global literary consciousness in the 19th century gained new significance during the Cold War through the classification of First and Third World literatures, framed by development discourse and modernization theory. These discussions, identified with Fredrich Jameson reflect the political dimension of literature through the duality of allegorical-canonical texts, and have brought forth many criticisms and counter-arguments. The post-Cold War era, often mischaracterized as a moment of global equality, continued to reproduce such classifications under the guise of globalization. With the rise of the concept of the Global South in the early 2000s, debates around literary hierarchy have taken on new forms like Global Literature, where economic and political inequalities continue to shape the criteria for inclusion, visibility, and value in world literature. This paper argues that these shifts demonstrate how literary classifications reflect broader ideological frameworks and seeks to contribute a critical perspective on how world literature is constructed, circulated, and contested.

Keywords: Cold War, First-Third World Literatures, Global Literature, Global Hierarchies, World Literature