

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Situating Pablo Neruda in the Domain of World Literature: The Universality in his Selected Poems

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ABSTRACT

World literature defines a space that is post-colonial, non-canonical and largely post-modern. It amalgamates the global and the local, making the literature a cultural impetus. Reality constitutes of perception and imagination, which are subjective, disoriented, dissociative and associative in nature. The present paper attempts to situate Neruda in the domain of World Literatures through David Damrosch's perspective on World Literatures. A qualitative analysis of his selected poems has been undergone based on the common themes of death, war, life and existence.

Keywords: World literature, Canonical, Global, Local, Death.

What constitutes literature? Are literary works only limited to the works of Western European canon? Can Literature liberate itself from European masterpieces? What is the significance of including non-western works in the literary domain? Should literature be a fluid category inclusive of works from multicultural landscapes? These arguments form the crux of Damrosch's article *World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World*. In extenuating the above claims, Damrosch has described World Literature as an elliptical space created between the source and the receiving cultures where literary canon undergoes a shift from the relatively restricted core of masterpieces to a universal approach. In the words of Gugelberger, "Third World Literature can be understood only when it is seen without any reservations whatsoever as part of what Goethe and Marx have termed World Literature".

This research paper endeavours to situate Neruda within the purview of world literature with reference to five of his poems: "Song for the Mothers of Slain Militiamen" and "I am Explaining a Few Things" from the collection *Spain in Our Hearts*, "Death Alone" and "The Dead Woman". These poems can be

related to themes of war like death, existence, suffering and isolation.

The Spanish civil war seems to have influenced Neruda's works which heavily reflects the above mentioned themes on consequences of war in his poetry. Manuel Duran and Margery Safir's book *Earth Tones* talks about the influence of Spanish warfare in the poetry of Neruda. "The Spanish Civil War was so critical in Neruda's development as a man and as a poet, that it becomes attractively simple to divide Neruda's poetry into two clear-cut sections, parted by the great explosion of the war" (77).

For instance, the poem "Song for the Mothers of Slain Militiamen" reflects the effects of war which was the cause of the death of his friend and poet Federico García Lorca. His works record the atrocities of Spanish civil war, not from a historical perspective but it shows the contemporary situation and the mental conflict of the people. This idea can be justified using Neruda's words from *Memoirs*: "I have gone through a difficult apprenticeship and a long search, and also through the labyrinths of the written word, to become the poet of my people" (171).

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Neruda, through his poetry, reaches into the inner lives of the people in Spain during civil war. His poems on the war in Spain seem to voice out the struggles faced by the Spanish citizens during the civil war. Through these poems, the readers are able to receive a broadened perspective of the regional conflict rather than limiting their knowledge within the literary canon.

Neruda's poems will be looked under as a part of World Literatures using three markers: Universal theme of war and the use of simple diction that has made his works translatable.

Taking the thematic connections into consideration, Neruda delves into the presence of life in death and vice-versa; and the transition from one state to the other in the poems *Death Alone* and *The Dead Woman*. The ubiquitous nature of death cannot be eluded but our sense of purpose in our lives comes from the sense of denial towards the inevitable death.

In the poem *Death Alone*, Neruda's use of the disoriented descriptions of death - "Death lies in our beds/.../lives a full stretch and then suddenly blows", juxtaposes the omnipresent nature of death with the immediacy and the urgency that it denotes. The "face of death" and the "gaze of death" have been given the colour green by the poet. The colour violet that stands for the future, imagination and dreams has been mentioned thrice. The inevitable realities of life in the form of corpses, coffins, graves, cemeteries, bones and "darkness, darkness, darkness" portrays the universality of life and existence. Life and productivity, represented by the colour green, is reflected through the image of death, thus intertwining the state of existence, both in life and in death.

In *The Dead Woman*, Neruda uses the images of the senses that work not only through the physical organs but also through the existence of humankind. The poem portrays the parallel processes of life and death, which are not singular static states but multidimensional dynamic aspects of the imagined, perceived and the experienced. The existence of life in death is reflected and the In *Testimony of the Invisible Man*, Nancy Willard articulates "Neruda makes it clear that our most intense experience of impermanence is not death but our own isolation among the living".

Parallel can be drawn between the account of the European War Poets like Sassoon and Owen and Neruda's portrayal of the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. By establishing these connections, this study will endeavour to delineate the universality in the experience of human existence irrespective of diverse cultural geographical influences. Neruda's poems portray the horrid images associated with war which include broken families, men annihilated, and the destruction of the entire city of Spain. His poems are claimed to have captured the realistic side of the civil war and it is independent of any political ideology. Siegfried Sassoon paints similar pictures of war in his poem "Counter Attack" where he says that the place of war was "rotten with dead" and the soldiers loathed "the strangled horror/And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead." Wilfred Owen has shattered the romantic notions of war with which the victims are commemorated and the survivors are hailed in his poem "Spring Offensive".

Similar to these widely acknowledged war poets, Neruda has expanded the scope of literary canon by establishing a strong political ideology against oppression and violence. Through his poems we attempt to question the basis on which literary classics are categorised. Damrosch highlights John Guillory's point that who reads, and why people read matter as much as the specifics of what is read as canonical (Damrosch 8). Similarly, our notions of war are etched through our exposure to the European masterpieces.

By using simple diction, Neruda attempts to bridge the gap between his poetry and the people of Spain. The language seems to provoke the readers to feel the harsh realities faced during that time. Through the images and symbols employed in depicting the contemporary situation in Spain, a strict departure from the canonical style of writing can be witnessed in his poems. His way of bringing out the collective and the universal in the gamut of his individual experiences marks his significance in the domain of World Literature. For instance, Neruda addresses the cruelties of warfare in the poem "I Will Explain a Few Things", which reads like a prose:

Come and see the blood in the streets,
come and see the blood in the streets,
come and see the blood in the streets

(261)

According to David Damrosch, World Literature is work gained in translation which is extenuated by Maurya who states how Neruda is “one of the most read and translated poets of any foreign language” in India. Translation immortalises time in texts and reinvents historical identities. Translation has made it possible for us to read Neruda in the field of World Literatures. The importance of the context of Neruda’s works “is to broaden the reader’s horizons through the encounter with cultural differences” (9), as said by Damrosch in his essay, *World Literature Today : From the Old World to the Whole World*.

In an interview with Wang Ning, Damrosch says that literary works refract reality, as opposed to reflecting them, thus, giving us ways to think and work around the inner strains and prospects of the world. Neruda’s poems refract the universal nature of the tensions and the possibilities present in the reality through his individual and confessional views.

In his essay *Frames for World Literature*, David Damrosch states that “...world literature operates in a multi-dimensional space, in relationship to four frames of reference: the global, the regional, the national, and the individual. Similarly, works of Neruda manifolds in multiple perspectives as remarked by Jaime Alazraki in “Books Abroad”, “Neruda is not merely chronicling historical events...the epic of the continent intertwines with his own epic.” Neruda, indeed, transcends the frames of the global and the individual and contributes to domain of world literature.

Neruda’s diverse experience that he gained through his journeys and travels in Asia and Europe, and acquaintances with artists expanded the scope of his content and themes. The universal themes of war and death in Neruda’s selected poems transcend the boundaries of the dominant hegemonic influences by indulging in social cultural and political aspects common to people irrespective of differences in origin, language and exposure. His readers connect with the social cultural and political milieu as portrayed in the aforementioned poems. Taking recourse to the readability of translation Neruda’s poems have attained pluralistic and multi-

dimensional status. From these markers, Pablo Neruda can be read as a poet under World Literatures.

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