

Peer Review

Review of: "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures"

Joanna Bocheńska¹

1. Iranian Studies/Section of Kurdish Studies, Jagiellonian University Cracow, Poland

The article "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures" offers a very interesting evaluation of the so-called "small literatures" and aims to establish a new definition of specifically "small literature" as distinct from "minority" and "migrant" literatures.

The goal is clear and well-grounded, given the presented overview of existing literature, which clearly demonstrates the insufficiency of certain research perspectives (for example, Casanova's centre-periphery approach) and the need to make existing definitions less vague and more precise.

However, while the reasoning behind the choice of topic is relatively well justified, the proposed definition does not yet seem convincing. Below, I identify several points that I find particularly unclear or problematic.

1. **Creativity & Self-Representation** The authors rightly contest the passive, victim-oriented centre-periphery approach and highlight the creativity of minoritised groups in engaging with the centre (p. 1). However, the definition presented in the second part of the paper does not explicitly refer to this issue and leaves no room for self-definition by the creators and primary audiences of small literatures. I suppose there are some sources, such as interviews with the writers, podcasts, TV programmes, etc., that would shed some light on this topic. Do they support the idea of being part of the "small literary world," or maybe they have other ideas about it or strategies they apply in coping with the centres? In the first instance, the authors could address the question of how the topic of self-representation relates to defining the "small literature." Is it at all taken into account?
2. **The term "small".** I am not convinced that "small" is an appropriate term for describing literature in a scholarly context.
 - The word "small" appears to draw on the very "popular cultural geography and geopolitical imagination" that the authors criticise on page 2. It relies on an assumed binary of big/powerful

versus small/less powerful actors, which is taken for granted rather than treated as contestable. I understand that the authors wish to play with this notion and image, but in that case, their positionality toward the term—and the reasons for retaining it—should be better explained, especially in relation to the popular culture connotations.

- Although the authors state that they will consider both “qualitative and quantitative focal points” and the broader context of small literatures, the discussion remains very abstract. On page 7, we read: “We on the other hand, contend that the size of the nation, as a determinant of quantitative measurables and the historical (post)imperial/(post)colonial situation, as a determinant of qualitative specificities, are cornerstones in the assessment of small literatures.” However, the text provides no concrete examples of how a group would be classified as “small” in practice, making it difficult to see how the definition would actually function.

3. **Independent state?** Since “small literature” is to be distinguished from “minority” and “migrant” literatures, one apparent criterion is the existence of a state and its legal system, which supports the language and literature through various institutions. Yet this criterion remains an unacknowledged “elephant in the room” throughout the paper. The issue should be addressed more explicitly and connected to the “world literary system” discussed on page 8.

4. **Eurocentrism** I understand that the paper is part of the project “Comparative History of Small Literatures in Europe.” However, the phrase “in Europe” is absent from the article’s title, which makes it read as extremely Eurocentric. Moreover, there is no mention of post-Soviet countries (for example, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, or Armenia), whose experiences could enrich the discussion. This omission raises questions about the project’s actual concept of “Europe” and whether “small literatures” is intended as a term applicable only within a European (or even EU) context. While bringing Middle and Eastern European experiences—often neglected in mainstream academia—into focus is already an important contribution, as a researcher of Polish-Tatar background working on a Kurdish topic, I find this approach insufficient. Even if the project’s primary goal is to highlight theoretical contributions and experiences from lesser-known Central European countries, the conceptual scope of “small literatures” should be broader and more open to global contexts. The most striking difference between the EU and many other global contexts is the lack of legal frameworks recognizing minor languages and the realities created in them. In many places, people are living outside of the global “literary systems” and risk their lives to create, publish, and translate literature in their mother tongues. Therefore, such a text should at least mention the existence of the reality “outside the EU box” and not treat it as a self-contained and only reality. See, for example,

The Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights, Editor(s): Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson (2022).

5. **The (World) Literary System** This seems a promising concept for capturing the many contexts, intricacies, and dynamics identified by the authors. At present, however, it remains only briefly sketched and insufficiently developed. I believe it could be more fully integrated with—or even merged into—the core concept of small literatures.
6. **Stressing the significance of the study** On page 8, there is a sharp, powerful sentence that would ideally suit the beginning of the article: “The majority of literatures of the world are peripheral literatures and given the criteria presented below, small literatures generally fall into this category.”
7. **Text organisation** I would suggest dividing the paper into smaller, clearly defined sections to better guide the reader through its ideas.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.