

Peer Review

Review of: "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures"

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The article is a substantial and well-informed literature review that addresses an important issue in the field of comparative literature, namely, the lack of terminological and methodological consensus around “small literatures.” Its major strength lies in the systematic mapping of the field, particularly with the careful recovery of Central and Eastern European theoretical traditions (Đurišin, Even-Zohar, regional interference models). The proposal of a preliminary definition combining quantitative and qualitative criteria is a valuable intervention and constitutes the article’s most original contribution. Rather than merely cataloguing existing terminology, the authors succeed in demonstrating why the proliferation of labels (i.e. minor, exiguous, ultraminor, micro-literatures, contact cultures) shows a deeper epistemological problem due to the absence of a shared framework on small literatures.

The authors’ proposal of a preliminary definition of small literature that integrates quantitative and qualitative criteria is compelling. By combining demographic scale, institutional infrastructure, repertoire size, and translation capacity with territorialisation, historical depth, linguistic positioning, and degrees of autonomy or heteronomy, the article moves beyond purely metaphorical or relational uses of “smallness.” This effort to render the concept analytically operational represents a genuine step forward for the field and provides a promising basis for future comparative and typological work.

Some aspects of the argument, however, would benefit from greater nuance and calibration. The article traces the genealogy of world literature studies to the world-systems approaches, while the genealogy associated with David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and post-philological circulation-based models follows a different trajectory. A clearer distinction between world literature as a methodological horizon and world-systems theory as one possible explanatory model would significantly strengthen the framing. A second point in this regard is that the article grants Casanova disproportionate weight, despite acknowledging extensive criticism of her work. Casanova is presented as having “eclipsed” earlier

systemic approaches, yet Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and related frameworks remain highly productive and widely cited, particularly in translation studies and comparative systems research. The claim that polysystem theory has been marginalised or superseded is not convincing in its current form. Nor could Casanova's work be considered as influential in the field. Hence, Casanova risks functioning as a straw man against which the authors position their own methodological renewal.

Third, the article asserts that centre–periphery perspectives give limited consideration to historical–political contexts, system construction, and linguistic specificity. However, world–systems–informed literary studies have, in many cases, been precisely concerned with historical differentiation, institutional mediation, and political asymmetries. The issue is not the absence of historicisation per se, but rather the level of abstraction at which some models operate.

Finally, the uncritical application of postcolonial frameworks to Eastern and Central European literatures is one of the article's most problematic aspects. The text cites studies that adopt postcolonial terminology with insufficient critical distance, risking the flattening of historical specificity. Cultural domination, imperial asymmetry, or geopolitical dependency are not equivalent to colonialism, and treating them as such risks erasing the distinct histories of colonial experiences. While intra-European imperial formations (Habsburg, Russian) certainly warrant comparative analysis, this requires careful conceptual calibration, not terminological extension to postcolonial studies by analogy.

Overall, the review represents a rigorous, ambitious, and highly valuable contribution to current debates on small literatures. Its breadth of scholarship, conceptual clarity in surveying a complex field, and engagement with theoretical traditions emerging from small-literature contexts make it an important point of reference for future research. In particular, the effort to move beyond terminological proliferation toward an analytically operational definition of small literature is particularly remarkable, and it will be useful across comparative literature, world literature, and translation studies.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.