

Man-Tiger and the Thai readers: A Case for Peripheral Readership of World Literature

Sutida Wimuttikosol¹

(Received: May 9, 2020; Revised: June 15, 2020; Accepted: June 15, 2020)

Abstract

World literature is an issue of academic inquiry that has been heavily debated at the core of the world literary system in the Global North; yet, it seems to be disproportionately discussed in the Global South from where such group of texts in question is assumed to originate. This is not surprising considering that the concept of world literature itself, which could be traced back to the early 19th century, was originally conceived in Europe. One area of study that has been constantly overlooked by academics at the metropole is the reception of world literature at the peripheral sites beyond the North. Despite being circulated globally, this set of texts is usually associated with the white metropolitan readership. This research paper argues that the perspective of the readers at the periphery is crucial to the understanding of the “problem” called world literature and needs to be recognized as part of its interpretive community. Through an empirical study of the Thai readers’ responses to Eka Kurniawan’s *Lelaki Harimau* (in English, *Man Tiger*; In Thai, *Sa-ming Sam-dang*), it reveals how the reception complicates existing assumptions about world literature’s readership as well as its social and cultural significance. Finally, it discusses the way in which texts from the Global South could simultaneously engage the readers beyond national boundary and register the social inequality in a local level.

Keywords: Man Tiger, world literature, magical realism, peripherality, reception studies

¹ Lecturer of the English Language and Literature Program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University
e-mail: sutida.w@arts.tu.ac.th

มนุษย์-เสือและนักอ่านชาวไทย: กรณีศึกษาเพื่อผู้อ่านวรรณกรรมโลก ณ ชายขอบ

สุธิดา วิมุตติโกศล²

บทคัดย่อ

วรรณกรรมโลกเป็นประเด็นทางวิชาการที่ก่อให้เกิดข้อโต้เถียงมากมายที่ศูนย์กลางโลกรวรรณกรรมซึ่งอยู่ในกลุ่มประเทศซีกโลกเหนือ ทว่ามักกลับถูกพูดถึงน้อยมากในแถบประเทศซีกโลกใต้ซึ่งเป็นพื้นที่ต้นกำเนิดของงานกลุ่มดังกล่าว ปรากฏการณ์นี้ไม่ใช่เรื่องน่าประหลาดใจ เมื่อพิจารณาข้อเท็จจริงที่ว่าแนวคิดเรื่องวรรณกรรมโลกซึ่งสามารถสืบย้อนไปได้ถึงต้นศตวรรษที่ 19 นั้น เกิดขึ้นครั้งแรกในทวีปยุโรป ประเด็นศึกษาซึ่งนักวิชาการที่ศูนย์กลางมองข้ามมาโดยตลอดก็คือการรับและการอ่านวรรณกรรมโลกในพื้นที่ชายขอบนอกซีกโลกเหนือ แม้ว่างานวรรณกรรมกลุ่มนี้จะถูกเผยแพร่ไปทั่วโลกแต่มันมักจะถูกเชื่อมโยงกับกลุ่มผู้อ่านผิวขาวในเมืองมหานครเท่านั้น บทความวิจัยชิ้นนี้เสนอว่า มุมมองของผู้อ่านที่ชายขอบโลกรวรรณกรรมมีความสำคัญอย่างยิ่งต่อความเข้าใจ “ปัญหา” ที่เรียกว่าวรรณกรรมโลก และจำเป็นต้องได้รับการยอมรับเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของชุมชนการตีความนี้ ผู้เขียนวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ของการตอบรับนวนิยายเรื่อง *Lelaki Harimau* ของ Eka Kurniawan (ชื่อภาษาอังกฤษคือ *Man Tiger* ชื่อภาษาไทยคือ *สมิงสำแดง*) โดยนักอ่านชาวไทย เพื่อชี้ให้เห็นความซับซ้อนของกลุ่มผู้อ่านงานวรรณกรรมโลก รวมไปถึงนัยทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมของมันท้ายที่สุด บทความอภิปรายความเป็นไปได้ที่งานวรรณกรรมจากซีกโลกใต้จะพาคนอ่านก้าวข้ามขอบเขตชาติไปพร้อมกับนำเสนอความไม่เท่าเทียมทางสังคมในระดับท้องถิ่น

คำสำคัญ: สมิงสำแดง วรรณกรรมโลก สัจนิยมมหัศจรรย์ ความเป็นชายขอบ การศึกษาการรับ

² อาจารย์ประจำสาขาวิชาภาษาและวรรณคดีอังกฤษ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์

Introduction

Since David Damrosch's revival of Goethe's idea of world literature in the early 2000s, this field of study has been subjected to a lot of criticisms and debates. Defined by the scholar as any literary work that is "actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (2003, p. 4), world literature, on the one hand, seems like an extremely inclusive category. On the other hand, it is viewed with skepticism to rely exclusively on the market and the marketing scheme. Having "World Lit" writers such as Orhan Pamuk, Junot Díaz and Salman Rushdie in mind, the editors of the literary magazine *n+1* criticize today's world literature--by this they mean literature from the non-western writers that manage to occupy the central position in the literary world--for its lack of revolutionary spirit of the "earlier era of World Literature, when things were still 'postcolonial'". They then call for the return of the "internationalist" literary "project", not "product" (*n+1*, 2013a). A similar argument about the commodification of world literature has been made in *Against World Literature*, where Emily Apter critiques its institutionalization in American universities. In the field of world literature, she argues, local literature is subjected to "pedagogical transmission by instructors with low levels of cultural literacy and nonexistent knowledge of a translated work's original language" (2013, p. 326). Apter proposes a pedagogical model for the "untranslatability" as an alternative to what she understands as the market driven curricularization of "the world's cultural resources" (2013, p. 3). For Tim Parks, the British writer and translator, he is concerned about the disappearance of "the kind of work that revels in the subtle nuances of its own language and literary culture" as a result of literary globalization. Noting that "more and more European, African, Asian and South American authors see themselves as having 'failed' if they do not reach an international audience," he identifies the formula for the "dull new global novel" as a combination of Rushdie or Pamuk's "fantasy devices" and a liberal political stance (2010).

Although this kind of criticism is certainly valid and should be born in mind, such critics fail to account for what world literature, either the "good" or the "bad" one, means *for* the readers in the *world* beyond the centers of literary marketplace and educational institutions. Poorva Rajaram and Michael Griffith (2013), in their response to the *n+1*'s article, contend that the political burden should not be automatically placed upon the third world writers, and that "we will happily choose experience-based novels set in universities over a transnational literary elite that insists on ventriloquising the poor" (as cited in *n+1*, 2013b). As for the Iranian professor Omid Azadibougar, even the critics of the center-periphery unequal relations tend not to see "how often [world literature] has been used in peripheral locations to positive effect" (2018, p. 230). In defense of world literature against its critics whom he calls the American left, Azadibougar posits that:

In the Iranian context, World Literature becomes the tool to battle two repressive cultural forces: a) a growing nationalist and cultural provincialism that is disseminated through departments of Persian language and literature; b) a Eurocentrism that is popularized through departments of English, French and German. (2018, p. 232)

As a Thai academic working in the department of English literature, I find his statement applicable to the Thai context in both aspects. Being the only country that officially survived European colonization, Thailand has its own proud nationalistic narratives as well as national language and literature heavily endorsed by the government through educational institutions. At the same time, even though European language departments in higher education cannot compete with the Thai department in their local, everyday significance, they represent the *civilized*, that is, the socially and culturally advanced societies. Since the Thai royals were among the earliest groups sent to study in Europe, especially in England and France, the expertise in European languages and cultures has long been carrying social signification closely connected to the Thai elites. This incongruous coexistence of nationalism and Eurocentrism could be undermined, at least partially, by an encounter with literary and cultural products beyond those consecrated by either local or global ruling groups. Therefore, while for some scholars in the North, world literature could be seen as another global commodity manufactured for the “well-educated, well-traveled, fairly comfortable people” (n+1, 2013b), it could be a productive site of cultural negotiation, both in the local and global scales, for the readers in the South. Moreover, perspectives from the South to the South could render visible the literary registration of shared experiences that hitherto mediated by the literary center in the North.

From my vantage point at the periphery, the problem of world literary studies in western academia seems less about its subjection to the logic of capitalism than about its blindness to the actual *world* beyond the center. Intentionally or not, the work that has been successfully circulated to the global literary center will sooner or later reach the peripheries. Yet, materialist critics of world literature seem to be, understandably, too focused on the way in which the white middle-class metropolitan readers dominate the market, and too inattentive to the peripheral sites of reception of this body of texts. In other words, the readers at the periphery, who could be most affected by global unevenness, are not imagined by these scholars as part of the world literature’s interpretive community. Apart from emphasizing the exclusivity of the academic institution in the North, it limits the way in which world literature as an object of study could be understood.

I argue that the existing approaches to world literature need to be revised to include the peripheral perspective of the South, itself extremely diverse due to its geographical expanse and historical specificities. Even if it reveals the limitations rather than the possibilities,

the contextualized study of each site of reception at the periphery is one important step towards the understanding of the “problem” called world literature beyond the viewpoint of the literary core.³ In this paper, I look into the responses of Thai readers to the Thai translation of an Indonesian novel *Lelaki Harimau*, written by Eka Kurniawan, the Jakarta-based author. The analysis reveals how they complicate the assumptions about world literature’s readership as well as its social and cultural significance. To put the Thai readers in perspective, I first problematize the institutional and cultural power of the world’s literary centers that affects the reception at the periphery. Next, I discuss a reading that exemplifies the perspective at the core before demonstrating how we could transcend it.

The curse of the magical and the fantastic

In the discussion that follows, I analyze the data collected from the Thai readers of the novel. The main source of information is a book group that I co-organized with *Bodthajorn*, a Bangkok-based publisher specialized in world literature in translation.⁴ Apart from that, I looked at the online reviews of *Sa-ming Sam-dang*, the Thai translation of *Lelaki Harimau*, and conducted unstructured interviews with the readers who either wrote about the book on the social media sites or were recommended by other interviewees. These sources, admittedly, came from the well-educated middle-class demographic. They have time to read for pleasure; they approach the texts as serious readers; and they use the internet as a channel to voice their opinions. This is not unpredictable since, as Sarah Brouillette pointedly remarks, “It is not only the case that world literature exists for a small roster of readers but that all literature exists for a small roster of readers” (2015, p. 102). In other words, it is already a luxury for many people to read what deemed “literature”, not to mention the globally trendy one. Accordingly, the “peripheral readers” in this context of analysis do not mean people who are marginalized due to their class, race, and gender positions. The term is used to refer to the existing and potential readers that are peripheral to the field of world literary studies. Although the middle-class Thai readers of *Sa-ming Sam-dang* are far from being economically and culturally equal to the similar demographic in the North, they by no means belong to the marginalized group in their own country. Their ambiguous reading location—the *local* center at the *global* periphery—bespeaks the way in which the center-periphery dynamic is at play at a local site of literary reception. Their responses to the book’s narrative style and thematic concern, therefore, not only challenge western approaches to world literature but also

³ According to Franco Moretti, “world literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*” (2000, p. 55).

⁴ The session was held on the 24th of February 2019. There are five other sessions organized as part of the same research project (2018-2020). See pictures and discussions of all the events at <https://web.facebook.com/wereadaloud/>.

undermine the consuming North/consumable South binary opposition. Before demonstrating how the book group undertook such a double task, I will examine the effect of the magical realist label, the global mode of writing *Sa-ming Sam-dang* is attached to, on this Thai site of reception. It is an instance of how the South's cultural dependency on the North manifests itself in the circulation and reception of world literature.

Lelaki Harimau was originally published in Indonesia in 2004 and brought to the English-speaking world as *Man Tiger* in 2015 by Benedict Anderson, the late historian who wrote the introduction for its Verso's English translation. The narrative begins with the death of a rich old man named Anwar Sadat. He was violently bitten on the neck by a young man named Margio, who later told the police that it wasn't him who killed the man, but the female white tiger inside him. The rest of the novel retrospectively provides piece by piece the background information that leads up to Margio's action at the end of the novel. The readers gradually learn about the lives of the people in the postcolonial coastal town in Java, Indonesia; Margio's hatred towards his father who fails as a breadwinner and regularly rapes and abuses his mother; the convoluted relationship between Margio's and Anwar Sadat's families; and, probably most importantly, the origin of the tiger, which has been passed on from generation to generation.

The Thai version of the novel, translated directly from Bahasa Indonesia by Pensri Panich, was published in 2018, together with Anderson's introduction, translated from English by Kamolaka Jittaruttha. The book is dedicated to Anderson himself since he was and is revered by many Thai intellectuals, including those who are involved in the publication of the novel. On the inside cover of *Sa-ming Sam-dang* (ส่มิงสำแดง), the promotional statement reads as follow:

Sa-ming Sam-dang is a piece of literature brimming with originality, written by Eka Kurniawan, an Indonesian writer who carries on Latin America's "magical realist" tradition through the depth of the muddy, rural life, in a manner unique to Southeast Asia. (2018)⁵

Evidently, magical realism is treated here as a global stylistic treasure that could be passed on and localized from one Southern region to another. In Thailand, as probably elsewhere in the South, the term "magical realism" is usually associated with the Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Unlike the majority of texts from the South, his work succeeded in being placed right at the center of the world republic of letters. In Christopher Warnes's remark on the increasing popularity of the genre, presumably in the west, over the past few decades, he

⁵ All forms of reception of the novel reported in this paper were originally written and spoken in Thai and translated by me.

suggests that its reach to the general public—its becoming “familiar to millions”—could be attributed to the appearance of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club in 2004. (2009, p. 1). Given the author’s popularity among Thai literary enthusiasts long before the Club’s endorsement, it is not surprising that “magical realist” feature of *Sa-ming Sam-dang* is highlighted in the publisher’s promotion of the book. However, contrary to the advertisement, the majority of readers in my study concluded that the book did not meet magical realism’s criteria, whatever they are for them. One of them even said she felt like being fooled into expecting so. Remarkably, they mentioned García Marquez’s name and work several times, and such texts as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* became a standard against which *Sa-ming Sam-dang* is measured.⁶ One reader in the book group explicitly said that he read the novel with certain formal expectation and could not help comparing it with other magical realist works he had read:

I was not really into it. I felt as if it was a ‘carbon copy’ of the original. If the writer were a student practicing writing, he would get an A. But as a novel to be actually read, I didn’t feel it was good.

This reflection corresponds to a few other readers that I interviewed. One said Kurniawan failed to engage him as García Marquez did while another felt the author simply tried to mimic his style, like many Thai writers do. Further, an award-winning writer told me that the book reminded him of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, García Marquez’s famous novella, and he thought that the story was too familiar to Thais to be exciting. Regardless of Kurniawan’s actual sources of inspiration, the form of this Indonesian novel is considered formulaically derivative by these readers. A cause of this perception could be the magical realist label that had been attached to the novel even before it was imported into the Thai literary marketplace.⁷ Instead of enabling the Thai readers to relate better with the novel from the perspective at the periphery, it became the *curse* that marked the “original” point of reference that put them off. In other words, Latin American writers, represented by García Márquez, own the copyright of magical realism; consequently, other literary works that share similar formal qualities with such a masterpiece as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* could be seen by many readers as its copies. I would like to add here that the academia in the North

⁶ There are at least two versions of the Thai translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The first authorized edition has just been published in late 2019.

⁷ In the description of the novel on Verso Books website, the tiger is referred to as a “supernatural female white tiger” and the “magical being”. Several blurbs on the Amazon page, excerpted from both US and UK media publications, also praise the book using the words “magical”, “supernatural”, and “fantastic” as well as comparing the author to Gabriel García Marquez.

is indeed where this “original” is sanctified, that is, being recognized, conceptualized and institutionalized.⁸ Thus, the center can be said to *produce* the originals without having to be the origin. This case coincides with Joseph Slaughter’s remark on the way in which Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, the two most prominent world literary academics, divide the world literary space—between “those who bring newness into the world and those who recycle old ideas” (2014, p. 45).

On top of that, the common features that Thailand and Indonesia share as Southeast Asian countries were seen by some readers as not-new. This view is probably another symptomatic desire for originality; at the same time, it could suggest a sense of being excluded from the book’s implied readership. Being too familiar with the world portrayed in the text to be excited by its fantastic quality, some Thai readers displayed their awareness that such world could be fascinating for some people whom they thought were the target readers. A reviewer wrote on the *Goodreads* website that “I don’t see the ‘weretiger’ as something magical, but when thinking about western readers, I find it possible that they feel it is” (2018, Mar 28). The Thai writer, when asked about the novel’s being associated with magical realism, said that “I think it responds to the preconception of the west about this region”.⁹ Arguably, it is not the mode of writing itself but its label that alienated some readers. Despite traveling around the world, this global literary genre prevents the South from actually seeing the South since it implicates a particular way of approaching the text that some readers in the South may not identify with. It is also conceivable that some other peripheral readers would be led by the media to adopt western eyes and taste. In that case, they have to alienate themselves from their own reading position in order to appreciate the “unfamiliar” in the text. This emphasizes how powerfully the Northern-made label mediates between the Southern sites of production and consumption.¹⁰

As I mentioned earlier, attempts to define world literature as an object of study within the global literary institution betray the exclusivity of the point of view of the metropolitan readers. A recent example is Pheng Cheah’s article “Worlding Literature: Living with Tiger Spirits” (2017) in which the critic uses *Man Tiger* to exemplify what he calls “worlding literature”. Contemporary studies of world literature, Cheah argues, “banalizes” Goethe’s normative project by equating literature’s world-making power with its circulation in a global scale. Inspired by Heidegger’s concept of world, he suggests that we not take for granted the

⁸ *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, the first critical anthology of magical realism as a subject of academic inquiry, was published in 1995 by Duke University Press.

⁹ Personal communications in 2018 and June, 2020.

¹⁰ Meghan Downes, a scholar of Indonesian contemporary culture, also found that the “global” media coverage reframed ways in which the author is recognized in his own country, from a pulp fiction writer to a literary figure (2019, pp. 177-195).

world as a “container” of objects but pay attention to the process of “worlding”, which is “the original ground from which human norms and values spring” (p. 94). By this definition, *Man Tiger* is the worlding literature because of its “radical destabilization of every aspect of human sovereignty when human beings are opened without any defense to the non-human or better yet, the inhuman” (p. 99). It presupposes the original unity between Margio and the white tiger. As Cheah puts it, “the tiger is released when Margio is opened up to others, its coming points to a prior wholeness of connections that is at the same time a holding-together—the worlding of a world” (p. 106). Cheah’s argument is a case against the ethic of tolerance in the context of multiculturalism, which is grounded upon the unequal power relations between the tolerator and the tolerated. The literature that enacts the worlding process leads to a new understanding of (in)human relations. It is not that “we” should tolerate others who are different because it is an ethical act; rather, we are able to tolerate them because “we are always already with others” (p. 107).

Fascinating as it is, Cheah’s conceptual framework reveals his assumption about the implied readers of this “worlding literature” that Thai readers pointed out. The “we” who need to discover through their reading that they are “already with others” cannot be said to include Thai readers, or probably readers in many peripheral locations. The pronoun “we” indeed refers to the readers that are initially alienated to the idea of Man-Tiger hybrid or to the “cultures that have not been completely disenchanted or purged of magic, worlds in which spirits dwell with human beings” (p. 87). Although the Thai well-educated middle-class readers recognize themselves as belonging to the modern world, their responses suggested that they were also familiar with the world of belief and superstition and had no need to reconcile these two worlds through narratives. The effect that the story is anticipated to have upon the western readers thus means almost nothing for them. If the only function of the novel is to make its readers aware of this human/non-human togetherness, it is not surprising if some Thai readers are not especially impressed with it. It might even be understandable if one sees it as a local product catered for global tourist readers. In the next section, by focusing on the discussion in the book group which yielded completely different readings from Cheah’s, I will illustrate how the empirical studies of reception reveal complicated reading positions at the periphery and, as a result, suggest a possible way in which world literature could be conceptualized from the perspective outside the center.

Living with the strange and the familiar

The two-hour book group session on *Sa-ming Sam-dang* was held in a café in Bangkok, and there were 15 participants including me as the participatory observer. At the beginning, we responded to the facilitator’s question about our impression of the book so that she could pick up interesting points from there. During the discussion, everyone was free to add

information or raise questions whenever they wanted to. My analysis of their readings, therefore, is based less on their individual accounts of finished reading than on the result of the meaning-making process that took place collectively, but not homogenously, in the session.

Through their conversation about the novel, this book group revealed an ambivalent reading position as both the outsider and the insider. With outsiders' perspective, these Thai readers seemingly approached the story set in rural Indonesia like other tourist readers might do, that is, with curiosity about the cultural others. In his account of why he found the novel interesting, one participant said that he would like to see whether the characters "believe in spirits and worship trees". Another saw the novel as a "national allegory" while disclaiming her knowledge of the country. The distance between the readers and the characters was most clearly discerned in their religious affiliations. The group discussed questions surrounding the characters' religious practice and belief, with particular emphasis on the issue of gender oppression which is usually associated with Islam. Interestingly, a reader used the temporal metaphor, stating that "their clock is a bit slower than ours", to indicate that people in the Muslim world are lagging behind in terms of gender equality. This was in tune with the discourse of progress that marks the difference between the "modern" society of the colonizer--the Prime Meridian of modernity--and the "premodern" colonized.

Nevertheless, these readers' sense of otherness towards the characters cannot be straightforwardly taken as adopting western eyes. The expressed interest in the characters' superstition could be seen as an attempt to understand Indonesian people in rural areas by comparing them to people of the same demographic in Thailand. Since Thai country people are commonly seen as having superstitious belief and practices, by mentioning such behavior as worshipping trees, the speaker might actually attempt to find shared characteristics of the Thais and the Indonesians rather than highlight the differences. Similarly, a Bangkok-based reader who was originally from the Southern part of Thailand where there is a large Muslim population tried to imagine Indonesia's rural life by comparing it to her hometown. This mixture between the foreign and the familiar shows that these readers were not entirely alienated from the narrative. They did not identify with the Indonesian characters yet were aware of the possible similarities between such characters and certain groups of people in their own country. Arguably, varying degrees of distance between the text and the readers in this book group stemmed from both the cultural differences between the two countries and the social division in a local level. These urban middle-class readers were the outsiders of not only the Javanese culture but also the rural Thailand. The way in which they engaged with the text, therefore, simultaneously reflected their social position in relation to the foreign others and the local others.

One example of the responses that could be understood in that double sense is a reader's account of how, at one point, she stopped caring about the faith of the characters:

The whole story is so sad, every aspect of it. Getting to the end I felt, well, the problem can never be fixed. Like when the railroad arrived at the village and then was left deserted and became the father's hideaway. It's like, the development went there, but just half-way through.

Wishing, and then failing, to see any way out of the tragedy, this reader resigned herself to the bitter ending. This is certainly not that she lacked sympathy, but that she was too overwhelmed by it. At the same time, the fact that she could finally stop being emotionally invested in the story confirmed her position as the outside observer. She knew what "the problem" was, but she was not part of it. Remarkably, the description of the characters' inescapable doom that this reader cited thematized not the dead end of the domestic tragedy but the failure of modernization in the village. In other words, consciously or not, "the problem" was seen not as a personal one but a social phenomenon that affects individual lives.

In the novel, the only railway in the village has only one track, so it has no need to follow the timetable to avoid accidents. It is said that passengers are able to hop on and off whenever they want, while firewood or cows could easily stop the train. As a technology of capitalist modernization, the railway could neither implement the rule of universal time in this rural community nor bring its people anywhere. When it finally ceases operation, the connection between the public and the personal cannot be clearer: "Then one day the train stopped coming, with no prior announcement or explanation, like a girl who silently ditches her boyfriend" (Kurniawan, 2015, p. 159). This experience of unfinished modernity, which is somehow linked to the tragic faith of the characters, can evidently be seen across the Global South, including Thailand, as well as in the Global North's peripheral areas.¹¹ It is also portrayed in minute detail in such an archetype of magical realist texts as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to which the book group repeatedly referred. It should be noted, however, that this aspect of similarities between the two texts was not acknowledged by the participants. Even when they compared a rich old woman in *Sa-ming Sam-dang* who eats the soil of her own land in protest against her sons' business scheme to Rebeca in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the focus was on their similarly peculiar behaviors, not the similar social condition to which the two novels respond. It might be argued, therefore, that the double sense of

¹¹ See, for examples, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (1985) and Elena Ferrante's *The Neapolitan Novels* (2012-2015).

urban middle-class alienation I mentioned above not only limited the readers' empathy for the characters but also prevented them from seeing the shared experiences of the socio-economic marginalized across the globe.

Another instance of class distance between the readers and the protagonist is a participant's comment on Margio's joblessness. In the novel, Margio, who is in love with Maharani, the youngest daughter of Anwar Sadat, decides to tell her about their parents' affair. The act seems to automatically cancel their relationship since Maharani immediately leaves the village. However, the reader noted that the parents' action was not supposed to concern the children, and what actually rendered their love impossible should be the fact that Maharani had a better future. She wondered why, while the girl was pursuing a university education, the protagonist was unemployed and could not earn his living. This viewpoint, informed by the bourgeois ideology of self-improvement, was strikingly alienated from Margio's moral and economic universe. As described in the story, even Anwar Sadat's well-off family has to give up a plot of land his wife inherits from her ancestor in order to send their daughters away to the university. Margio and his family who have been living as squatters are not in the position to afford such means of social mobility. Additionally, the assumption that the adultery committed by Margio's mother and Maharani's father, resulting in a premature baby who later dies, will not affect the young lovers' relationship was markedly individualistic. In an urban, modernized society, such family affairs as this are probably not a great concern to family members, much less to the outsiders. Nevertheless, in Margio's rural, traditional community where people intimately know each other, the situation could have totally different repercussion. The reader's difficulty to comprehend Margio's circumstance from his perspective might be a result of her class position; at the same time, it called attention to the realistic aspect of the novel which was at times overshadowed by its surreal elements. Margio is not only the carrier of his people's culture but also the representative of his class. Although the text seems to focus mainly on the family drama, not unlike Thai soap operas do, the socio-economic factors that play a significant role in the narrative are too manifest to ignore, whether or not the readers find them relatable.

In spite of the limitations caused by both cultural and social gaps, the exchange of information and insights in the book group allowed participants to reflect on the complexity and heterogeneity of what would otherwise be seen as a unified, national culture. Through the discussion, the group realized, for example, that the Javanese culture portrayed in the novel could not be taken as representative of Indonesia. Neither can those in Sumatra, Bali or Timor. Additionally, it was acknowledged that the religious belief of the characters needed to be understood in their own context and should not be conflated with the representations of the Muslims in the Arab world. In terms of gender oppression and domestic violence, the participants at one point agreed on the fact that Thailand, a Buddhist-majority country, also

shares the same problems. The class boundary, it appeared, was harder to cross than the cultural one, and it certainly shaped the way in which the readers engaged with the text. Nonetheless, a participant who is an entrepreneur found the economic struggle of the protagonist's family very relatable. Despite feeling against the book in his first read because of the magical realist label, he later appreciated the realistic details of the social context in which the story is set. It could be said that, even though the multiple levels of distance between the readers and the characters were not completely erased, this collective reading revealed the potential of the text to make recognizable both the shared experiences across national boundary and the inequality in a local level. More importantly, each reader could be encouraged by the group to examine her own prejudice against the cultural and social others.

When it came to the fantastical aspect of the novel, Thai readers were certainly insiders. Most of them grew up with the stories of the weretigers. They learned about them not exclusively from the oral tradition, but also from various adaptations of the folklore on television.¹² Their perception of reality, therefore, was not shaken by the emergence of a tiger from the body of a man. This does not mean that they fully believed in the existence of the weretigers, but that its possibility was not beyond the imagination of this interpretive community. Actually, the group yielded two sets of interpretation of Margio's transformation that they held equally valid. One saw it as an expression of Margio's psychological condition; another assumed that the tiger inside Margio's body either released itself or was unleashed by her owner/husband. The first interpretation was backed up by psychoanalysis, while the second by reference to the traditional belief in "Kwan", a personal spirit of every individual, that many Thais still hold on to¹³. An advocate of this interpretation argued that the magical tiger has always been part of "our ecosystem". Another participant, in addition, said she could not determine whether it was Margio or the tiger who committed the crime since they were not separate beings. This coexistence of realist and non-realist approaches to the text pointed to the coexistence of the two worlds in which these readers are living: the modern capitalist society governed by reason and the premodern world of tradition and belief.

The unlikely combination between the old and the new, which is not unique to Thailand but could be experienced in many places in the Global South, complicated even further the reading position of these readers. Despite their distance from the characters who are their social and cultural others, they regarded the tiger spirit as a possible part of their "self". In other words, the tiger was less alienating than people with different social position or religious belief. As Cheah rightly pointed out, "relations with non-human forces are fundamental to

¹² The most recent example is *Angkor*, a very popular thriller/action series about a woman possessed by the vengeful tiger spirit. It was first produced in 2000 and remade in 2018.

¹³ *Kwan* can be compared to *chi*, the personal god in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

social life in many cultures” (2017, p. 107). However, precisely because of this, the readers in the Global South may not be liable to the shocking effect of the emergence of the tiger that Cheah anticipates to have upon the western readers. Neither may the thematization of the world prior to the separation between human and nonhuman beings stimulate “a re-envisioning of relations with others beyond the humanistic values of tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding” in this particular reading context (p. 107). Rather, the book group paid attention to the question about the tiger’s status within the narrative. Their discussion around the topic demonstrated a possible way in which non-western readers could productively and critically read world literature originated from other global peripheries.

In their attempt to understand the ending of the novel, participants exchanged ideas about what the tiger, as ancient as the villagers’ ancestors, represents. By treating the tiger as a representation of something else, it seemed that the readers valued the metaphoric tiger over the literal one. I asked other participants if it was the case, and while some people agreed with my remark, some contended that one could acknowledge the existence of the magical tiger without dismissing its potential to also function in the narrative as a symbol. The more important point was where each approach led to:

If we use the Freudian analysis, we might see the tigress as the id, which means it does not have any existence or a separate entity from Margio. But if we think it is a real tiger, it would allow us to ask other questions. What is his motivation? Does he use the tigress as just his tool? Or is it the tigress who feels the need to protect this family and kills Anwar?

The issue of protection invoked debates about who had the responsibility to protect the family, moving the group away from the realist/non-realist dichotomy. Some passionately agreed on the idea that the tigress as part of Margio’s self was triggered by Anwar’s refusal of Margio’s request that he marry his mother, hence the act of protection. Some, on the other hand, insisted that the tigress has nothing to do with the conflict and that it is Margio who is upset by the rejection and releases his spirit animal. These contested readings, one assigning the agency to the tiger and another to Margio, brought to light the ambiguous status of the animal, as clearly seen in the conversation that followed. While one participant pointed out the tiger’s voicelessness, another considered her attack as an oppressive act:

P1: We don’t know if the tigress really wants to protect the family. But, if we think about the voice of the characters, though we don’t hear much from Mameh [Margio’s sister] at least we know her thoughts. The one who is completely voiceless is the tigress. We don’t know at all what it thinks.

P2: The mother was about to find happiness. The murder brought his family back to misery. The tigress seems to represent the oppressive convention and the culture that lacks communication. That is why it is inheritable, from generation to generation. We can't choose; it chooses us.

The tigress was seen as both powerless and powerful. On the one hand, she cannot even speak for herself. This view corresponded to some participants' interpretation that the female tiger was inherited by the male member of the family as an object of possession, even though she could choose her husband from the available lot. On the other hand, she mercilessly punished the transgressor of age-old convention. In this light, Anwar was not guilty of betraying Margio's mother, but of standing for the consensual but unconventional sex outside marriage. P2 also observed that the tigress attacked Anwar as soon as he spoke his mind, right at the place where the voice came out. Notably, the fact that the tigress does not, or cannot, explain herself makes her an empty signifier to whom readers could liberally assign meanings according to their own persuasion. Yet, the readers' seemingly divergent ways of looking at the animal revealed a similar view towards its social environment. Whether representing the oppressed or being the technology of oppression, the tiger was obviously caught in a repressive, hierarchical society where the pattern of domestic violence had been established and continued for generations and certain voices were not allowed to be heard.

From the perspective of those who are familiar with the magical creature, its cohabitation with human beings does not certify the harmonious togetherness before division but suggests otherwise. The structure of oppression had been normalized until it became a "natural" way of being, an "ecosystem" through which the network of both intraspecies and interspecies relationship is constructed. The tigress would always be domesticated as part of the man's self and then inherited by his male descendants. The husband and the son would naturally speak and act on behalf of the wife and the mother. The voices of the domesticated and possessed beings, human or nonhuman, were constantly displaced elsewhere. This less than ideal form of coexistence as seen by the book group is not the world envisioned in Cheah's formulation of worlding literature. Drawing from Heideggerian theorization of the world as a network of references that "precedes the rational human subject and brings us into relation with other beings" (2017, p. 93), the critic holds that Margio/tigress's mutual act presents to the readers the initial unity between the man and the tiger. While it is entirely possible that the western audience would read this magical moment the way Cheah suggests, the cultural and social proximity prevented the Thai readers from imagining such a pre-social man-tiger harmony in the text. Significantly, the readings at different sites of reception reveal different viewpoints towards both the literary work and the world itself. Although the urban middle-class Thai readers were alienated from the rural Indonesian characters, they were familiar with

folkloric stories that both reflect people's belief in the mysterious power of nature and embody the multi-layered oppression within the society. This is evident in a participant's comment on the creature's gender. He thought that it made more sense that the tiger was a female, since "spirits in our region" usually originate from grudges, not evils, implicating that it is the women who are normally victimized. With this assumption in mind, the fact that the female tiger in the novel is voluntarily tamed by the patriarch might be more disturbing than inspirational.

Conclusion: towards the *world* beyond the center

Manifestly, while the story as a whole did not generate the readers' identification, the tiger's emergence in particular made visible the world in which both the readers and the characters are living. It is possible, then, that the surrealist dimension of the text appealed to the book group's sense of connection with the characters more strongly than the realist one did. The significance of the supernatural aspect of narratives, for these readers, is its ability to reconnect them to the social and cultural others they might feel alienated in other contexts. This kind of response cannot be equated with the tourist readers' desire for the exotics even though the Thai readers remain the outsiders to the story. Such a reading position at the global literary periphery is crucial to the intellectual and political engagement with literature from the Global South. Attempts to establish "responsible" ways of reading this set of heterogenous texts for western readers are undoubtedly laudable. Yet, doing so without recognizing the readers beyond the North as part of this interpretive community simply endorses the centrality of the metropolitan perspective within the field. Even the materialist theorization of world literature would leave the inequity within the world literary system inadequately addressed.

As I have demonstrated in this paper, a peripheral viewpoint enables us to see the text as a channel through which the South can relate to the South beyond the national boundary. An insight one would gain from reading world literature could also be an antidote to the Eurocentric assumptions about culture, society and literature that they have somehow internalized. I would like to further argue that a contextualized reading of world literature specific to the social and historical particularities of each reception site is not just a theoretical intervention in a local level but a political necessity. Since many readers at the peripheries actually belong to the local center, it is important that they are made aware of their social and economic distance from the marginalized characters despite being geographically or culturally close. Apart from seeking similarities across cultures or species, they could profit from being attentive to differences of economic condition, social environment, educational opportunities and so on. As for readers at the metropolises, a peripheral perspective could prompt them to recognize the fact that the discrepancy between them and the characters in

literature from the Global South could not easily be reconciled by either (non)humanist or humanitarian readings. This may not be the world-saving project, but it is a possible way in which a reader of a globally circulated texts in different locations of the world could critically comprehend herself, along with other readers of the same texts, as part of this uneven world-system, and more importantly, as an agent of change.

References

- Apter, E. S. (2013). *Against world literature: On the politics of untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Azadibougar, O. (2018). Peripherality and World Literature. *Journal of World Literature*, 3(3). 229-238.
- Brouillette, S. (2015). World literature and market dynamics. In S. Helgesson & P. Vermeulen (eds.), *Institutions of world literature: writing, translation, markets* (pp. 93-108). London: Routledge.
- Cheah, P. (2017). Worliding literature: living with tiger spirits. *Diacritics*, 45(2). 86-114.
- Damrosch, D. (2003). *What is world literature?*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Downes, M. (2019). Found in translation: Eka Kurniawan and the politics of genre. *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 175(2-3). 177-195.
- Kurniawan, E. (2015). *Man Tiger* (L. Sembiring, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Moretti, F. (2000). Conjectures on world literature. *New Left Review* 1 (January-February), 54-68.
- n+1. (2013a). *World lite: What is global literature?*. Retrieved from <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>
- n+1. (2013b). "The Rest is Indeed Horseshit," Pt. 6. Retrieved from <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/horseshit/the-rest-is-indeed-horseshit-pt-6/>
- Parks, T. (2010, February 9). *The dull new global novel*. Retrieved from <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/>
- Phakin. *Goodreads*. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2342268877>
- Slaughter, J. (2014). World literature as property. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, (34). 39-73. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/24392130
- Warnes, C. (2009). *Magical realism and the postcolonial novel: between faith and irreverence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.