

Towards a Definition of Small Literatures

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Abstract: This review essay examines the concept of small literature and emphasises its peripheral position in the world literary system. Drawing on theories from comparative literature, translation studies, postcolonial studies and world-systems analysis, the historical and methodological debates on small literatures are examined. The discussion traces the early perspectives of comparative literature and the influence of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature, and assesses contemporary scholarly contributions, including translation studies and geocultural approaches. Distinguishing small literatures from migrant and minority literatures, the article highlights their unique dynamics, including their polyfunctionality, multilingualism, limited repertoires, self-reflexive discourse, impeded global circulation, lack of metropolitan recognition, and diverse strategies of worlding. The study proposes a refined definition of small literature, based on quantitative and qualitative criteria and

taking into account its geopolitical, linguistic and institutional dimensions, in order to provide a comprehensive framework for further research.

Keywords: Small literatures, Comparative literature, World literature, Centre-periphery, Literary system, Definition

Based on world-system studies, the world-literature turn in comparative literature research has highlighted the inequalities between central and peripheral literatures, which include what are often referred to as small literatures. While the problem of inequality has mostly been “considered from the positions of the centre [...] the voice of small literatures in this theoretical concert” (Satkauskytė 276) has also gained momentum in recent years. Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (1999 / 2004) was one of the texts that launched the debate of small literatures in the world literature system. While scholars of small literatures agree with her assessment in terms of the general laws of inequality, structures of dominance, typologies of autonomy and heteronomy, and the lack of cultural capital impacting their international circulation, the shortcomings of her analysis have been pointed out. In particular, scholars have questioned her replication of “stereotypes from popular cultural geography and geopolitical imagination” (Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen, Atkin and Milutinović 4) and her lack of contextualisation, of offering “first-hand insights into the literatures being described themselves” (Milutinović 715). Gross generalisations made her portray small literatures as “self-absorbed victims of systemic neglect and dominance” (Chitnis *et al.* 4). Casanova’s text, given its seminal role in the grounding of world literature studies and its authoritative position in comparative literature studies emanating from the centres of the discipline, has eclipsed earlier systemic studies and approaches, proposed by small literature studies themselves. Itamar Even-Zohar’s Polysystem Theory, originating in the context of Hebrew literature, and José Lambert’s Translation Studies, based on the case of Belgian literature, had already drawn attention to the system-determining structures of domination that dictate the multiple dependencies and characteristics endemic to small literatures, in terms of difficulties of circulation, strategies of repertoire construction, pitfalls and opportunities related to multilingualism.

This brief overview indicates that research on small literatures is predominantly conducted from a centre-periphery perspective, with limited consideration given to the historical-political context of small

literatures, the construction of their literary system, their linguistic specificities, and the prominence of their self-reflexive discourse, among other aspects. With the consolidation of the research field of small literatures, we have reached a crucial moment to address questions of methodology, terminology and definition. There is still no consensus on what small literatures are, how knowledge about them should be produced, and from what angles. This is where our article attempts to move the field forward by reviewing the critical discourse on the phenomenon. Secondly, we propose a preliminary definition of small literature that outlines key aspects of its location in the world literary system and identifies qualitative and quantitative focal points for a comprehensive description of the phenomenon.

Although the discussion on small literatures has gained momentum in the wake of the turn in world literature studies, this does not mean that it is entirely new. One could even say that the debate on small literatures coincides with the rise of comparative literatures studies itself. Hugo von Meltzl, the editor of the very first comparative literature journal, the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, published in Cluj (now in Romania) between 1877 and 1888, and writing at a time of rising cultural nationalism, was acutely aware of the consequences of the inequality of the world literature system for the visibility, or lack thereof, of small literatures. He saw in the emerging discipline of comparative literature a valid tool for bringing small literatures into a larger international context.

Our secret motto is: nationality as individuality of a people should be regarded as sacred and inviolable. Therefore, a people, be it ever so insignificant politically, is and will remain, from the standpoint of comparative literature, as important as the largest nation. The most unsophisticated language may offer us most precious and informative subjects for comparative philology. (Meltzl 45)

Paul van Tieghem, a prominent representative of the French School of comparative literature, is very much in line with Meltzl when he also argues in favour of the equal recognition of “less widespread literatures” (*littératures à rayonnement limité*) in comparative literary history rather than relegating them to footnotes or addenda chapters (van Thieghem 205). It can thus be concluded that it is in the context of comparative literature in its nascent and classical stages that the concern for small literatures emerged. These literatures were regarded as a distinct category of national literatures, distinguished by their diminutive scale.

While the above-mentioned early examples focus on how comparative studies might engage with small literatures in literary history, in the 1960s and 1970s efforts to conceptualize and characterize them emerged in various academic contexts, outlining new possible approaches and offering new denominations to address this phenomenon. The most influential contribution to the discussion in the West appeared in the context of the French theory, in particular the essay *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (1975) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It is an important text, not least for its conceptualisation of the hitherto vague notion of small or, in this case, minor literatures described as the literature of a minority in a major language (Deleuze and Guattari 29). The concept of minor literature as characterised by the two philosophers has had a steady career in (comparative) literary studies, so much so that it is often still used to designate and forcefully homogenise an astonishing variety of small and smaller literatures, their diverse and divergent contexts, as well as their historical development and the construction of their literary field. The concept of minor literature has since been criticised and “the paucity of its theoretical development” (Dominguez, Di Rosaria, Ciastellardi 278) has been pointed out. The notion of small literatures presented here proposes to broaden the perspectives on the phenomenon by going beyond the linguistic criteria posited by Deleuze and Guattari and by multiplying the angles of approach, from historical and repertoire analysis to qualitative and quantitative methods.

The emergence of systems studies and Even-Zohar’s Polysystem Theory in particular has made it possible to refine the perspective on small literatures, and by the same token on major literatures, by introducing new elements into the analytical comparative toolbox such as multilingualism, translation, heterogeneity, processes of interference/influence and repertoire construction, thus paving the way for a thorough assessment of small literatures that focuses on their specificities and their ongoing engagement with other literatures. Prior to the contributions of Even-Zohar, the Slovak comparatist Dionýz Ďurišin had revised the concept of influence. The term had historically served as the primary criterion in establishing the hierarchy of literatures based on temporal priority and originality. In this paradigm, more prestigious literatures were regarded as exerting a greater influence on less important and smaller literatures. As a scholar from a so-called in-between peripheral Central European nation that comparative studies frequently characterized as a belated copier, Ďurišin offered a reinterpretation of influence from the

perspective of literary communication and reception theory. He argued that traditional comparative studies had overlooked the significance of the receiver's selective acts (which should also have been regarded as creative) and the importance of the transformation of the received elements brought about by writing strategies that adhered to the habits or needs of the receiver's native literary process. Consequently, he opted to elucidate the interrelationships among literary works through the lens of creative inter-literary reception (Đurišin *Theory of Literary Comparatistics* 159–60).

The cultural turn in comparative literature, with its focus on how socio-cultural contexts and multilingual and intercultural settings shape literature and impact on its circulation in a system of unequal power relations, has opened up new avenues to approach small literatures. The concept of interregional literature, developed by Johann Strutz in the 1980s, describes the specific multilingual and geocultural situation of literary cultures in the Alps-Adriatic region and gives an account of the multi-layered interferences and incongruities between linguistic, cultural and political contexts (Strutz 201). The Dutch comparatist Geert Lernout takes a similar regional approach to that of Strutz when he coins the term 'contact cultures'. Lernout identifies multilingualism and interference-processes as central to small literatures in borderland locations: "The Low Countries, like the Alsace, Switzerland or Luxembourg, have always been 'contact-cultures', smaller cultural regions where often two or more national or linguistic cultures rub against each other. In that sense the cultural traditions in these regions have tended to be particularly open to other influences [...]" (Lernout 410). The concepts of interference and creative reception were pivotal in facilitating a more nuanced understanding of small literatures. Their "'nomadic' search for world sources, their 'in-betweenness', syncretism and often irregular development" (Juvan *Literary* 84) resonated with the tenets of the postcolonial paradigm regarding the location-power axis. The postcolonial paradigm subverts the conventional systemic centre-periphery configuration, wherein power relations are typically obscured, by placing the particulars of the linguo-cultural milieu in which the literary field is situated at the forefront. François Paré's concept of "exiguous literatures," which he applies to minority literatures of ethnic communities in Canada, former colonial literatures, island literatures and small literatures in general, has been an important contribution in this regard. Paré describes these literatures as having limited circulation beyond their context, and notes

that their international status is inversely proportional to the prestige that these literatures have in their societies (Gauvin 34). While Paré's concept is limited to North American literatures, the postcolonial paradigm is becoming increasingly important in exploring the situation of literatures in Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic states. This coincides with the globalization of the discipline of Postcolonial Studies, which includes previously neglected approaches to intra-European colonialism in various imperial contexts, such as the Habsburg empire of Austria-Hungary and the Russian empire. "Developing Comparative Postcolonial Studies is crucial for a proper understanding of both the interconnectedness and the specificity of colonial and postcolonial histories and cultures in the different language areas and nations of Europe" (Göttsche 7). In the case of Latvian literature, for instance, this requires a consideration of the different waves of oppression that refer to different imperial contexts. This approach, which combines the methods of Postcolonial and Post-Soviet Studies, is well suited to analysing the effects of the cultural dominance of antagonistic imperial centres in different historical circumstances.

World literature studies has also contributed new concepts to grasp the complexities and interdependencies of small literatures by situating them in specific geocultural contexts. The concept of 'ultraminor literatures', coined by Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch, takes scale and space as defining criteria, emphasising that ultraminor literatures are located in ethnic enclaves and on small islands. Limited in size, they struggle with "structural handicaps and a systemic lack of capacity and resources connected both to space and to time" (Moberg and Damrosch 134). Quantitative aspects such as the size of the linguistic community, literacy rates, access to publication and archiving facilities and dissemination are mentioned as additional criteria. The most recent concept to appear in this field is that of micro-literatures, which Mircea A. Diaconu understands as literatures written in languages that are rooted and present in several national territories at the same time, as is the case with a large number of Eastern European literatures that straddle national territories and literatures. Diaconu defines micro-literatures as "a literary culture that builds up its identity cross-stally and in conjunction with another or several other literatures within and without the host country" (Diaconu 137). Situated at the intersection of established national literatures – the macroliteratures – microliteratures are torn between the desire for territorialisation or territorial incorporation into the macroliterature system and the struggle to preserve their individuality.

Diaconu's term sheds new light on the phenomenon traditionally labelled 'ethnic minority literature.'

This overview of concepts in the context of and in relation to trends in comparative literature is by no means exhaustive, but it does point to the longstanding engagement with the phenomena of small literatures according to the different perspectives, methods, and agendas of the scholars involved. The conceptual overview provided here does not include the myriad of thematically and analytically focused labels such as "dominated", 'peripheral', 'marginal' or 'less diffused' [or 'underrepresented literatures'] that "reflect a scholarly consensus about the unequal international context in which literatures circulate" (Chitnis *et al.* 2–3). Nor do we have the space here to review and summarize the plethora of articles, edited volumes and monographs. In lieu of the state of the art, we would like to mention two major recent volumes that, while moving the field forward, also testify to the lack of consensus on the terminology and definition of small literatures.

Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations (2020), edited by Rajendra Chitnis, Jakob Stougaards-Nielsen, Rhian Atkin and Zoran Milutinović offers pioneering insights into translation strategies of European literatures in less well-known languages by focusing on as diverse contexts as Bosnian, Catalan, Czech, Dutch, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Swedish and Serbian. Taking as their analytical lens approaches to supply-driven translation, "the role of literature in cultural diplomacy, the relationship between state or third-sector institutions and individual advocates and gatekeepers" (Chitnis *et al.* 6) and applying them to diverse genres, they take a critical stance towards inequality in the translation and publishing industries (5). They thus not only precede but complement Gisèle Sapiro's recent study on the sociology of translation *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur mondial? Le champ littéraire transnational* (2024), which reveals the crucial role played by "des intermédiaires culturels et des institutions littéraires dans la construction de la figure de l'auteur mondiale" (Sapiro 10), in large literary cultures. This issue is all the more pressing for small literatures, where the role of literary and cultural intermediaries is paramount. Small literatures are gaining international presence through translations and metadiscourses, especially in dominant languages such as German and English. Promotion and funding from home countries, international networking, book fairs, festivals, media coverage, and prestigious prizes play key roles. Small publishers from semi-peripheral regions are of crucial importance. They rely on symbolic capital rather than profits and are supported by state subsidies

and international organizations. Large publishers market these translations by linking unknown authors with famous ones or current media topics. The concept of “capillary worlding” describes how small literatures, such as Slovenian literature, are connected to the global space through minor channels like social networks, small publishers, public funding, book fairs, literary festivals, and media coverage of national or regional prizes. German translations published in Austrian cultural centers contribute significantly to the internationalization of Slovenian writers (Juvan “Kako misliti”).

Since good scholarly practice urges each study of small literatures to offer its own understanding of the term, Chitnis *et al.* choose to circumvent the conundrum by focusing on the qualitative “small”, which “being less theoretically established and marked [...] relates less to the size of the nation or historical subservience to empire than to the hegemonies of transnational publishing in which these literatures operate” (Chitnes *et al.* 3). The adjective becomes a thematically focused lens to investigate the topic via case studies from “small European nations,” without, however, offering a clear understanding of the criteria for determining which European nations qualify as small. This, in the authors’ defence, is of course one of the major difficulties regarding the object of study in the field of small literature research. 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.

Contested Communities. Small, Minority and Minor Literatures in Europe (2023) edited by Kate Averis, Margaret Littler and Godela Weiss-Sussex, concentrates on literatures from the early twentieth century to the present day and thematically combines literature from European peripheries with multilingualism and migration in order to show, on the one hand, how these literatures instigate a transnational reconception of the European literary canon and, on the other, to investigate authorial strategies of central-marginal positioning in light of “institutional and material contexts in which their texts are produced and that both enable and constrain their access to a public sphere” (Averis *et al.* 1) Refining their object of study, they note that,

Our topic encompasses both ‘small’ literatures, which issue from linguistic communities that are based in countries where their ancestral language and regional cultures are rendered peripheral (Cornish, Breton, Basque, Galician, Low German or ‘Plattdeutsch’), and ‘minority’ communities of migrants and their descendants whose cultural allegiances and practices are continuously

considered through the lens of difference. These include historic diasporas (German Jewish writing), histories of actual colonization (Italian-Somalian, Black and Asian British), including those that self-identify as 'benevolent colonialism' (Portuguese Africa, Danish Greenland), and yet others that have their roots in labour migration (Eastern Europeans in UK, Turks in Germany) or globalization more generally (Eastern Europeans in the post-Cold War West, Latin Americans in Europe)." (Averis *et al.* 3–4)

As indicated by the study's title, the focus is on literature from diverse communities. This is evidenced by the wide variety of linguistic, cultural and migrant communities found in contexts as diverse as unified nations and post-imperial and post-colonial countries.

The different interpretations of the term small literature and its variety of contexts, from small nations to migrant communities, as well as the different methods and approaches outlined here, inevitably show the extent and richness of the field of small literatures. However, they also point to the lack of a "theoretically established" definition and description of small literatures, to echo Chitnis. Drawing on the methods, concepts and topics discussed above, we would like to propose our definition to the discussion, by addressing quantitative and qualitative aspects. We will consider the location of small literatures in the world literary system by looking at their position and function from both the historical, diachronic perspective and its synchronic counterpart: historically, the notion of small nations arose during the establishment of the inter-state system in the Restoration period, while the synchronic view focuses on the geospatially uneven distribution of cultural capital, where small literatures, largely deprived of it, could not figure as nodes of thick socio-cultural networks of influence. Further, we will attempt to distinguish them from minority and migrant literature.

The majority of literatures of the world are peripheral literatures and, given the criteria presented below, small literatures generally fall into this category. Peripheral literatures are defined by their relations to the global centres of the literary world-system and/or to temporary sub-centres. These relations are considered to be those of dependence on centres as providers of the forms, themes, and norms to be followed, appropriated and adapted to local traditions and circumstances in the peripheries, on the one hand, and the need to be recognized by these centres in order to enter the global literary circulation, on the other.

In our view, a small literature is defined as a literary system or subsystem that is quantitatively smaller (in terms of its repertoire, its

media, its actors, and the institutions of literary production, mediation, reception, and criticism) than the average or large literary systems among or within which it exists. The smallness of literature is a key factor that pushes it into a peripheral position in the world literary system. Like other peripheral literatures, the development of small literature is constantly recalibrated against a global centre, while its worlding depends on its recognition by such centres. In the world-systems approach, the term “position” is understood to encompass both structural and spatial, territorial meanings. The concept of “small literature” differs from that of “migrant literature” in that the former is sedentary and territorialised. It is historically rooted in a specific geospatial region whose identity is established by the ethno-linguistic community that has inhabited it over long periods of time, despite the variability of its political, administrative, and ethnic boundaries over time. Conversely, migration literature is characterised by the deterritorialization and mobility of literary producers, reflecting their ambivalent ties with the host country and their homeland. Consequently, migrant literature rarely evolves into an independent literary system that encompasses its own media, institutions, readership, and critical discourse. In contrast, this is usually the case with a small literature, which fosters a more robust and independent literary ecosystem. The distinguishing feature of microliteratures, as a subcategory of small literatures, is the presence of an autonomous literary system, albeit on a small scale. This distinguishes microliteratures from other classifications such as minor literatures or those of diverse identity-based social minorities, including LGBTQ+ literature.

Contextualisation, variously focused, is a key element for knowledge production about small literatures. In addition to territorialisation and sedentariness, as the material basis for the community as producer of a small literature, history in a *longue durée* perspective gives an account of the development of the literary system over time and in relation to (and dependence of) the political, social and economic context of the community and the territory.

The discourse of self-awareness is a prominent feature of the metadiscourse of small literatures as it constitutes a valuable archive to account for the literature’s self-perception, while also bringing into conversation its perception from the outside by the major and neighbouring centres of the world literature system. The discourse of “smallness” (Glesener 161–65) is widespread in all genres and media and moves in opposite directions: while it represents and interprets the perceived ills and

traumas associated with being peripheral at certain points in time (such as being late, derivative, dependent and unrecognised), it also provides insight into systemically conditioned strategies and attitudes of resilience adopted by writers, actors and institutions for self-determination. These strategies vary greatly over time and depend on *and* are driven *by* the processes of institutionalisation and professionalisation. These, together with the quantitative size of a literature, are co-determinant for the position in the world literary system: the more institutionalized a field is and the more it invests into capillary worlding, the more visible its position in the world literary system is likely to be.

A corollary to literary peripherality in this respect is the linguistic world system. Peripherality is as much a question of size, location, history/age and institutionalisation of the literary system as it is of language. The literary world system and the linguistic world system are closely intertwined. Hypercentral and supracentral languages, to use de Swaan's (2001) terminology, are not only those of major literatures but *ipso facto* also of circulation and translation. Central languages (or national languages) and peripheral languages (in principle only used by native speakers), on the other hand, are always confronted with questions of larger circulation. Circulation is also conditioned by the linguistic organisation of a literary system. Literatures with a multilingual literary system, in which hypercentral and/or supracentral languages coexist with central and/or peripheral languages, are confronted with an endemic asymmetry regarding the dissemination of their literatures in different languages. While the production in hypercentral/supracentral languages is theoretically better positioned to circulate outside the system, since translation is not necessarily required and the central (national) languages can rely on capillary worlding processes, literary production in peripheral languages often faces an uphill struggle for international outreach, as energies are concentrated on promoting the production with more linguistically established capital. Multilingual Luxembourgish literature is a good case in point here: whereas literary texts written in French, German and English fulfil the linguistic prerequisite to travel to the neighbouring systems, those written in Luxembourgish, in absence of an efficient translation policy, struggle to cross borders.

If geospace, history and language form the system-defining context, then quantitative properties such as author population, readership, institutions, editors, annual production, translation rates, print productions are important metrics for judging the size of a small literary

system. There is no consensus yet on what upper and lower limits should apply to the size of the system, but demographics and the territory it occupies are valuable objective vectors to work with. However, as size indicators from studies of small political and economic states show, a small state can have a population ranging from a few thousand to several million. This is a crucial point that needs to be clarified by further research, but studies on small states offer potentially useful modelling opportunities: their positioning of small states in world politics and the geopolitics of great powers (Long 4) and their analysis of the structures and agency of small states could serve as a useful analogue heuristic tool for assessing the degree of autonomy or heteronomy of literary systems. The latter are key terms for the study of the position of small literatures in the space of world literature over time, as they evolve from emergent systems, often closely linked to the fate of their territories, to (semi)autonomous fields organised independently of political and economic powers. While the early initial phase exhibits all the hallmarks of heteronomy, as the literary field is still developing and literature is closely linked to the emergence of the (state/national) community and its national political concerns, later phases bear witness to the process of autonomisation and the gradual establishment of (aesthetic) rules, the book chain (writers, editors, libraries, critics, etc.), literary spaces (schools, academies, circles), literary discourses, instances of consecration and so on (Denis and Klinkenberg 30–31). The smallness of the literary system tends to manifest itself most prominently in the plurifunctionality (Đurišin *Interliterary Process* 133) of actors and functions in the book chain: while in large autonomous systems the overlap of functions is rare and the multifunctionality of actors seldom, smaller systems rely heavily on the versatility of its actors. Writers accumulate different functions by also being editors, critics or holding institutional posts. Small literary systems often qualify as semi-autonomous as they heavily rely on state subsidies for their existence. Semi-autonomy goes beyond the purely material aspect in that the authority vested in the international instances of authorial consecration exceeds that of the national instances (Bourdieu 4). Small systems thus exist under the influence (of trends, of themes, of structures) of larger systems. This last point brings in the notion of repertoire, understood here in a limited conception (as opposed to Even Zohar's understanding of repertoire as rules and models of culture planning) of genres, trends and styles. Small literatures are characterised by a limited repertoire since genres, trends and style may not be present

in the system in the same variety and abundance as in larger systems. The factors determining the presence or absence of elements of the repertoire vary from historical (the emergence of the literature and its subsequent development prevent genres, styles, trends from being present), political (in case of state-controlled literatures), the degree of professionalisation of the system (state subsidisation).

These preliminary reflections on definition are part of a larger conversation in the project Comparative History of Small Literatures in Europe which we coordinate for the committee Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages of ICLA. One of the main aims of our planned volume is to provide an overview of the historical and contextualised development of small literatures. This requires the development of a specific methodology based on the definition of small literatures outlined here. Further steps include the design of a typology that takes into account the various types of small literatures and the elaboration of a descriptive model to assess the specificities of the intricate web of dependencies and agencies of small literatures.

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