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# 5. Multilingualism and Creativity in World Literature

*Wen-chin Ouyang*

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Languages travel and migrate

One of the most important features of world literature is ‘multilingualism’. Multilingualism in poetry and stories written in any language around the world may best be described as ‘languages in dialogue’. Languages travel, talk to each other and interact. This can take place across languages, and even within a language, which makes each language multilingual. Multilingualism is both the sign and site of creativity in world literature, as will be seen in examples from Arabic, Chinese and English stories. These stories represent creative multilingualism in two overlapping ways. They have travelled around the world through literary translation and cinematic adaptation, bringing their languages, world views, motifs and characters into dialogue with other cultures, languages and literatures. More importantly, they are born in translation and adaptation, in inter-cultural, inter-lingual and inter-literary dialogues.

Language Lives

Languages in Dialogue

Wen-chin Ouyang

I speak Mandarin peppered with English to my Chinese friends. In Arabic I use one of the spoken registers and intersperse it with classical Arabic as

well as English words, phrases and even sentences to chat with my Iraqi, Lebanese and Syrian colleagues at SOAS. When I speak to my brother in Taiwanese, it is saturated with Arabic, English and Mandarin. Arabic, Mandarin and English, the three languages I know well, are normally seen as three discrete and distinct languages, but they have blended into each other in my speech patterns. I pick and choose from each language and mix them up depending on my audience and what I want to say. Everybody I know is multilingual but not in exactly the same way. My brother is the only person I know who understands my three main languages and their inflections: standard Arabic and her<sup>1</sup> spoken regional variations (such as Libyan, Egyptian, Levantine and Gulf); Chinese Mandarin and Taiwanese; and English, in particular the US variety. The way I speak to him reflects his languages. My Arab colleagues and friends are fluent in Arabic and English. I am bilingual around them. European Arabists tend to know two or three Middle Eastern languages as well as two or three European languages. I can even put my smatterings of French and Persian to good use in conversations with them. Chinese Arabists often know only Arabic and Chinese. I speak to them in Mandarin, which is the lingua franca among the Chinese today, and only turn to Arabic names and terms when we discuss Arabic culture and literature. Certain concepts and practices are culture-specific.

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Fig. 1 Wen-chin Ouyang. Reproduced with her kind permission.  
Photograph by Dai Yazhen (2018).

1 You may notice that 'language' appears as 'she' in this chapter — a reflection of its gender in Arabic (and in some other languages, e.g. German).

One of the most obvious traces of languages in dialogue is found in mentions of food. English, for example, is full of foreign-sounding words such as *spaghetti*, *couscous*, *falafel*, *hummus*, *kebab* or *ramen* (see 'The Multilingual Life of Food' in the Introduction to this volume).

Food has a way of integrating itself and the culture of its production and consumption seamlessly into the fabric of any language. Even the most innocuous food items can have a global history. *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997–2007) is not big on food or drink. However, breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner and even feasts do mark the time of the day or give a sense of space when adventures or misadventures happen. Dialogues or adventures take place during mealtimes, or where meals are served. Meals and teas are respite from misadventures. Similarly, staple food, spice and drink in the seven novels give this world-famous series a background in British as well as European imperialism and colonialism. Harry, Ron and Hermione's all-time favourite is chocolate, whether in the form of chocolate frogs, a mug of hot chocolate, or medicinal chocolate blocks Madam Pomfrey makes her young patients eat. It comes from South America and has been travelling around the world through the production, trade and consumption networks created and supported during the age of European empires between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. The potato — boiled, roasted or fried — has made its way into English cuisine from the Americas. Pumpkin, which goes into pumpkin pasties and Harry's favourite drink, iced pumpkin juice, comes from North America. Pepper in Madam Pomfrey's 'Pepperup potion', which 'left the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours' (Rowling 1998: 128), is native to Kerala in southwestern India. Coffee, favoured by the Muggles, originated in tropical Africa, Ethiopia and the Sudan. Merchants took it along on their travels around the world beginning in the fifteenth century, and it arrived in England in the sixteenth century through the efforts of the British Levant Company and East India Company as well as the Dutch East India Company. The brew for all occasions in *Harry Potter* is tea, which is native to Southeast China. The British East India Company brought it to England in the seventeenth century. The appearance of these food items and drinks in *Harry Potter* tells us that the English language is a seasoned traveller, that it is not only an important world language but also that it has absorbed into its very fabric its encounters with other languages around the world.

## Multilingualism of the English Language

Britain has engaged with Asian, European and Middle Eastern empires diplomatically, economically and militarily for thousands of years. English is multilingual, locally and globally. At home, she sports regional, class, ethnic, gender and professional inflections, to name but a few examples. In the world, she engages in dialogue and mutual enrichment with the languages she encounters in her travels. These two characteristics of English, or for that matter any language, are visibly hard at work creatively in world literature. In Julian Barnes' acclaimed novel *England, England* (1998), the satire of the search for an authentic English identity and tradition is effective and poignant precisely because the fabric of its language undermines any notion of authentic, sovereign Englishness. England is not a desert island, the novel shows, but a part of the world in the past and at present. English cultural institutions, such as the Royal Family, Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, Manchester United Football Club, the Class System, Pubs, the Union Jack, the West End, the BBC, Shakespeare, the Cup of Tea, Stonehenge, Marmalade, the Tower of London, the Bowler Hat, Oxford/Cambridge, Harrods, Double-Decker Buses, Black Cabs, Alice in Wonderland, Winston Churchill, Marks and Spencer, Magna Carta, have to be extracted carefully from her history of imperialism (Barnes 1998: 83–85). The characters who partake in the process of excavation speak what sounds like 'pure' English but they switch registers depending on the occasion, and spew out 'foreign' words and phrases without a second thought. Words like *faux*, *jouissance*, *marquee*, *mauve*, *portico*, *wigwam*, or phrases like *noli me tangere*, *soixante-huitards*, *eau de toilette*, *bon mots*, *je ne sais quoi*, *capito*, *coup d'état*, *lèse-majesté* and *feng shui* appear everywhere in the novel.

*Feng shui* 風水 is perhaps the most recent addition to the English language compared with the other 'foreign' words and phrases quoted above, and its foreignness is immediately detectable. Denoting a Chinese world view concerned with the unobstructed flow of air and water in the organization of living spaces, it is seamlessly blended into the English prose that describes a character, Jerry Batson, who always avoids confrontation:

'Your *brain*, my money.' Sir Jack's correction was an amiable growl. You didn't jerk someone like Jerry Batson around, but the residual instinct to establish dominance never left Sir Jack. He did so by his heartiness, his

embonpoint, his preference for staying on his feet while others sat, and his habit of automatically correcting his interlocutor's first utterance. Jerry Batson's technique was different. He was a slight figure, with greying curly hair and a soft handshake he preferred not to give. His manner of establishing, or contesting, dominance was by declining to seek it, by retreating into a little Zen moment where he was a mere pebble washed briefly in a noisy stream, by sitting there neutrally, just feeling the *feng shui* of the place. (Barnes 1998: 34–35)

*Feng shui* serves as an example of how languages interact with each other in generating new expressions, here, in English. It is not relevant whether the English expression gets the Chinese concept of *feng shui* right or, for that matter, its broader context, which is here referred to as *Zen*; rather, it is more important to see how the two terms, *Zen* 禪 and *feng shui*, by now vaguely familiar in English, can quickly, effectively, and poignantly portray a personality and his mode of action in adversity: Jerry Batson is usually calm and tends to go with the flow. They at the same time activate the visualizing capacity of language, conjuring up a scene of a monk meditating in complete stillness and silence amidst winds blowing in trees and waters running in streams.

## Languages Travel and Interact with Other Languages

Languages have been travelling with people and things since time immemorial, not only across different parts of a city, as London buses do today, but also around the globe and across empires in caravans along the Silk Roads by land from China through Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe all the way to England, and by sea from the Pacific Ocean via the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. They encounter other languages on their travels, interact with them, and pick up from them ideas, motifs and even entire world views, such as *Zen*, *feng shui*, and democracy, which, in time, become seamless parts of their adoptive language.

A language thrives on dialogues with other languages, for in these dialogues a language refuels, gains new energy and gets creative. It discovers novel ways of expressing old ideas. More important, it finds new things to say. If language is the stuff of literature, multilingualism is the stuff of world literature. World literature comprises not only novels that travel from one nation to another through translation, but also poems and stories whose literary worlds are multilingual, shaped by

languages in dialogue, and populated by ideas, motifs and even world views circulating around the globe. Barnes' novel *England, England* is a brilliant example. He skilfully weaves these into the fabric of his very English prose. His English is a language that has been around and is packed with goods from the languages and cultures with which it has come into contact.

### Parseltongue: Humans Who Converse with Animals

Harry Potter converses with snakes, but he is not the first or only person who can do so. A farmer in 'The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey' in *The Arabian Nights* understands every word his animals say. The Queen of Serpents, Yamlikha, in another *Nights'* story, 'The Tale of Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn', speaks human language.



Fig. 2 Yamlikha, who tells the young Ḥāsib a story in 'The Tale of Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn' from *The Arabian Nights*, is a serpent queen, a common motif in world literature. Nuwa, the Chinese goddess of creation depicted here, is imagined as a serpent queen. Illustration from Edward T. Chalmers Werner. 1922. *Myths and Legends of China* (New York: Harrap). Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nuwa2.jpg#/media/File:Nuwa2.jpg>

Ideas, motifs and world views travel easily from one cultural sphere to another, with and through language, or above, beyond and around language. These are at the heart of creativity in cultural expressions of all kinds, in literature written for adults and children, and in popular culture including movies, comics and games. They are exchanged at various points and through diverse means of cultural encounter within global networks of circulation of people and things, such as the Silk Roads, and they always pick up traces from the places where they have been. They also interact cross-culturally and, in due course, become multilingual as well.

The figure of the monk, a Buddhist spectre of whom flickers in Barnes's prose, is a good example. He is a globetrotting shape-shifter traceable to multiple religious traditions and their attendant popular cultures, including Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism and Islamic Sufism. While they have in common the renunciation of material pursuits and commitment to spiritual contemplation, they each have their distinct world views and practices. Buddhist and Hindus are celibate and vegetarians. Buddhists shave their heads and beards but Hindus and Sufis (except perhaps for Persian Qalandars) do not. Christians and Daoists drink alcohol but Buddhists, Hindus and Muslim Sufis are not supposed to. However, by the time they have travelled around the world and come into contact with each other, they can look uncannily alike.

### Worldly Itineraries of the Monk

The archetype of Barnes' Buddhist monk may be traced to the Tang scholar pilgrim Xuanzang 玄藏 (602–64), whose historical journeys from China to India in search of Buddhist sutras are famously fictionalized as a series of demon-conquering adventures starring his disciple the Monkey King, Sun Wukong 孫悟空, in the sixteenth-century Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West* 西遊記 by Ch'eng-en Wu (1961, trans. by A. Waley; 1977–1983, trans. by A. Yu). An itinerant monk is melded from this Buddhist archetype overlapped with the Daoist archetype, and put on the centre stage of action in *Ji Gong Quan Zhuan* 濟公全傳 (Life and Deeds of Ji Gong). Ji Gong 濟公 (1130–1209), a historical figure nicknamed the living Buddha, is one of the most popular monks in Chinese culture. He is revered among Buddhists and Daoists alike.

Guo Xiaoting 郭小亭, a Qing dynasty (1644–1911) author, refashioned his life and deeds from popular legends into a novel. *Ji Gong* is a fictional biography made up of fantastic tales about a mad monk with supernatural powers who wanders around Song China. He eats meat and drinks alcohol but cures illnesses and saves lives. He also exorcises demons from bodies and homes. He is in this the nemesis of all Buddhist and Daoist charlatans.

Itinerant Buddhist and Daoist monks are staple minor characters in popular Chinese fiction. They are inspired by real life mendicants, who also smack of Hindu monastics. Having renounced material pursuits and committed themselves to a simple, celibate and vegetarian life of meditation and spiritual contemplation, they depend on donated food and charity for their needs. Some live a settled life in monasteries but many wander from place to place. These wandering monastic mendicants pop up everywhere in storytelling around the world. In Chinese fiction, such as *Ji Gong*, they appear as charlatans who make a living out of conning hapless people into giving them shelter, food and gifts. In Chinese ‘martial arts’ or ‘chivalric’ novels, comics, films and television series, Buddhist (Shaolin 少林) and Daoist (Wudang 武當) monks are ‘knights errant’ who right wrongs and defend the poor and powerless against rich bullies and corrupt government officers.

In Arabic, a wandering monastic, al-Nāsik, makes his first appearance in a collection of tales of Indian origins said to have been translated from Middle Persian into Arabic in the eighth century by Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>c</sup> (died c. 756/759) under the title of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. Al-Nāsik in this collection of stories, known in English as the *Fables of Bidpai* or *Pilpay*, offers wise counsel to the perplexed. He appears as a mendicant in Arabic didactic ‘Mirror for Princes’ literature in the tenth century. For example, in the central Asian book *Kitāb Naṣīḥat al-mulūk* (1983) (misattributed to al-Māwardī, d. 1058), which provides counsel for kings, he takes up temporary residence in the homes of the rich and powerful and admonishes them in regular daily sessions. He is also a recurring character in popular epics in the Islamic world, such as *Ḥamzanāma*, also known as the *Dastān of Amīr Ḥamza*, which is a foundation myth of Islam in Central, South and South East Asia. It is structured around the fanciful exploits of Muḥammad’s uncle, Ḥamza ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who in history died before Islam was

established but in popular storytelling spread Islam in Asia east of the Arabian Peninsula. The stories of Amīr Ḥamza have been circulating in Arabic, Balinese, Georgian, Hindi, Javanese, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and other languages, and in these stories the nāsik plays an instrumental role in revealing God's plans for humanity, particularly the conquering Muslims. Con artists impersonate this mendicant monastic sage in *Alf layla wa-layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights*), known in English as *The Arabian Nights*, and show up dressed as itinerant Sufis who, like Buddhist and Daoist charlatans in Chinese fiction, pretend to be able to tell fortunes, cure barrenness and exorcise demons.



Fig. 3. Sun Wukong, the hero of *The Journey to the West*, transforms his hair into miniature monkey kings. Screenshot from *The Monkey King* 西遊記之大鬧天宮. 2014. Directed by Cheang Pou-soi.

Chivalric monks have no presence in Arabic stories. They do make frequent appearances outside Chinese fiction, in Shaolin monk movies in Hollywood cinema and American comics and games. Tibetan monks have generated a particular kind of interest for both cultural and political reasons. *Bulletproof Monk* (2003), albeit a box office flop, provides another brilliant example of how creativity works cross-culturally. The story, based on the comic novel of the same title written by Brett Lewis and illustrated by Michael Avon Oeming (1998), begins in 1943 and ends sixty years later. A Tibetan monk is entrusted with protecting a scroll containing knowledge that can make its reader powerful, young and

immune to injury. He is given the power of the scroll and told to find successors and pass on the scroll in the future. The scroll becomes the object of a quest for the Nazis, who pursue it even after the fall of Nazi Germany. They initially try to rob the Tibetan monk of the scroll at the Tibetan monastery in 1943, and are in hot pursuit when he reappears in what looks like New York City sixty years later to look for his successors. The scroll turns out to be a smokescreen and the knowledge is actually tattooed, in Tibetan, on the monk's body. The monk finds his successors, Kar, an American low life, and Jade, a Russian crime lord's daughter, and transfers the writing on his body to them, half to Kar's body and another half to Jade's, before he disappears.

*Bulletproof Monk* has the feel of both Hollywood Holy Grail films and Chinese *Wuxia*. However, it is more like a quest for the Holy Grail than a tale of Shaolin chivalry in Chinese *Wuxia* 武俠 and *Kungfu* 功夫 films, resembling *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) rather than *A Touch of Zen* 俠女 (1971), in which a Tibetan monk makes an appearance. It is created out of genre fusion and conceptual blending. The Holy Grail is overlapped with the Tibetan scroll, and Hollywood action adventure with Chinese *Kungfu* extravaganza. It tells the familiar story of the quest for power, youth and immortality, but does so in an intercultural way, showing that despite our divergent expressions we all share some core concerns, and that regardless of our differing cultural, political and religious backgrounds, we have in common our sense of justice and ability to distinguish right from wrong. Kar and Jade need not be monks in order to appreciate their responsibility as the guardians of Tibetan secret knowledge. Whether Tibetan language and the knowledge it contains are intelligible or not is beside the point. Even as they rely on language to acquire and convey meaning, some ideas, motifs and world views can travel outside language via other means of communication. They can travel visually through comics and films, or through a combination of smatterings of languages, visual representations, sounds and gestures when they are put to use creatively in order to effect dialogue, communication and mutual understanding. This corresponds to what we found in *England, England*, where Julian Barnes deploys multilingualism inherent in English to situate England in the world, and to mock those who insist that it is a desert island.

*Language Lives*

## Multilingualism and Multiculturalism

Wen-chin Ouyang

I mix languages because I can. But more often than not I bring one language into another in order to express an idea that exists in one language but not the other. How do I convey the Chinese culture of politeness, *keqi* (客氣)? Initially the expected conduct befitting a guest, it has over the centuries come to frame the ways the educated Chinese interact with each other in society. A Chinese guest does not make demands on his host; rather, he goes with the flow and puts himself at the disposal of his host. Similarly, no Chinese would impose himself on others in speech or action. On the contrary, he will always give way to others — after you, at your service, your humble servant, I don't need anything, what makes you happy also makes me happy.

This culture of politeness is manifest in the language of social interaction, *ketao* (客套), which is formal, self-effacing, and distant. The closest to Chinese *keqi* is Persian *ta'ārof*. I have yet to find their equivalent in the other languages I know. Clearly, when I explain the Chinese culture of politeness to Iranians, I immediately turn to *ta'ārof*. If I have to explain *ta'ārof* to the Chinese, of course I invoke *keqi*. *Keqi* and *ta'ārof* are not exactly equivalent cultural codes, but they do evoke likeness in social behaviour and language. What if my interlocutor does not know Chinese or Persian? I explain in our common language, as I have done in English, quoting the concepts in Chinese or Farsi, describing the cultural contexts and giving examples. I can do so because both the Chinese and Persian concepts of *keqi* and *ta'ārof* are an integral part of my thought and language. Even if I choose to communicate in a single language, such as English, it embeds Arabic and Chinese.

## Translation and Adaptation are Creativity in Multilingualism

Multilingualism has always been an important source of creativity in world literature. I have mentioned three examples from pre-modern times which continue to resonate with readers around the world today: *Ḥamzanāma*, *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *Alf layla wa-layla*. These three

major literary works are effectively international collaborative projects that initially garner creative imaginings from a plurality of languages and traditions of storytelling along the Silk Roads and then re-convey the stories in different languages each in a unique formulation. The youngest, *Ḥamzanāma*, treasured by the Mughals in India and found written down in an enormous illustrated manuscript (in 46 volumes and 48000 pages) commissioned by Emperor Akbar in about 1562, is based on multiple sources in numerous languages used among the Muslims. It exists in diverse renditions. According to Ibn al-Nadīm (1988: 364), who authored the famous tenth-century catalogue *al-Fihrist*, the oldest *Kalīla wa-Dimna* was of either Indian or Persian origin, and was translated into Arabic in the eighth century by a famous man of letters. This work cannot be traced to any original authoritative text in any language. It exists in multiple versions in multiple languages, such as Syriac, Persian and Turkish in addition to Arabic. Each version is unique, but all versions overlap. Their inherent ideas, motifs and world views can be traced to multiple sources in Arabic, Greek, Persian, Turkish and Sanskrit.

The most global of the three works, *Alf layla wa-layla*, was of Persian origin according to the same *al-Fihrist* (363–64) and was translated into Arabic at the same time as *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. It was most popular among Arabic speaking men of letters, who collected stories and compiled books in a similar fashion. However, there is no definitive Arabic text. There is rather a variety of texts which contain a core of common stories as well as different stories. European orientalist, through translation into French first and English later, collated a variety of Arabic and Turkish texts, brought them together with oral storytelling, and fashioned them into the so-called full text in the nineteenth century, of course with the help of Arab ‘editors’. Two of the most famous stories, ‘Aladdin’ and ‘Ali Baba’, are very likely the result of Arab-European collaboration. Even today, *The Arabian Nights* is available as adult or children’s literature in different languages and versions, with no two identical renditions. If you look carefully, you will find two forms of multilingualism at work in each version, even in a ‘European’ concoction such as ‘Aladdin’: firstly, that the tale was created, and exists, in a multilingual environment; and secondly, that its language, be it Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Turkish or Swahili, is multilingual. Set in China but permeated with Arabic and Persian details, and

in whichever language you hear or read it, you can tell that genie is unquestionably Arabic (the word was imported from Arabic *jinnī* via the similar-sounding French word *génie*) and that the magical ring is old Hebrew, traceable to Solomon legends in ancient biblical folklore.

### Transfiguration, Transmogrification

'Animagus' is a wizard who can change from human into animal form in *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997–2007). A wizard can also learn from lessons on transfiguration how to transform humans into animals or animals into humans. Transmogrification (*maskh* in Arabic and *bian* 變 in Chinese) is a well-known motif in popular stories around the world. The nine-tail-fox in Chinese legends famously transforms herself into a seductress woman and causes empires to fall. The Monkey King (齊天大聖孫悟空) can transform himself into seventy-two different living beings. Sakhr, a demon in Solomon legends, transforms himself into Solomon and rules on his behalf for forty days. Humans are regularly turned into animals and back again in *The Arabian Nights*.



Fig. 4 'Nine Tails Fox', from the Chinese *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經), which has existed since the fourth century. Image by Hu Wenhuan 胡文煥 (1596–1650) in *山海經圖* (sixteenth century). Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E5%8D%97%E5%B1%B1%E7%B6%93-%E4%B9%9D%E5%B0%BE%E7%8B%90.svg>

Transmogrification, or transfiguration in Harry Potter speak, or adaptation in the language of literary criticism, is the creative impulse

behind the ‘worlding’ of the figure of the monk, as we have seen, and of what is perhaps the most popular story in *The Arabian Nights*, ‘The Tale of Sindbad the Mariner’, known in English as ‘The Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor’. This already multilingual and multicultural story becomes even more so as it travels around the world one more time, in this instance moving from the Middle East to Europe, North America and Asia through translation, and by means of adaptation from popular story to literary novel, and from literature to music, film, cartoon, graphic novel and anime. As it travels across cultures, genres and media, the original *Nights* pick up even more cultural and linguistic layers. Each tale is not only transformed in translation but also in adaptation. Translation is creative (see Chapter 6 in this volume), as is adaptation. Adaptation, like translation, is premised on conversations across languages in addition to genres, media and cultures.

No two renditions of ‘Sinbad the Sailor’ are the same (this is also true of ‘Aladdin’ and ‘Ali Baba’). If the seven voyages of Sindbad the Mariner in *Alf layla wa-layla* repeat the same story of ‘relief after hardship’ to urge the devout to have faith in God while doing their best, they come to be an important part of an Egyptian ‘national allegory’ in Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *Layālī alf layla* (1979; *Arabian Nights and Days*, 2001). In North America, the eighth voyage of Sinbad the Sailor becomes a ‘fantastic’ tale of American fascination with modern technology in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade’ (1845) and in John Barth’s *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), a parody of post-modernist storytelling about the rise and fall of an American tycoon. Sinbad sheds his literary masks in cinema, television and comic books. He is a pirate prince who goes on adventures, saves a princess, and becomes king in Hollywood action adventures, starting with *Sinbad the Sailor* (1947) through DreamWorks’ animated *Sinbad: Legends of the Seven Seas* (2003) to even more recent cinematic and TV adaptations. He is an adventurous boy in Japanese animation, starting with the TV series *Arabian Nights: Sinbad’s Adventures* (1975) and continuing with the TV film *Magi: Adventure of Sinbad* (2016) and the film trilogy *Sinbad* (2015–2016), in which the hero travels around the world and learns about freedom, love, friendship, loyalty, responsibility and justice.

All the retellings of Sinbad the Sailor, as we have seen in the example of the itinerant monk, take the character from *The Arabian Nights*, set

him in a different linguistic and cultural environment and send him off on a fresh series of adventures. He acquires a wardrobe, gallivants around in his new personality, Sinbad, and performs the tasks the readers and viewers expect of him in the new environment. He learns 'foreign' languages, such as English or Japanese, and integrates himself into the storytelling of the literary novel or short story, or the graphics of comics or anime, or the moving images of film and television. However, remnants of Arabic and the 'original' story saturate the very fabric of all the 'foreign' languages Sinbad speaks and the new arenas of his action. The transformation of Sindbad into Sinbad requires creative fusion of the 'original' with the new environment, in which languages, genres, media and cultures not only come into contact with each other but also actively engage with each other in dialogue. New works of art are born. Multilingualism, in the form of languages in dialogue, is at the heart of world literature.



Fig. 5 Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in *Sinbad the Sailor* (1947). Directed by Richard Wallace. Visualization of Sinbad in this film is arguably a creative fusion of Arabic storytelling, European translation, orientalist fantasy and Hollywood filmmaking.

## Perspectives on Researching World Literatures

The researchers involved in the 'Creativity and World Literatures' strand of Creative Multilingualism have also pursued a range of other projects that illuminate how language diversity enriches the creative possibilities enacted in world literature.

### Researching the Borders of Languages in Literature

Jane Hiddleston

Having worked for a long time on postcolonial literatures in French, I have been interested in the ways in which writers try to capture and express colonized culture within the language of the coloniser. Writers from North Africa, such as Assia Djebar and Abdelkebir Khatibi, often either intersperse their French with Arabic terms, or theorize the presence of Arabic within French in a range of subtle and transgressive ways. Francophone Caribbean writers such as the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire also stretch the French language by including great lexical diversity, or reflect on the interpenetration of French with Creole.

My close engagement with translanguaging strategies in postcolonial writings has led to a deeper questioning of the borders of languages, which are very often far more porous than it might at first appear. This reflection on the porosity of languages generates a further questioning of cultural hierarchies and power struggles. But it also invites us to think about how language far exceeds the framework of the nation, and even of the verbal, as multilingual writers experiment with multiple forms of expression in order to challenge our assumptions about how we frame and define language itself.

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## Researching Language Differences in Literary Texts

Laura Lonsdale

I have always been interested in the expression of language differences in literary texts. In the last few years this has taken me to study the way writers experiment both stylistically and conceptually with the possibilities of the multilingual. Literature that incorporates more than one language challenges us to be aware of the boundaries of our own language, to realise that the world can be perceived and described in ways that both differ and coincide. In the process it can explore a range of cultural, political and even ecological questions, from migration to biodiversity, while at the same time enriching the store of words and figures available to a given language.

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## Researching Multilingualism as a Lens through which to Read Power Dynamics

Nora E. Parr

Do ideas mean the same thing in different languages? What happens to an idea when it travels across languages? This is what I explore, and through the often loaded, and always sensitive idea of 'trauma.' Existing theory on trauma says humans, when they are suddenly exposed to something violent, are shocked — so shocked they often do not have words to describe or explain what has happened. The solution for trauma is formed against this idea, and aims to give people and societies words, practices, and actions that help to deal with and integrate the experience of violence into a new everyday living.

My project looks at Palestinian literature on the *Nakba*. The word (meaning 'catastrophe' in Arabic) first indicated the violent shock of Palestinians being uprooted from their homeland and dispossessed of their land and material heritage as Zionist forces expelled them and

declared the State of Israel on their land. More than seventy years have passed and the Palestinians are still waiting to return home. They have come to see *Nakba* as an ongoing process. The ‘shock’ of violence has come to shape and inform their everyday lives for generations, and the forces that saw to that first eruption of violence have not disappeared or dissipated.

So, is ‘trauma’ in English (and Spanish, and French, and German, all of which *do* use the same word and idea behind it) the same as it is in Arabic? My research suggests no. To complicate matters, the word in Arabic for ‘trauma’ is a calque for the nineteenth century English concept. ‘Trauma’ was rendered by Arabic translators as *ṣadma*, meaning ‘impact,’ collision, or sudden surprise — an excellent rendering of a foreign term. But trauma is the norm for many Palestinians. When there is no ‘after,’ when violence shapes or constitutes the everyday, ‘trauma’ needs to be re-defined. In my project, multilingualism means reading the Arabic word, *ṣadma*, as an ‘English’ (European) idea. I mean being sensitive to the fact that the two terms, ‘trauma’ in English and ‘*ṣadma*’ in Arabic, are not equivalent, and that work must be done to offer a new and better definition of trauma in Arabic based on its wider cultural use and understanding.

Multilingualism provides a lens through which to read power dynamics and the unequal weight of one idea across different languages. Contextualizing concepts and terms that cross linguistic borders and historical contexts, multilingualism allows for any analysis to be sensitive to words whose definitions have been occluded through uneven circulation.

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## Find Out More

### Multilingualism

**Gramling, David. 2016. *The Invention of Monolingualism* (London: Bloomsbury Academics), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501318078>**

A cogent account of the process through which our multilingualism has been reduced to monolingualism.

**Lennon, Brian. 2010. *In Babel's Shadow* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press), <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816665013.001.0001>**

Lennon exposes the problems globalization generates with regards to translation and publication of multilingual literature.

## World Literature

**Damrosch, David.** 2003. *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

A very accessible introduction to the idea of world literature as literature that travels and how to read it.

**Helgesson, Stefan, and Pieter Vermeulen (eds).** 2016. *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge).

This volume explores the creative, cultural and financial forces that go into the translation and circulation of national literatures, and the making of world literature.

**Hiddleston, Jane, and Wen-chin Ouyang (eds).** [Forthcoming: 2021.] *Multilingual Literature as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury).

The essays in this volume display ways in which literatures that juxtapose and blend what are usually considered to be sovereign linguistic systems contest the very category of 'national literature', while raising questions about the concept and definition of language.

**Moretti, Franco.** 2005. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Modes for Literary History* (London: Verso).

World literary history is presented in this volume in the form of maps, graphs and trees.

**Ouyang, Wen-chin, Jane Hiddleston, Laura Lonsdale and Nora Parr.** 2020. 'Creativity and World Literatures: Languages in Dialogue', Research Strand 5 of Creative Multilingualism, <https://www.creativeml.ox.ac.uk/research/world-literatures>

Research project on world literatures conducted as part of the Creative Multilingualism programme between 2016 and 2020. This chapter draws on that research.

### *Sinbad and The Arabian Nights*

**Irwin, Robert. 1994. *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Penguin).**

A comprehensive account of the history of *The Arabian Nights* in Arabic and European translations.

**Ouyang, Wen-chin. 2005. 'Whose Story Is It? Sindbad the Sailor in Literature and Film', in *New Perspectives on [the] Arabian Nights: Ideological Variations and Narrative Horizons*, ed. by Wen-chin Ouyang and Geert Jan van Gelder (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 1–16.**

This essay relates *The Arabian Nights* to classical Arabic literature and provides an account of the globalization of 'Sindbad the Sailor'.

**Warner, Marina. 2011. *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights* (London: Chatto & Windus).**

Warner analyzes the impact of *The Arabian Nights* in European literature and culture.

### Credits

Permission to include their contribution was kindly granted by the following:

Wen-chin Ouyang for the photograph of herself (Fig. 1).