

When Translating Ultra Minor Literatures Is Not Enough to Counter Epistemicide

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THE ESSAY “Translating Worlds through Words: The Bird-View of the *Selalihini Sandeshaya* (The Starling’s Message)” and the accompanying “A translation of select quatrains from the fifteenth-century Sinhala poem සැලලිහිණි සංදේශය / *Selalihini Sandeshaya* (The Starling’s Message)” published in “Curated: Thinking with Literature,” address some of the key questions that were discussed at the “Comparing the Literatures” workshop held at Stanford University in fall 2021. සැලලිහිණි සංදේශය / *Selalihini Sandeshaya*, which translates to The Starling’s Message, was written by the renowned Buddhist monk-poet Thotagamuwe Sri Rahula around AD 1450. This poem is a canonical text of Sinhala literature composed during a time when Sinhala-language literature flourished in Sri Lanka. Celebrated as Thotagamuwe Sri Rahula’s best poetic work, *Selalihini Sandeshaya* falls under the Sinhala *sandesa kavya* genre or “message poems.” The entry published in “Curated: Thinking with Literature” features a representative sample of five verses from the poem that I have translated, presented alongside the original written in Sinhala as well as a gloss version of the translation. Accompanying this selection of verses is an essay that provides close reading of the five poems. This essay also explores some of the challenges that scholars working on what David Damrosch calls “ultra minor” literatures from the Global South¹ must contend with, particularly the politics of organizing and compiling bibliographies.

Given that literature, literary criticism, and literary theory take precedence in literary studies, very little attention is given to the study of the compiling, organization, and maintenance of bibliographies such as the *WorldCat* or UNESCO’s *Index Translationum*. While working on the translation of the *Selalihini Sandeshaya*, one of the key challenges I encountered was accessing prior translations of the poem in oft-used, established “world” catalogues such as *WorldCat*. Records of translations of popular and canonical texts such as *Selalihini Sandeshaya*, often taught even in high schools in Sri Lanka, were absent in the key bibliographies mentioned above.

¹ David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Varying transliterations of the title and author's name and the absence of bibliographic records of secondary sources also added to the challenge in working with one of the most well-known classical literary texts of Sri Lanka. Neither the "Western" platforms nor some of the Sri Lankan bibliographies themselves hosted information about the translations of *Selalihini Sandeshaya*, demonstrating how ultra minor literary cultures such as that of Sinhala can be rendered invisible through their nonrepresentation and noninclusion in bibliographic platforms. Bibliographies, thus, contribute actively to ongoing forms of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms "cognitive injustice."² Bibliographic absences generate false and nonexistent lacunae vis-à-vis ultra minor literatures, particularly from the Global South, whose literary cultures in noncolonial languages remain opaque to those who did not happen to grow up in such literary cultures and/or do not have close contact with them. This once again generates flawed impressions about literary cultures from the Global South, which, despite having literary histories going back to times before the birth of Christ (consider the Indian epic *The Mahabarata* by Vyasa, compiled around 400 BCE, which is ten times longer than *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* combined), are deemed to be "hearts of (epistemic) darkness" with no claim to culture, science, or literature (as evaluated according to standards set within Western epistemologies). Bibliographic visibility is one among the many modes via which justice against epistemicide à la de Sousa Santos can be achieved. While translation is indeed crucial to opening up contact zones between the Global South and the Global North, in resisting the monolithic Epistemology that has come to embody patriarchy, (neo)colonialism, and capitalism, and in order to push the boundaries of comparative literature and comparative epistemologies in the quest for justice against epistemicide and to achieve cognitive justice, scholars of (comparative) literature should also critically engage with latent nonliterary artifacts like bibliographies, which regulate the way we think about the futures of comparative literature and translation. A

² Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 20.