

# Cosmopolitanism, Trauma and World Literature: A Review of *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma*

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**Abstract** With the increasing rise of global problems, cosmopolitanism has become one of the hot topics in contemporary academics. In *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma*, Vladimir Biti claims that, to a large degree, the concept cosmopolitanism is derived from the personal or national traumatic experience, and explores the conception of cosmopolitanism and its impact on the European and non-European cultural and political space. As an alternative, he calls for a dispossessed cosmopolitanism, which refers to dispossessed belonging outside the established political space, aiming to maintain the form of dissensual politics and to reexamine nationalism, patriotism and democracy accordingly.

**Key words** *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma*; cosmopolitanism; democracy; literary theories; the politics of trauma

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As an age-old issue as it is, “cosmopolitanism” has been recently revitalized, owing to the emergence of globalization. As David Harvey aptly puts it, “cosmopolitanism is back” (Harvey 529). Starting in the mid-1990s, it has become one of the hot topics in contemporary academics. Vladimir Biti’s latest book, *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma* (2016), is intriguing and provocative, which invites readers to take a step back from “the noise” of the world and view it in a light that encompasses a wide range of theorists.

The word cosmopolitanism is derived from the Greek “Κόσμος” and “Πόλις,” meaning “world” and “city.” The conception of cosmopolitanism can be traced back to Diogenes, the founding father of the Cynic movement in Ancient Greece, who claimed that “I am a citizen of the world.” A cosmopolitan, thus, means a “citizen of the world.” Although the term cosmopolitan was used by Greeks earlier than the Stoic philosophers, it was the Stoic philosophers who firstly took this term and endowed it with a meaning of being “cosmopolitan.” Later, cosmopolitanism was resurrected by the Enlightenment, and continues to make an impact on modern critical theory. Perhaps no discussion and exploration of contemporary cosmopolitanism can be complete without some reference to Kant’s cosmopolitanism. He launched a revolutionary way to justify cosmopolitanism.<sup>1</sup> In some sense, the west cosmopolitan political tradition derives from Kantian understanding of cosmopolitanism, although some critics claim that Kant changed his views over time and his ideas are somehow paradoxical and inconsistent.

The complex dynamics in cosmopolitanism lies not only in contradiction since its inception, but also in the interdisciplinarity and multifacetedness in its follow-up development. According to sociologist Craig Calhoun, cosmopolitanism means something different on different occasions: it refers to the world as a totality (Calhoun 428). It also resonates with Wang Ning, who proposes ten varieties of cosmopolitanism to prove its pervasiveness (Wang 103).

While a growing awareness of common risks with the advent of globalization is arguably fostering a sense of collective future, it leads a call to mediate on cosmopolitanism afresh. As Wang has pointed out, while the advent of globalization has thus provides cosmopolitanism with notions for its rise, cosmopolitanism has in turn provided globalization with a sort of theoretic discourse, and thus, cosmopolitanism has once again become a current theoretical topic (Wang 100).

Most critics deal with cosmopolitanism from the perspectives of political philosophy and sociology and thus have given adequate attention to the relevant issues of literary and cultural production and criticism. Against this backdrop, Biti’s groundbreaking book sheds new light on the treatment of cosmopolitanism in those areas. Providing a detailed account of the conception of cosmopolitanism, this book traces literature, theory and democracy in post-theoretical context, and investigates the emergence of the cosmopolitanism and its impact on the democratic reconfiguration of the European and non-European cultural and political spaces. Biti claims that, to a large degree, the concept cosmopolitanism is derived from the personal or national traumatic experience. His study of the equivocal cosmopolitan narratives consists two parts. Part one deals with the

rise of the modern cosmopolitan idea of literature from French Republic of Letters to Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. He jumps into his chapters by taking a detailed interpretation of Voltaire's retroactive canonization of the Republic of Letters as starting point, and then comparing national universalism with cosmopolitan nationalism, Johann Gottfried Herder with Friedrich Schlegel in terms of literary *Bildung*, Kant's "Mankind" with Herder's "Nature," and finally elaborating on Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* and globalization. The second part traces the destiny of modern literary theory by clarifying Bakhtin's cosmopolitan self, immigrant cosmopolitanism, class cosmopolitanism, messianic cosmopolitanism, Deleuze's and Rancière's philosophies, etc.

As already observed above, Biti's conception of cosmopolitanism mainly focuses on the literary and cultural levels, trying to align Europe and its others, narrative theory, trauma theory and other research fields. For want of a better understanding of cosmopolitanism, he proposes an insightful term as cosmopolitanism axis from the perspective of cultural and political trauma. Moreover, he offers a thick description of cosmopolitanism, and provides a comprehensive account of evolution of the literary concept and ideological trend by employing longitudinal and latitudinal study approaches and molding various materials toward a particular position and synthesis. Historically, cosmopolitanism has mirrored the ideologies of different periods, carrying different connotations in in different contexts. In this sense, Biti's comprehensive and systematical analysis and reinterpretation of cosmopolitanism in the context of contemporary literary criticism and world politics are undoubtedly context-oriented, and by doing so, it becomes an important force in the profound study of cosmopolitanism.

In "Theory and Trauma"(2009), Biti emphasizes the importance of trauma in the study of cosmopolitanism and literary theory. He notoriously avers that literary theory is usually regarded as being a child of the cosmopolitan spirit (Biti, "Theory and Trauma" 83). Coincidentally, after investigating Georgian literary thinking, Irma Ratiani argues that writers are engaged in the dialogue between nation and the world, cosmopolitanism and patriotism when they experience personal or national trauma (Ratiani 510-512). There is no doubt that trauma has impacted almost all—if not all—the spheres of life. Trauma theory, shifting its area from psychology towards contemporary cultural criticism, becomes a significant paradigm in contemporary academics.

It needs to be mentioned that the present academic world of trauma is still haunted by nation, freedom, liberation and other political ideas under the rubric of Western value system. Biti thus denaturalizes the concept of trauma (4) in response

to the victims repressed by western modernity in the process of globalization. Inasmuch he does not refer to the psychoanalytically inspired concept of trauma, but focuses on cultural and political trauma, mixing personal and collective trauma, as well as overt and covert trauma. To put it in narrative terms, Biti argues that individual narratives indirectly indicate the experience of pain, and the collective ones directly present it. In this regard, he takes French Republic of Letters as a convincing instance to elucidate. He claims that Voltaire's covert and individual trauma experience evoked by his unfair economic, political and social treatment stimulated his project of cosmopolitanism and looked for remedy in literature. Equally illuminating is German "cosmopolitan nationalism" that implies overt and collective trauma narrative. The long nineteenth century marked a period of great change for Germany. The French Revolution led to a new consideration of self in the German nation. To turn the long-term inferiority into the superiority, German intellectuals engaged in the huge mission of evoking patriotism and strengthening the national identity. In other words, modern German nationalism, to some extent, is the production of national reaction to the trauma.

Borrowing the concept of subject and object in political trauma, Biti coins the term of cosmopolitanism axis to bifurcates the carrier group of victims into agencies (speaking "survivors") those politically entitled to conduct the dialogue of equals, and the non-political enablers (silenced victims), excluded from this dialogue in order to procure its prerequisites. Rather than strict opponents, they are co-implicated attributes lying along the social, political, economic and cultural axes. Shifting from either-or-logic to as-well-as-logic, agencies and enablers establish the coexisting relationship, which can be seen in the instances of enlightenment and romanticism. It is, however, based on the fundamental premise that the lower enablers should firmly adhere to the higher agencies' law, otherwise they will be expelled, just like Roman cosmopolitanism that does not destroy but expand. In addition, agencies and enablers can also switch positions. Biti cites Cavarero, Levinas and Nietzsche's challenge to European mainstream pattern of subject-formation, that is to be a subject means to accept a subjected position, to become a self means to surrender to the Other (311).

The cosmopolitan fusion of enablers with agencies along this axis, in the meantime, cannot but produce new enablers. To put it in another words, one man's remedy is another man's new round of suffering, and it foreshadows new traumas by multiplying new enablers. Such a transformation of trauma communities from victims into killers can be seen in Voltaire's Republic of Letters, Rousseau's social contract, Herder's and Goethe's generous cosmopolitanism. In conclusion, as Biti

shrewdly observed, the irremovable and permanently resurfacing gap between the agencies and enablers is the traumatic origin of cosmopolitan projects (2). Trauma narratives at the expense of the denial of other traumas construct the discourse of cosmopolitanism (9-10), which repeatedly reproduces the exclusion that they were trying to overcome (37). The cosmopolitan healing of social and political trauma paves the way for the forthcoming global democracy, and the trace of the cosmopolitanism idea of literature is also the key contention of Biti's argument. Therefore, the reconceptualization of trauma and the relationship between agencies and enablers is the gist to understand the connotation of cosmopolitanism, literature, theory and democracy.

Biti tries to investigate cosmopolitanism in the context of the whole western culture to cope with a couple of questions: "where does the concept come from?" "Where will it go?" Along with the transformation from enlightenment, romanticism, and Russian formalism to French structuralism, Biti's profound analysis on evolution of the literary concept and ideological trend highlights the dialectical unity of continuity and discontinuity in the process of development. The continuity refers to that process of change in which the new thing inherits the reasonable part of the old in a continuum form; whereas the discontinuity manifests the negation of the old in a discrete form. While romanticism was, in essence, a movement that rebelled against and defined itself in opposition to the enlightenment, early romanticism still carried on the verities of universalism and cosmopolitanism from the enlightenment, displaying diversity-in-unity. Russian formalists' rewriting of early romanticist cosmopolitanism was revolutionary in its spirit. The affirmation of literature's innate strangeness resulted in the growing dependence on the interpretive context, which remained loyal to the early German Romanticist advocacy of the fundamental arbitrariness of life. As the legitimate inheritors of Russian formalists' revolutionary doctrine, French structuralism also committed itself to the reconstruction of the condition of the possibility of literariness.

A close look at the Biti's analysis reveals that he does not limit to the longitudinal comparison, he also uses the method that combines historical survey with latitudinal comparison, breaking the barrier of discipline, space and time. For instance, when comparing Herder to Schlegel, Biti underlines the unity-in-diversity. Despite the fact that they belonged respectively to "hard" Enlightenment and "soft" Romanticism, and they shared two *Bildung* attitudes; in the development of his Romanticist idea of national literary history, Schlegel drew largely upon his Enlightenment predecessor Herder. In comparison, diversity-in-unity is

displayed in the analysis of Goethe and David Damrosch. Goethe's approach and idea is, to some degree, taken up by Damrosch. Damrosch's alternative project of world literature in comparison with the national, however, reveals that he misuses Goethe's elitist idea for the sake of imperial globalization. As opposed to it, being established in exile, on foreign soil, the U.S.-American democratic cosmopolitanism belongs to the Roman type (171).

Upon entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the literary critics have been constantly haunted by the anxiety about the death of the theory. Just as Terry Eagleton's dramatic opening salvo claims, the "golden age of cultural theory is long past" (Eagleton 1). Admittedly, the function of theory is no longer ubiquitous as before, and it is to a certain extent restricted. However, Biti does not quite agree with its death report. We are now in the post-theoretic era, with the prefix "post-" that does not merely indicate the temporal sequel or break, but also stresses the ongoing influence of the former on the latter. For Biti, theory is confronted with the echoes of a dispossessed exile, and enters the process of self-disempowerment (347-349). To put it more bluntly, the dispossessed belonging makes theory decentralized. Bearing the traumatic narrative between agencies and enablers in mind, post-theory's permanent task is to raise awareness of the violence inherent in such undertakings as well as to give those anonymous "exilic" enablers space to speak their traumatic experience. Viewed in this light, Biti's proposal for an alternative form of cosmopolitanism, namely the dispossessed cosmopolitanism is rather timely and suggestive. It refers to dispossessed belonging (345) outside the established political space, aiming to maintain the form of dissensual politics<sup>2</sup> and to reexamine nationalism, patriotism and democracy accordingly (20).

Putting it in a nutshell, Biti offers his readers an excellent and fruitful vision of fostering new understandings of cosmopolitanism, democracy, literature, theory and trauma. Although his map of cosmopolitanism is necessarily limited by its proximity to Europe, and does not deal with cosmopolitanism in other regions in the world, his projection of the dispossessed cosmopolitanism is insightful and persuasive that can resonate with Chinese context. According to Douwe Fokkema, cosmopolitanism could be regarded as the defining feature of Chinese culture (Fokkema 3). The notion of *tianxia* (all under heaven) embodies a worldwide perspective rooted in Confucian thinking, and the proverbs such as "all men are brothers within the four seas" and "the whole world is one family" also reflects social egalitarianism in Chinese traditional ethics. With the benefit of the hindsight, Biti's contributions will hopefully open up the concept of cosmopolitanism to the kinds of perspectival shift from western countries to China. In bringing

Western cultural trends and theories in China, Biti's projection of dispossessed cosmopolitanism could, to some extent, inspire Chinese intellectuals to export Chinese culture and literature to the world's cultures and societies.

## Notes

1. For instance, Derrida regards Kant's conception of cosmopolitanism as one of the milestones in the construction of the concept. Wang Ning has also emphasized Kant's profound influence upon Marx, Engels, Derrida, Habermas and other theorists' concept of cosmopolitanism. For more details see Derrida Jacques, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (Routledge: London and New York, 2001) 21; Wang Ning. "Cosmopolitanism." *Foreign Literature* 1(2014): 98.

2. Here, Biti uses Rancière's term. According to Rancière, political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice; while "policing" means imposing a consensus on a political space by suppressing the gap amid it. For Rancière's understanding of the "police" (as against the "political") see Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans L. Heron (London: Verso, 1995) 11-20.

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