

THEORIZING COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN A GLOBALIZED ERA

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Abstract:

In the era of Globalization no countries are rigid in their geographical, cultural, lingual and ethnic boundaries. Similarly, no literary genre is pure and isolated. Every country's literary production is either combined or compared with that of the other. Hence, comparative literature provides a platform for studying the literatures of variant countries in comparison. In an era of Globalization, the borders of almost every nation are becoming fuzzy and slippery. Comparative Literature is discipline that has emerged recently which takes into account the literary production of two different countries and writers. The present paper attempts to trace the emergence and development of this discipline by evoking an array of literary figures of repute. Modern era is marked with Multiculturalism, Multilingualism and a borderless world. Therefore, the present paper attempts to theorize Comparative Literature in variant domains in as a special discipline that has emerged in the recent times due to the advent of Globalization.

Key Words: *Comparative Literature, Translation Theory, Globalization, Comparitist, Multiculturalism.*

Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines Comparative Literature as “The combined study of similar literary works written in different languages, which stresses the point of connection between literary products of two or more cultures, as distinct from the sometimes narrow and exclusive perspective of English Literature or similar approaches based on one national canon. Advocates of Comparative Literature mention that there is, despite the obvious advantages, much to be gained from studying literary works in translation.”¹ This definition opens up the possibilities of comparative literary study as it stresses the connection between the literary products of two cultures. It becomes a significant tool in the analysis of international cultures, multiculturalism, national identity and literary studies.

Comparative Literature is also dedicated to the study of literature in the broadest possible framework – interlingual, intercultural and interdisciplinary. This framework can be used in the comparative study of any two writers will touch upon these three parameters. Further, both the writers may include in their literary projects, interest of psychology, gender,

migration, social behaviour and history. Hence, a comparative study of their works has to be interdisciplinary too. As a practice, Comparative Literature also deals with the interrelationship of literature with other cultural practices and other disciplines like philosophy, sociology and psychology. It also looks into the factors that shape the style and themes of writers. The writers share certain basic comparative platforms. They represent men, women, the marginalized group and both of them carry the marks of the period they belong to. Hence, one can preempt in their writings their reflections on gender issues and their respective and comparable attitude to variant practices.

Conventionally, Comparative Literature is considered to be an academic field dealing with the literature of two or more different linguistic, cultural or national groups. However, of late, the definition and scope of Comparative Literature have become broad-based in the wake of transnational movements, globalization and multiculturalism to include the new concerns like migration, identity, mobility and ethnicity. Also included in Comparative Literature is a range of inquiry into the comparisons of different genres, as for instance, the use of autobiography.

In the days when nationality, national culture and identity have become more elastic and porous, Comparative Literature has a more complicated task to perform. It will have to take into account the extended domains of nationality in the diasporic spaces and the notion of an identity in motion.

Due to its interdisciplinary nature, a comparative study exhibits some acquaintance with translation studies, sociology, critical theory, Culture Studies, migration studies, history, politics, architecture and folklore. Subsequently, a research project in Comparative Literature is designed by drawing from many of these disciplines. This eclecticism has also invited criticism on comparative method by saying that it is insufficiently well defined or that a comparatist too easily falls into dilettantism, because the scope of the study is, by necessity, broad. However, such concerns do not seem to affect the popularity of comparative method and the data generated in the comparatist's research is found very useful to bring a cross light of academic interest in diverse cultures. Further, Comparative Literature carries within its scope immense possibilities of studying literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across disciplines and across the boundaries between literature and other arts.

In its broadest sense, Comparative Literature is the study of literature without borders. For instance, a comparitist looks into apparently dissimilar blocks of literature to unearth connections, similarities and influences. What propels such a study is a desire to study literature beyond national and cultural boundaries or to show how literary works as cultural artifacts move across those rigid boundaries of nationality and culture. A research in Comparative Literature is also an attempt to integrate literary experience with other cultural phenomena, such as philosophical concepts, migration and social movements. The researcher, therefore, has to make an effort to link the literary experiences of reading both the writers taken for study.

In its earlier phase from the late 19th century to the mid 20th century, the focus of Comparative Literature was largely on the possibility of studying the cultures of two different nations. In this respect the French School of Comparative Literature and the German School of Comparative Literature were more engaged in the comparative study of the genres like drama and poetry of different national origins. Scholars like Rene Welleck, Geoffery Hartman, Peter Demetz and Lionel Trilling tried to evolve a programmatic network and a methodological canon for Comparative Literature. They also used many East European literary theories within the scope of comparatist's study. However, this situation has undergone rapid change as many universities in the United States and Europe are making provisions for more approaches and disciplines within the framework of Comparative Literature. For instance, the American School of Comparative Literature, though closely aligned to the internationalist visions of Goethe and Posnett, arguably reflects the interest in Culture Studies. Comparative Literature emerged as a result of the Culture Studies boom in universities during the 1970s and 1980s. One can also see among the recent comparitists an attempt to focus the study away from the nation based approach. Gayatri Chakravarty-Spivak is one such scholar and David Damrosch and Steven Totosy de Zepetnek are the other popular figures. These scholars have challenged the nation based thinking and formulations of Comparative Literature by juxtaposing them with the developments in globalization and multiculturalism. They propose a comparitist method to suit the paradigm of shifting national identities, along the lines of cultural shifts necessitated by migration.

In 21st century, a project in Comparative Literature can be considered as an extended dialogue across the country and across the theoretical lines. Further, it has also come to signify a pluralistic image of diverse methodologies and research goals that have come to

constitute the discipline of Comparative Literature. One should also make a note that Comparative Literature has taken into its scope aspects such as shifting canons, the issues of race and gender and the impact of ideology, as certain main points of inquiry. It has also tried to bridge the gap between traditional literary scholarship and Culture Studies.

In recent times, Comparative Literature has expanded its scope to accommodate the concerns of many disciplines and approaches. Consequently, a study in Comparative Literature in the present era has come to locate itself on multiple domains such as translation, identity politics, Culture Studies, cross-cultural understanding and even history.

A researcher may select writers belonging to two different nations, representing two linguistic traditions. Such a project brings into its scope and method transnational as well as transcultural understanding. Since the corpuses of primary data are located in two linguistic traditions, the study on them too would become both intercultural and interlingual. In this context, one will have to say that such a comparative study touches upon the methods of translation as well. This study will also have to go beyond the conventional notions of comparability. Further, the researcher may feel that the translation of the works of a writer in a language other than English facilitates a better comparative study of the fiction of the said writer with those of an English writer. This comparatist notion of translation is also highlighted by S. K. Bose who observes that translation is closely linked to Comparative Literature. He points out how there is a shift in the understanding of the role of translation in national literatures and their comparative study:

Translations became necessary to and in comparative literature as soon as the discipline tried to move beyond the comparison of European literatures only. Yet, though now necessary translations were nonetheless treated as an evil for a long time to come: they were made and criticized, mainly from the point of view of accuracy, which corresponded to the use made of translation in teaching both the classical and the national literatures, but again this did not lead to any reflection on the phenomenon of translation as such. If anything, it restricted any reflection, once again, to the level of the word, totally ignoring any factors beyond the word, such as the text as a whole, not to mention the culture in which that text was

embedded, as even potentially relevant to the study of translation. ²

A project in Comparative Literature can also be a positive and productive reflection on the intercultural phenomena of different magnitudes including language, translation, and identity. Such a project is also an endeavour in multicultural recontextualisation of cultural materials such as literature, drama and film. Further, Comparative Literature has been considered as an interdisciplinary engagement that mobilizes versatile methods and domains. S. K. Bose amplifies this interdisciplinary scope of comparative study:

Conceived as an interdisciplinary field since its very beginnings, “comparative literature” evolved from an initial philological and historicist enterprise involving vast bibliographical knowledge to an omnium-gatherum for every study expanding outside the limits of a statutory humanities program – becoming eventually a place accommodating everything unfit for one of the “classic” areas of study: history, national literature, philosophy, etc. ³

It is understood widely among the comparatists that Comparative Literature has a transcendental function too. Writers including Oscar James Campbell are of the opinion that finding out mere similarities is not the end of comparative study. Campbell believes that a good comparative study facilitates cross-cultural understanding. He observes, while defining the scope of Comparative Literature:

Comparative Literature... endeavors, in the first place, to discover general laws which transcend any one literature, such as development of types and forms under the progressive relationship of different literatures. In the second place, it seeks to reveal relations of affinity within two or more literatures. Finally, through the discoveries of similarities and differences by the means of comparison, it endeavors to explain the inception and growth of individual works. That is, like all scientific studies of literature, our methods are primarily investigations of the processes by which a work has come into

*being and appraisals of the forces which produced this result. In other words, the methods of comparative literature do not seek to produce or enhance aesthetic delight, but rather to create new models of understanding.*⁴

This model of trans-cultural understanding is the spine work of this study, too. A researcher may feel that the comparative study of the fiction of two writers belonging to different linguistic traditions can result in finding trajectories of progressive relationships between the nations and cultures that they represent.

Globalization has brought new interest in Comparative Literature. This economic phenomenon has facilitated better and faster transmission of cultural materials between nations. Further, it has also enabled literature and other cultural expressions to reach out to a wider audience. Globalization has also made it possible a cross fertilization of cultures resulting in a higher degree of hybridity in both the use of languages and of the literary forms. Further, globalization has also made the boundaries of nations and cultures very porous and hence it has revived an interest in Comparative Literature. In the 21st century, one can say that cultural homogeneity is a myth. This statement can be testified if one scrutinizes the so-called national literatures. One can see that these national literatures have heavy international content, more than ever before. Hence, a study into such literatures would also need to have fresh perspectives on nationality, culture and language. S. K. Bose spells out these redefined functions of comparative literary research in an era of globalization:

*In a world of globalization it is the task of literary historians to reassess their national legacy from a new perspective. Instead of believing that it is possible to narrate events 'as they happened in reality', scholars may be tempted to present the same event from different, sometimes even contradictory perspectives. In the past emphasis was placed on the personality of the writer or on evolutionary processes; in the future important, perhaps even drastic, changes in the structure of the reading public may serve as a starting point.*⁵

Comparative study, too, takes into account the respective perspectives of writers of different nations and languages on culture, readership and nationality.

Comparative Literature also has great literary, political, economic and cultural significance in the present millennium. In the era wherein dominant cultures are interrogated and deconstructed, Comparative Literature becomes a potent tool in Social Sciences to study the forces that operate within cultures. S. K. Bose explains the political and economic implications of comparative study in the 21st century by pointing out how cultural hierarchies could be critiqued and reworked with the help of a comparatist's mind:

The original enterprise of comparative literature, which sought to read literature trans-nationally in terms of themes, movements, genres, periods, zeitgeist, history of ideas is out-dated and needs to be rethought in the light of writing being produced in emergent cultures. There is therefore a politicised dimension to comparative literature; Spivak proposes the idea of planetarity in opposition to globalization, which she argues involves the imposition of the same values and system of exchange everywhere. Planetarity in contrast can be imagined, as Spivak puts in, from within the precapitalist cultures of planet, outside the global exchange flows determined by international business.⁶

This theoretical formulation leads one to the point of convergence between Comparative Literature and Postcolonial Studies. If literatures and cultures are compared and evaluated from the point of view of subaltern readers, such an enterprise will also lead to liberation from mental Colonialism as the readers get to reinvent the pluricultural space that the writers create in their works. This emancipatory angle of comparative study is explained effectively by S. K. Bose:

Crucial here is the idea of polyphony or plurivocality, as opposed to an earlier model, promoted by the colonial powers, of univocality. Other voices can now be heard, rather than one single dominant voice. Plurivocality is at the heart of post-colonial thinking.⁷

However, any comparative project should also be taken with a word of caution. If a comparative study necessitates boundaries in terms of place or culture, they may tend to

become artificial. Such an understanding of boundaries may also sound archaic in the 21st century. Researcher has to be cautious of this pitfall of comparative study, and hence has to avoid getting trapped in the exercise of defining cultural and national boundaries. This awareness makes a comparative project different and more challenging in the 21st century. The same anxiety is echoed in the words of S. K. Bose:

*When comparative literature lost its way was in trying to determine how comparison should take place, hence the drawing up of artificial boundaries and the prescriptiveness of some of the theories. This was particularly true of so-called French school of comparative literature in the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, other comparitist notably in the United States, opted for an 'anything goes' approach, where comparative literature was loosely identified as any comparison happening between any kind of text, written, filmic, musical, visual or whatever. Both these approaches struggled with the idea of comparison itself, getting caught up in definitions of boundaries.*⁸

Comparative Literature also provides new historical locations for readers, especially the readers of the so-called the Third World countries. This is made possible when readers become more mindful of the reading process and when they consider reading as a political act of redefining themselves. This argument, by extension, also implies that Comparative Literature provides new identities as much for the readers as for the writers. S. K. Bose explores this possibility of Comparative Literature:

Spivak is concerned with the idea of a 'to-comeness' which she sees as the way forward for comparative literature. I am more concerned with a 'has-happenedness', but both of us, in different ways, appear to be suggesting that rather than seeing comparative literature as a discipline, it should be seen simply as a method of approaching literature, one that foregrounds the role of the reader but which is always mindful of the historical context in which the act of writing and the act of reading can take place. The term 'comparative literature' only

*started to emerge early in the nineteenth century when the discourse of national literatures came to the fore; there was no sense in the comparative literature in the eighteenth century and previously, when scholars read across languages and disciplines were loosely defined and inter-connected.*⁹

A comparative study, along the lines of S. K. Bose's argument, try to see how historically located readers look at the experiences and expressions of two translocated writers. Such an exercise will at once make the readers conscious of their identity and location though it may also fascinate them to see how these writers traverse in space and time negotiating their identity and relationships. Comparative Literature has also emerged as a tool for multicultural negotiation. Hence, comparitism of multicultural negotiation has been used commonly in the contemporary literary discourses. S. K. Bose explains this renewed significance of Comparative Literature in the global context of literature and culture:

*In a time of ascendant Realkultur of totalization and a global Realpolitik of inexorable drift into totalitarianism, the role of Comparative Literature as intellectual discourse, as instrument of reading, and as discipline devoted to the contrapuntal juxtaposition and correction of texts, cultures, and contending identities that might be just as comparable in their commonly shared attribute of deeming themselves incomparable, and that might consider their own formation, history, and privilege incommensurable, Comparative Literature has the obligation to break through the antinomian immunity that absolutes and totalizations would accord to themselves and attempt to negotiate the (il)logics of incomparability.*¹⁰

What S. K. Bose indicates is that Comparative Literature is not just a methodology of study but also an ideological location. He explains how Comparative Literature as a critical discourse is also an ethical position that can unmask, interrogate, critique and allay the process of an ideological totalitarianism. S. K. Bose amplifies the political significance of comparative study in 21st century:

Comparative Literature, in other words, must negotiate among cultural productions and discursive formations that arrogate to themselves the immunities of incomparability and the impunity of exceptionalism. A logical starting point for this task might be the commonality of immunity from comparison such cultures share in their respective mythoi of exceptionalism. Viewed as symptoms of a dialectical paradox, rather than granted the unimpeachable status of antinomy that they would embody in their vehemence, the cultures that define the beginning of the new century as comparatively intractable might be reminded that intractability is itself a tract.¹¹

Comparative study is not just an attempt to compare the two cultures that the two writers represent but also to locate their respective and comparable use of cultural materials, sensibility and use of alternate space, their interrogation of dominant cultural and political practices. And, thus, the study may propose an investigation of the ideologies embedded in different cultural and geographical sites of the world and literatures. Further, negotiated comparative literature is dialogical rather than being an academic monologue. It has in its scope various axes of negotiation that would define new means to carry out comparative study. Such a study, ideologically at the least, resists intellectual, political and cultural totalization. A comparative research should aim to use comparative mode to see how far it can resist stereotypes and ideological ghettoisation that happen frequently in literary discourses. Hence, one can say that the basic objective of this study is to redefine Comparative Literature itself in the 21st century literary context so as to accommodate the interest and concerns of elements like Diaspora, Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism, migration and Culture Studies.

Comparative Literature has also come to accommodate within its practices an attempt to cross different boundaries and borders. Gayatri Spivak in her path-breaking work, *Death of a Discipline* observes that in the times of globalization, Comparative Literature has to become liminal to address the socio-political issues, a new pluralistic world order. She explains this new-look Comparative Literature and its functions:

Comparative Literature and Area Studies can work together in the fostering not only of national literatures of the global South

but also of the writing of countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when maps were made...there is nothing necessarily new about the new Comparative Literature. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge that the times determine how the necessary vision of 'comparativity' will play out. Comparative Literature must always cross borders.¹²

Accordingly, comparative study is a project in crossing borders to see the trans-nation linkages that one can locate in the works of the writers taken for study.

Susan Basnett too tries to bring a new life into Comparative Literature. She shares Spivak's opinion that Comparative Literature is something more than a mere academic discipline. She maintains that the way forward for Comparative Literature is to move beyond its Eurocentric origins. She observes:

A new comparative literature will need to 'undermine and undo' the tendency of dominant cultures to appropriate emergent once (Spivak, Death, p.100), in other words it will need to move beyond the parameters of Western literatures and societies and reposition itself within a planetary context.¹³

Sachidananda Mohanty too is of the opinion that in the era of globalization the scope and objectives of Comparative Literature have changed. However, he also indicates that Comparative Literature is vital in academic discourses. He explains the significance of Comparative Literature in its connectedness to Culture Studies and the new opportunities that Comparative Literature can open up:

Comparative Literature is important because a multiplicity of different literary traditions and cognitive interests are important. They are gateways of knowledge. The new Comparative Literature that I envisage recognizes the specificity of each tradition while promoting a dialogue among literary communities and civilizations.

*To sum up: the forces of academic and cultural globalization today are inimical to the humanities and the liberal arts. And yet, a democratic polity is the best bulwark against such assaults. The current crisis calls for measures that are radical and innovative. We must cross boundaries and forge alliances across disciplinary frontiers without easy recourse to dilettantism. Translation, Comparative Literature and Culture Studies must co-exist and sustain each other. Imaginatively handled, such challenges could be turned into opportunities. That clearly is the direction in which we ought to go.*¹⁴

Along the lines of what Mohanty suggests, the comparative study should propose an imaginative use of comparative techniques, crossing the boundaries, disciplines such as Literature, Culture Studies, Gender Studies and Migration Studies to look into the works of writers taken for study

Itineraries in Comparative Literature too have changed over a period of time though legacies are renewed time and again in this discourse. They have come to include as Eva Kushner says, philosophy, sub-cultures and the study of intellectual migrations. Kushner explains how Comparative Literature has become more experimental in recent times to enrich other disciplines in the humanities:

The field called comparative literature has, over time, and often implicitly, assume interrelatedness within and among language as well as cultures. More often than not it has assumed that invariants among literary phenomena, which it is the comparatist's joy to discover, may point to universals. It is only gradually realizing that universals are hard to come by. What we brandish as universal may be the unanalyzed reflection of our own vision. One manifestation of this fault is eurocentricity, but it has been known to operate in other directions as well. Comparative literature has, consequently, become a much more experimental field, dubious not only about traditional models of literary history but about all pre-

*constructed models, diachronic or synchronic. Indeed, comparative literature has often served as experimental ground for the rest of humanities.*¹⁵

A research in Comparative Literature should also gear up to interrogate eurocentricity in the understanding of cultural locations and family units. It would make an attempt to see the cultural interrelatedness and cultural identities as the units of comparison among the works of the writers taken for comparison.

It is also argued vehemently in Eva Kushner that comparative studies in the 21st century will have to accommodate issues of identity in the larger and more intricate cross-cultural context. Kushner observes how comparative studies at once touch upon individuals and groups as important stake holders:

*The literary studies and particularly comparative studies of tomorrow have an extraordinary responsibility in rediscovering that symbolical function, and its working within and among cultures. Identity operates by identification, which is a kind of bonding and explains why groups and members of groups feel so strongly about certain formal features of cultural artefacts relating to their self-expression, to the formation of their collective personalities, and to the individual's identity and difference with respect to those collective personalities.*¹⁶

The researcher should be aware that an entry into a comparative discourse on the writings of two writers is more like opening Pandora's Box as the number of social, political and aesthetic issues that the study can trigger up can be astronomical. However, it becomes necessary in a comparative study to decide the comparative parameters and operational tools to be employed in the research. Though it is possible to study the two writers comparatively from innumerable vantage points such as Feminism, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism and Postfeminism, the researcher has to define the parameters for comparison. However, the parameters may overlap with the broader concerns of Feminism, Postcolonialism, Marxism, Culture Studies and Migration Studies. It will also show how a comparative study involving two writers has significant cultural, social and multidisciplinary implications.

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