

## Aspects of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

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### Abstract

This paper gives an account of comparative Literature which is a complex and common discipline. This discipline employs the literary technique of comparison and it explores cultural studies. This approach can be called as interdisciplinary approach, providing a reflexive study to position the forces that construct our daily lives. The discipline brings out a comprehensive picture by moving towards the subjects holistically. It combines feminist theory, social theory, political theory, history, philosophy, literary theory, media theory, communication studies, translation studies and art criticism to investigate cultural phenomena in various societies.

### An Eclectic Definition of *Comparative Literature*

The broad-based, eclectic definition of the term *Comparative Literature* was promoted by Prof. Henry H.H. Remak in 1961. The definition has rooted itself solidly in all the literature departments globally and remains strong and irreplaceable. He observes in his well-known, scholarly article, "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function" included in the edition, *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective* (1961):

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge & belief, such as the arts (eg. Painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, and Social science (eg. Politics, economics, sociology), religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human experience. (1)

### Relevance of Two-tier Explication

Professor Remak's two-tier explication is a depoliticization of comparative study and stresses that a researcher of Comparative Literature should not get involved in the problems of 'nationalism' - this must be taken seriously by an Indian research scholar with a warning note that he / she should not become parochial. The American comparatists concentrated on constructing a model of an 'interdisciplinary work', the sole aim being to do away with chauvinistic nationalism and to consider literature in the light of linguistic or 'political boundaries.' The belief is that in spite of difference in language and culture, all nations have certain things in common. Comparison between literatures becomes 'comparative' through technical use of comparisons, that is, 'comparativism', of themes, genres, movements and trends of a minimal pair of two literatures. Comparative Literature transports literary materials from one language to another.

The early studies of the American School were essentially humanistic and linked the subject to the individual evolution, social evolution, national evolution, and because of it wide deliberations effected global evolution also. The studies' focus was the influence of the environment on the social and individual life of man. As Posnett observes in *Comparative Literature*:

The central point of these studies is the relation of the individual to the

group --the gradual expansion of social life, from clan to city, from city to nation, from both of these to cosmopolitan humanity, as the proper order of our studies in comparative literature” (86).

### **Emphasis on Humanity’s Collective Achievements**

Thus, the influences between international literatures are side-lined; a greater stress is laid on humanity's collective achievements through time and place and across disciplinary lines. By ignoring the influence principle in Comparative Literature of the French School, and relating literature to science and art, new fields of study have been generated by the applying the principles of 'parallelism' and 'intertextuality.'

The 'Parallel' is derived from the idea of similarities in humanity's social and historical evolution, obviously indicating the harmony in the process of literary development. Such a study claims that there are affinities between the literatures of different peoples whose social evolution is similar, regardless of mutual influence or direct relation between them. In other words, this kind of investigation tries to find analogous patterns of thought in art and literature, and by extension in culture, in the different parts of the world. The comparatist, then, seeks to determine the bases and premises that underline common features between literatures and writers, or the affiliation of a phenomenon with a specific pattern.

### **Focus on Common Elements**

A significant objection raised is that literatures will be obviously different because of their national and historical backgrounds. However, it is noteworthy that the common elements of the literary phenomena can be agreed upon, whether they are related or not. The ‘parallel’ study, then, becomes successful in establishing the *weltanchaang* (world-view), to show that the humanity, though separated by language, community and nationality, is after all one. The objection of the comparatists is sharper when it comes to the question of culture, which blatantly sets apart binary ‘parallel’ studies. Such an irksome condition, at present, has resulted in the creation of ‘Comparative Cultural Studies’, a new area of investigation and a boon to Comparative Literature. 'Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies', is obviously, yet another segment of the discipline Comparative Literature and to undertake a global investigation of such a study augments a new direction of research.

### **Critical Theory and Literary Criticism**

Cultural studies form an academic field wedged in critical theory and literary criticism. It is interdisciplinary providing a reflexive study to position the forces that construct our daily lives. It also considers the political dynamics of contemporary culture, its historical foundations, the conflicts it has undergone and defines traits. It shows how particular medium or message gets related to ideology, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and/or gender, and does not investigate a particular culture or area of the world. The discipline of Cultural Studies does not offer a unified theory, but an assorted field of study enfolding many different approaches, methods and academic perspectives.

### **Employing Multi-disciplinary Information and Analysis**

At present, the discipline of Cultural Studies is a movement or a network and exercises significant influence on English studies. Cultural studies move toward the subjects holistically, combining feminist theory, social theory, political theory, history, philosophy, literary theory, media theory, film/video studies, communication studies, folk studies, translation studies, and art history/criticism to investigate cultural phenomena in various societies. It seeks to understand the ways by which meaning is generated, disseminated, and produced through various practices, beliefs and institutions, politically, economically and socially within a given culture. The wide scope of such a study provides significance to the Regional Literatures also, especially in the multi-lingual/cultural

situation of India. An investigation in the cultural mores apparently effects comparison with similar ethnic traditions.

### **Local as well as Global**

'Cultural studies' evaluates local and global forms of resistance to Western hegemony because of globalization. It also studies the increasing communication worldwide, as people now are exposed to the ideologies of mass media. Moreover, human culture itself is becoming more unified as a result of globalization. Critics venture to combine many areas of study, such as interpersonal relationships and the influence of the media. They believe that a researcher must study the unifying atmosphere in which they all occur and from which they emanate, namely, 'human culture'. This 'human culture' is becoming more and more unified itself because of globalization. It can be further examined in a wide range, particularly in the comparative context, since Cultural Studies cannot be identified with any single theoretical paradigm or tradition.

### **The Text**

In the context of Cultural Studies, the text not only includes written language, but also films, photographs, fashion or hairstyles, make-up, even tattooing - the texts comprise all the meaningful artifacts of culture. Similarly, the discipline widens the concept of "culture". "Culture" for a cultural studies researcher, includes traditional high culture (the culture of ruling social groups) and popular culture, but also the everyday meanings and practices - the last two are given greater emphasis. Raymond Williams, a renowned culture critic observes in his book *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* that it is hard to define the word 'culture' because it is not a discrete approach but a set of practices "not a tightly coherent, unified movement with a fixed agenda ... a loosely coherent group of tendencies, issues, and questions". He also examines how the word has acquired different meanings at different times. In the 'Introduction' of the book, he says:

.. culture ... had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use ... was changed, in the nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment.... The development of the word culture is a record of a number of important and continuing reactions to these changes in our social, economic and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored, (xiv-xv)

This interesting explication unquestionably points to the dimensions seen in the sense of the word 'culture' that can be dealt with, examined and applied individually, to interpret different texts, and also conduct a comparative study.

### **Coordination between Western and Non-Western**

The specialists of Comparative Literature have often questioned the nature of their discipline, its domains of application, and the possible developments of their field of research. In our era of globalization, the dialogue between theoretical constructs coming from Western countries and those from non-Western nations contributes to diversification and multiplies perspectives. Civilizations impact each other, and the moments of contact can be either transitory or long-lasting; they can give rise to new forms and ideas or displace and/or transform old ones. The new or transformed forms acknowledge the meeting of literatures and cultures to foster better understanding of the bonds that

bind and of the differences they present. While 'Comparative Cultural Studies' invites discussion of co-existent yet distinct literary and cultural trends, movements and histories, the notion of confluence hopes to complicate the workings of unilateral influence and engage with the study of relations, literary and cultural flows, and the exchange of ideas. The effort is not to forge any fictive unity among people, societies and nations, but to understand the thrilling harmony of diverse melodies that meeting of cultures can generate.

### Challenge for Indian Comparatists

An Indian comparatist has to think how the "diverse melodies" can be effectively engaged and employed to achieve global standards. In fact, India is the right nation to move forward implementing fresh ideas. Dr. Babli Moitra Saraf of Ramjas College, University of Delhi in her 'Report on the 9th Biennial Conference of Comparative Literature Association of India' makes a valid statement that while the enthusiasts of World Literature were keen on arriving at common goals and methodologies,

... the CLAI Conference 2009 established that the divisive experience and discourses of colonialism are still dominant and relevant, issues of the nation-state are yet unresolved and are still being addressed, and in more region and culture specific ways than ever. Micro histories and ethnic identities within the Indian nation-state are emerging, encouraged and enabled by .. the new-found literacy of first generation literates, from margins, gaps, interstices, and every imaginable crevice that this vast, varied, pluralistic, poor, and problematically democratic nation can pour out in an effort to be heard. This polyphony, or these "diverse harmonies" sent out a common refrain.... So while the 'center' debates about whether A World Literature is possible ... the conference in the 'periphery' proved that India was unto itself the world, with its own centers and peripheries wherein texts would be and are being retrieved, created and compared and that this could continue eternally because of the seemingly inexhaustible nature of the unimaginably vast store of yet untapped sources and resources, both material and imaginative. (<http://www.thefreelibrary.com>)

Dr. Saraf avows that the deliberations of the conference have opened up a vast area which are potential of becoming all things to all people. "There is really no "outsider" to comparative literature in India. For the conference demonstrated that India was the site of the comparative. Here single language literatures do not function in single language cultures and thus the comparative is *axiomatic*". An Indian comparatist must accept this as *mantra* and start working in intra-cultural studies through regional literatures. The compelling necessity is to get out of the parochial attitude or accept English translations. Then only 'Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies' will thrive in the academia.

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