

The Origins of Comparative Literature as Pedagogy: The West and India

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Abstract: Comparative literature could not be said to be a “field” or a “discipline” that is carved out of exclusion. It could be best described as a “method” to approach literature. This article looks at the various views on comparative literature and its origins in the West and India. It first takes-in the views of important comparatists across the globe, then looks at the pedagogic histories, and finally focuses on the Indian space, where it enjoys a bright future, just like in the West.

Index Terms - Comparative Literature, Early history, Theory, Concepts, Perspectives, Definitions, India, Tagore, Buddhadev Bose.

I. INTRODUCTION

The first thing that we need to do, in order to explain what comparative literature is, is to observe the words: “comparative” and “literature” - focusing more on the word “comparative”. It is difficult to find one suitable definition of comparative literature. What we need to do is to place side-by-side, the prominent definitions that celebrated scholars and critics in this field have given us over the years. Doing that, we would immediately observe that they have all sprung from multiple ways and multi-levels of “comparison” in literature, along with other forms of art. For instance, according to René Wellek and Austin Warren (1942), comparative literature, firstly, should study oral literature – folk-tale themes, their migration and so on, then, look at the relationship between two or more literatures. Thirdly, study literature in its totality and identify itself with “world literature”, “general” or “universal” literature. Paul Van Tieghem (1946) differentiated between general literature and comparative literature. He called studying movements and fashions of literature transcending national lines as general literature, while comparative literature meant studying inter-relationship between two or more literatures. Henry Remak’s conception of comparative literature, in 1971, was that of studying literature beyond the confines of one particular country, plus looking at the relationships between literature and other areas of knowledge and belief, like other arts (painting, music, architecture and so on), the sciences, other spheres of human expression. One of the most recent definitions of comparative literature is by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek in 1999. He stresses on at least two ways of studying literature. Firstly, a comparatist should know more than one national language or literature. There should be knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature. Secondly, comparative literature should include the Other: that might be a “marginal” literature, a genre or various text-types. He goes on to say that an intrinsic form and content of comparative literature facilitates the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature. The term “comparative literature” has been quite diversely interpreted. Professor Haun Saussy, in an important article of his, lets us know that the term was seen in France as the study of the mutual relations, different literatures (“literature” in terms of linguistic/national borders) have with one another. When it comes to the United States of America, it was more about methodical global perspectives, bringing forth common patterns of development – about how literature evolved: its “inception”, “culmination” and “decline” (Saussy 2006: 9). In this module we are going to talk about how comparative literature came into being. Susan Bassnett gives us some key points regarding how the term comparative literature first appeared and the historical context behind its birth.

II. EARLY PEDAGOGIC HISTORY

Firstly, we need to know that comparative literature was a reaction to nationalism in Europe. The term denoted a sense of going beyond the narrowly nationalistic. Even though the term was first used loosely, it reflected the wish for peace in Europe and for harmony between nations. Speaking of the appearance of the term, it was during a period of transition. The nations in Europe were struggling for freedom from the Turkish, Austro-Hungarian Empires, Russia, France and new nations were built. Even though these terms are problematic, “national identity” and “national culture” defined one-another, at that time. Bassnett informs us that the word “littérature comparée” was first used by Noel and Laplace in their anthology used to teach literature: *Cours de littérature comparée* (1816). During the period comparative studies were being published in physiology, mythology, philosophy, aesthetics and in Indo-German philology. Germans preferred the term “vergleichende Literaturgeschichte” (appearing in 1854). Ulrich Weisstein in his book *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory: Survey and Introduction* (1973) thought that the German term was more inclusive in nature involving literary history, literary criticism, literary theory and poetics, involving an international perspective. The earliest English usage of the term is attributed to Matthew Arnold in 1848, where he refers to “comparative literatures” to make a comparison between other literatures and literature of England. It was assumed that Arnold followed the French scholar Jean Jacques Ampere’s use of “histoire comparative” who had in 1832 delivered a lecture under the same title. In 1841 his book was titled *Histoire de la littérature Française au moyen âge comparée aux littératures étrangères*. The actual birth of comparative literature as academic quasi-discipline occurred in 1897 when a chair of comparative literature was established in Lyon, followed by a second chair at Sorbonne. In 1900 the French scholar Louis Paul Betz published his *Bibliographie de littérature comparée*. The text had an important role to play and is considered to be the basis of Fernand Baldensperger and Werner P. Friedrich’s voluminous bibliography published in 1950. In the English-speaking world the foundational text was H. M. Posnett’s *Comparative Literature* published in 1886. In the United States, Susan Bassnett states that a course in general or comparative literature existed at Cornell from 1871 and a chair was established at Harvard in 1890. In 1894 Charles Mills Gayley proposed the establishment of a collaborative Society of Comparative Literature and in his 1903 essay titled “What is Comparative Literature?” advocated laying the foundations of criticism in the scientifically determined common qualities of literature. During the war there

was a notable emigration of artists and intellectuals from Europe to America, and this facilitated the development of the method in the United States.

III. PRE-PEDAGOGIC HISTORY

As Saussy makes us realize, Comparative literature (in official terms) is said to be the product of the nineteenth century, but we would eventually realize that all kinds of literature have always been comparative. For instance, the clay tablets of Mesopotamia being the proof of rivalries and strategic merging among hero-narratives of neighbouring cultures. Or the fact that Chinese writers and speakers became aware of how their own linguistic structure (tones, logographic characters) stood out, after their prolonged exposure to Pali and Sanskrit idioms of Buddhist teaching. The relations between Greek and Latin, Chinese and Japanese point to close interactions. Languages in contact with one another give rise to hybrid forms (translation, pidgins, creoles, bilingualism), thereby posing a problematic in the way a particular literature/language is known (Saussy 2006: 5-6). Some important figures could be considered, who paved the way for future comparative literature studies. For instance, we can look at Madame de Staël, who knew five languages and had travelled extensively, whose French text, *De l'Allemagne* (1810) shows the beginning of spotlighting and critically analyzing genuine interrelationships. Even though she does not draw scholarly conclusions here, she looks at the bonds uniting German and French literatures and their mutual influences, in a nascent manner. Her angle is spoken of as being essentially sociological. She also displays the ability to differentiate between aesthetic and non-aesthetic moments (Weinstein 1973: 170). Her text, it is said, shows French culture with its unconscious universalism, as a world of differently ordered thoughts and sentiments. Herder (who was one generation before de Staël) argued that every nation had its personal irreducible, cultural personality and scheme of values, but that concept was ineffective against de Staël's work (Saussy 2006: 6).

We come to Goethe, now. In the 1820s, Goethe predicted the imminent and eventual age of "world literature"/Weltliteratur, in which travel and national commerce would usher in. Goethe realized how whatever would please the (majority) general public would expand limitlessly and this kind of literature would be accepted and appreciated in all geo-cultural spaces (Saussy 2006: 6).

Next comes Hugo Meitzel de Lomnitz, who initiated the field in 1877, by founding the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur* – the first journal of comparative literature. The name of comparative literature and the institution were foreseen in its leading article, "The Present Tasks of Comparative Literature". He thought that there was this need of clear foundations, a concrete disciplinary justification, plus a formal apparatus for providing a framework, in the field. He viewed the journal as a "meet" helping the construction of a fruitful comparative literature community. In order to prevent the journal to be mistaken for a philological one, de Lomnitz consciously differentiated between the then strongly nationalistic philology and comparative literature. His two significant principles of comparative literature were those of translation and polyglottism (for instance, the necessary balance of inter-cultural transfer and studying/analysing original texts). There were other important points, too. Like, the intimate relationship between language and literature. Springing from the Romantic philosophy of language, this point would be a precursor to the Eastern European formalist engagement of structural linguistics in studying a text, and "literariness". Then there was the concept of the inherent interdisciplinarity of comparative literature (the engagement with philosophy, aesthetics, ethnology, anthropology and the like). Reforming literary history was another great point, by Hugo Meitzel de Lomnitz. He looked at comparative literary history being based on solidly literary phenomena – any literary history always would need translation projects. Translation would complement polyglottism. The first volume of his polyglot journal (in 1879) contained articles in Latin, Hungarian, German, French, English, Italian, Provençal, Chinese and Romanian – in sync with de Lomnitz's view of every nation having equal rights in world literature – nationality being the individuality of the people, to be kept sacred and inviolable (he prescribes ten languages as the basis for literary study: German, English, French, Icelandic, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Spanish and Hungarian). He also urged for collecting literary and folklore materials from the widest possible areas, rather than comparing what were directly and easily available.

Saussy continues to give us more vital information. In 1877, "comparative" denoted one or more programmes in a single word. In the earlier times, serious scholarly attention was given to only ancient Greek and Latin "celebrated" texts. Most of the manuscripts of other cultures and spaces were considered "barbaric". Then there was a change. The previously neglected texts then begun to be focused upon. From the 1800s, philological disciplines emerged across Europe, enabling the deciphering of Old French, Old English, Middle High German, the Scandinavian and Celtic languages/texts. Scholars looked into the manuscripts of *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Eddas*, the *Chanson de Roland*, and so on, to find out their bases in myth and history and also, being the cultural "property" of a certain people, how those texts talked about their origins. The attempt to form a national identity by the scholars using the past, in the backdrop of national rivalries, led to an age of what was called, "national philology". However, national frontiers would actually be blurred through the application of the comparative method – which the scholars were using to extract the grammars and mythologies of various texts. By diligently surveying the laws of phonetic drift and grammatical modification, we would find that the Germanic, Romance, Celtic, Slavic, Persian and Indic language-families (even after being mutually unintelligible) were forms of the same language, at the kernel. Also, in the content of utterances, the consequences of applying this method were the same. For instance, in 1877 itself, it was observed that the *Ramayana* and the *Iliad* might be based on the same premise. The *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Shahnamah* had episodes talking about similar events, in different ways, under different names. One kind of literary study drawn from manuscript editing and another from linguistics form a dialectic, in this case (Saussy 2006: 7-9).

In relation to modern comparative literature studies, Ernst Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach are also important figures, and cannot be left out of the discussion. Curtius' most famous text happens to be *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948). Here, he dealt with vital topics like the cultural world of the Latin Middle Ages, literature and education's functions at that time, the relationship between poetry and rhetoric, the book as symbol, self-references of the medieval poets, Horace, Diderot and so on. The passionate classical scholar defended cultural values, springing from classic European traditions (like individualism and elitism) and disliked the 1930s' political events and public culture getting trivial. According to him, as the entire European culture had their common roots in the world of classical antiquity, an understanding of it would resolve conflicts and nationalistic tussles. True learning, Curtius stated, should come from a kind of intuition, plus the connections between great spirits. Writing poetry, he said, comes from the mystical harmony of spiritual unity. Curtius attacked "Geistesgeschichte" (the history of ideas)'s speculative nature – it considered different forms of cultural expression and attempted to present a broader image of past cultures. He argued that for an effective philological study of the past, one should have sound knowledge of medieval Latin and deeper facts of medieval culture. Speaking of Auerbach, another philologist, like Curtius, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western*

Literature (Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur; first published: 1946) is his most famous work. He was in the opinion of the necessity to be proficient in many languages, and to study a lot of complex literary works, for executing comparative literature methodologies. At that time, it was advantageous for a philologist to be considered more “continental” than a comparatist, due to his polyglottism. He only stood by working with texts which one has read in the original language. He considered the task of philology being to evaluate language and literature, so that they contribute to a history of the human race (the spiritual and intellectual history of much of the past millennia, which has achieved self-expression). The difference between “high” and “low” styles was also a question he dealt with.

IV. ORIGINS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN INDIA

Now, let us come down to the context of comparative literature in India and how it began in the country. As Sisir Kumar Das tells us, it was difficult and inadequate to study individual literatures, in the Indian space, because literatures never evolved in isolation. It was always felt necessary to place those literatures (also languages) in relation to one another (going beyond the “comfort-zone” of one’s one linguistic/literary traditions), before the formal establishment of a comparative method. Different cultures and literary traditions, in different historical moments/time-frames, have always come in contact with one another in interesting ways. There is a wonderful example in ancient Indian literature, through which one can see the multilingualism of the society, the hierarchy of the languages used, plus the possible idea that literature could exist in more than one language. Sanskrit and ancient Tamil did come into contact with each other (it could be explored here, whether one impacted/influenced the other), yet they were never studied in a comparative method by older scholars. Those scholars studied Sanskrit literature with Prakrit. Now, one can find that in classical Sanskrit plays, Prakrit has been used at different points usually as dialogues of different caste members. The priests and the kings spoke in Sanskrit, the women in Sauraseni Prakrit, the working-class folk in Magadhi, and the songs almost always in Maharashtri. So, witness the “normal” view of literature extending beyond one (regional) language, in ancient India, and the way it was “normal” for writers of that time to use more than one language (even if they differed in their grammar/sound-systems) in an individual text. In the medieval period in India, various literatures, even after springing from Sanskrit, were (in various degrees) influenced by Perso-Arabic traditions. These literatures came into close contact with one another – the languages were spoken in neighbouring areas. New themes, genres, styles grew from such interactions, at that time. One cannot but immediately think of Manipravalam, here, as an example where Sanskrit and Malayalam came together. Such hybrid poetic language, could be found in Tamil and Telegu, but solely in Malayalam, Manipravalam became a rich vessel of literature. Lilatilakam (14th C; in Sanskrit) is important here, as it is about the grammar and rhetoric of Manipravalam – only to be understood by the depth in both of these languages and literatures (Das 1989: 1-3). Then there was the case of Urdu (origin: 12th C) that emerged out of high Persian influence on Khariboli.

Das goes on to highlight many more facts: It was not before 19th century, when modern Indian literatures were placed as subjects in academic institutions of the country that under a false assumption of their autonomy, they were categorized based on their respective linguistic affiliations. There was also the discovery of Sanskrit by European scholars – with its affinity towards Greek/Latin, also the commonality with body of myths/religious thoughts/archetypes of both the Eastern and Western worlds. Sir William Jones and N. B. Halhed are important figures here. Lord Hastings openly declared his wish to connect texts like the *Bhagwad Gita*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Mahabharata*. This impacted the College of Fort William (estd. 1800), where the British scholars studied more and more Oriental texts/authors (T. Macan’s attempt to translate *Shahnamah*, for instance). The supporters of this new kind of open-minded scholarship predicted that there would be literary works of diverse nature, having different sets of poetics and based on different cultures. The spread of English education also brought in a critical awareness of examining emerging literatures – both by Indian and Western scholars, though, there was essentially a Eurocentric critical view to evaluate the Indian texts. Scholars like G. U. Pope, during this time, openly validated that no literature could stand alone. Michael Madhusudan Dutta was one of those, who questioned the earlier methodology relating to “purity” and exclusiveness of national literatures, urging the execution of newer set of tools. One can never overlook the fact that, the first figure to heavily request for a comparative study of literature, as a recognized academic quasi-discipline was Rabindranath Tagore. The title of Tagore’s 1907 lecture was “Visva-Sahitya”. The title means world literature in English. The English expression “comparative literature” by Tagore was actually used by him to express his notion of “world literature”. It is important to remember here, that for creating a parallel education-system, outside the University of Calcutta, the prominent intellectuals and intelligentsia formed the Jatiya Siksa Parisad (National Council of Education) in 1906 (Das 1989: 5-9). Claiming literature as the expression of all of humanity, Tagore proposed universality, and that literatures within and across nations should interact with one another. Keeping Indian mythology at the centre and using metaphors, Tagore expressed literature as a world besides the immediate, tangible material one – here humankind extends itself through the creations and feelings of others. He encouraged the view of universal humanity in universal literature – freeing oneself from a narrow provincial mentality. Also, that one should realize the interrelations among all kinds of human endeavours at expression.

As indicated before, there were oppositions against the usefulness or credibility of having entire academic departments of comparative literature. Das continues, stating that the British academic institutions, acting as models for the then Indian ones majorly dismissed its worth. However, in 1956, the first full-fledged department of comparative literature in India came into being at Jadavpur University. Buddhadeva Bose is a key figure here. As Professor Subha C. Dasgupta puts it, “Buddhadeva Bose, [was] a renowned poet whose name is linked with the beginning of the modernist movement in Bengali poetry in the thirties of the twentieth century, and who was also a profuse translator of modern non-English European poetry as well as of the classical Sanskrit author Kalidasa, was called upon to take charge of the department. Bose invited Sudhindranath Datta, another important modern poet and translator, to teach in the department. Datta... advocated interacting with poetic traditions from all over the world... The foundational impulses of the discipline in Bengal were creative, with a focus on the training of the imagination, and were transnational, along with a trace of the historical imperative to look beyond the colonial masters. Contrary to the popular perception, decolonizing processes were never really the defining factors in carving out a pedagogy. There were larger goals and visions. English literature had an important place in the syllabus and in the first phase Jesuit priests and Sanskrit scholars were part of the faculty... The department at Jadavpur University... was the single full-fledged department of Comparative Literature in the country for a long period.” (Dasgupta 2012).

It should also be mentioned here that prior to this, in 1919, the Department of Bengali was established in the University of Calcutta. Figures like Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay (who initiated the first department of modern Indian languages, in the same

university) encouraged scholars in Bangla to look beyond it and into other Indian literatures – “weaving” them in a beautiful garland – the highest level of content and direction of the study of Indian literature. Also, Sri Aurobindo, who (in a series of articles) expressed how right it was to view Indian literature as a whole, the only way to grasp the fullest expression of the Indian mind. By the late 1950s, one also finds the Bengali department in the University of Calcutta having courses on English Romantic Poetry and sections of Sanskrit literature in its Masters’ programme (known as Comparative Literature). Then, in 1974, Professor R. K. Dasgupta started a post-M.A. course (Comparative Indian Literature) in the Department of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi (Das 1989: 11-14).

V. CONCLUSION

Comparative Literature has moved in different directions in accordance with the needs of history. Today in the globalized world there is more and more need to adequately come to terms with the multicultural nature of the world, to build bridges or to discover them where they do not seem to exist. The inter-relational perspective with which the method had begun its journey still remains at the core.

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