

# Revisiting Thematology: Importance of Studying “Themes as a Method” in Comparative Literature

Dr Koel Mitra,

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

The Neotia University, Kolkata, India.

**Abstract :** This paper tries to relook at the Research Methodology Triad of Comparative Literature; which conventionally acknowledges and approves Genology, Thematology and Historiography as the three pillars of Comparative Literature Methodology. Thematology, or “theme studies” is one of the most important analytics in situating literature in a comparative milieu. The basic premise of analysis between texts, cultures and their mutual interjections often brings a scholar back to the question of revisiting the term itself. Has “Thematology” itself evolved as a category, over the years? In what ways have Thematology changed from the way it was conceived in the earlier years? This paper tries to look at the basic tenets of “Thematology” through the lens of its own trajectory.

**IndexTerms – Comparative Literature, Methodology, Thematology, Theme-Studies, Theme.**

The study of literature often focusses around some key central axes; one of them being the study of content. Keeping in mind the nuances of “terminological uncertainty”, let us begin our understanding of Thematology as primarily “a study of content” and “a study in content”. The fallacies that will arise as a result of this definition are clearly something that we, as comparatists, or scholars of Comparative Literature, can use to our advantage. The problems of nomenclature will help us critically examine the term in more detail rather than delimit the structure of the definition. The “components of content” will of course not be congruent to the “theme”, but “thematology” as merely “a study of themes” will not be complete either. For the sake of understanding the variety of content in terms of its structural premise, we have to begin by assuming that “theme” is not a homogenous category; it may and will include distant terms that will gather with its respective meanings to give the term a holistic shape. This paper tries to delve into the core theoretical definitions of theme, in a context of ever-evolving definitions.

A contrastive comparison of themes has been a favourite preoccupation of comparatists, particularly of the French School, for whom any semblance in texts, more precisely in content, was an object of analysis. The similarities were assumed to be traceable to common routes. Almost always therefore, a contrastive study of content between two or more texts pre-supposed an a-priori “contact” between them. This notion obviously had its easy advantages. It made comparisons easier because comparatists began by assuming pre-set contexts. The difficulties that such practices of comparison of content gave birth to were however, too huge to ignore. The divorce of “Theme Studies” from “Topos Studies” is one such early instance where comparatists like Trousson, Frenzel and more prominently Harry Levin showed the problems of using the word “theme” as an all-pervasive category. Ulrich Weisstein, in his book, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory: Survey and Introduction* (1973), uses the phrase “terminological uncertainty” (earlier used in this paragraph), to bring to notice the many meanings that can exist parallelly and simultaneously within the study of themes.

The transportation of the words “Stoff”, “Rohstoff”, “Motif”, “Plot”, etc. as ones that are close to the word “Theme” in many ways but not quite similar, makes it easily understandable for us to assume that the word “theme” in itself requires some to-and-fro journey for a clear understanding. There could be many ways of looking deeper into the word; of which let us choose a prominent one; the one most potentially explained by Weisstein; to look at it from roughly three angles; Development, Definition and History. Weisstein of course includes a fourth category as well, which is perhaps the one upon which he emphasises the most. This category will focus on Thematology as Methodology.

While looking at the development of the word, the names of Trousson, Frenzel and Levin are inescapable. For Trousson, Thematology or *Stoffgeschichte* are principal to the study of Comparative Literature. For Trousson, as also significantly for Frenzel, a study of themes was a process for doing historical studies. We will look into this in more details in the chapter dealing with the diachronic study of themes. A close reading of Frenzel’s *Motive der Weltliteratur* would suggest that for Frenzel, Thematology, in spirit, could be equated with Motivology. For him Thematology would mean tracing an element of history across literatures of many centuries. Each time we do theme studies, we actually come across a renewal of the same historical element in the unit called the theme. He refers to this history of ideas as *Geistesgeschichte* and uses this to refer to a historical moment that is recurrent in nature and keeps coming back into culture with the help of different genres, movements, etc.

However the problem with this method is that each textual theme is necessarily read as part of a historical rejoinder and quantitatively as well as coercively positioned as part of a larger linear document. The essence of the texts in particular is often lost to serve the larger purpose of the unbroken historical thread. Additionally the work in itself seems to become of lesser importance as contrasted to its thematic coherence. Cohesion of the work gives way to coherence of the theme. This gives a scope for the entry of the word motif to be studied simultaneously with theme. Elizabeth Frenzel (1963) connects the notion of leitmotiv, more predominantly used in musicology, to the domain of the literary work and opines:

“This concept, transposed from Wagner’s music to literature, means the repetition of the same succession of words, at least in echoes or in slight variations, in different places of a literary work, which are related to each other by this community.”

In musicology, leitmotiv would be roughly divided into three main components; the principal idea, the non-semantic central thrust and a characteristic motif which is extra semantic to the composition but an inherent signature of the same. The motif can then be seen as one of those principal units in a composition that keeps coming back in such a formulaic pattern, that the recurrence itself, however extra semantic, constructs a new formula of some sorts which accelerates the grammatical progression of the composition itself. While comparing these to literary works, the extramusical meanings acquired by the leitmotiv can be most relevantly compared with literary motifs. Certain motifs remain unchanged across the works of several writers in a certain period of time. This may help us to understand the common thematic trend of a particular literary movement which repeatedly marks its presence in the works of several writers of the same age. Also they may keep recurring in the works of a single author as a signature mark, a mark by which the author will remain identifiable. What is also worth mentioning at this point is the fact that even if motifs give away the identity of the authors as some kind of a signature, it is not in any way equivalent to a symbol. Motifs are different from symbols because of its unlikeliness with the latter in terms of the semantic value. While symbols will most definitely have a semantic component, motifs are essentially extra-semantic in nature.

Paul van Tieghem officially distinguished five sectors in thematology; themes, types, legends, ideas and sentiments. For him, thematology exists at a contextual level rather than at an extra-textual one. Even though in practice, many terms may and will overlap with many others, a rough distinction clearly shows that an inclusion of idea and sentiment, which are an integral semantic component of the text, along with themes and types, which, like the leitmotiv, are extra semantic but inherent to the core text is an approach by which Tieghem suggests a holistic discipline of study under Thematology. He does not prioritize one kind over the another and insists in an amalgamation of all the categories to build up the whole structure of Thematology. In 1968, Harry Levin introduces the neology called Thematology in place of Stoffgeschichte. Weisstein suggests that in order to avoid the “terminological uncertainty” between the two terms, it is best to keep the words Stoff and Theme as distant as possible from each other. Since all these terms can separately or unanimously pertain to relevantly function under the academic pursuit of Thematology, the term, at large, would then mean not a study of themes, but a study of content categories. Also Motif, Stoff and Theme, even though separately all thematological categories, are not to be mistaken as units of meaning. Levin points out that the interplay of content categories is often headed towards an avenue for the progression of ideas. If they are, then surely a comparatist would not be mistaken to understand such content categories as units of meaning too. It is here that Levin clarifies that themes can be and are polysemous. They have the privilege to be endowed with multiple meanings and each theme may surface and re-surface in specific situations with specific sets of meanings. This clearly shows that the relationship between themes and meanings is not a priori. Meanings are not something that themes begin with. Meanings are categories that get added to or subtracted from themes as and when applicable. Had they been units of meanings or any other form of meaning bearer, then themes would have lost the beauty of polysemy.

Let us look into some details at the content categories in question to have a clear understanding about their significance in Thematology. The terms have been used from Weisstein and condensed to easily understandable receptions on each of them. Most of the explanations have been taken from Sibaji Bandopadhyay’s ‘Introduction’ to Thematology: Literary Studies in India (2004).

**Stoff:** This German word means something like “stock” or “material” or “stuff”. This content category forms as a result of Rohstoff, which is unshaped. Stoff as a subject matter is shaped, and performs upon the Rohstoff.

**Rohstoff:** This word means “raw material” or “raw stuff”. This is an actual event, occurrence or a moment that is external to the literary work. The Stoff is shaped out of the Rohstoff to gain literary qualities that can be presented and performed within the text. However one must not presume that because the Rohstoff is unshaped and unperformed in the literary text, which gains shape only through the Stoff, it lacks the coherence of the self-sufficient Stoff. Even for Rohstoff to become Rohstoff, the category has to be acted upon. Rohstoff is also a representation. Rohstoff may arise out of the words of an eye witness, a news account, a journalistic account, etc. However, to say that the stage of Stoff is one direct and unilinear passage “from” the Rohstoff is not only untrue, but it also bears the risk of declaring the Rohstoff apolitical. In practice it would be better to understand Rohstoff not merely as “raw stuff” but as “unperformed non-literary stuff”. Rohstoff is raw not in the sense of sanctity and purity, but in the sense of being too narrowly, or in the same vein, too widely political. There is a bridge between the Rohstoff and Stoff. There is no one single straight line. Rohstoff is not a miracle. It is as much touched upon as much as the Stoff. This bridge is mediated by informers, meaning makers, etc. and as a result of this mediation certain integral content develops within the literary work. To simplify it one may say that Rohstoff is external to the literary text and Stoff is integral to it.

**Plot:** Plot, which is distinctly different from the Story, is that structural component of the text that can be coherently summarised. It is a part of the story; that part which is represented in the text and may not be necessarily be “complete” or congruent” to the entire story. Plot is important not only to understand “what has happened” but to understand the “order in which it has happened”. Plot is a chronological interpretation of the story.

**Tale:** A tale is an imaginatively recounted story that has its base in real calendar time. Unlike a plot, the tale is not entirely a fabrication. It is based upon some real event which can be infinitely recounted. This also means that within each tale there can be infinite number of plots. The plot is fictive, the tale has some real claim to chronotope.

**Situation:** this category revolves around clusters of human emotions and values upon which a culturally similar mass responds and reacts in similar ways. Situations give rise to human emotions or situations are born out of human emotions. Love, hatred, friendship, etc. may be cases in point where they may be born out of specific situations or give rise to situations. For example a situation called “Partition” may give rise to “friendship” as well as “enmity”. On the other hand, “enmity” may be the result of a certain kind of partition.

**Motif:** Already discussed in some detail, it is that content category or unit which is neither as complete as a plot or story, nor relatively any bit holistic. It is that minute pattern, structure or design that recurs frequently at understandable sequences and is often unit-results of situations. Situations are like the outer physical crust which contains an otherwise abstract motif within it. Motifs usually do not change meanings with situations. They are stagnant inflexible units of situations which can be identified as the only thing constant in ever-changing situations and themes.

**Theme:** As Sibaji Bandopadhyay in his 'Introduction' puts it, "Theme is the result of a passage from the general to the particular. Theme is motif concretized." Motifs are those abstracts which get concretized in themes. Trousson suggests that Themes maybe divided into sub-categories: Heroic Themes and Situational Themes. Heroic themes are ones in which the heroes give supreme importance to the Stoffs that is created after them. In this the hero is more important as a person than when placed in a network of situations. The hero outgrows the situational importance and becomes important as her/himself. Such heroes are often remembered for just being themselves; often extracting their qualities out of the situations in which they excelled. The heroes are displaced because they are integrated in a larger understanding of literary texts. They become themes in themselves. Situational themes require not the heroes as the primary units but the situations. What becomes recurrent as situations can happen to heroes across different time and space. The importance of heroes is not particularly necessary for this sub-theme to gain primary focus and importance.

These terms have evolved in themselves, while trying to define and redefine the different aspects of Theme Studies in the context of synchronic and diachronic study of Thematology. In this paper, we will but attempt to learn the basic definitions of Thematology and understand the different content categories that join to comprise the pursuit of Comparative Literature in general and Thematology in particular. Here, we have seen the cultural specificities of themes, the relationship of literary themes to the conditions of material productions, the importance of content categories in understanding the domain of themes, units of meanings and how recurrent units surface and re-surface into literary works across time and space. We have also looked in one of the three axes in the triad model of Comparative Literature Methodology and searched the importance and role of Thematology in it while locating it simultaneously with Genology and Historiography. In fact the primary task of this paper is to locate Thematology from a space of theoretical obscurity to a position of critical interest.

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