

## **Comparative Literature: Fresh Frontiers and New Challenges**

**Dr. Milon Franz**

**St.Xavier's College for Women**

**Aluva**

**India**

### Abstract

The paper titled 'Comparative Literature: Fresh Frontiers and New Challenges' attempts to analyse the new roles and responsibilities, Comparative Literature assumes in the postcolonial age. In the context of culture jamming and homogenization, Comparative Literature is encountering multiple and complex challenges, necessitating the need for redefining the perspectives and functions connected with critical and creative performances in the area. Beyond the common endeavor of compering two literatures, it is supposed to play a definite role in encountering multi culturalism. The paper analyses the paradigm shifts that have taken place in perspectives, practice, interpretations and interference in the field of Comparative Literary endeavours in the context of globalized standpoints. It is supposed to stand for the cause of the hitherto unheard and marginalized literatures, at the same time facilitating the process of establishing dialogues with other literatures.

### **Key words:**

Multiculturalism, indigenous, homogenizing, imperial divide, insulation

In this age of the hybridized / polyphonic voices and varied cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities, the role of Comparative Literature is acquiring diverse and complex dimensions. The postcolonial world is throwing it into a very crucial and precarious position. It doesn't simply stand confined within the narrow limits of academic investigation and literary enquiry. Susan Bassnett says, "Comparative Literature involves the study of texts across cultures, it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literature across both time and space" (2). Cutting across time, space, history, culture and language, it encompasses a wide arena of critical and investigative endeavours, interfering with all spheres of human activity. And as such, Comparative Literature is operating within a sophisticated and intricate matrix of an international agenda which is cultural and political. While it is bound to facilitate multiculturalism, it has also to withstand the onslaughts of cultural imperialism which attempts to erase the marginalized and the indigenous.

Comparative Literature in the present context is distant both from the common parameters of mere comparison of two literatures and also from the utopian ideal of establishing a world literature or 'weltliteratur', as Goethe put it. On the other hand, it stands in the cross roads of multiculturalism as it makes its impact on the world nations bringing a much more serious threat to the specificity of culture. We live in a world of representations and representations define and create culture. In the present times when cultures are being trampled by the corporate sponsored cultural imperialism, literary theories, practices and endeavours are bound to fortify the minority and the powerless in their combat against imperialism. At the same time they have to undertake the role of safeguarding the uniqueness of indigenous cultures, against the threat of creating a monolithic/unified culture and literature. Literature cannot be seen as a symphonic whole. It can't be studied exclusively as concerted and secular historical experiences. The attempt to unite the literary, cultural and political endeavours under the label of globalization brings in a lot of threats. It is not always guided by a pure motive, but by a dangerous political agenda for sabotaging the minority cultures and literatures. Hence, there is a need for Comparative Literature to be guided by new standpoints and perspectives. When universalism today takes up a fascist role, Comparative Literature can furnish a transnational and humanitarian perspective on literary performance. Therefore the crucial function Comparative Literature is to perform today is in connection with the resolving of the dichotomy between the universalizing and insular tendencies of literary enquiry in the dynamic global environment created by the new imperial

process. It is a move across boundaries. At the same time it has to unearth and highlight the uniqueness of realities that exist within cultural, linguistic and racial boundaries. It is both a study within boundaries and across boundaries.

The most important factor to be discussed in this issue is the shift that has taken place in the perspectives. It has been felt urgent that the hitherto marginalized and colonized people should be heard from and their ideas should be known. Edward Said observes:

It is possible to argue that the continued production and interpretation of western culture itself made exactly the same assumption well on into the twentieth century, even as political resistance grew to the west's power in the peripheral world. Because of this and because where it led, it becomes possible now to reinterpret the western cultural archive as it fractured geographically by the activated imperial divide to a rather different kind of reading and interpretation. (287)

He says that this interpretative change of perspective allows us to challenge the sovereign and unchallenged authority of the allegedly detached western observer. The new shift coincides with the realization by countries like India that they have for long been at the receiving end of the theory in which the west is the donor or initiator and the rest the so called postcolonial societies are the receivers. As Avadhesh Kumar Singh points out in his book, *Comparative Literature*, it has led to a realization that this paradigm has to be reversed by receiving the western theories and pronouncements proactively — going back to our own critical traditions and reviving whatever has the possibility of life in the manner of the west that revived the rhetoric of the antiquity in the twentieth century for their critical and interpretative purposes. It also involves understanding, accepting, digesting and assimilating into our critical traditions whatever is good in the western critical tradition. While a tendency prevailed to measure ourselves in terms of the isms like postmodernism and postcolonialism on the other hand there came up a consciousness that these are neither our categories nor our agenda (153). Further as global and local converged in different ways, there was an impending danger of the local, being submerged, economically, culturally, intellectually and in the end politically in the global. This created the need for attempts by the local to assert its specificity in cultural and literary terms. The paradox is that comparative literature in the west began as a reaction against aggressive insulating nationalism and now it exists as a dominant weapon against the threat of the de-nationalism coming in the wake of globalization. A seductive mask of neo capitalism has made the local more conscious of its specificity and impending

dangers of it particularly that of submergence of local into global. There is an urgent need for a sort of strategy to be evolved to preserve, sustain and further itself against the homogenizing forces. The most efficient and vehement vehicle in this strategy of course can come in the shape of comparative literature. Avadesh Kumar Singh observes: The little nationalities may assume menacing proportions if they are suppressed, are not allowed to grow or accorded place due to them in the entire scheme of things. These voices or identities always wait for being heard and accepted. They do seek opportunities for dialogue but not for insulation or isolation. Nothing can be more dangerous than thwarting their yearnings for dialogue among them” (153). Comparative Literary studies are supposed to facilitate this process of establishing dialogues with other literatures. Out of this dialogue we have to evolve a new model which would preserve and sustain our own experience and culture. At a time when the terms like nation, nationality and sub nationalities are redefined, it is expected of comparatists to abandon hierarchical value judgements. They have to combine and play the role of sympathetic outsider and cautious insider.

Thus Comparative Literature is characterized by a shift of perspective, especially in the oriental nations. It started with western literature and looked out wards; now what is happening is that the west is being scrutinized from without. It is a radically alternative perspective and a reevaluation of the discourse of national literature. Homi K Bhabha sums up the new emphasis in an essay discussing the ambivalence of postcolonial culture, suggesting that “Instead of cross-referencing there is an effective productive cross-cutting across sites of social significance that erases the dialectical, disciplinary sense of cultural reference an relevance”(Bassnett 6). It cuts across and through all kinds of assumptions about literature that have come to be seen as Eurocentric. The challenge posed by non-European critics to the colonizing nations’ systematic process of ‘inventing’ other cultures has put ideology firmly back on the agenda of literary studies. It also coincides with the reviewing of canonical texts and theories. The growth of national consciousness and awareness of the need to move beyond the colonial legacy has led to the development of comparative literature in many parts of the world. The way Comparative Literature is used in China, India and Africa, is constructive in that it is employed to explore both indigenous traditions and imported traditions, throwing open the whole vexed problem of the canon. What is being studied is the way in which national culture has been affected by importation, and the focus is indigenous culture. Comparative Literature in the third world and the Far East changes the agenda for the

subject. The new Comparative Literature is calling into question the canon of great European masters, and this process coincides with other challenges- that of feminist criticism, questioning male orientation and post modernism, revaluing the role of the reader. They have exposed the part played by the subterranean forces of institutionalized power structures, masquerading as centers of universal liberalism.

Translation studies have profound implications for the future of Comparative Literature. Its emphasis on literature as a differentiated and dynamic conglomerate of systems, characterized by internal oppositions and dynamic shifts, contributes to its rapid entry into literary studies. The notion of literature as a polysystem sees individual literary systems as part of a multi-faceted whole, thereby changing the terms of the debates about ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ cultures, about ‘great’ literatures and ‘marginal’ literatures. It is a major shaping force for change in the history of culture. We can say that Comparative Literature today exists in an extremely transitional stage. In one sense it can be pronounced as extinct. The narrowness of the binary distinction, the unhelpfulness of the ahistorical approach, the complacent short sightedness of Literature as a universal civilizing force approach have all contributed to its demise.

But it lives on under other guises. That is n the radical reassessment of western cultural models at present being undertaken in many parts of the world, in the transcendence of disciplinary boundaries through new methodological insights supplied by gender studies or cultural studies, in the examination of the processes of inter cultural transfer that are taking place within translation studies. Postcolonial Comparative Literature is also a voyage of discovery. Only this time, instead of the European setting off in search of riches and new lands to conquer equipped with maps and charts to aid him, this voyage is one towards self-awareness, towards recognition of responsibility, guilt, complicity and collusion in the creation of the labyrinthine world of contemporary writing. Europeans are no longer embarking on that voyage from the centre of the world either, for centres and peripheries have been redefined.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bassnett, Susan. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. London: Blackwell, 1993. Print.
2. Said, Edward W. “Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories”. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. K. M Newton. London: MacMillan, 1988. Print.
3. Singh, Avadhesh Kumar. *Indian Comparative Literary Studies*. London: MacMillan, 1992. Print.