



Need of Comparative Literature in Multilingual, Multicultural India

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Abstract:

Comparative Literature is requisite when it comes to study Indian literature as India is dominated by multi-lingual and multi-cultural practices (beside our mother tongue we also speak in other languages). India is a colourful combination or a mosaic construction of various languages and culture, religion, races and the ethnic groups. Comparative Indian Literature is also a holistic study of all regional literatures, which stretches beyond the boundaries of religion, casts and races and encapsulates regional traditions, cultures and languages. The purpose of such Comparative literature study is to discover the common areas among the various literatures written in different Indian languages. Comparative literature study is a kind of co-ordination which seeks resemblance in some respects. In such study not only comparison but other methods such as description, characterization, interpretation, narration, evaluation are employed. It is independent of linguistic or political boundaries.

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Comparative literature is the study of inter-relationship between any two or more than two significant literary works or literatures. Literature is the expression and exchange of feelings and experiences. Comparative Literature is more so, because it is the study of literature that traverses geographical, cultural and linguistic borders, nations, time, periods, genres, forms and themes. It bridges the gap between regions and nations and strengthens the bond. It views literary texts as both being the product of a specific language and culture and as a universal phenomenon transcending national and cultural boundaries and time frames.

The concept of comparative literature originates in *Hitopadesha: 1.3.71* where it is written that it is only the narrow minded people who think that this is mine and this is someone else's, for the selfless entire universe is a family:

अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् ।
उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥

ayam nijah paro veti gananaa laghuchetasaam
udaaracharitaam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam

Comparative Literature in began in India in 1956 with the establishment of Jadavpur University in Calcutta. Its parent body was the National Council of Education where Rabindranath Tagore made his speech on world literature or *Visvasahitya* which he called Comparative Literature in 1907. The term 'litterature comparee' was first used by Villemain, a French scholar in 1829. Friedrich Schlegel used the term 'Universal poesie' in 1798. Amiya Dev in *Comparative Literature in India* writes: "Indian Literature is not an entity but an interliterary condition in the widest possible sense of the concept

which is related to Goethe's original idea of 'weltiliterature'"(2) which means 'world literature', a stage when all literatures would become one. 'Weltiliterature', the term formulated by Goethe means literature that belongs to and can be appreciated by all nations and peoples, and also which by sharing of ideas acts as mediator between different nations and helps to deepen and augment the spirit of man. The definition of comparative literature given by Bijay Kumar Dass is very simple vivid and understandable:

The simple way to define comparative literature is to say that it is a comparison between the two literatures... Comparative literature analyses the similarities and dissimilarities and parallels between two literatures. It further studies themes, modes, conventions and use of folk tales, myths in two different literatures or even more (1).

Tagore refers to comparative literature by the name of 'Vishvasahitya' a term used for Universalism of literature and writes:

From narrow provincialism we must free ourselves, we must strive to see the works of each author as a whole, that whole as a part of man's universal creativity, and that universal spirit in its manifestation through world literature (Buddhadeva Bose Comparative Literature 22).

Mathew Aronold made meaningful efforts in English world and emphasized strongly the significance of the comparative approach to literary works. He wrote in a letter in 1848, "every critic should try and possess one great literature at least besides his own and more the unlike his own, the better" (Dhawan Comparative Literature 22).

Comparative literature does not mean mere setting of one work of literature against the other but in Comparative literature two or more than two literatures are studied side by side. Here literature is studied not in isolation but in comparison. Van Tieghem defined comparative literature as thus: "The object of comparative literature is essentially the study of diverse literatures in their relation with one another" (Wellek Discriminations 15). It would be comparison of two or more similar or even dissimilar forms or trends within the literature in the same language or different languages. The emphasis is laid not just on the linguistic excellences and the embellishments but deeper reading of the text is required. It would also encompass the literature of different nations and authors from the various languages where their works are put side by side to understand the underlying elements and contrast themes, artistic devices to expand the universal knowledge of literature. In this way, the subject matter becomes vaster and perspective wider.

Bijay Kumar Dass rightly projects the purpose of Comparative literature where everywhere one looks beyond the borders of his nation or province:

Comparative literature transcends the narrowness, provinciality and parochialism of national and general literatures. The complacency of regional writers are shaken when the comparatists study their writings along with the writings of other writers in different other languages (Comparative Literature 4)

The motives of the study of comparative literature can be various; however, it is done with a view to use it as the most useful technique of analyzing the work of art. One can recognize the qualities of a work more effectively by comparing it to other works in different languages. Secondly one can take a balanced view of literary merit. Thirdly, any literature belonging to any particular region or nation cannot be studied as a standalone creation of the author and is needed to be studied in relation to other literatures. Comparative literary study aims to define the spirit of the nation reflected in the language and literature. In these studies of similarity and differences the aim is creating a universal structure of oneness.

The large diversity of cultural traditions and shared histories in India calls for a comprehensive comparative approach to the study of literature in the country. According to Gayatri Spivak 'Liberal Multiculturalism' is the aim of comparative literature. As no literature, work of art exists in isolation but each text has a tradition, cross-cultural influence, it is related to other texts. Any work of art which may be taken as only one of its kind is always a reproduction of some other work as each work of art is related to the society, culture, history and there are various influences on the writer. Studying Indian literature demands a comparative method where the classical or modern literature is studied under the entire Indian background as India has many languages and literatures. Majumdar in *Indian Dimensions Comparative Literature* suggests that:

Indian literature is neither "one" nor "many" but rather a systemic whole where many sub-systems interact towards one in a continuous and never-ending dialectic. Such a systemic view of Indian literature predicates that we take all Indian literatures together, age by age, and view them comparatively (7).

Thus, Indian literature cannot be studied in singular and to study Indian literature in the plural is equally problematic. It is possible to understand Asvaghosa or Kalidasa in isolation, but when the two poets are read in relation to one another and also in relation to their times, one comes to notice certain features like the 'renunciation' themes, Buddhist tones of Asvaghosa, and the activistic themes and the brahmanical learnings of the Kalidasa. These poets are also compared with each other against the Kusana and the Gupta age in Indian history. Both the poets are equally indebted to Valmiki and we realise that they have many ideas, expressions and conventions in common. This allows us to evaluate them more fully and more significantly.

Indian Literature has its roots in Sanskrit and Dravidian language. Epics like Ramayana and the Mahabharata were recreated from Sanskrit to each and every regional languages of India. The stream of other great Indian classics, mainly the Veda, the Upanishad, the Bhagavata, as well as the great creations of Kalidasa etc. were moved over from Sanskrit into regional languages. In this way, several elements were transported from one source language to another through different approaches.

Indian criticism started in 200 B.C. with Bharatmuni's —*Natyasastra*. He was the first critic, who had compared and contrasted the characteristics of "Rasa" or taste with the performance of drama. In the Indian context other classics of literary criticism are Anandavardhana's *Dhvani*, Kuntaka's *Vakrokti*, Abhinavagupta's *Rasa-Bhava theory*, and *Kavyadarsah* of Dandin play an important role. Rasa, Alamkara, Riti, Dhvani and Vakrokti are concepts around which poetic criticism always moved. Entire Sanskrit and Prakrita literature and even the literature in modern Indian languages has been appreciated keeping these theories in mind.

In Indian Context there are two approaches to comparative literature: one, the influence of European writers on Indian writers or vice versa like Eliot's *The Waste Land's* influence on Niranjana Bhagat and Indian influence of *Upanishads* on Eliot. The second influence is of Indian writers of one region on the other. Here we can take the works of Premchand, Bankim Chandra, Tagore who influenced Fakir Mohan Senapati and Sanskrit poets' influences on Nissim Ezekiel and so on. Influence of Sufism in Gajals and Persian plot or Story like *Hatim-tai* and *Alibaba Aour Challis Chor* on Indian literature.

It is further essential to understand that the subject of Indian literature is connected to various sources, themes, mythology, forms, artistic formulations, and historical, social, religious and political movements. The early literatures like the *Rig Veda*, *The Upanishads*, *The Puranas*, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, *The Buddhist Jatakas* and Jain stories are the store house of themes and motifs which have influenced the writers of India. Characters and myths, incidents and motifs have been supplied by these works and it is always a fruitful study to have a comparative look at such literature because of its recurring themes. The images of Rama, Sita, Karana, Urvashi, Nachiketa, Kunti, Krishna, Arjun, Draupadi, Radha, Ravana, Bibhishan, Sakuni, Manthara etc. are used in different perspectives

and style in the today's Indian literature by different Indian writers. For example, the story of Urvashi has passed through several hands. The heartless woman of Rig Veda is being turned into a very romantic nymph by Kalidasa and is being regarded as the very essence of beauty by Tagore. The story of Karna, the valliant hero and Kunti has been the theme of many works. Tagore wrote Karna-Kunti-Samvada, while Shirawadkar wrote Kaunteya and Swant wrote the novel Mrtyunjaya where Karna is the central figure. There is recurrent use of these themes in modern Indian literatures like, destiny of Karana, harassment of Draupadi, love of Krisna and Radha and so on.

In spite of the diversity in the literary achievements, difference in situation, dissimilar environment, distant areas where the writers have belonged to or have written about, or the different time of writing and diverse language of writers as well as their creative expression transforms them from the local to the universal, from the particular to the general. In all Indian languages there is an Indian idea or theme at work regardless of language it is written in. Sarat Chandra (1876-1938) hailed from Bengal and wrote in Bengali, Prem Chand belonged to U P and wrote in Hindi and Urdu, and Nanak Singh from Punjab wrote in Punjabi. Though these writers lived in different areas and wrote in different languages this diversity did not affect their passion for social reform. All the three writers wrote about the problems and sufferings of women in their society. Creative genius of Sarat Chandra is reflected in his characters: Savitri (*Charitrahina*), Ananda didi (*Shri Kanta*), Madhvi (*Barodidi*). Prem Chand female characters are Purna (*Pratigya*) who is a widow; Suman (*Seva Sadan*) is forced to adopt the path of fallen women; Nirmala (*Nirmala*) is suspected by her husband for no fault of hers. Similarly in the novels of Nanak Singh, women's problems have been depicted in similar manner. Saroj (*Adh-Khilaia-Phul*) is a widow; Kamini (*Katti Hoi Patang*) has been thrown out of house by her husband; Sundari (*Chitta Lahu*) is a victim of society; Salochana (*Adam Khor*) is a suspect. They all question about the position of women in society.

The incident of colonial rule has also influenced different Indian writers in different ways. When the whole nation was fighting against the tyranny of British rule, the writers like Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, R K Narayan in *Guide*, Kamala Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice* and *Nectar in a Sieve*, gave voice to the social problems of hunger, starvation, casteism, and untouchability. Their protagonists suffer from common predicament.

The issue of cultural identity, linguistic, gender, religion, region, caste have emerged as an important point of discussion both in Indian politics and literature since 1980s. This Indian context sparked off interesting debates on the idea of development, modernization, class/caste, gender, etc. There are a great deal of writing from various communities surfacing in the post eighties. This development is also represented in literature, especially in Dalit and women's literatures.

Along with feminist studies and post-colonial studies, literature in India is directly linked to the rise of modern Indian nationalism. Swapan Majumdar one of the important comparatist opines that "comparative literature has been used to assert the national cultural identity" (14). In India, the emotional upsurge of the nationalist movement drove the writers beyond the narrow confines of their regional literature and taught them to appreciate the beauty of the literature belonging to their neighbouring states. Mulk Raj Anand, Yash Pal, Sardar Jaffri, Ahmad Faiz, Amrita Pritam were influenced by the down trodden class and produced literature for a classless society and for equality between man and woman. All though they wrote in different languages, they were confronted with the same political, social and economic situations. India, the country is one, it's problems are similar, it's environment is same, only the languages are different so a comparative study is the tool to understand its literature.

Translations are also valuable in bringing about similarities and dissimilarities between significant works of literature and are very helpful in the field of Comparative literature. Bijay Kumar Das in *A Handbook of Translation Studies* says:

Translation has proven as a major factor for the development of culture all over the world...It brings a correlation between literature and culture in every multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. Hence translation highly promotes the cause of comparative literature” (133).

It is true that translation of a literary work of literature cannot render the original taste yet it can convey the very message the author wanted to express and a translation may be better than the original and at times as it may have remarkable qualities to survive for a longer time. It leads to rediscovery and revaluation of great literary works of other language. Secondly, when the literature is translated into other language, it immediately gets the scope of being compared with the literary texts written originally and also being accepted as the mainstream work. Fitzeral translated Omar khayam’s *Rubaiyat* from Arabic to English and then many Indian poets from different regional languages had translated *Rubaiyat* from the Fitzeral’s English version. Jatindranath Duwara, the renown poet of Assam had translated it into Assamese as *Omar Tirthal*. The plays of Vijay Tendulkar are translated into regional languages like Bengali, into national language Hindi and into English also. His *Ghashiram Kotwal* is staged in many countries. The plays of Girish Karnad are also translated in many regional languages and thus at once demand a comparative study.

The main purpose of Comparative literature is to understand the relation between literature and the human activity and human predicament. Comparative literature is the study of literature using comparison as the main instrument where the study is of the heritage of man and consequently of every aspect of human experience. Its main purpose is to amalgamate the entire human experience and embrace it earnestly, and thus all human relationships are fulfilled through the comparative approach to literatures pertaining to different regions. Comparative study helps to diminish regional and cultural boundaries, and in place of that universality of human relationships emerges out. Indian philosophy had believed that the Supreme power of the whole creation is Brahma and man’s ultimate aim is to meet God and attain ‘nirvana’ or salvation. Behind the whole creation of the universe is the infinite divine power. ‘Paramatma’ is the source of unlimited love, joy, beauty and ultimate truth. This is the essence of Indian life and all the Indian writers aim to convey that through their writings.

I conclude that common history, inherited themes, common experiences and similar processes of dealing with these influences may be said to mark the integral element of ‘Indian’ literature. Therefore, the conceptualization of comparative literature is quite relevant to multi-lingual and multi-cultural nation like India to retrieve the unity of the country. I want to quote K. Chellappan, who has rightly written in *Thematology of Comparative Indian Literature*:

Comparative Literature in the broader sense sees the unity of human consciousness and the unity underlying the different ways in which the human spirit has sought expression creatively, producing different cultural patterns (110).

Comparative Literature provides readers a serious, sustained understanding of cultures beyond their own and helps them to become better global citizens. Thus, we need to look at our literature from within and also study the context in which they are produced and considered and to turn towards the sources and resources resulting from cultural contact far older than the colonial episode, reflect upon their influences as well as their survival in ‘post’ colonial modernity. Indian literature, thus, is a continuous, ever evolving and inter-literary process where Indian language and literature are consistently in the re/making.

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