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Literature in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Comparative literature provides a valuable framework for examining literary works across different languages, cultures, historical periods, and literary traditions. This research paper, entitled "Literature in Comparative Perspective," explores the significance of comparative approaches in understanding similarities, differences, and interconnections among literary texts. It examines how themes, genres, narrative techniques, cultural values, and social experiences are represented across diverse literary traditions. The study also highlights the role of translation, cultural exchange, historical contexts, and interdisciplinary perspectives in shaping literary interpretation. Using a qualitative and analytical approach based on selected literary texts and secondary sources, the research emphasizes how comparative analysis broadens critical understanding and promotes cross-cultural dialogue. It argues that literature in comparative perspective not only enhances the appreciation of literary diversity but also reveals universal human experiences and distinct cultural identities. The study concludes that comparative literature is an essential field for developing a deeper, more inclusive, and globally informed understanding of literary expression.

Keywords: *Comparative Literature, Literary Analysis, Cross-Cultural Studies, Literary Traditions, Cultural Identity, Translation Studies, Interdisciplinary Approach, Literary Criticism, Global Literature, Cultural Exchange.*

The study of literature can be a meaningful as well as legitimate academic exercise only when it is directed to our needs, private as well as social. So can the study of comparative literature. In India one finds instances where the study of more than one literature has been a prevailing practice, be it the school or collegiate system. As a discipline born out of the need to reinvent Humanities scholarship in the subcontinent, Comparative Literature is grounded on the possibilities of reading literatures of the country as well as of the world, while taking cognizance of methodology that can be applied to these texts. One finds plenty of single-literature departments offering English Literature, Hindi Literature and regional literatures across the length and breadth of Indian universities. While these departments profess a view of particular literatures being produced in singular or diaspora appearances, the contention they seem to be referring to is the evolution of language-literatures within a specific area. Thus English literature departments focus on literatures from the British mainland, the history and the politics that aid its development, while also taking note of worthy translations from earlier colonized spaces. Single Literature departments across the country are offering courses in Sanskrit aesthetics, African politics as well as modern linguistics with a smattering of continental philosophy. Therefore, an English department may provide one with a collection of the choicest specimens of World Literature, written in English, while moving students along the corridors of European philosophy teamed with Sanskrit grammar. This would seem befitting to any student who wishes to get a wholesome understanding of literatures across the world and has access to only one or two languages. However, when English as language and literature is taught in places like India, Kenya, Spain, Pakistan it comes with the historical, linguistic and cultural baggage of colonialism brought forth by mass propagation of religion, language and education perceived with a sense of hierarchy.

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The question of literary excellence; that only works of undisputed literary excellence should be offered. (In this case it meant virtually the study of disputable 'peaks' of English Literature.) The question of literary excellence implies a value judgement as to what is literary and what is excellence, and from whose point of view. Liyong, was successful in the removal of the English Department, with the introduction of African Literatures Department at Nairobi University, Kenya, which offers a comprehensive syllabus of formal elements and various traditions which make the geographical space of Africa.

In India Thomas Babington Macaulay's dream of creating a class 'Indian in blood, but English in taste' wasrealized with the formation of several English Literature departments across British India. With the establishment of Sera pore Press and Fort William College in 1800 began the process of transition in administration and education activities. The study of English Literature in India can be traced from the British government's educational reforms which included Macaulay's Minute, the 1813 Charter Act and the 1835 English Education Act of William Bentinck, along with missionaries' work of imparting religious expositions. In the early phases of education in India, English teaching was imparted alongside Oriental 1989. However, with Macaulay's Minute, funds for teaching of Oriental languages were reduced, and English emerged as the language more suited for studying Humanities. Oriental Studies or Indology which had had many takers from Sir William Jones to Max Mueller, included education in Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Urdu, and later Marathi and Chinese. Macaulay proposed the sum of money allocated for education of the natives be put to another purpose—teaching the English tongue to aspiring civil classes—and Persian was replaced as the court language with English. This led not only to the creation of a class of citizens who would be included in administrative affairs at a later stage, but also facilitated an 'Indian' understanding of a foreign language. As many Anglophone countries have been a witness, the homogeneity of a single language (in this case English) came to be contested in India, Nigeria, Canada, America and so forth. The idea of the English language as hegemonising, and homogenous entity remains a question for most English teaching departments across the world, wherein the question of the influence and adaptability of languages may be looked into.

Coming back to the nature of Comparative Literature as taught in India, the epigraph by Sisir Kumar Das states the pressing concern of relationships that exist between Indian literate. Comparative Literature is an approach that pushes the boundaries of single literary criticism not only beyond the study of a single literature, but also beyond the conventional fence of aesthetic appreciation and historical criticism by making the study interdisciplinary.

Comparative Literature as a discipline outside of India may be said to have formed after the Napoleonic Wars, as a means of including other viewpoints. The English name of 'Comparative Literatures' was coined by Matthew Arnold in 1848, the French referred to it as 'Cours de litératurecomparée' which can be dated to the early 1820-30 Germans called it 'Vergleichendeliteraturgeschichte', primarily known through MorizCarrièr, in 1854. How literature can be conceived as an exercise in plurality is perhaps one of the questions a practitioner of Comparative Literature is concerned with. However, the discipline may stand for a broadening of world-views, and an extension of what may be called as the reader's 'horizon of expectations.' DevSen points out that the discipline is composed keeping in mind an interdisciplinary framework, and it breaks certain boundaries of aesthetics and history by placing the student in a co-habitable space. Comparative Literature may be said to have existed since the Greco-Roman period in the West and the 11th century in India during which the Bhakti and Sufi movements had spread across South Asia. The basic premise of Comparative Literature is known to be bordered along the lines of a text as a plural entity, which means that anybody attempting a textual study of the Ramchandar would be doing a genre-based study of charity, a thematic study that would lead them to Bhakti rasa, while also taking note of the language, in this case Awadhi (Indo-Iranian, Deccan family) which moves across the central and the southern regions of the subcontinent. The Comparative Literature methodology thus speaks of these particularities while reading any text, which may be summarized as Historiography, Genology, and Thematology

The need for an academic enquiry into this condition of 'comparitivism' emerged in French and the Russian academic circles during the 1900, wherein debates between General and Comparative Literature surfaced along with engagements related to 'form' and 'content'. During the 19th century the need to construct national identities was felt across America, Greece, Poland, France and Italy, and 'World Literature' emerged as an expression and means of identifying with other national identities, spearheaded by Goethe who called it 'Weltliteratur'. However, it must be noted that World Literature refers to a taxonomical category, whereby the collection of the finest specimens of literary productions across the world were being assimilated according to European sensibilities. Various ways in which Shakespeare was made available to British India and Africa would lead one to explore the ways in which his plays have been adapted or translated by the readers, which forms an important illustration of Reception Studies. The need being felt in 1960 Nairobi echoed in Calcutta at a different historical juncture, with the country's engineering institutes being set up, and the sense of the need to promote scholarship in the Humanities. It was at this point, in 1956, that the noted poet-scholar Buddha Bose, editor of Kilo, whose work ranged from translating the French poet Baudelaire to an exposition on Bengali cuisine, established the Department of Comparative Literature at the Jabalpur College of Engineering.

Comparative Literature as a discipline was formed to provide its practitioners the opportunity to move beyond the boundaries of English and engage with the variety of literatures found in other European languages.

The course was designed in such a manner that students gained an understanding of one regional language, Bangla (in case of Jadavpur) and one classical language, Sanskrit, and later Tamil, the primary idea being to first situate other English across the globe, and the second to have access to two distinct language families within India, via which other languages could also be approached. Departments offering Tamil, Urdu, Hindi, Bangla, Malayalam, Kannada et al propped open a diverse arena for students of literature. Amidst these developments, questions pertaining to separate language histories were beginning to surface.

With the establishment of the department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, a distinct set of ideologies and practices began to form under the scholarship of NareshGuha, Buddhadev Bose, and SudhindranathDatta. Phases of literary engagements beginning from the 1960s could be said to have followed a traditional pattern of education, wherein the European and the American schools of Comparative Literature were studied. This would entail the beginnings of Comparative Literature as an academic practice with reference to the Russian school of literary scholarship, namely the OPOJAZ in St. Petersburg and the Moscow Linguistic Circle between 1910 and 1930. With due emphasis added to the debates fashioned between genre studies and thematic studies, as well as the question over literary studies' relations to form and content, the relationship between the creative work and the creator was brought under a new light by the reader, and the act of reading a text . In a department of Comparative Literature, the nature of the relationship between reader, writer and text has been continually explored keeping in mind the importance of methodologies. Comparative Literature functions in a most dynamic way, by locating itself as a practice within a specific geo-political space, are it in a multilingual country like Canada, a multicultural nation like the United States, or pluricultural India.

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Conflicts of interest

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