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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Comparative Literature is emblematic of the urge for the convergence in the modern world both at the intellectual and the cultural levels. The boundaries of knowledge are transcended by the contemporary currents of thought in various fields where these currents are impelled by a passion for synthesis.



Comparative Literature has not only interdisciplinary approach but also a transnational dimension though it has its roots in the national literature".¹ (K Chellappan, p.109)

KEYWORDS : Comparative Literature , modern world , human kind .

INTRODUCTION:

Comparative Literature is an interdisciplinary field; it studies literature across national borders, across time period, across language, across genres, across boundaries. It provides geographically and chronologically a broader perspective on the literary and cultural achievement of human kind than is possible from within a single literature alone.

Comparative Literature crosses the barriers of borders of single language and national literature. Comparative Literature studies a literature with reference to other literatures, generally on a bi- or multilingual or national basis.

After Goethe's proclamation in 1827 that national literature did not mean much any more and that the time for world literature approaching, literary studies all over the world gradually moved towards deprovincialization, towards working together for a better literary and social consciousness.

Comparative Literature as a distinct discipline has been nurtured in Western universities for more than 150 years. It became a subject of study in the latter part of the 19th century.

Though comparative literature as a literary concept is of recent origin, comparison as a tool of

criticism has been in use since the birth of criticism. "The method of comparison is not peculiar to comparative literature; it is ubiquitous in all literary study and in all sciences, social and natural. Nor does literary study, even in the practice of the most orthodox comparative scholars, proceed by the method of comparison alone. Any literary criticism will not only compare but reproduce, analyse, interpret, evoke, evaluate, generalize etc, in all one page".² (Rene Wellek, p.17).

It was Matthew Arnold who used the term 'Comparative Literature' for the first time in English, in 1848. He wrote – "How plain it is now, though an attention to the comparative literature for the last fifty years might have instructed any one of it that England is in a certain sense a behind the continent."³ (GWE Russell, p.8). But it was a private letter not published till 1895. In English the decisive use was by Posnett, who used the term on the title of his book in 1886. In France, Villemain was the first to use the term.

The word 'Comparative Literature' has given rise to debates over the years. There is no consensus about its meaning, scope and methods. According to Wellek and Warren the term comparative literature initially meant the study of oral literature, especially of the themes of folk tales, in relation to their migration into higher artistic literature. They also defined that the study of relationships between two or more literatures comes under the purview of comparative literature. In addition they propounded the conception, which identified comparative literature with the study of literature in its totality with world literature. They envisage the ideal of the unification of all literature into one great synthesis, where each nation would play its role without abandoning its individuality.

Van Tieghem defined comparative literature thus: "The object of comparative literature is essentially the study of diverse literatures in their relation with one another".⁴ (qtd in Rene Wellek, p.15). He confines comparative literature to binary relations. As Wellek says,

"Comparative literature in the narrow sense of binary relations cannot make a meaningful discipline, as it would have to deal only with 'foreign trade' between fragments of literary production".⁵ (qtd in Rene Wellek, p.15).

A more inclusive definition is given by H.H. H. Remak. He puts it, "The study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country of the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and the other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts, philosophy, history the social sciences, religion, etc, on the other hand".⁶ (qtd in Rene Wellek, p.15)

Comparative literature emerged as a new discipline to work against the notion of national literatures. Its final aim is to visualize the total literary activities of man as a single universe. As Rene Wellek says – "Comparative literature has crystallized the movement against the romantic emphasis on a single national literature; it obviously cannot and should not disperse of this basis in the study of single works and single literatures and will not and cannot ignore national differences. But it will transcend them and aim at a distant ideal goal, a universal literary history, and a universal literary theory."⁷

Comparative literature needs at least two literatures to start with. But this dual concern is not sufficient to meet all the demands of comparative literature. Because comparative literature views the literatures produced in all languages and in all countries as an indivisible whole. A comparatist has to go beyond one language and one literature. He has to extend his area of investigation to as many languages and literatures as possible.

"A comparatist is hardly in a position to exercise any aesthetic judgment in choosing the best works in all languages of the world. He is concerned mainly with the relationships, the resemblances and differences between national literatures; with their convergences and divergences. He has to work within a rigorous frame work to avoid subjective predilections and personal preferences. But at the

same time he wants to arrive at a certain general understanding of literary activities of man and to help create a universal poetics. Goethe wanted the common reader to come out of the narrow confines of his languages and geography and to enjoy the finest achievements of man. The comparatist also wants to come out of the confines of language and geography, but not so much to identify the best in all literatures as to understand the relationships between literatures in their totality".⁸ (Sisir kumar Das, p.96)

WHY COMPARATIVE LITERATURE?

National literatures have played great social roles in different countries. Literature has played a role in creating a sense of cultural superiority. "The study of national literature is not tough for any nation. No national literature howsoever powerful, is sufficient to counteract the innate provincialism of man; no national literature, no single literature, howsoever rich is rich enough to present the highest literary achievements of man. The study of literature, then, has to be directed towards these goals, one dependent on the other, namely an enlargement of taste and an inheritance of the total achievement of literature".⁹ (Sisir Kumar Das, p.6).

The present age has shown keen interest in the variety of literatures produced in different languages of the world. Earlier people were happy with their own literary achievement. They did not have any desire to know the literature of other countries. The exclusiveness of the ancients began to break down gradually with changes in political and religious lives. Today the impact of one literature on another has become a part of the creative process. The revolution in transport and communication, especially internet has made the world a global village. People have realized the immensity of the world literature – Today's reader is more knowledgeable about the literatures of various nations than readers in the preceding centuries. The translations of classics have created a silent revolution. "The greatest singular effort of the availability of significant works of literatures of different nations in translation is liberalization and an enlargement of taste".¹⁰(Sisir Kumar Das, pp.6-7).

The growth of multi-lingual situations, migrations of people from one country to another has created awareness of literatures of other countries.

The concept of comparative literature is more relevant to multi-lingual and multi-cultural nation like India to rediscover the unity of the country. "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".¹¹(K. Chellappan, p.110).

Comparative Literature provides readers a serious, sustained understanding of cultures beyond their own and helps them to become better global citizens.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY:

As Wellek says, Comparative Literature is a genre of literary research without boundaries of language, ethics and politics. It aims at studying all genres of literature from an international angle because all creative literary writings and experience have an aspect of unity. There exists the distant ideal of anticipating from the international angle the establishment of a global history of literature and global studies of literature. The scope of its research covers historically unrelated phenomena in language and style', as well as origins and influence in history. Comparative Literature studies both the history of literature and theories of criticism.

For the study of various literatures comparison is the main tool. As Eliot says comparison and analysis are the chief tools of the critic. Anybody who wants to bring out the specialties of a work compares it unconsciously and automatically with similar works. But for a comparatist the method of

comparison becomes fundamental. He compares consciously, "Comparative Literature is explicitly comparative. It tries to be systematic without being eclectic and this single-mindedness implies a method"¹² (I.N. Choudhary, p.3).

But Comparative Literature cannot be confined to comparison alone. Instead various methods including description, the portrayal of characteristics, interpretation, narration, explanation and evaluation should be used as frequently as 'comparison'¹³ (Warren and Wellek, p. 3)

International contextualism in literary history and comparative criticism are the laws which determine the overall plan or method for the proper understanding of the field. ¹⁴ (I.N. Choudhary, p.3)

Now comparative literature has taken shape into a five dimensional discipline:

Thematic studies or thematics

Genre studies or geneology

Influence studies

Comparative poetics

Translation studies

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