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Comparative Literature: From Eurocentrism to Decoloniality

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Abstract

This paper attempts to trace the history of Comparative Literature as a tool to postcolonial understanding, as well as the importance of a reciprocal relationship, where Comparative Literature can be understood, formulated and practiced through a postcolonial perspective. Though the correlation between these two areas of study has not gone unnoticed, yet, neither has there emerged a decidedly theoretical comparative postcolonial framework. The paper seeks to briefly map the history of the discipline and situate it in its postcolonial reception. In the course of the paper, paper will be focussing on three main aspects of the Comparative Literature-postcolonial conjunction, more or less in this order: postcolonial analysis of the discipline; the decolonising of Comparative Literature; and inversely, decolonising through comparative literature.

Keywords:
Comparative Literature; Eurocentricism; Postcolonial; Decolonial; Orientalist

Origin and Eurocentricism

The emergence of Comparative Literature as a conscious discipline was a European phenomenon. Broadly speaking Comparative Literature of the early 1900s can be characterized under two headings; that which believed strongly in national consciousness as integral to Comparative Literature (Europe) and that which sought to do Comparative Literature in transnational terms (America). While the former model implicitly indicates the latent racism which was to manifest itself in the World Wars, the later appears to be an idealistic and humanistic endeavour to encompass all that is understood as great literature, so as to arrive at a "world literature" i.e. *Weltliteratur* proposed first by Goethe. However well-meaning such an enterprise may sound, our postcolonial consciousness has taught us to be wary of humanistic claims. Indeed, Goethe himself was not innocent of nationalistic pride, which highly qualifies and renders suspect his vision of world literature. World Literature, as this quotation shows, was a means of displaying Germany's defining role in the world of culture:

> Everywhere we hear and read of the progress of the human race, of the broader view of international and human relations. Since it is not my office here to define or qualify these broad generalities, I will merely acquaint my friends with my conviction that there is being formed a universal world literature in which an honourable role is reserved for us Germans … (qtd in Majumdar, 51)

Rene Wellek defined this model of comparative literature as "identical with the study of literature independent of linguistic, ethnic, and political boundaries … Comparative Literature can and will flourish only if it shakes off artificial limitations and becomes simply the study of literature (qtd in Bassnett, 36)." To read literature outside of its defining context is not without its problems. Susan Bassnett responding to the above quote disapprovingly remarked: "No mention of the historical perspective here; invasions, colonization, economic deprivation are all set aside, for what is being considered is literature, and only literature, as though all writers worked in a vacuum divorced from external reality (37)." Though Bassnett criticized the approach, she failed to mention the politics behind it. Universal or world literature would, knowing western

shortsightedness, take literary and experimental values generated out of a western context to be the normative ones. So, it becomes apparent that a western value system masqueraded in the guise of naïve, humanist universalism.

G.N. Devy in "The Commonwealth 'Period'" argued that the origin of European Comparative literature lies in Oriental philology. Sir William Jones, who was the first eminent European scholar of Oriental philology, established clear parallels between Sanskrit and the European languages of antiquity. But his Orientalist interest was not altogether uninvolved, as the ultimate aim was to master the knowledge of subjugated nations for imperialist purposes. Quoting from his "Third Anniversary Discourse" delivered to the Asiatic Society at Calcutta (1786), Devy substantiates the ulterior motive of Jones and the Orientalist enterprise, "I begin with India, not because I find reason to believe it the true centre of population or of knowledge, but, because it is the country, which we now inhabit (146)."

The separation of Asian and African comparative studies into Indology and Anthropology, thus, ensured that Comparative Literature was regulated by European epistemology. Comparative Literature then would become just another institution, which would reproduce and recirculate western values and therefore, consolidate and perpetuate colonial domination. Where literatures of other cultures were acknowledged, it was done only in self-relational terms. Swapan Majumdar in an essay entitled "Indian –Western Literary Relations" alluding to the Indian colonial situation points to this pseudo and self-referential appreciation which the colonial subjects also learnt -

> When the British Orientalists discovered the "Indian Shakespeare" in Kalidasa, or Bankim was called the "Scott of Bengal" or Tagore the "Shelley" by their own countrymen, these no doubt were the epithets used as tributes though these now smack of colonialist expansionism (69)

Even where such appreciation may be genuine, it firmly placed the western colonizer countries at the centre to which, at best, the colonized countries literature could approximate. Such a comparative appreciation of literary worth implied that literary traditions that did not obtain in the colonizer country's literature would be neglected. Bhakti literature for example has a rich history in India and can be compared to Sufism in Persia. However, Comparative Literature as practiced in its heyday in the West, was

primarily Eurocentric and only occasionally was interested in literature other than European.

This Eurocentricism meant that comparative studies dwelt on ages and genres which created the sense of their superiority. For instance, European history literally blacked out the influence of the Arabic sciences, by labelling the medieval period the "dark ages" and refusing to acknowledge its indebtedness. Comparative Literature thus seldom, if ever, resulted in studies of literatures which were not European. The colonial disregard for the traditions perceived as different from the 'civilized West' is apparent in the study of Africa through anthropology, objectively it would seem, but actually riddled with cultural bias. As Ania Loomba explains, "anthropological studies rested upon the assumptions that non-European peoples were backward, primitive, quaint, sometimes even 'noble' but always different from the products of western civilization (48)." Relegating the study of Africa to the discipline of anthropology, further denied indigenous African traditions the status of the value loaded terms "culture" and "literature." So entrenched did such colonial thinking become that even in the 1970s Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer had to deliver his lectures in the department of Anthropology at Cambridge, because the English Department "did not believe in any such beast as "African literature (qtd in Bassnett, 73)." Nor was such blatant invisibilizing of African literature confined to imperial European countries. The duplication of European practices even in erstwhile-colonized countries was commonplace, with African universities perpetuating the bias.

Postcolonial Challenges

The call to revise the English Department syllabus is a reaction to the study of English literature as established during colonial rule, which aimed at producing colonial subjects to serve Macaulayan purposes. A step toward changing conditioned colonized consciousness was to be initiated, as the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o realized, through the abolition of the English department, in his case, at the university of Nairobi to establish in its stead, broadly structured comparative departments, his aim being "to orient ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre. All

other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation, and their contributing towards understanding ourselves (qtd in Bassnett, 74)." Such an approach reversed the centre (Europe)-margin (Africa, Asia etc.) equations, not for its own sake, but as the outcome of the new Africa centred consciousness, which would replace the Eurocentric one. A similarly fresh perspective, on Comparative Literature or rather a similar appropriation of Comparative Literature for post colonial purposes was proposed by Swapan Majumdar, who argued that western literature (including that from America and Australia) is composed of sub-national literatures, which all inherit virtually the same legacy as that of the European continent. On the other hand "Indian literature ... should be compared not with any single literature of the west, but with the concept of Western Literature as a whole, while the regional literatures should be assigned the status of constituent sub-national literatures in India (54)." This radical approach reshuffles the hierarchical equations between the colonized and colonizer to locate India in the privileged position of focus and at the same time reduces European literatures into a simplistic monolith in replication of the centre's own self-centred logic.

Thus, while the earlier western models for Comparative Literature were presented as depoliticised, comparative literary study as it evolved from Indian and African reconsiderations was deliberately and unabashedly reformulated so as to serve political purposes. It became as Bassnett recognizes "a political activity, part of the process of reconstructing and reasserting cultural and national identity in the postcolonial period (39)." Yet despite such an appraisal of the development in Comparative Literature in the postcolonial period Susan Bassnett states unequivocally,

> Today comparative literature in one sense is dead. The narrowness of the binary distinctions, the unhelpfulness of the ahistorical approach, the complacent shortsightedness of the literature-as-universal-civilizing-force approach have all contributed to its demise. But it lives on under other guises: in the radical reassessment of western cultural models at present being undertaken in many parts of the world ... (47)

Bassnett's statement implicates her in the colonialist discourse which she herself has been at pains to highlight and expose. The notion that since Comparative Literature as it appeared in its imperialistic guise has become a spent force and is therefore no longer important severely undermines and is dismissive of alternative postcolonial models. Did

Bassnett mean that Comparative Literature given a postcolonial thrust, no longer qualified to be called comparative literature or that in non-western hands it was no longer a force to be reckoned with?

The Decolonising Turn

Part of the force of Comparative Literature as it had been arrogated by postcolonially conscious critics is that it took over a cultural colonizing tool and reconstructed it into a decolonizing one. So, once Comparative Literature was refashioned by applying a postcolonial perspective, it could in turn be redeployed to serve the needs of postcolonialism. Comparative Literature through the lens of postcolonialism, recognized that influence and reception could not be studied outside of their specific contexts. It became clear that literary dominance coincided with economic or political dominance. In the Indian context Majumdar drew our attention to the fact that during colonialism if certain authors were "received favourably, it was primarily because the Englishmen in India preferred to talk of them with esteem (99)." Reception and influence then was not a neutral or voluntary act but was determined through recommendation and accessibility rather than appreciation. As Amiya Dev bluntly put it in "Towards Comparative Indian Literature" "we learnt to venerate the language and the literature of our colonial masters: hence the influence. We learnt correspondingly to feel inferior about ourselves: hence the reception (39)." Comparative Literature backed by postcolonial ideological considerations effectively dismantled western notions of literature, theory and history. GN Devy in the essay "Comparative Literature East and West" explains how literary works once canonized as world literature produce general 'criteria' for all literatures, and as a result "the other 'criteria' of local origin and limited ability get relegated to the background as 'obscure' and literary texts that do not confirm to the standard criteria are brushed aside as 'para-literature' (29)."

The superimposition of western values as normative literary standards was effectively diffused by the polysystem theory proposed by Itamar Evan-Zohar, where literature is perceived as a differentiated and dynamic conglomerate of systems. Literature then becomes a multifaceted whole constituted by individual literary systems

which are not viewed as central or marginal, but varieted. Thus Swapan Majumdar in accord with such a theory proclaims "the business of comparative literature is certainly not to blur or obliterate the distinctive features of different literatures and to marshal these under the command of General literature, but to bring in full relief the distinguishing areas of their originality (53)." Comparative Literature can therefore be employed as a useful tool towards the assertion of cultural difference and alterity, as the path to what Wole Soyinka called "self apprehension." This search is germane to those postcolonial countries which were adversely affected by colonialism. Often in colonies where the indigenous peoples were colonized on their own territories, the colonizer country chose to rule from a distance, discouraging mixing and predicating the desirability of their presence in the belief that the natives required their civilizing touch. In such cases the native population was at least temporarily, almost entirely conditioned into believing in its own worthlessness. Colonial encounters, especially those between the east and west, almost always not only excited an appreciation for everything that came from the colonizers, but conversely, also a depreciation of everything native. One mode that such colonised countries adopted to reestablish their lost dignity was to affirm and celebrate differences instead of being embarrassed and apologetic about them. In its initial stages such a stance is bound to produce rhetoric which is almost identical to the colonizer's but since it is an angry emotional response emanating from the margins, it is neither dangerous nor earnest. Sri Aurobindo thus tries to show how cultural values are in fact affiliated to power politics, and that were the Indians in a privileged position they would

> dismiss the *Iliad* as a crude and empty semi-savage and primitive epos, Dante's great work as a nightmare of a cruel and superstitious religious fantasy, Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian of considerable genius with an epileptic imagination, the whole drama of Greece, Spain and England as a mass of bad ethics and violent horrors ...109

And so the passage continues to considerable length. Here there is an outright denunciation of western literature in terms which the British had reserved for the colonized – savage, primitive, barbarian, immoral. There are numerous instances from the early Indian nationalist period where Western literature was unfavourably compared with Indian literature as for instance Rabindranath Tagore's statement: "in the Tempest

it is all oppression, malevolence, and torture – in Shakuntala unanimity, tranquility, and compassion. In the Tempest nature has assumed the form of man, yet has failed to unite with it by the bond of the soul. In Shakuntala trees and plants, birds and animals have, besides retaining their animal nature, acted in concert with man (qtd in Majumdar, 59)." Though this phase in most postcolonial countries has died out such countries are still striving to grapple with their situation. The need to create a separate independent identity is extremely important, not only to reinstate the sense of self-worth but also as a platform for political action.

For postcolonial Nations then identity is instituted by difference. Nationalism, with its accompanying anti-colonial discourse, is crucial to the identity formation of postcolonial countries. Anti-colonial nationalism is not modular, as Benedict Anderson suggests, but as Partha Chatterjee affirms "in fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not western(6)." Chatterjee argues for the colonial subject's right to imagine and thus criticizes the idea of nationalism being solely a derivative discourse. While Chatterjee views colonial nationalisms as different from, and crucial to the formation of postcolonial nations, Homi Bhabha chooses to undermine the very term. Bhabha emphasizes the performativity of narrative which leads to the construction of the notion of nation-ness, which in actuality is a liminal, indeterminate image. Bhabha's objective is to jeopardize "the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production (4)." Bhabha's post-structuralist strategy of erasing differences similarly diffuses the notion of postcolonial identities. Bhabha argues that postcoloniality creates the cross-cultural state of a hybrid ambivalence, which counters colonialist discourse of cultural purity and alterity. Thus for Bhaba mimicry becomes an unselfconscious result of the constructedness of colonial discourse, rather than a deliberately wielded weapon. But though such writing deconstructs the notion of the innate superiority of the colonizer over the colonized, both being in a state of relational flux, it denies political agency to the colonized subject, and as such carries force only on a theoretical level. Gerry Smith in "The Politics of

Hybridity: Some Problems with Crossing the Border" argues that "the dissolution of the border is far from unproblematic, and that although it is a typical tactic within colonial 'reverse discourses' hybridity is also hegemonically recuperable, easily absorbed by those with an interest in denying the validity of a coherent discourse of resistance (43)." To overcome identities predicated on difference may be desirable, and theoretically subversive, but before this state is reached, such theorizing invalidates the attempt even before the end is in sight. Nationalism and identity difference, realistically speaking, remains the only viable source of self-definition and self-esteem for postcolonial nations.

Ashcroft et al in the *The Empire Writes Back* suggest that if it were not for the development of national literatures as well as "the comparative studies between national traditions to which these lead, no discourse of the postcolonial could have emerged (17)." Ashcroft et al are not, as it would appear from this statement, arguing that Comparative Literature has been a formative influence towards the growth of postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, without isolating Comparative Literature as a separate discipline, the writers of the book acknowledge the importance of doing postcolonialism through a comparative approach:

> both literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross- culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless history of conquest and annihilation … the strength of post-colonial theory may well lie in its comparative methodology and the hybridized syncretic view of the modern world which this implies (36)

Comparisons with postcolonial countries draw attention to the significant parallels and national differences, and reveal the "imperial-colonial relationship as disjunctive rather than continuous (19)." While earlier studies of the colonial situation still operating within the colonizer's worldview would often subsume colonial differences to their common difference to the colonizer, postcolonially conscious comparative studies have sought to bring into focus the distinctiveness of colonial situations. G. N. Devy argues that the differing cultural contexts out of which individual instances of commonwealth literature is produced literally renders comparison between them impossible. Colonial rule is the only common factor these literatures share, their histories being non-comparable. For Devy, cultural style, emerging from a common language, is the only

feature which bears comparison. Comparative studies of English literatures produced in postcolonial countries can be based on the

> various strategies adopted towards imitation of the English language, and themes of root-searching, colonised-coloniser tensions, memory, past, history, deracination and acculturation, and use of experimental narrative structures, point-of-view, tense and gender use, and a tone of self-assertion (151).

Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe, can in part, be answered by such comparisons between postcolonial countries where European colonizing and neo-colonizing countries are reduced to marginality. One significantly substantial means of provincializing Europe is to study in comparison different literatures within single nations. More often than not, colonized countries have at least two languages, the indigenous language and the language of the colonizer country. For example, Canada which is a special case, has two main languages, English and French both of which owe their origin to colonialism. The Indian situation in this regard is unique, with literatures in over twenty languages, it offers innumerable opportunities for comparison across linguistic boundaries. Not only does this present an area of study independent of expressly colonial considerations, it also undermines the hegemonic supremacy of English, which even a so-called postcolonial writer like Salman Rushdie asserts in the Indian context, in blatant disregard of the voluminous work being produced in the numerous regional languages of India. Ashcroft et al totally overlook the existence of literatures in languages other than the "english" variables to be found in different colonised countries. Sisir Kumar Das in "Why Comparative Indian Literature?" in an attempt to arrive at a suitable definition of Comparative Literature relevant to the Indian context, redefines the scope of the western model of Comparative Literature as understood to be only applicable across nations. Arguing for comparison across linguistic boundaries he proclaims, "our Comparative Literature must be Comparative Indian Literature because nothing else can be the basis for our literary study (100)." Indeed, Das argues conclusively that literature, in the Indian context, is intrinsically comparative, the conscious attempt to read literatures in comparison being

comparatively only a recent phenomenon. Literatures in ancient and medieval India have always been in contact. Particularly in ancient India, writers often used more than one language within the same text seamlessly and were appreciated by ancient critics.

In Contemporary Times

The 21st century has seen the dialogue between postcoloniality and Comparative Literature evolve further. If David Damrosch spear headed a revival world literature through translation, he did so continuing the ethnocentric Western bias. His uncritical belief that translation can give an impetus to world literature has been critiqued by Emily Apter. In *Against World Literature* Apter argues that translation erodes linguistic and political nuances and creates a false sense of equal accessibility of a text which in actuality is inflected with the asymmetries of power equations. She posits untranslatability as a defiance of so-called universal standards of readability and an assertion cultural difference and identity. Aamir Mufti's call to forget English is an attempt to de-anglicize the dominate discourse in order to allow for vernacular traditions to prosper. Most recently Walter Mignolo's call for epistemic delinking from a universalistic narrative seeks to allow space for pluriversal knowledges.

Conclusion

The postcolonial critique of Comparative Literature has evolved with the increasing interventions of the Global South. Spivak's notion of planetary consciousness is an interesting and compelling challenge to a singular civilizational dominance that has fostered a plurality that can be seen in such ideas as digital humanities.

The comparative postcolonial framework is not proposed as the end, it is only the means to overcome postcoloniality, if that is possible. Only when the aesthetics of opposition is replaced by the aesthetics of identity, when cultural relativism independent of hierarchical or oppressive connotations, is established, will world literature be born. Meanwhile, it is hoped that we are moving towards imagining literature as reflective of planetary coexistence.

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