

Tools and Schools of Comparatists: A Perspective in Comparative Literature

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Abstract

Comparative literature is a kind of literary study that deals with literature of two or more linguistic or cultural groups. And a person associated with comparative literature is known as a comparatist. As this study is a comparative in nature, it demands a new kind of approach to study it. And consequently, there emerged different schools of comparative literature such as European schools consisting of French, German, English, American etc and non-European like African, Indian and so on. This paper attempts to identify the tools and approaches of the comparatist and elaborate the similarities and differences in the schools of comparative literature.

Key Words: Comparatist, comparative literature, translation studies, French school, German school, English school

The terms 'comparative literature' and 'world literature' designate a similar study or scholarship. It is defined as a study of 'literature without borders'. Comparative literature is sometimes also called 'Complit'. It deals with the literature of two or more linguistic, cultural and national groups. The student and teacher of comparative literature are known as 'comparatist'. Comparative literature is widely used in many universities and departments in the USA.

Though it is often practiced with different languages, it may also work with same language (for example English). If the literature originates from the different nations or cultures among which that language is spoken.

What are the qualifications of comparatists? They should be proficient in several languages (at least two languages of source and target languages of the texts under study). They should be familiar with

different literary traditions, literary criticism, and major masterpieces of those languages.

The perspective of complit is an interdisciplinary in nature. It comprises of the study of literature across national borders where writers from different nations are studied; across the time period where writers from two different points of time are considered; across the languages where writers from same country writing in different languages are taken; across the genres where a poet or a dramatist is compared with a novelist or vice versa; across the boundaries between literature and fine arts such as Music, Painting, Dance, Film etc. where the piece of painting or dance or any other arts can be compared to literature or vice versa; and finally across disciplines such as Literature and Psychology, Science, Philosophy, Architecture, History, Politics, Sociology etc. where works of fiction and nonfiction

are studied comparatively. It is therefore the object of study of *complit* is combination of two entities having similarities and dissimilarities.

The interdisciplinary nature of the study demands that comparatists must be acquainted with translation studies, sociology, cultural and critical studies and history to name few. The syllabus of comparative literature, therefore, is designed by the scholars from several departments or streams.

Eclecticism is one of the points of criticism. Eclecticism is an act of selecting good out of different available sources. The major charges leveled on this ground are the following: one, *complit* is insufficiently defined; two, the comparatist fall easily into dilettantism, the state of being amateur or generalist because of its vast and broad scope of study. Other way round, eclecticism appears to be a suitable method of comparatist, and dilettantism is basic qualification of the student of *complit*.

The existence of Comparative Literature gave rise to the different schools of comparative literature. Susan Bassnet contends that most of the scholars of *complit* haven't 'come to meet at a definite point' about comparative literature which led to contrasting perspectives. These contrasting perspectives include West Schools and Non-European Schools. The former consists of French school, German school, English School and Russian school, while later considers African, Indian and so on. It calls for a bit more elaboration of these schools for clear understanding.

French School

French School of comparative literature came under the influence of Positivism, the movement which looks at the things skeptically, rationally etc. The two important aspects of this school are the notions of influence and reception. The methodology adopted by the comparatist of this school doesn't attribute the superiority to the literature of one nation over other. They are least interested in making comparison for superiority-inferiority of one piece of literature over other. M. M Enani points out precisely the methods of this school. It is "a branch of literary study which traces the mutual relations between two or more internationally and linguistically different literatures and text ... a branch of literary history, for it tackles international spiritual affinities."(p.12, M. M. Enani, 2005) Thus, the comparatists attempts to examine the origins and influences of one nation over another.

Being binary studies, with intention to find similarities and dissimilarities in the works, the Comparative Literature studies "take place between specific individuals". There is no space and scope for 'anonymous' writings, 'folkloric', and 'collective' works which are excluded on the ground of being oral and impersonal.

Paul Van Tieghem distinguished between 'General Literature' and Comparative Literature. To him, general literature is very vague while for him comparative literature exists for studying 'two entities' or books or writers etc.

Remak, American scholar, maintains that Tiegham's categories are 'inseparable' both depend on one method. Remak is supported by Guyard, the founder of French School. Remak agrees that Tiegham widens scope to General Literature than earlier national literature "instead of confining themselves to two European Literature (French and English or German) the devotees of French School are invited to bring more literatures from inside and outside Europe into the zone of their studies." (p.13, M. M. Enani, 2005)

M. Wahba points out that the French School failed to define terminologies and methodologies of Comparative Literature because of their focus on "outside impact on literary works while ignoring the internal aspects of texts in questions."

French School's common fields of study are the concepts of Influence and that of Reception. Influences may be literary or nonliterary or it may be direct or indirect influences. Enani believes that Influence is seen as a "movement of an idea, a theme an image, a literary tradition or even a tone from a literary text into another." (p.15, M. M. Enani, 2005)

French School demands that the comparatist needs to be "well-versed in different languages, cultures and literary history in order to come up with sound conclusions" (p.19, M.M. Enani, 2005). This becomes a standard of measuring in the hands of the comparatist.

Both Tieghem and Guyard concur that the study of the writer's impact on a foreign country cannot be divorced from studying the reception of this writer's works in that

country to a degree at which it becomes impossible to distinguish between 'reception' and 'influence' (p.19, M.M. Enani, 2005). For instance, Fitzgerald's translation of Ommar Khayam's Rubayait or Pushkin's adaptation of Byron elegy to Russian style or English sonnet and Marathi *sunit* are the examples of concepts of Reception/Imitation/Borrowing in the study of comparative literature. In these examples the original stanza forms, styles and patterns are recreated in English, Russian and Marathi respectively. Nevertheless, while doing this, the line of demarcation needs to be drawn between 'imitation' and 'borrowing', the creative activities and 'plagiarism', a literary theft.

According to the French School, the sharing between international literatures happens in the following fields of study.

- i. Literary schools and genres: Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Surrealism etc. Or Epic, Novel, Drama etc. Early Indian English writing was influenced by English Romanticism.
- ii. Ideological Echoes: national history, philosophy, ethics, culture, politics etc. cannot be divorced from literary history.
- iii. Image Echoes: Country's image in the foreign writer's work. For example E.M. Foster's *Passage to India*. Image of certain character representing the nation. For example dress, trade, culture, cuisine, procreation etc.

- iv. Verbal Echoes: give and take between languages; words and idioms which crept from border of one into another language.
- v. Human Models and Heroes: literary characters from myths, religions, history etc.

Thus, the French School of comparative literature emphasizes on the languages of literature so as to examine the mutual impact and influence. Therefore influence and impact of one literature over other is a tool of the comparatist of French School.

German School

The origin of German school of comparative literature is traced back to the nineteenth century. Great writer Goethe is considered the pioneer of comparative Literature in Germany. But it flourished in the second of half of the twentieth century. Credit goes to Prof. Peter Szondi who popularized new school of comparative literature. It is Szondi who considered drama, lyrics, poetry and hermeneutic in general and comparative literature. His idea was furthered by the talks delivered a constellation of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul De Man, Theodor Adorno, Rene Wellek, Geoffrey Hartman and Lionel Trilling to name few. Szondi's idea of comparative literature was taking shape through a series of talks by these luminaries. The perspective is formed by transnational or transatlantic comparative literature that is inspired by the ideas of East European literary theorists and structuralists, the Russian and Prague school of criticism. Thus, the crux of this school is

focus on thematology or thematic concerns of the texts under study.

American School

Second half of 20th Century witnessed American school of comparative literature. It is a reaction against French school. It aims at going beyond the political borders of literary texts. Henry Remak is considered to be pioneer of American school of comparative literature. To him, comparative literature is not a discipline but a “a connecting link between literature and other fields of cognition such as Fine Arts, Social Sciences, Humanities and General Sciences. By doing away with the ‘chauvinist nationalism’ of French School, American School relies on the models of ‘transdisciplinary work’. Bassnett puts, “the American perspective on Comparative Literature was based from the start on ideas of ‘interdisciplinary and universalism’” (M.M. Enani, 2005). The foundation of this school is universalism and interdisciplinarity. The foci and the fields of study in American School shift to ‘parallelism’ and ‘intertextuality’. Let's elaborate these concepts.

Parallelism Theory criticizes the principles of ‘Influence Theory’ for its inaccuracy and ambiguity. Ihab Hassan proposed another alternative theory of parallelism in which the idea of similarities in humanity's social and historical evolution is seen in the literary development. For instance, the political and social relations during the feudal period resulted in similar patterns of thought, art and literature in different parts of the world. The notion of influence of one text over

other gain importance because of both influence and context, it is simply because the context allows influence to take place.

In Intertextuality Theory, intertextuality refers to the reference of a text to another. M Enani defines it “as the relation between two or more texts at a level which affects the way or ways of reading the text” (M.M. Enani, 2005). There are two texts the old text and the new text; the former is termed as hypotext and later the hypertext. Hypotext, as Genette calls it, is the component of influencing text. Transtextuality is across textuality which blends the components of hypotext and hypertext. Literature, to this school, is a continuous process of reshaping of old texts and making it new ones. Therefore, parallelism and intertextuality is reading strategies of this school.

English School

First time Mathew Arnold used this Comparative Literatures (in plural) in his letter to his sister.

It is based on his Touchstone Method in that the high seriousness of matter and manner is tested by complying with Greek, Latin and French masters.

Placing is the methodology used wherein two works are placed together for ‘mutual illumination’. Both the entities are considered equal.

Beyond Euro American Schools

The fate of comparative literature in the second half of the twentieth century in the non-euro American schools is traceable in the glimpses of ideas held by the

comparatists. In 1970s Neupokeva criticized American method of criticism as being unfair in treating text’s ideology by regarding “text as an independent entity” and which was seen as ‘formalism of the west’.

In Czechoslovakia, Durshin states that Comparative Literature, history of literature, and theory of literature are interwoven in any objective literary comparison though each has its own properties. He finds two parameters/ dimensions of Comparative Literature: ‘literary relations’ and ‘Parallelism between literatures’

Rene Wellek delimited the scope of Comparative Literature to ‘the literary text or text’ by disregarding external factors.

Other colonized countries like India and Africa rejected the ‘European formalist approach’ and they have adopted the ‘politicization of literature’. Indian, African, Asian and Latin American refused to accept ‘European critical tools’ for ‘it is illogic and dangerous to obtrude European conceptions upon non-European visions of the world.’

In India, Comparative Literature veers towards “to start with the home culture and to look outwards rather than to start with the European model of literary excellence and to look inwards”. This gave birth to Indian Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) in 1981. The ICLA aims at proving “the grandeur of Indian literary cultural heritage in all times and history.”

In Africa, the comparatists stand firmly and aggressively against ‘the so-called European literary and cultural influence of Europe on Africa’ Chidi Amuta calls it, “one of the

ruses in the trick bag of those critics who see European culture as having had a civilizing impact on primitive African writing.”

In conclusion, a new kind of study called comparative literature came into existence during the 19th century west and later it spread across the globe. The object of study is a combination of two or more entities for

which a comparative method is adopted. This remains the common and consistent features of comparative literature. What varies is the focus of comparative literature. It gives birth to various schools of comparative literature, each having its own perspectives or tools to evaluate the comparative literature.

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