

The Origin and Need of Comparative Approach to Study Literature

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, study of literature from comparative approach enables the readers to understand literature from multiple perspectives thereby making him broad-minded to accept the merits/demerits of a work of literature as an objective observer. His disinterested endeavours further allow him to delve deep into the complexities of literary works with reference to their themes, characters, settings, styles, narrative techniques, and cultural distinctness. The attempts on the parts of intelligentsia to study diverse literatures in comparison with each other have definitely opened up new avenues to both the common readers as well as research scholars. It is observed that there has been a considerable increase in the number of research projects that are based on the study of literary texts using comparison as a main tool of analysis. Therefore, the present research paper attempts to study various meanings of the terms 'comparative' and 'comparative literature' by taking into consideration scholarly views and opinions of H.M. Posnett, S.S. Praver, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and others in order to comprehend the intricacies related to the comparative analysis of literary texts.

Key Words: Comparative, comparative literature, multiplicity, Praver, Posnett, etc.

The world today has become a global village, where people, their languages, literatures, cultures, social traditions and customs are influencing and getting influenced by each other. In such a scenario, it has become imperative to understand and explore various facets of these different socio-cultural-literary traditions and conventions so that one can be easily get converged into these diverse cultures and be accepted as a member of the present globalized world. It is perhaps because of this amalgamation of different people, their cultures and literatures that in many of the internationally reputed Universities, the independent departments of languages and literatures have been merged into one and

have been called as School of languages, where the Faculty members having specialization in different areas of their subjects have come together and engaged in collaborative research with reference to similar or dissimilar aspects of different languages, literatures and cultures. This approach is called as comparative approach of study that allows the scholars to explore a variety of elements related to each others' areas of expertise. Though this approach is not an altogether new approach, it has really gained international recognition only after the advent of globalization that enabled comparatively unrestricted crossing the borders in all respects including geographical, economical, literary, cultural,

social, political and also mental. It is in this context that the present research paper attempts to minutely explore the concept of 'comparison'; however, as the canvas of this comparison is very vast and that of this paper very small, the researcher has planned to confine herself to the theoretical discussion related to only the comparative literature.

The term 'comparative', like many other technical terms, has come into English from the Latin word 'comparativus'. The credit of using the term 'comparative literature' in combination goes to the nineteenth century British poet and scholar, Matthew Arnold who used this term in one of his private letters. However, Arnold did not use this term in the same sense as it is being used today. It was Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, a scholar who held the Chair of the Classics and English Literature at the University of Auckland, who discussed various tenets of comparative literature in his monumental work '*Comparative Literature*', published in 1886. This can be regarded as the true beginning of comparative literature as a serious branch of learning. Here H.M. Posnett said that Comparative Literature is "a social science, which might enable the recognition and exploration of social and cultural differences and how different social and cultural structures produce different literatures" (Posnett)

It has been observed since the beginning of the twentieth century that the scholars in the field of literary study have started to explore the merits and demerits of a work of art by comparing it with other work/s of art. In recent times, there have been a lot of interest and excitement among the scholars to study

the literature of a country in comparison with the literature of other countries. It has opened up numerous possibilities for the researchers to interpret the literature in variety of ways resulting in the better understanding and appreciation of the works of art. Having such multiple meanings of the works of art have an added benefit to the field of knowledge as it enables all to accept the multiplicity and complexity inherent in the work of art. Naturally, the scholars have started to pay more serious attention towards the study of literature using comparison as an essential and also an effective tool to analyze the works of literature belonging to different countries and languages.

It is said that:

The discipline of Comparative Literature is *in toto* a method in the study of literature in at least two ways. First, Comparative Literature means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. (Zepetnek 13)

As per this definition, a comparatist is required to know not only two or more languages from two or more nations but also he should be well-versed with other disciplines of learning which include history, culture, religion, sociology, etc. Perhaps the most important aspect of this definition is its emphasis on the principle of

‘inclusion’ which (intentionally) takes in its fold the ‘Other’ which was hitherto neglected, excluded, disqualified or considered to be exterior having inferior qualities compared to those of mainstream works of literature. Therefore, comparative study of literature can be regarded as an approach that involves and supports each and every possible ideology that ventures to treat equally all works of literature belonging to different languages and different national traditions. Such an approach allows the scholar to compare the literary qualities of one work of art with those of the other taking into consideration all the possible fundamental aspects that go in shaping that particular work.

The term ‘Comparative Literature’ is also defined as “the study of the literatures of two or more groups differing in cultural background and, usually, in language, concentrating on their relationships to and influences upon each other” (dictionary.com).

This definition refers to the following essential aspects of Comparative study of literature: 1) The scholar of comparative Literature should select the literatures of two or more groups; 2) These groups should have different cultural background; 3) The literatures should belong to different languages; 4) The study should explore the relationships between the groups with reference to their literatures and; 5) The influence of one literature on the other and vice versa.

Such a study, it is believed, helps to better appreciate the works of literature as it takes into consideration the strengths as well as

the weaknesses of the works concerned along with the views and opinions expressed by the scholars. The similarities and differences in various aspects of these works can be compared with each other and a balanced judgement can be pronounced. Such a judgement helps the laymen to understand various complex elements of the work of literature in better manner which can also shape and polish their literary sense and sensibility.

It is interesting to note here that comparative literature does not confine itself only with the comparison between one literature and the other; it also involves the comparison of the literary text with other branches of arts and the areas that fall in the category of social sciences. In this context, S.S. Praver says that comparative literature is:

the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human-expression. (Praver)

The above discussion illustrates that in the study of ‘comparative literature’, the main instrument is that of comparison which enables the scholar to study one literature in comparison with other literature(s). The comparatist can think of comparing and contrasting different genres of literature

produced in different periods of time in different languages used in different countries. This leads to the compelling necessity for a scholar to be acquainted with different languages and literatures including various disciplines of learning like music, film, painting, etc. He should be in a position to understand the inter-relationships among the various fine arts including literature with that of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. However, the attention should be paid towards the fact that such an approach does not lead the researcher in the wrong direction. In this context, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek warns that such involvement of the scholar of comparative literature with other arts and disciplines:

results in the lack of a clearly definable, recognizable, single-focussed, and major theoretical and methodological framework of Comparative Literature. There is a problem of naming and designation exactly because of the multiple approach and parallelism. In turn, this lack of recognized and recognizable products results in the discipline's difficulties of marketing itself within the intermechanisms of intellectual recognition and institutional power. (Zepetnek 16)

The study of comparative literature 'involves its focus on literature within the context of culture' not vice versa otherwise it may end up in becoming the part of cultural studies rather than comparative studies. Therefore, it is the sole responsibility of the comparatist to confine himself to the study of the select works of

literature in the broader context of the culture (which might have moulded the general content of those works) instead of getting engulfed by the culture itself.

Comparative literature aims at interdisciplinary approach of studying various aspects of a work of art. The comparatist studies the work of literature in relation to the other fine arts and also the disciplines like humanities and social sciences. Therefore it is observed that:

"The characteristically intercultural and transnational field of comparative literature concerns itself with the relation between literature, broadly defined, and other spheres of human activity, including history, politics, philosophy, art, and science. Unlike other forms of literary study, comparative literature places its emphasis on the interdisciplinary analysis of social and cultural production within the "economy, political dynamics, cultural movements, historical shifts, religious differences, the urban environment, international relations, public policy, and the sciences" (Wikipedia).

The comparison between a work of literature and that of the other disciplines like history and sociology helps the reader to broaden his horizon and think from humanitarian point of view with universal perspective. As this study cuts across the national boundaries and explores various thematic and stylistic similarities in the works under consideration, it enables one to grasp the various conflicts and complexities in the lives of the characters concerned.

There are some scholars who believe in the fact that there have been literatures in one country which are different from each other in multiple aspects. In such cases, one has to pay attention to this socio-cultural and linguistic diversity which gives birth to distinct literature in different parts of one nation. In Indian context, there have been hundreds of languages spoken by the people belonging to different locations. Apart from the languages recognized by the Indian Constitution, there are many languages in which literature is being created for more than eight hundred years. Even the literatures created in these constitutionally recognized languages are quite different from each other due to the differences present in the socio-cultural conventions of the users of these languages. Hence a study of Tamil literature in comparison with Marathi literature do also falls in the category of comparative literature. Therefore it is essential to understand that national boundaries cannot hamper one to classify such studies under the nomenclature of comparative literature.

Taking into consideration the presence of different literatures written in various Indian languages, Amiya Dev has rightly suggested that one should think of 'Indian literatures' in plural rather than 'Indian literature' in singular. It will help, Amiya Dev argues, to recognize the multiplicity involved in different Indian literatures. (Dev 7) Hence, it can be said that comparative study of literature involves the study of literatures that might belong to the same nation but having different linguistic and cultural overtones.

In the recent times, there have been discussions and deliberations on the element of 'nation-state' in the study of comparative literature that led to the beginning of a movement in America and gradually spread in other parts of the world. The proponents of this movement try to move away from the:

'nation-based approach ... towards a cross-cultural approach that pays no heed to national borders. It remains to be seen whether this approach will prove successful given that Comparative Literature had its roots in nation-based thinking and much of the literature under study still concerns issues of the nation-state. Given developments in the studies of globalization and interculturalism, Comparative Literature, already representing a wider study than the single-language nation-state approach, may be well suited to move away from the paradigm of the nation-state. (Wikipedia)

However, it has been observed that there are attempts (many of them deliberate) to belittle the significance of the study of comparative literature as an effective tool to understand and appreciate the works of art. It might be the result of the institutional disregard and political indifference towards its value as an important methodology to comprehend the social, cultural, historical and literary aspects of a work of art. In view of this, there have been attempts:

to redefine the discipline (of Comparative Literature) - in whatever context – (which) is a valid as well as

timely exercise. Comparative Literature remains an embattled approach and discipline of the study of literature. Yet, it produces that meaningful dialogue between cultures and literatures that is its mark theoretically, in application, and in basic as well as higher level education. It will continue to have supporters, students, and disciples who value Comparative Literature's insistence on the knowledge about as well as the inclusion of the Other in the widest definition of the concept and its realities, its global and international nature, its interdisciplinarity, its flexibility, and its objective as well as ability to translate one culture into another by the exercise and love of

dialogue between cultures. (Zepetnek 15)

Thus, in the study of 'comparative literature' comparison is the main tool of analyzing the work of literature that compares two or more similar or even dissimilar forms or trends within the literature belonging to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This comparative approach of studying literature, the researcher believes, would enable the common readers to understand the literary works in better manner. Though comparison is the main tool of the study, the researcher has also used its attributes such as description, characterization, interpretation, narration, and evaluation to analyze the autobiographies selected for the topic of present research.

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