Comparative Literature: Concepts, Its Present status and New Territories

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to provide researchers interested in the history and evolution of “comparative literature” with a collection of references delineating the evolution of the concept and the development of academic departments dedicated to its study. The paper includes a first section describing the main issues contributing to the “identity crisis” with which studies and departments defining themselves as “comparative” were consistently confronted ever since the term was coined. The paper also offers an overview of the elements that usually confer a “comparative” quality to a literary study, such as interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism, together with a few relevant definitions describing the commonly accepted meaning of the term at a particular point in time. Further it has a sketch of the current status of the concept and of the institutions dedicated to its study.

This paper primarily focuses on facts and documents from the European and North American continents. Its main purpose is not to arbitrate the multitude of trends and opinions trying to associate the term with a singular meaning. It merely attempts to provide a systematic perspective of the subject matter.
INTRODUCTION

A work of literature always makes connections. It not only reaches individual readers; but also it invokes other literary works and traditions. It is truly a mechanism that can challenge or embrace scientific or historical knowledge, can be translated into another language or can be transformed into a film. Comparative literature explores this rich tapestry of relationships. It is the study of written texts from more than one language, culture, or region. The wide variety of materials encompassed lends itself to interdisciplinary and innovative approaches. The term comparative is not restricted to the study of different national literatures. It also refers to comparative studies within a single linguistic culture, e.g. in a multicultural society or a postcolonial country. The series seeks to re-assess the complex relationship between margin and center, emphasizing, whenever possible, a non-Eurocentric perspective.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

During the late 19th century, comparatists purported Zeitgust or "spirit of the times" which they assumed to be embodied in the literary output of each nation. Fyodor Buslaev was one such comparatist. Going by the present day standards, it would not be incorrect to put the works of that period under the categories of Chauvinistic, Eurocentric or even racist, however, the intention of most of the scholars during that period was to enhance the understanding of other cultures, not to claim superiority over them although there works were often used by the politicians and others from outside the field, for this purpose. Some important works forming the foundation of Comparative Literature include Transylvanian Hungarian Hugo Meltz\'s scholarship and also Comparative Literature (1886) by H.M. Posnett, a scholar from New Zealand. However, the ideas of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his vision of
“world literature” (*Weltliteratur*) and Alexander Veselovsky with laying the groundwork for the discipline, too deserve a due credit for the same.

From the end of the Second World War onwards, the rise of Comparative Literature in the United States spurred, the reason for which was probably the immigration of leading European scholars in the field of humanities such as Roman Jakobson, Leo spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Rene Wellek, Theodor Adorno. There was an increase in belief in comparative studies as a universal discipline in humanities, in which research primarily focused on what is universally human.

By the last quarter of the 20th century, the entire field of the humanities was caught up in new changes in the paradigm of scholarly methodology. In comparative literature, this is also shown by the fact that under the influence of deconstruction, new historicism, “postmodern” theories and philosophies, postcolonial theory and gender studies, humanistic universalism is subject to sharp criticism, leading to the rejection of the concept of *world literature*.

In the year after the Second World War, when geopolitical map was being reshaped, Wellek, was the one who celebrated “The Revolt Against Positivism in Recent European Literary Scholarship.” Moreover, no later than seven years he proposed to a new American audience “The Concept of Comparative Literature”.

**ISSUES CONTRIBUTING TO THE “IDENTITY CRISIS” TO COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

In the last few decades, comparative literature has widened its horizons and spread even to those parts of the globe that it had not reached earlier. It has thus become truly global at least from the external perspective. However, at the same time it has faced a crisis in its traditional centers across Europe and North America, which has shaken its conceptual premises, theoretical foundations, and methodological structures. This crisis had an adverse affect on its inclusion in university and scholarly institutions, and jeopardized its social status. Comparative literature itself is no exception here because the situation described above was attribute of all of literary studies, the humanities, the social sciences, philosophy, and the general theory of science, and was also connected with the changing nature of research areas and subjects. The discipline responded to this fundamental change brought about by the postmodern age, through increased self-awareness and a true flourishing of relevant production.
Slovenian comparatists also participated in this line of thought. They may not have been the first to do it, and they may not have done it regularly and to a full extent, but they have done it sufficiently in order to observe, follow, and report on these developments. The stress between the literature of the world and the literature of the nation is at the heart of the challenge of comparative literature. In institutional terms, however, the literature of the nation has emerged triumphant. North American universities sport large, robust departments of English and small, but still flourishing, departments of select foreign literatures as French, German, Italian, and Spanish. Despite its monumental literary tradition, Russian literature struggles. Hebrew and Yiddish remain stable, but for how long? However nothing can surely be said of the Chinese or Persian literature. The discipline of English drew from the efforts to define the national literary tradition of “Essential Englishness” But who was to speak for the other languages and literatures?

The life of comparative literature was never easy. According to Hugo Metzl de Lomnitz, a Rumanian nobleman, the discipline's first programmatic statement suggested that an adequate understanding of comparative literature required eleven languages, including German, English, French, Icelandic, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Spanish, and Hungarian, with Latin and Greek not counting since they could be assumed. If the list was Eurocentric, the method was centered on contrast. What is more, early comparative literature developed not at the center of Europe but at its eastern precincts, in places like the University of Cluj, now in Rumania or in Istanbul, where Erich Auerbach conceived and wrote Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.

Even nowadays, lots of opinions are formed for and against the study of comparative literature. The interdisciplinary nature of the field means that comparatists typically exhibit some acquaintance with translation studies, critical theory, cultural studies, sociology, history and also religious studies. As a result, comparative literature programs within universities may be designed by scholars drawn from several such departments. This eclecticism has led critics, from within and without to charge that Comparative Literature is insufficiently well-defined, or that comparatists too easily fall into dilettantism, because the scope of their work is, of necessity, broad. Some critics question whether this breadth affects the ability of Ph.D.s to find employment in the highly specialized environment of academia and the career market at large.
DEFINITIONS AND MEANINGS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Many comparatists seem to experience acute uneasiness when required to define comparative literature, because the act of defining comparative literature itself is perceived as limiting, delimiting, and ultimately opposed to the openness which is an apparent characteristic of the field. And yet, even without definitions we all seem curiously to have a sense of what comparative literature is. On the other hand, even though we know what it is, most of us also would admit that there are some problems with the name: Though "literature" seems innocuous enough at first glance, but the adjective "comparative" is certainly a troublemaker. However, we all agree to a large extent that Comparative study of literature is an up-to-date, global approach that emphasizes the integration of literature from many countries. It includes the comparison of different national literatures, the study of genres, themes, and periods, the theory of literature, and the relation of literature to other art forms. It has been called the study of “literature without walls.” The study of comparative literature can be identified to a kind of ethical negotiation between literatures; this negotiation does not apply an ethical scale to literatures, but allow them to be defined as specific replies to ethical issues, which can be shared by many nations, cultures, communities.

Comparative Literature is, by tradition, the study of literature beyond the geo-cultural boundaries of one particular country or hemispheric region. In addition, it pays special attention also to the study of relationships between literature and other areas of knowledge and intellectual inquiry. This includes areas such as linguistics, the visual and performing arts (e.g., cinema, painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), as well as other fields such as the sciences, religion, etc. In sum, it is the comparison of the literary with other spheres of human epistemology, expression, and intellectual investigation. Comparative literature not only allows you to appreciate and internalize the values of your own culture; it also opens the way into other cultures.
CURRENT STATUS OF THE CONCEPT

With the recent developments in the studies of globalization and interculturalism, Comparative Literature, is already representing a wider study than the single-language nation-state approach. Further it might move away from the paradigm of the nation-state. While in the West Comparative Literature is experiencing institutional constriction, there are signs that in many parts of the world the discipline is thriving, especially in Asia, Latin America, and the Mediterranean. Current trends in Comparative literature also reflect the growing importance of cultural studies in the fields of literature. In today’s shrinking world, there is virtually instantaneous communication between countries. An understanding of the cultures of other countries and the ability to communicate with other people are important abilities for the future: these are the fundamental skills developed in the comparative study of literature. The recent trends in the comparative literature has expanded its territories and it has evolved as one of the subjects within the liberal arts which are commonly labeled “the humanities” because they concentrate on human values, imagination, creativity, and systems of thought. The discipline of comparative literature offers several advantages: knowledge of at least two cultures, the ability to analyze written materials, experience in writing, and proficiency in at least one foreign language.

Comparative literature has emerged as an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts (music, painting, dance, film, etc.), across disciplines (literature and psychology, philosophy, science, history, architecture, sociology, politics, etc.). Defined most broadly, comparative literature is the study of "literature without borders." Scholarship in Comparative Literature include, for example, studying literacy and social status in the Americas, studying medieval epic and romance, studying the links of literature to folklore and mythology, studying colonial and postcolonial writings in different parts of the world, asking fundamental questions about definitions of literature itself. What scholars in Comparative Literature share is a desire to study literature beyond national boundaries and an interest in languages so that they can read foreign texts in their original form. Many comparatists also share the desire to integrate literary experience with other cultural phenomena such as historical change, philosophical concepts, and social movements. Comparative Literature as a discipline is now practiced almost worldwide, in India and China as well as in Europe and North and South America. The discipline of Comparative Literature also has scholarly associations such as the ICLA International Comparative Literature Association and
Comparative literature associations exist in many countries as BCLA British Comparative Literature Association and ACLA American Comparative Literature Association. Also, there are many learned journals that publish scholarship in Comparative Literature.

**CONCLUSION**

If we do not study other cultures, we cannot even understand our own. This statement truly reflects the importance of comparative literature in the present scenario. Comparative Literature is a magnificent window that enables us to perceive a variety of people, cultures, ideas, current questions, concerns, trends, societies and histories. It also offers us an exposure to the enchanting world of literature, essays, biographies, autobiographies, films, visual arts and music. Comparative Literature calls upon works from all around the world; from conventional and experimental forms, from many languages, and from all time periods of human expression. It is truly a tool to encourage critical thinking, to assess and reassess our ideas, and to provide the ultimate pleasure of expression through writing and discussion.

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