

**Impact
Factor
3.025**

ISSN 2349-638x

Refereed And Indexed Journal



**AAYUSHI
INTERNATIONAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY
RESEARCH JOURNAL
(AIIRJ)**

Monthly Publish Journal

VOL-IV

ISSUE-I

JAN.

2017

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Importance of Comparative Literature in the Era of Globalization

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Introduction:

The term 'comparative literature' means "any literary work that compares". It is a literary discipline and ought to be recognized as the most important academic activity of the present era. According to *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, the word 'compare' means 'to examine (items, etc.) to see what differences or similarities they have' and the meaning of the term 'Comparative Literature' is 'the study of the literatures of different languages and nations and the relationships and similarities which may exist between them'. Although literary comparison has been in use for many centuries, comparative literature as a distinct body of humanities is of recent origin. The discipline of comparative literature belongs mainly to the twentieth century. The French term 'Litterature Comparee' for 'Comparative Literature' emerged in France around the beginning of the 19th century. In England, the poet and critic Matthew Arnold used the term 'comparative literature' for the first time in 1848. Arnold 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 far behind the continent."¹

The field of comparative literature is very vast and it can be viewed from different perspectives. Critics have arrived at affixed norm but are working towards enriching literary comparison through the creation of fresh and more developed theories. According to Henry H.H. Remak, "comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, 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."²

The American as well as the French 'schools' of comparative literature approve of this definition. However, the French comparatists put forward different opinion about the second part of the definition viz. the study of the relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief. They don't think that the other areas such as arts, philosophy, history, social sciences, religion come under the study of comparative literature. They think that the comparison between literature and a field other than literature be accepted only if they are systematic and a definitely separable, coherent discipline outside of literature is studied. For example, the historical sources of Shakespearean drama would be 'comparative literature' only if historiography and literature are focused in this study.

Comparative Literature, National Literature and World Literature:

The terms 'national literature' and 'world literature' seem to overlap with 'comparative literature'. National literature is the literature of a particular nation. The subjects which occur in comparative literary research may go beyond the limits of national literature scholarship. The topics in the study of national literature occupy a place of greater importance in the study of comparative

literature. An air tight distinction between comparative literature and national literature is difficult. There can be writers writing in the same language and belonging to different nations. In the same way, there can be writers belonging to the same nation but writing in different languages.

The term 'World Literature' refers to masterpieces from all over the world towering above every normal horizon. The famous German scholar Goethe coined the term 'world literature' as a reaction to Romantic – even pre-Romantic literary criticism. Goethe's conviction was that "like all things of supreme value, art belongs to the whole world and can only be promoted by a free and general interaction among contemporaries." Whatever pleases the masses will expand without limit and find approval in all areas and regions. Goethe regards that world literature will develop through literary translation because human beings strive for direct knowledge of various literatures.

There exist differences between comparative literature and world literature. Comparative literature deals with the relationship between two authors of different nationality or authors writing in different languages. The term 'world literature' implies recognition through the world. Comparative literature may compare anything that is comparable no matter how old or new the works may be. In practice, comparative literature deals with literary figures of the past who have achieved world-wide fame. World literature deals with time and world-honoured literary productions. It deals with authors of our own age. The American concept of comparative literature tries to make inquiries into the relationship between literature and other orbits; world literature does not. The study of comparative literature requires method; world literature does not. Comparative literature requires that a work, author, trend or theme be actually compared with a work, author, trend or theme of another country or sphere but a collection of essays on world famous writers might be called 'figures of world literature'.

A comparative literature study does not have to be comparative on every page nor even in every chapter, but the overall intent, emphasis and execution must be comparative. No rigid rules should be set down beyond these criteria. Comparative literary study is very important in the Indian context because it studies interrelationship between two or more literatures. Comparative literature can be studied in Indian context under the following heads: sources, themes, myths, forms, movements and trends and criticism.

There are certain 'schools' of comparative literature such as 'French school', 'German school' and 'American school'.

The French School :

In the early 20th century until World War II, the field of comparative literature was characterized by a notably empiricist and positivistic approach, termed as the 'French school'. Comparative literature as a discipline emerged and grew in France. According to the founding fathers of the French School, comparative literature is a branch of literary study which gives importance to the mutual relations between two or more internationally and linguistically different literatures or texts. The perspectives of the scholars of the French School place a strong emphasis on geographical and linguistic boundaries in the comparison. According to this approach, comparative literary study should take place between specific 'individuals.' It means that 'anonymous', 'folkloric' and 'collective' works, even if well-known and accepted, are excluded from the province of comparative literature, for no other reason than their being oral and 'impersonal.' The scholars belonging to this school look for "origins" and "influences" between works from different nations.

The French School studies the processes of Influence, Reception, Imitation and Borrowing.

German School:

German school of comparative literature has its origin similar to French school in the late 20th century. The German school of comparative literature is very much influenced by the Russian formalists. The Russian formalists were primarily linguists. They emphasized the study of language. According to them the work of literature is basically aesthetic. The German school gave importance to the aesthetic unity in a text. The French emphasized on the text. The German school also placed emphasis on the text. The French and the German view was Eurocentric. After World War II, the discipline developed to a large extent owing to one scholar in particular, Peter Szondi (1929-1971), a Hungarian who taught at the Free University Berlin. Szondi invited international guest speakers to Berlin.

The American School:

'The American school' is the term used for post-war scholars who reacted against the French school and who sought to return to matters more directly concerned with literary criticism, emphasizing the detailed historical research that the French school had demanded. The American school was more closely aligned with the original international visions of Goethe and Posnett reflecting the postwar desire for international co-operation. They looked for examples of universal human "truths" based on the literary archetypes that appeared throughout literatures from all times and places. The approach of the American School would be familiar to current practitioners of Cultural Studies.

The founding father of this school, which appeared in the second half of the twentieth century, Henry Remak, states that "comparative literature should not be regarded as a discipline on its own but rather as a connecting link between subjects or 'subject areas.' A comparison thus can be made between two or more different literatures and between literature and other fields of cognition (music, painting, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, sociology, psychology, religion, chemistry, mathematics, physics, etc)." In this Remak leaves it all to the comparatist to lay the grounds for his or her study, which should not be involved in the problem of 'nationalism.' It is the 'depoliticization' of comparative study then which makes the American perspective on comparative literature different from the French one.

Though some critics claim that it is an offshoot of modernist literary criticism, the American perspective is actually a formulation of earlier definitions of the subject. In the 1890s Charles Mills tried to draw a distinctive line of American comparative literature (not differing much from the line drawn by Matthew Arnold, H. Macaulay Posnett and Arthur Marsh) by assuming that the subject "should be seen as 'nothing more or less' than literature philology, by insisting on the importance of psychology, anthropology, linguistics, social science, religion and art in the study of literature."

Putting aside all the distinctions used by the French School, the American comparatists fastened their attention on constructing a model of an 'interdisciplinary work.' The sole aim beyond this model is to do away with chauvinistic nationalism, mainly brought about by considering literature in the light of linguistic or 'political boundaries.' Despite difference in language and culture, all nations have certain things in common. Hence, as Bassnett sums it up, "the American perspective on comparative literature was based from the start on ideas of interdisciplinarity and universalism." Furthermore, this perspective threw over another basic principle of the French School, namely binary study, in regarding that the study of affinities and differences between two international literatures was just one angle of the subject, and that, as Gayley proposed, "the study of a single literature may be just as scientifically comparative literature if it seeks the reason and law of the literature in the psychology of the race or of humanity."

The attitude of early scholars towards comparative literature was quintessentially humanistic. Posnett, Galey's contemporary, linked the subject to "the social evolution, individual evolution, and the

influence of the environment on the social and individual life of man." In this way, the influences between international literatures are ignored and an emphasis is placed on humanity's collective achievements through time and place and across disciplinary lines - a view which seems to break down the barriers drawn by the French School between the interrelated elements of one single subject, which is literature. Arthur Richmond Marsh's definition of the subject was distinctive in relating it to pure literary criticism rather than to history.

The American School of comparative literature, though largely welcomed in different parts of the world, has not escaped criticism. To start with, it confuses 'comparative' with 'general' literature on the ground that both are involved with studying one subject (literature). The determination of comparative literature's boundaries is marked by 'duality' in relating literature to other arts and sciences - a duality which makes the subject's province too vast to investigate and come up with accurate conclusions. The final and most serious fault is the failure of the American comparatists to avoid the problem of rabid nationalism, which has marked the French School and which they have intensely opposed, as they have shown in considering their literature superior to all others.

Current Developments:

There is a movement among comparatists in the US and elsewhere to re-focus the discipline away from the nation-based approach with which it has previously been associated towards a cross-cultural approach that pays no heed to national borders. Work of this nature include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* And Steven Totosy de Zepetnek's *From Comparative Literature Today towards Comparative Cultural Studies*. 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.

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