

## **Redefining the Subject Matter and Methodology of Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization**

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**Abstract:** *The paper explores ways of redefining the subject matter and methodology of comparative literature in harmony with the tremendous cultural and ideological changes in the age of globalization. In this age of globalization, I would argue, comparative literature maintains a unique place from which effective means of human reconciliation, co-existence, and cross-cultural mutual understanding, may be offered. This is mainly a byproduct of the cultural turn which characterizes comparative literature in an age of globalization. In these terms comparative literature may be geared towards highlighting cross-cultural human commonalities, and yet recognizing different peoples' diversities and unique mores and values which could be viewed as distinct components of a universal civilization as it is reflected in world literature – the raw material of comparative literature. Through the study of world literature as a cultural phenomenon in its national perspectives and its international contexts (a practice which lies at the heart of the comparatist inquiry) the reader will be able to grasp the experiences of man in all their diversity and their common human values and cultural codes. This undertaking is bound to draw the world closer together in an age of endless ideological, cultural, civilizational, and political conflicts. The widening of the scope and the expanding of the territories of comparative literature to accommodate the newly defined mission of the discipline may pave the way to produce a concept of global citizenship based on broad human affiliations and common core human values in the new millennium which is marked with the evolving spirit of globalized consciousness. This supports a long-held conviction by proponents of comparative literature that the practice of the discipline contributes to enhancing intellectual liberalism which brings with it an attitude of sympathy and understanding among human beings across national, cultural, and civilizational boundaries.*

In Lester Pearson's book *Democracy in World Politics* which was published in 1955, we come across the admonition that humans were moving into 'an age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other's lives. The alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash and catastrophe' (83-84). Pearson's prophetic statement and warning bring to mind Robert J. Clements' reflections on the cultural and political roles comparative literature is in a unique position to play in a world which has been transformed into what is called a global village, as is anticipated by Pearson's prophetic remarks made in the 1950s, In section XV (entitled *The Future of a Discipline*) of his book *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline: A Statement of Principles, Praxis, Standards*, Robert J. Clements writes:

The need for understanding among peoples is greater than ever. Despite the creditable job being done by educational television to bring the peoples and places, from all corners of the world into the home and the classroom-especially

when a "bowl" football game or a crime drama does not divert ninety percent of the viewers- the increase of international understanding is not keeping up with the increased tensions and dangers. More and more nations are now equipped with nuclear overkill, and more liberated nations are feeling excitement of militaristic nationalism.

Courses in comparative literature-Western Heritage, East- West, or World in dimension-are one of the few ongoing media for international understanding, a potential for "cultural exchange (1978: 279-280).

The notion that comparative literature may serve as an effective medium for constructing cultural and intellectual bridges among nations of the whole world in an age plagued with clash of civilizations, political conflict, and cross-cultural misconceptions and misrepresentation, figures as the main theme of the conference Comparative Literature in the Arab World held in Cairo in December 1995. The message of Dr Ahmed Esmat Abd Al-Mageed (former Secretary of the Arab League) to the conference sums up in great precision the vital role comparative literature may play in promoting global understanding, reconciliation, better mutual recognition across cultural and civilizational boundaries. The message is worth quoting in its entirety as it sheds light on the shifting boundaries of comparative literature away from its traditional critical approaches and subject matter, that is, in response to the growing international misunderstanding, tension, and clash of civilizations:

I believe that it is the role of comparative studies in literature today to act as a means of enhancing mutual understanding among peoples and nations, reducing psychological distances between them, and getting rid of the distorted images that each party holds of the other. Consequently, these studies are capable of spreading a spirit of tolerance and establishing the concept of acknowledging the other and his/her right to differ, hence abandoning notions of superiority that begets despise and breeds racism. It is in this context that the Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and Science is keen on encouraging academic and scholarly efforts to analyze mutual interaction of ideas, representations, and images as manifested in different literatures – overcoming barriers of language that can obstruct the meeting of cultures, as well as making of translation today, as it was in the past, a means of understanding and a melting ground for diverse human efforts (Etman 1988:9).

Perceived in the context of East-West dichotomy and in particular anti-Arab sentiment and stereotyped images of Arabs and distorted image of Islam based in illusions and ignorance in the West, the message provides a blueprint for boosting cross- cultural understanding, fracturing stereotyped images, and reducing political conflict and tension between East and West. Comparative Literature, I would argue, seems to have the potential to meet all kinds of challenges including lack of peaceful co-existence, sympathetic human understanding, and political cooperation among peoples of different nations in times of crisis and tense relations. Katie Trumpener's views on the vital role ascribed to comparative literature in the American context in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September, 2001 may illustrate the point I am trying to make:

Over the last three years, enrollment in Yale's world literatures course has more than quadrupled—partly in response, presumably, to September 11<sup>th</sup> and the current war in Iraq. Our syllabus itself, to be sure, is not overtly topical. In 2003-4, texts included *Gilgamesh*; several-hundred-page chunks of *The Mahabharata*, *The Arabian Nights*, and *Tale of Genji*; various versions of *Sundjata*; *The Odyssey*; Hrafinkel's *Saga*, *The Breton Lais*, and *Midnight's Children*. We spent a lot of class time talking about formal questions of genre, temporality, narration, narrative consciousness, and perspective. But these texts also, quite insistently, raised questions of foundational violence and the ethics of conflict, of the logics of feud, massacre, terror, and genocide as well as the quasi-theological role of literature in mediating ideological shifts and moments of historical crisis, enacting conversion and convergence (2004: (95-96).

Comparatists' characteristic concern for renewal and their constant search for proper subject matter for the discipline have inspired new generations of comparatists to map out new domains and explore new territories for comparative studies. Again, here the American experience furnishes a good example as to what extent comparative literature is well equipped to meet challenges this time in educational and ideological domains in American culture at the present time. In this context Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein write:

Above all, they embody an intellectual orientation that has much to recommend itself to students in the United States at this moment of our history. For all our concern today with multiculturalism and opening the canon, it would be ironic indeed for us to ignore the central blind spots of American culture: its monolingualism, its unawareness of cultures that exist both close to and far beyond our borders, its implicitly hegemonic view of America's place in the world order. These issues and the mind-set behind them cry out for attention today, and comparative literature is arguably the sole humanistic discipline equipped to meet this educational and ideological challenge (1955:80).

Just as comparative literature seems to have the potential to respond to specific situations, as it has been already pointed out, that is in the context of East West relations and in connection with the American experience, so it meets basic Indian cultural and sociopolitical needs. According to Margaret Chatterjee, Director of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, in India comparative literature proves to be more effective medium than “comparative philosophy” and “comparative religion” in bringing about peaceful co-existence, reconciliation, and acceptance of the other among various Indian cultural groups and communities. In more specific terms Chatterjee argues:

Comparative Literature as a discipline should enable us to savour the richness of the literatures within national boundaries and also help us to go beyond those boundaries. In this way it is a discipline which bears a dual responsibility. The besetting dangers of our times are parochialism and regionalism on the one hand, and xenophobia on the other. If educated people succumb to either or both of these, there can be no hope for the country. Comparative studies take their stand on the appreciation of otherness and the delightful discovery of what is akin (1989: vii).

Charles Bernheimer maintains that the comparatists' preoccupation with the study of what national literatures may have in common and their concern for

highlighting the unique cultural factors they may reflect might hamper the achievement of the discipline's humanistic unifying goals and the promotion of meaningful relations among peoples and civilizations. In an article entitled "Introduction: The Anxieties of Comparative Literature," Charles Bernheimer argues:

The more literatures you try to compare, the more like a colonizing imperialist you may seem. If you stress what these literatures have in common- thematically, morally, politically- you may be accused of imposing universalist model that suppresses particular differences so as to foster the old humanist dream of man's worldwide similarity to man. If, on the other hand, you stress differences, then the basis of comparison becomes problematic, and your respect for the uniqueness of particular cultural formations may suggest the impossibility of any meaningful relation between cultures (1995: 9).

Bernheimer's first warning seems to run counter to the aspirations of the old generation of comparatists that comparative literature may serve as an effective tool towards the revival of new Renaissance humanism. Paul Van Tieghem, for instance, argues that the new Renaissance humanism brought about by comparative literature studies is 'broader and more fecund than the former, better able to bring nations together. Comparatism imposes on those who practice it an attitude of sympathy and understanding toward our fellow beings- an intellectual liberalism without which no work to be commonly shared by all peoples can be attempted' ( qtd. in Clements 1978: 281). Similar views are held by the well- known French comparatist Rene Etiemble for whom comparative literature of various nations should be regarded as the common spiritual wealth of all mankind and as an interdependent entity which promotes mutual understanding between peoples and fosters the unity and progress of mankind.

Bernheimer's second contention that respect for uniqueness of each culture may impede the creation of relations between cultures is also untenable. Diversity and uniqueness of each culture, I would argue, could be viewed as only variations on basically common human pulsations, thoughts and feelings. In other words, an insight that the study of comparative literature may highlight is that although cultures may vary, people through the world are not so very different. Hermann Hesse's reflections on literature as a medium in which points of convergence and confluence of human ethos and sensibilities find an aesthetic expression may shed light on the issue:

The more discernment, sensibility, and alertness to relationships we put into our reading, the more we see every idea and every literary work in its unique individuality and conditionality, and see that all beauty, all charm hinge precisely on this individuality and uniqueness -and nevertheless we seem to see more and more clearly that all these thousands of voices of the people strive towards the same goal, invoke the same gods under different names, dream the same dreams, and suffer the same sufferings. In illuminated moments, the reader perceives in the thousand fold fabric of innumerable languages and books, woven through several millennia, a wondrously sublime chimera, the face of man as a unity compounded by magic from a thousand contradictory traits (1979: 104-105).

Insofar as it tends to explore human commonalities and to respect cross-cultural diversity and uniqueness, comparative literature is posed to play a vital role in promoting multiculturalism-inspired education in the 21 century as it is conceived by Paul Kennedy. In his book: *Preparing for the 21 Century* Paul Kennedy makes a plea for gearing general education towards highlighting both of what human beings have in common and of their individualistic traits and unique values as the best means towards preparing for entry into the twenty-first century:

Yet education in the larger sense means more than technically retooling the work force, or the emergence of professional classes, or even the encouragement of a manufacturing culture in the schools and colleges in order to preserve a productive base. It also implies a deep understanding of why our world is changing, of how other people and cultures feel about those changes, of what we all have in common as well as of what divides cultures, classes and nations (1993: 341)

Recognition of what humans have in common and the respect shown for their differences, two of the new major concerns of comparative literature, contribute to the creation of 'hospitable space for the cultivation of the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding, and genuinely global consciousness' (Bernheimer 1995:10)

The newly defined roles of comparative literature in the age of globalization represent a remarkable departure from the traditional approaches of comparative literature as a critical system. According to traditional schools of comparative literature, comparatist inquiry falls into four categories: first, the study of influences and analogies, second, the study of movements and trends, third, the analysis of works of art from a generic point of view, finally, thematology which comprises the study of themes and motifs in works of art belonging to different national literatures (Jost 1974: vii).

Except insofar as they involve the study of literary works in their national perspectives and in their international contexts, these approaches are not unique to comparative literature, general criticism and literary theory adopt the same approaches and categories. Against this background, Rene Wellek put forward his well-known argument that Comparative Literature suffers from a serious crisis which is its failure to identify its distinct subject matter and methodology (Wellek 1963: 282).

As we have been seeing, through widening the scope of comparative literature and exploring new domains for the comparative method, new generations of comparatists have succeeded in transforming threats to comparative literature, so to speak, into new opportunities for self-scrutiny. This results in putting forward proposals for renewal and redefinition of new proper subject matter and distinct methodology and practice based on a new, truly globalized knowledge that transcends boundaries of culture, race, region and politics. Obviously, the main dynamic force whereby the discipline's process of change and renewal is driven is its peculiar emphasis on cultural turn in new comparative studies, on the levels of theory and practice.

The empowering of the comparative perspective in the academy is bound to produce multicultural people who can act as competent individuals liberated from all forms of biases, blind commitment to uniculturalism, and rejection of the other in a globalized world in which dialogue and reconciliation among peoples and cultures would replace conflict and civilizational clashes. In these terms comparative literature seems to share postmodernism's rejection of Eurocentrism in favor of expanding what might be described as cultural canon, thus modifying the way humans tend to view each other. The result is creating propitious environment and atmosphere for greater human understanding, tolerance and acceptance of the other, in an age of globalization.

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