

TOWARDS COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDIES: DEBATE AND EXPERIMENTS

AMRIT SEN
VISVA-BHARATI,
SANTINIKETAN, (W.B.) INDIA

Abstract

Defined as a field of study where “selected tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with selected tenets of the field of cultural studies i.e. that the study of culture and culture produces – including but not restricted to literature, communication, media art etc. is performed in a contextual and relational construction and with a plurality of methods and approaches, interdisciplinary and if and when required, including team work” (Zepetnek 262) comparative cultural studies is emerging as a nascent discipline with its own set of debates and experiments. This paper sets out to ask three questions – why comparative cultural studies, how comparative cultural studies and where comparative cultural studies? In asking this last question, I shall also look at the Indian experiments with such pedagogical issues. The material factors behind the rise of comparative cultural studies fall back upon certain very obvious realities. There has been a decline of humanities in general and literary studies in particular within the global within the global scenario. The shift has rather been to acquiring skill in languages. At various universities for example, the new demand is for languages like Chinese, Japanese or the European languages dictated by exciting new job prospects. Consequently, funding in the humanities has gradually dried up and we are moving towards a system where departments are progressively being clustered with inadequate resources to carry on courses in individual honours subjects. The incursion of the new media and rampart digitization has also completely changed the way in which the category of the text has been redefined – to restrict oneself to the singularly written text is progressively becoming an anachronism both in academic institutions and career opportunities. But most importantly, the frenzied pace of globalization is creating demands for new identities where cultural familiarities with the other existences are becoming crucial for call centres, interpreters and cyber professionals who hop on from one project to the other.

Keywords: comparative literature, comparative cultural, cultural studies

TOWARDS COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDIES: DEBATE AND EXPERIMENTS

-AMRIT SEN

Defined as a field of study where “selected tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with selected tenets of the field of cultural studies i.e. that the study of culture and culture produces – including but not restricted to literature, communication, media art etc. is performed in a contextual and relational construction and with a plurality of methods and approaches, interdisciplinary and if and when required, including team work” (Zepetnek 262) comparative cultural studies is emerging as a nascent discipline with its own set of debates and experiments. This paper sets out to ask three questions – why comparative cultural studies, how comparative cultural studies and where comparative cultural studies? In asking this last question, I shall also look at the Indian experiments with such pedagogical issues.

The material factors behind the rise of comparative cultural studies fall back upon certain very obvious realities. There has been a decline of humanities in general and literary studies in particular within the global within the global scenario. The shift has rather been to acquiring skill in languages. At various universities for example, the new demand is for languages like Chinese, Japanese or the European languages dictated by exciting new job prospects. Consequently, funding in the humanities has gradually dried up and we are moving towards a system where departments are progressively being clustered with inadequate resources to carry on courses in individual honours subjects. The incursion of the new media and rampart digitization has also completely changed the way in which the category of the text has been redefined – to restrict oneself to the singularly written text is progressively becoming an anachronism both in academic institutions and career opportunities. But most importantly, the frenzied pace of globalization is creating demands for new identities where cultural familiarities with the other existences are becoming crucial for call centres, interpreters and cyber professionals who hop on from one project to the other.

It is in this context that the rise of culture studies has revitalized the traditional humanities departments. Basing itself on the ‘interplay between lived experience, texts or discourses and social context’ (Saukko 11) the intention of the cultural studies approach

has been to locate 'empirical changes in culture and society on living human subjects' and 'inviting these same human subjects ... to reflect on how they live through and make sense of such changes'. (McRobbie 170) Culture studies has therefore cut across disciplines and methodological structures to bring together popular forms, methodological approaches and has widened the very ambit of the notion of the cultural product as texts. However its very plurality has become a bone of contention with critics arguing that it lacks methodological rigour and selectively approaches its problems with theoretical assumptions. The other major lack in cultural studies has been its restriction within certain cultural zones only – a product of British and American universities its emphasis has largely been restricted to cultures of these nations, although systematic studies of other cultures, especially in India is quite fast catching on. Its interdisciplinary approach and its ability to bring within its ambit the 'popular' has also been its major strengths, so much so that most university syllabi are hastening to adopt it in some form or the other.

With the rise of the philosophy of cosmopolitanism, the necessity for a more global response to cultural studies has been recognized on an urgent basis. In her very seminal essay on cosmopolitanism Martha Nussbaum points out: "we live in a world in which the destinies of nations are closely inter twined with respect to basic goods and survival itself... any intelligent deliberation about ecology – as also about food supply and population – requires global planning, global knowledge and the recognition of a shared future". (Nussbaum 160) Nussbaum places the onus on the need for cosmopolitanism in education to begin this global dialogue:

we need not only knowledge of the geography and ecology of other nations... something that would already entail much revision in our curricula – but also a great deal about the people with whom we shall be talking, so that in talking with them we may be capable of respecting their traditions and commitments. Cosmopolitan education would supply the background necessary for this type of deliberation. (Nussbaum 160)

This need for dialogue across national boundaries draws cultural studies towards the discipline of comparative literature. Can one extend the scope of comparative literature to extend and collaborate with the methodology of culture studies? I would like to refer at this moment to two of the most problematic areas of comparative literature – its prioritisation of the written text and its eurocentric and American models. Has comparative literature really evolved in other scenarios especially in India? Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak refers to these problems in her 2003 volume *The Death of a Discipline* urging an alliance

between comparative literature and area studies, with the goal of making these enterprises resemble each other. Comparative literature she feels, would gain from the linguistic and political coverage, institutional alliances and the rigor of area studies, while area studies would learn to think conceptually about things that are better understood through close reading of all kinds of texts than through empirical observation – for instance, in what ways cultures come to be imagined as others. Spivak’s argument is to locate the common ground in language – for comparatists they would learn languages outside the conventional ambit, area scholars because they would be exposed to languages with literary depth, rather than only social, scientific fluency. (Greene, 156) Could we extend Spivak’s argument a bit further embracing different orders of cultural production? It is with this question that I enter my next question – how comparative cultural studies?

In his comprehensive essay on comparative cultural studies Steven Zepetnek outlines several principles on which the comparative cultural studies approach will be based. He proposes this against ‘the currently reigning single language approach dealing with a topic with regard to its nature and problematics in one culture only’ (Zepetnek 236) and aims to ‘implicitly and explicitly disrupt the established hierarchy of cultural products and production similarly to the disruption cultural studies itself has performed’. (Zepetnek 237) Zepetnek’s first principle is to focus not on the ‘what’ of culture but the ‘how’ of the operation of culture arguing the comparative mode will not be locked in questions of a ‘better’ or a ‘superior’ culture. Zepetnek also argues about a possible dialogue between cultures, languages, literatures and disciplines as opposed to the institutional and self referential exclusionary aspects of single culture studies – Zepetnek extends this inclusivity to all ‘marginal, minority, border and peripheral cultures and cultural form’. (Zepetnek 255) In order to facilitate this the argument is that the scholar working in this field is required to have an in-depth grounding in more than one language and culture as well as in other disciplines. The fourth principle is the focus of comparative culture studies in all parts of culture (literature, arts, publishing, sports etc.) and in relation to all disciplines including history, sociology, psychology etc. Zepetnek also argues for a theoretical and methodological focus on evidence based research and analysis involving rigorous use of archives and field-based work pertaining to cultural forms. Three notions of interdisciplinarity are brought into play in this context – transdisciplinarity (analysis and research within the disciplines of the humanities), multidisciplinary (analysis and research by one scholar employing any other discipline), and pluri-disciplinarity (analysis and research by team work with participants from several disciplines). Zepetnek argues that the pluri-disciplinarity is a key component in any functioned praxis of comparative culture studies. The paradox of globalization forms another key element in such a study – the use of technology, industry and communication on the one hand and a rigorous

awareness of the forces of exclusion as represented by local, racial, national, gender and disciplinary on the other. Zepetnek also stresses the 'vocational commitment' of the practitioner of comparative culture studies in order to implement the recognition and inclusion of the other with and by commitment to the in depth knowledge of several cultures as basic parameters. While this might be a utopian telos for the discipline, in its more practical career oriented outlook the blunting prejudices and the initiation of dialogue and understanding might be a more reasonable goal. (Zepetnek 258-60)

Where I take exception with Zepetnek is in his argument that comparative culture studies has a built in focus on English based on its impact emanating from North American culture studies which in turn is rooted in British cultural studies. (Zepetnek 258) In making this assertion Zepetnek is locked in his own argument of exclusion – for any comparative culture experiment to work successfully it is imperative to ground itself within languages in which the pedagogic apparatus is based. English can be one such language, but to make it an exclusive language of practice is to probably kill the approach at its very inception and restrict it to a niche academia.

So what would an academic curriculum of comparative cultural studies be about? It is interesting to take a look at some of the programmes that are being implemented across the globe. The Northern Arizona University programme talks about its emphasis on the "what" behind a work of art, "how" that work imparts meaning and the cultural context the "why" from which it derives. The constituent parts are accordingly Art History, Asian Studies, African Studies and the Comparative Study of Religion with its framework for understanding the religious motives and differing beliefs, practices and values of people that shape their decisions and actions, their history, social structure and psychology. The University of Minnesota focuses on how discourse and cultural production both shape and are shaped by life in time, space, matter and society. Common issues range from music, film, myth, ritual, architecture, urban design and religion as it states that it encourages work that is interdisciplinary (at times even anti-disciplinary) and cross-cultural. The Alfred University programme offers courses in anthropology, religious studies and Non-Western art history to explore how people construct and maintain their identities through social organization, gender relationships, values, myths, rituals and artistic expressions. The course involves study abroad and fieldwork to enable students to gain an appreciation of cultural pluralism, and develop specific knowledge of diverse societies and religious traditions. A sample cursory glance thus locates comparative cultural studies programmes as basing themselves across literature, art history, media studies, religious studies and area studies. Faculty accordingly is drawn from a wide range of disciplines and research uses collaborative methodologies based on both travel and fieldwork.

It might appear to any audience that comparative cultural studies has been an exclusive purview of Western academia and that its application in the Indian scenario will be negligible and given to a system of imitation of Western practices. In the final section of my paper I will argue that comparative culture studies had actually been pioneered and practiced in India in the experimental education of Rabindranath Tagore. I will also argue that apart from study across global cultures, Rabindranath's programme also involved a praxis of involving this study from below, in incorporating the marginalized other within the programme and outreach of the University.

Rabindranath Tagore's cosmopolitan upbringing involved a synthesis in the Brahmo household of the Jorasanko Kolkata milieu. Exposed to the ideas of European modernity and Unitarian Christianity, Tagore imbibed a deep reverence for classical Indian culture along with a familiarity with Persian culture. This upbringing was to be supplemented by his sojourns in rural Bengal where he came in contact with the rustic milieu of the country. This was to manifest in his idea of the *Visva-Bodh* or 'world consciousness' that he defined as the

extension and liberation of our consciousness from all the mystifications and exaggerations of the self ... the same energy which vibrates and passes into the endless forms of the world, ... when a man does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison house whose walls are alien to him. When he meets the eternal in all man then he is emancipated, for then he discovers the fullest significance of the world into which he is born. (*English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* II, 283)

Rabindranath travelled extensively across the world both before his Nobel prize in 1913 and after, circulating his idea of a global education and drawing both resources and faculty for his pedagogic programme.

Santiniketan started as an exclusively Brahmo school in 1901, in a hamlet 160 kms away from Kolkata but soon Rabindranath was to incorporate pedagogic components of English and science, in many cases drafting the primers himself. By 1912 he had already bought a house in nearby Surul and sent his own son to the USA to study agriculture. By 1916, Rabindranath's desire was to create a centre of Indian culture and the first forays of his nascent institution were dominantly in Indian religion and philology. As his horizons widened however the shift became more pronounced so that by 1921 when he established Visva-Bharati his manifesto was "to study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view; to bring into more intimate relation with one another, through patient study and research, the different cultures of the East and the west... and with such ideals in view to provide at Santiniketan, a centre of culture where

research into and study of the religion, literature, history, science and art of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, Christian and other civilizations may be pursued along with the culture of the west, with that simplicity in externals which is necessary for true spiritual realization in amity, good fellowship and cooperation between the thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and western countries." (*Visva-Bharati Quarterly* i)

The manifesto remains the first experiment in comparative cultural studies in India, presumably across the world. Yet now was this practice evolved? Rabindranath incorporated two new centres with what was erstwhile Vidya-Bhavana in the form of Sangeet Bhavana (the Department of Music) and Kala Bhavana (Department of Fine Arts). The educational programme at Santiniketan thus offered the choice of incorporating art and performance within the broader rubric. Within his space at Santiniketan, Rabindranath encouraged a departure from the Calcutta Art School with its exclusive agenda of promoting the Indian style of painting to incorporate a range of western impressionist, Surrealist paintings, African art and even the art of China and Japan. Writing to Abanindranath, Tagore wrote:

"The more I travel in Japan the more I feel you should have been here too. Squatting there all the time in your south verandah you will never realize how very essential it is to have contact with the living art of Japan so that our own art may revive and flourish." (*Japan Jatri* 182)

Having met Stella Kramrisch in 1920, Tagore invited her to Santiniketan in 1922 where she delivered a series of lectures on world art from Gothic to Dadaism. Rabindranath himself attended these lectures and translated them encouraging Nandalal Bose to evolve an art at Santiniketan that would open itself up to the world while remaining vigilant to local realities and using local material. A case in point is the black house at Santiniketan built of mud and coal tar, yet its frescoes depicted scenes and techniques of global realities and art forms. Rabindranath himself led this movement with relish as evident in his letter to William Rothenstein in 1937:

I have been playing havoc in the complacent and stagnant world of Indian art and my people are puzzled for they do not know what judgement to pronounce upon my pictures. But I must say I am largely enjoying my role as a painter. (Lago 75)

Rabindranath's experiments with music too deserve special mention here. In his first travelogue written in 1878 he had located the vivacity of western music and sought to experiment with it in a wide range of songs. Especially interesting is his experiment with the operatic form in *Kalmrigaya* and his translations of Scottish and Irish melodies especially the Scottish song *Auld Lang Syne* into *Purono Shei Diner Kotha*. At Sangeet Bhavana, Rabindranath brought western music in contact with the Indian classical music. In his travels to the far East he came across Javanese dance forms and costumes that he subsequently adopted and sent Santidev Ghosh to catalogue, learn and teach such forms to his students at Santiniketan. The same experiment was carried out with the form of the Kandy dance from Sri Lanka. Apart from these forms he familiarized his insulated Bengali audience with the Manipuri dance forms, deftly weaving them into dance dramas, cultural products that were then performed from the school level onwards. Thus art forms, art histories were available to students at Visva-Bharati to inculcate a sense of comparative cultural studies.

The experiments in comparative religion too need to be specified. While Rabindranath's first forays were into Sanskrit and Pali texts, he invited leading scholars like Vidushekhar Shashtri and Kshitimohan Sen. Subsequently he asked Kshitimohan to translate Kabir's Dohas, Nanak and Dadu's poems. A number of Buddhist text were translated while Rabindranath encouraged the translation of Hafez and Rumi into Bengali. A number of essays were written by Rabindranath himself to popularize the teachings of Christ into Bengali. Interesting use was made of the Brahma Mandir in this case. The space devoid of any deity was used to sing mantras, hymns and songs. Rabindranath himself wrote treatises, speeches and numerous songs on each occasion so that the young students would be familiarised with the ideas behind each religion and world then take off into more rigorous research. What we witness here is not merely comparative culture studies at a higher tertiary level but a truly cosmopolitan education at a very basic stage. While these experiments flourished, Tagore realized the importance of creating centres that could expose the students to languages and literatures across the globe. He invited Tan Yun Shan to set up the first Chinese studies department in 1927, considering it as a conduit to open Sino-Indian relations. He encouraged the study of Japanese literature and himself translated a number of Haikus and initiating a new genre of minimalist poetry in *Lekhan* and *Stray Birds*. His travels to Europe brought him in contact with Tucci and Sylvan Levi who initiated the study of European languages, while his trip to Persia in 1931 brought a surge of Persian studies in the university. Translation played a very important role in the popularity and adaptation of key texts at Santiniketan. Indeed, even the doctor Harry

Timbers who came to eradicate malaria after a brief stint at Russia, introduced the Russian folk dances to the school and university students.

While Santiniketan emerged as a nest for many cultures Rabindranath was equally interested in creating a comparative study of multicultural India. In 1937, the Hindi Bhavana was inaugurated and subsequently departments of Tamil, Marathi and Oriya were added allowing study and translation of various cultures within the rainbow. Few people in Bengal know that Maharashtra played an important role in changing the way in which sarees were worn in Bengal – the poet's sister in law Gyanadanandini Devi had brought it back from her stay there.

But the poet's other major experimentation in culture was to attempt a bridge between the elite and middle class *bhadralok* (urban intelligentsia) and the agricultural *chasas*. At a cultural level Rabindranath asked Kshitimohan to archive the Baul and the folk songs of Bengal, adapted them and brought them within the cultural practice of Bengali music. On a converse side he brought western modernity, medicine and agricultural learning to the villages, thereby making the university a facilitator in bridging cultural differences. The first department of social work in India was started at Sriniketan though Tagore called the process rural reconstruction involving the people and tapping into their *atmashakti*. In this effort he leaved heavily on people like Leonard Elmhirst, Harry Timbers, Gretchen Green and C.F. Andrews. Indeed, when Elmhirst asked the boys of Santiniketan to carry human waster as fertilizer for the fields, the culture shock was no less and Rabindranath himself had to intervene.

The other major pedagogical experiment that Rabindranath brought to Santiniketan was in the awareness of the environment. In this he synthesized his thoughts with the Scottish town planner Patrich Geddes. Both believed in the triad of the folk-work-place so that the natural, ecological ambience of the place dovetailed with economic realities. Rabindranath's use of open air classes and spartan residential areas, were meant to integrate the university to the community while sensitizing the children to the environment as a co-actor in the process of growth. In 1926 he designed the *Briksharopana* or the tree planting festival with its worship of the young sapling as divinity. Subsequently he redesigned the European fete as the *Anandamela* where children created, sold and donated their proceeds to charity within the structure of joyous celebration. In 1927 he initiated the *Halakarshana* or the plough festival creating a series of songs and hymns for the festival.

I would like to linger for a moment on these festivals as pedagogic spaces of studies in culture. In each case the festival drew heavily upon rituals including processions, communal participation, hymns and dress codes. Yet within them was a synthesis of

literary and performativity, that brought within itself ideas from other cultures and practices as well. The *Christotsava* is a case in point where Christmas carols were sung in conjunction with mantras and Rabindrasangeet drawing out commonalities in culture. Interestingly, all this was being done in Bangla so that the positive benefit of the programme could be radiated to the community at large. At the core of this programme was a departure from the confines of mere books or disciplines to a composite cultural texts that acted as vessels of the pedagogic process.

The decay of the ideals of Santiniketan and the pedagogic processes highlights the challenges that lie ahead for comparative cultural studies. With the increase of intake and governmental regimentation, departments proliferated and disciplinary confinements became paramount. Rabindrasangeet and dance, art practices became fossilized with the festivals that have now become archetypes rather than experimental processes that bring together cultures. With each Bhavana becoming a separate entity, collaborative researches have dried up, leading to progressive specialization. The availability of a pool of languages and cultural forms may trigger the inquisitive and engaged student, it does not radiate out to the wider community at large.

My paper has sought to trace the debates and experiments with the nascent discipline of comparative cultural studies in India. In a globalised, multicultural society like ours where texts and cultural forms proliferate, how are disciplines going to rise to face the new challenges? Are we consigned to reiterate our pedagogic practices in a declining phase of the humanities? Or will experiments in cultures be our way forward? In 1921, Tagore had been faced with a similar set of questions and had steered his university with the motto *Yatra Visvam Bhavatyeka Needam* – ‘where the world makes its home in a single nest’. I leave the question open to this discerning audience.

WORKS CITED

- Greenne, Ronald Arthur, “Review of *Death of a Discipline*”, *Substance*, Issue 109, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2006: 154-59.
- McRobbie, A. “The Es and the Anti-Es: New Questions for Feminism and Cultural Studies”, in M. Ferguson and P. Golding, eds. *Cultural Studies in Question*. London: Sage, 1997.
- Nussbaum, Martha, “Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism”, in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret W. Brown and David Held. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012: 155-62.
- Rabindranath Tagore, “Declaration” in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, 1.1 (1923): i.
- Saukko, Paula. *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches*. London: Sage, 2003.

Tagore Rabindranath, *Sadhana: The Realization of Life* (1913) in Sisir Kumar Das, ed. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996, Vol. II: 275-345.

Tagore, Rabindranath, "Rabindranath Tagore to William Rothenstein", Letter No. 195, in *Imperfect Encounters: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-1941*, ed. Mary M. Lago (Harvard: Harvard University press, 1972), p. 75.

Tagore, Rabindranth. *Japan Jatri*. Kolkata, Visva-Bharati, BS1326.

Zepetnek, Steven Totosy de, "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies", in *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, ed. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek. Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2003: 235-267.



Higher Education &
Research Society