

**IDENTITY CRISIS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE**

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**Abstract**

*Great waves of theory and criticism shifted Comparative Literature away from the study of two texts or authors from two different systems. At least in the West, the discipline faced a "crisis". Its identity came into question as Translation Studies evolved into a technical discipline with its own theories and methods, and World Literature developed its scope within the framework of national literatures whose relevance had stood the test of time. Some argue that Comparative Literature can be a part of literary theory or criticism. Disturbing disparities mark the field today, with its very name signifying different things across continental contexts: East-West relations, translation and culture, or interrelations of literatures. However, comparative literature has struck its roots in the Third World Countries and India in particular because of its multiple identities. In these countries this field presents a varied picture, with scope for exploring "indigenous" and "imposed" traditions, thus giving a focus different from the one for which it has actually evolved. We need a well-defined methodological framework to establish the status of comparative literature. That methodological framework can help scholars in this field to give it an academic status.*

**Key Words:** *Comparative Literature, Translation Studies, World Literature, Third World Countries, India and multiple identity, academic discipline.*

## IDENTITY CRISIS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

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### 1. The Basic Arguments

There are already numerous publications analyzing the discipline of Comparative Literature and its growth in different contexts and perspectives. There is an ongoing debate about its identity as an academic discipline. I enter a discussion of this identity crisis by way of statements from three different scholars working in the field of Comparative Literature.

- Cao Shunqing, Dept. of Comparative Literature, Sichuan University: in his essay 'Cross-Culture: A New Change and Breakthrough of Comparative Literature' says that, 'If we say the crisis as Wellek pointed out in 1958 was "a dead water", the crisis today could be "a fog" in which direction has been lost. With more standard sized specialty, the discipline springs up like mushrooms [*sic*]. Such a fact shows that this discipline has been far from being dead. On the contrary, it has a growing vitality. But why is it, theoretically, facing a crisis since it is with growing vitality?'
- According to Susan Basnett, her research paper titled 'Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction' says that, 'What we have today, then, is a very varied picture of comparative literary studies that changes according to where it is taking place..... The way in which comparative literature is used, in places such as China, Brazil, India or many African nations, is constructive in that it is employed to explore both indigenous traditions and imported (or imposed) traditions, throwing open the whole vexed problem of the canon.'
- SubhaChakrabortyDasguptain her essay 'State of the Discipline: The Indian Context' says, 'At the turn of the century, Cultural Studies programmes did usurp the space of Comparative Literature to some extent, and Comparative Literature responded by moving into a larger space of 'inter-disciplinarity', particularly in its research areas.'

The above arguments clearly state that Comparative Literature as a discipline is not dead, yet faces some crisis because of its multiple, varied, interlinking aims. There is a chance that it will lose its identity and emerge as Comparative Cultural Studies or one of the parts of the mainstream literary studies. At the same time, the way in which the discipline has

been made flexible in order to incorporate varied fields and applications is an interesting field of debate.

## **2. An Introduction to the Topic**

Likening Comparative Literature to God, Jancy James articulates the complexities in the field as a structured discipline. She says, 'there are millions of devotees who worship God daily or even hourly, and yet go through the crisis of faith, a kind of 'dark night of the soul' experience, question the foundations of their own belief in the very existence of God, and reach an abysmal level of commitment.'<sup>(1)</sup> Almost all concerns in this area just stems from the word

'Comparative'. Even two centuries after its birth the discipline of Comparative Literature has been undergoing thorough anatomical research to find whether now it is really dead or has established its identity. This search for identity and academic recognition was addressed by Rabindranath Tagore in India when the discipline had a very fragile stand in the country. However, the controversies multiplied in terms of the subject's gravity and methodology as more and more scholars started exploring this field of study. There has been no consensus with respect to its status as growing or dead. 'In 2003 Haun Saussy wrote "Comparative Literature has, in a sense, won its battles" whereas Susan Bassnett asserts, ten years earlier, that "today, comparative literature in one sense is dead' (Drisya 32). Variant accounts of the state of the field have contributed to a crisis that makes globally adoptable practice difficult.

Thus Comparative Literature has become synonymous with crisis. People in the field have learned to carry this field of Comparative Literature along with whatever perspectives they try to bring in this area. However, the root of this crisis is in the nature of Comparative Literature itself. Though experts have given numerous definitions, the perspectives are different in terms of its applicability in different continents and academic scenarios. Today, scholars have expanded the horizon of the discipline by bringing subjects other than literature into its 'comparative' scope. This interdisciplinarity has gained wide appeal among university students, who show a growing interest in the parallel study and exploration of various arts and science subjects.

Curriculum design is a serious problem faced by almost all Universities because of the above mentioned controversies and the vague nature of the discipline. It has become a real challenge as not the scope, structure and nature of the word 'comparative' have not yet been defined.

'Since the days of Rene Wellek's 'Crisis of Comparative Literature' (1959), which became a 'manifesto of sorts for what came to be known as the 'American School of Comparative Literature', emphasizing the importance of literary theory and championing cosmopolitan humanism over cultural nationalism, we have seen a lot

happening in/to the discipline: we have seen it 'in one sense dead', but still appearing 'in other guises', we have witnessed it breathing its last and then being reborn, especially in US.' (Raj xxii)

This rebirth is caused by the way the curriculum has been designed as an inter-disciplinary area and it slowly started expanding its horizons beyond an old world model vs. new world model. David Damrosch – author of 'Rebirth of a Discipline' – has brought out a model that addresses two aspects of it – 'one surveying the breadth of great literary traditions and the other plumbing the depth of individual literary texts/ culture.' (James 5) This has become one of the criteria by which curriculum of Comparative Literature can be framed in the post-modern world. However, the contemporary curricula in Comparative Literature have brought in more advanced changes by giving it the scope of exploring cultural aspects of related nations as well. This has given rise to new debates and thus another crisis.

#### **Arguments detailed:**

When we look at the twenty-first century developments in the subject area, scholars in the field have been going through trouble after trouble at different phases. An area with constantly increasing number of developments and evolution, Comparative Literature has come to a state in which experts have started claiming it to be a growing field than a dead one. However, these claims lack sufficient authority in establishing its truth. Susan Bassnett's claim that 'the area in one sense is dead' is a result of the inundations of literary theory from structuralism to gender studies leading astray comparative inquiries of texts, authors, readers and genres. Added to this, the formation of a World Literature course and Translation Studies resulted in this identity issues: "The present globalized world looks at "World Literature" as one that can be read in English translation [can also be rephrased as translations into native languages] rather than Comparative Literature that depends on multilingual expertise.' (Drisy 33) Though Comparative Literature has always claimed translation as a part of it, the area has grown beyond its framework and has come out with its methodologies and theories. Moreover, critics claim that a translated work is not a pure source for comparative study as translated language would not allow the reader to comprehend the original source culture. Since translation dilutes the essence of the original language, it fails the aims and objectives of comparative studies. All these new developments and arguments have created the so called crisis in the West. However, in the East it developed into a complex phenomenon. This complex growth of the field of Comparative Literature in the East is addressed by Susan Bassnett who wrote,

'Falling student numbers, the uneasiness of many comparatists that is revealed in defensive papers or a reluctance to engage in definition of what exactly their subject consists of, the apparent continuation of the old idea of comparative literature as binary study, i.e., as the study of two authors or texts from two different systems



(though the problem of how to define different systems is a complex one and unresolved), all these factors, reinforce the picture of a subject that has lost its way, even as courses in literary theory and post-colonial theory proliferate and publishers' catalogues list books in these areas under separate headings.....By the late 1970s a new generation of high-flying graduate students in the West turned to Literary Theory, Women's Studies, Semiotics, Film and Media Studies and Cultural Studies as the radical subject choices, abandoning Comparative Literature to what were increasingly seen as dinosaurs from a liberal-humanist prehistory. Yet even as that process was underway in the West, comparative literature began to gain ground in the rest of the world.'(5)

The increasing number of arguments, research and debates helped this area to create a new shape and approach in the Third World Countries but without losing its essence of comparison. The countries have started using the word 'comparison' in their own ways -- hence the boom in the subject area. It has gone beyond the texts and started embracing areas from humanities, cultural studies, sciences, philosophy and performance as means of comparison. Whether this should be Comparative Literature's actual aim is another question.

The above argument states that the discipline is growing though crisis follows it. However, the following argument supports the previous by stating that it is growing but not in the way it was created for. But this crisis is not an overwhelming issue as it incorporates in the methodology not all but most of the aspects related to its origin. The result is the birth of a new comparative literature discipline.

GayatriChakrabortySpivak, in a collection of essays, *Death of a Discipline*, argues that, 'the field of Comparative Literature should move beyond its Eurocentric origins to pave a way forward for the discipline from its decline. A new comparative literature is in need to destabilize the tendency of dominant cultures to subjugate others. Such a discipline should move beyond the strictures of Western concepts. Actually the discipline has taken over the activity of comparative analysis between cultures and literatures.'(Drisya6)

Now comparative literature has become a very strong discipline in Asian countries. These Asian countries have nurtured the subject to suit exploration of various national elements like identity and culture. The best example one can take here to evaluate is the situation in the Indian Sub-continent. In the West, Indian literature might be conflated with Sanskrit literature, but Indian writings in many languages; it is a conglomeration of varied cultures and identity. Indians have multiple identity, one national and others pertaining to their language, clan, religion or state that they belong to. This can be the sole basis of comparative literature here. A field of comparative literature can be developed in Indian universities in two ways easily. One is exactly based on the Old World model of comparison

of texts, authors etc. and the other on the comparative study of different disciplines related to literature.

For instance, a student of Maharashtra may have the advantage of knowing to read and write Marathi, Hindi, Sindhi, English and perhaps Gujarati. Doesn't this pave the way for comparative literary study of varied Indian writings and culture without relying on translation? Isn't it one of the objectives of comparative literature? Rather than going at the global level of studying and comparing foreign literatures, Indians can narrow down the discipline to study India's national identity and its rich literary resources. Looking at the other trend of comparative study of various disciplines, again India is a most suitable place. Almost all states in India have different history, geography, philosophy and art forms. A scholar in the field will be definitely astonished by the myriad possibilities the area will have in India. The Central University of Kerala, Kasargod conducted an International Workshop on Curriculum Development for Comparative Literature: Scope and Challenges in March 2010. The papers presented were actually an eye-opener in the field of Comparative Literature in India. The workshop showed the possibilities of interdisciplinary links like Folk Studies as a political tool of decolonization, embracing film and media studies – Comparative Film Studies, Teaching women's writing in Comparative perspective, Text and Performance, Arabic literature in diaspora, Comparative study of poetics, and Dalit studies. Each state in India has its own different folk tales and traditions, film trend and ideas, women's status and traditions and role, art forms and costumes, migration trend, literary theory from its own languages (especially Sanskrit poetics) and different class of people and their lifestyles which is different from that of the mainstream society. Thus I reiterate the question of Avadhesh Kumar Singh: 'Is India a curious comparative space? The plurality of traditions, languages, customs and topography offers immense opportunity for Comparative Studies' (James 08)

However, consider Susan Bassnett's statement, "Comparative Literature was on the decline in the West and was gaining ground in the rest of the world, particularly in Asian countries, is only partially true in the context of India" (4-5) The world 'partially' is to be noted here. Yes, it is right. The way in which the field of Comparative Literature is studied in Indian Universities is quite different from the way it was originally designed in the West. Most of the time it is about the narrowed comparison of Pre-British and Post-British identity and culture or the inter-links with other disciplines, focusing on culture, behaviour, history etc. (of the nation or state or community) rather than literary aspects. Thus it leads to an identity crisis as to whether it is exactly Comparative Literature in methodology and framework in Indian Universities. From the previous arguments one understands that the field of Comparative Literature has changed its nature and framework to make itself feasible globally and particularly in India. As the discipline grew in breadth and depth in

the Indian sub-continent, the literary focus of the system started facing some threats. The recent development of integrating cultural studies as a part of it has become a serious debatable issue in the academic and literary forums. Now Universities have rephrased it as Comparative Cultural Studies claiming that one actually explores and understands culture and its influence through literary appreciation and comparison.

'Comparative cultural studies is a field of study where selected tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with selected tenets of the field of cultural studies meaning that the study of culture and culture products – 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, inter-disciplinary.....' (Zepetnek 262)

Though culture is a part of literary studies, one cannot claim that culture is everything that constitutes a literary work. But the trend has gone in such a way that Comparative Literature has been made appear to be equal to Comparative Cultural Studies. As comparative literature starts working with gender studies, racism, history, and psychology, which are embedded in the cultural roots of a country and are a part of its literary tradition, there are greater chances of cultural studies taking over comparative literature as a part of it. This identity crisis Comparative Cultural Studies have brought in the field of Comparative Literature in Indian universities is another area of concern discussed in many international as well as national conferences.

According to Stephen Totosy de Zepetnek, who designates a discipline as "Comparative Cultural Studies" in his paper "From Comparative Literature Today Toward Comparative Cultural Studies",

'Comparative literature has contributed significantly to literary studies, I argue that it also has much to offer to cultural studies. In principle comparative cultural studies is conceived as an approach – to be developed eventually to a full-fledged framework – containing three areas of theoretical content:

1. To study literature – text / literary system – with and in the context of culture and the discipline of cultural studies
2. In cultural studies itself to study literature with borrowed elements – theories and methods – from comparative literature
3. To study culture and its composite parts and aspects in the mode of the proposed "comparative cultural studies" approach instead of the currently reigning single-language approach dealing with a topic with regard to its nature and problematics in one culture only.' (236)

### **Conclusion**

Since the crisis began, Comparative Literature [I personify Comparative Literature here as the rhetoric of "identity crisis" invites it] has been trying different levels of innovations in

its field to keep up the status of academic discipline. There is a dichotomy between West and East in dealing with this field. But the same dichotomy can be viewed as the output of two broad categories that can be critically studied to identify the purpose for which the subject stands for. Though threat from theory is still persistent in the West, Comparative Literature found a space in Third World Countries. However, parallelisms in Cultural Studies have created another threat to the discipline and as response to this threat it started diversifying into many areas of research. This field of studies is now known for its flexibility that the same flexibility is paving its way for survival but at the cost of its 'identity'. Cultural Studies cannot be equated with Comparative Literature. The best strategy for universities is to adopt a combination of both, naming the discipline 'Comparative Literature and Culture'— following universities like Royal Holloway University of London, Western University (Canada), University of Minnesota (US), University of Limerick (Ireland), University of Kent (UK) etc. They could also follow the lead of Stanford University's Comparative Literature Department, which addresses to modes of Comparative Literature.

Track A: The Literary Studies track integrates in-depth work in a primary literature with extensive work in a second literature (in the original language) and complementary course work in an outside field.

Track B: The interdisciplinary track integrates in-depth work in a primary literature with the focused study of literature in relation to other arts (film, music, painting, and so on), intellectual disciplines (anthropology, history, linguistics, philosophy, and so on), or comparative work in area studies.

The best way in which Comparative Literature may regain its status is in the efforts for literary scholars and critics. Unless there are definite principles, methodologies and theories to explain what the subject is and how it is to be studied, the identity crisis will be an endless phenomenon.

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