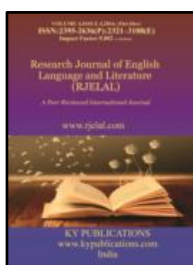




## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, POST COLONIAL SPACES AND TRANSNATIONAL COMPARITIVISM: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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### ABSTRACT

Comparative literature as a discipline had its origin in western academia and it still carries that supremacy and dominance. In the post-colonial era, this tendency to normalize the western supremacy is being challenged at various levels. The paper deals in detail with the complexities that Comparative Literature comes across within the post colonial spaces. When Comparative Literature meant as a liberating factor for European literatures, it rather demands more introspection of the existing layers of power structure in terms of language and literatures in Post colonial country like India. It doesn't confirm with Goethe's concept of 'World Literature'. In this globalized, cosmopolitan world the influence and power of English is taken into question in the context of translation in Comparative literature. Transnational comparitivism as a method to move away from the national boundaries lands at a space where the Eurocentric hegemony is the controlling factor of the whole concept of 'Transnationalism'. Transnationalism and transculturalism is something that is applicable only in a space where equality exists. The paper argues that the discipline of Comparative Literature in the post colonial Indian context subverts the power structure of the discipline itself so as to attend the literatures and languages vastly as the context demands.

Key words: Post colonialism- Transnational comparitivism- deconstruction – hegemony

The origin of Comparative Literature as a discipline in the nineteenth century western academia has past re(evolution) in terms of definitions and perspectives in the field of humanities with its diverse approaches which have reached as wider as comparative literary studies, cultural studies and so on. The field of comparative literature is still a contesting terrain scrutinized by scholars across disciplinary and national boundaries and is influenced and transformed with its contact with other areas of studies.

The post- colonial intervention in the field of comparative literature has a very great impact on the field. Currently the very terminology of post-

colonialism is under inspection for its dependence on the category of 'colonial' when it comes to self definition. The discourses are reduced to categories which are strongly remarked by the colonialism followed by the intervention of post-colonial scholars. In such a juncture, this paper mainly looks at the post-colonial interventions in the discourse on comparative literature with reference to concepts like the emerging concept of 'transnational comparitivism'

When Post-colonial literature which is constituted as a counter discourse to challenge and revise the forms of colonization becomes an academic discipline, its anti colonial perception from

the past colonies unravels the discipline's comparative inclination. It develops essentially a comparative discourse. The categorization of self/ other/ - east/west has said to have activated a comparative knowledge but this very system of knowledge is under the service of imperial power. Post colonialism even if claims to speak for and affirm the voices of margins in Said's Orientalism, the term post-colonial used in this paper is well aware of the politics of exclusion of margins within post-colonial theory perpetuated by Edward Said.

It is noteworthy that the origin of the discipline of comparative literature in west came as a challenge to nationalism whereas the very postcolonial state is the result of categorization as nations/countries on the grounds of different affiliations. It challenges Goethe's claim in Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe, 1835 that the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everybody must strive to hasten its approach." .For Goethe, world literature implied a body of valuable, classical works from across the globe or mostly in the European continent but the postcolonial period comparative literature does not entail the replacement of national literatures by world literature. As Bassnett quotes G.N. Devy, "Comparative literature has been used to assert the national cultural identity in the postcolonial period."

In challenging the Eurocentric notions and assumptions, the need to move beyond the canon is realized by comparative literature scholars and the discipline has developed in different parts of the world even though it is in crisis in the west. However, the scope, directions, challenges of the discipline has to be contested and debated on individual grounds in post-colonial space.

In the context of country like India, comparative literature is not limited to two texts or two authors of different languages but it takes into regard various identity affiliations like caste, gender, sexuality etc. Due to its emergence in the west, the discipline has embedded very many Eurocentric values theoretically and practically. The traditional comparative literature has to undergo transformation according to the context. To an extent, its initial emphasis on conventional methodology and the use of theory can be seen as a

tool to survive as an independent discipline resisting the merging with other emerging disciplines.

Since the last decade of the 20th century, critics such as Susan Bassnett began giving remarkable credit to postcolonial and translation studies in the field of comparative literature. To Bassnett, what brings comparative literature and postcolonial studies together is a common concern about "the problematic of language and national identity". She articulates that the sense of national identity of European (mainly French) comparitists which was once challenged by American approach with universality and ahistoricism at the top of agenda, has again entered comparative studies through a very different perspective. Non-European nations assert their national identity through literature, long kept at the bay by European theoreticians as "inferior" works. She also ascribed the growing recognition of translation studies to the rise of post colonialism.

In *Death of the Discipline*, Spivak questions the very ideological and cultural border between the first world based comparative literature and third world based area studies. One significant factor which has its influence on the very act of reading, writing, discussing the literature, theory, methodology form a post colonial space is the concern of production and circulation of 'knowledge'. Most of the theories, application, and methodologies still carry colonial legacies. As Spivak notes, one has to re constitute the form and content of the knowledge in order to replace this legacy. It has to be an endeavor to turn the site of production of knowledge.

In the contemporary era of globalization, the problem of comparative literature when we look from a subaltern perspective is that even if it is historically defined as a study of differences, the repression by those literary, linguistic and cultural productions within the discipline is the structural limitation of comparative literature's originary model. Frank J Warnke emphasized the need for the inclusion of non-canonical and non-Western works in comparative studies. His work "The Comparatist Canon: Some Observations" introduced the problem of major Western literature being so centralized in comparative studies that "smaller" Western and

non-Western cultures and literatures were almost totally taken for granted.

While it used to start with Western literature and then look outwards, nowadays comparative literature especially in India is following a completely opposite method. It starts off with India's own literatures and the exploration within the regional literatures. The fascination for the west and tendencies to look for influence and inspiration from the west are to be altered. One question to be posed is "Are the major works of literary traditions outside Europe familiar to European comparatists like how they are familiar with the old and new canonized European writers?"

In this digital era, the globalization of languages such as English has contributed to the diminishing of the need to learn different languages. The existing pedagogies would offer a student, the representative texts written in English or is translated into English. When the disciplines like comparative literature gets dominated by English Studies, It leads to the situation termed by Appadurai as 'aesthetics of decontextualization' i.e. ethnic, subaltern literary products became authentic, legitimate when it is dis-located from its original culture and Language which is the 'ignorance' towards other non-western, non-canonized products. It facilitates the consumption of the non western literature into mere objects. This tendency can be traced when one looks at the treatment of non European literature in European Universities, centers and Departments. In this context, the post-colonial literature becomes objects of what Aijaz Ahmed called 'Feitshized commodities' in his essay.

It is its urgency to deconstruct the binaries of European- non European in the comparative frame work. We need to move from the binaries to the individual categories towards the deconstruction of the power structures practiced in the comparative framework within post colonial space in terms of gender, Identity and all other affiliations. The post colonial comparative literature framework's exclusionary policy has to be questioned in order to accommodate minority, subaltern language, culture and literature in the institutional and academic levels. As Amiya Dev

discusses in her essay 'Comparitive Literature in India' the number of languages acknowledged by Indian Constitution and Sahitya Academy itself shows the prevalence of hegemonious languages and literature within Indian scenario.

If comparative literature operates as a discipline within the horizon of world literature, what is this 'world' literature whose world is mostly literature written in English? In a way, it is becoming rapidly monolingual with the language's colonial legacy and privilege.

Edward Said in 'Culture and Imperialism' notes, "To speak of comparative literature therefore was to speak of the interaction of world literatures with one another, but the field was epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy, with Europe and its Latin Christian literatures at its center and top". To overcome such a situation, for e.g. in countries like India, As U R Ananthamurthy suggested, one can propose the translation within the Indian Languages without losing the culture and ethnicity.

Post- colonial studies has to go beyond the binary of colonial- post colonial where postcolonial can be a critical contribution to decode neo- colonial manifestations and existing and emerging configurations of power and knowledge within colonial and post colonial. Spivak who plays a foundational role in post colonial theory proposed a new methodology of comparative reading, a new theory of comparitivism. In Spivak's project of comparative literature it is necessary to go beyond the established methods and reach down to where the space of subalternity is opened up. By "subalternity", Spivak understands subjectivity devoid of a possibility to speak due to the "epistemic violence" performed by hegemonic power/knowledge.

The idea of universalism can be seen as a crafty way to maintain the supreme position of the west. Said in 'Culture and Imperialism' notes "The notion of Western literature that lies at the very core of comparative study centrally highlights, dramatizes and celebrates a certain idea of history, and at the same time obscures the fundamental geographical and political reality empowering that idea."

When we look at the trend of 'Translation', the power politics will be clear in the rate of readership for translated third world literature to English in Europe and the accommodation of translated English third world literature in European Universities. As Spivak notes, it can neutralize the specificity of the original without any artistic and linguistic individuality.

In comparative literature, the categories of national literature, identity, regional literature gets more complicated when we add diasporic factor in postcolonial context. A part of postcolonial literature is written in metropolis with their location and their root. Looking at the opting of transnationalism to deal with the cultural complexities of the twentieth century mobile, cosmopolitan, globalized age in a post colonial perspective is politically very crucial to the discussion of comparative literature. It claims to offer a borderless comparative methodology moving away from the insistence on periphery and centre, colonial and postcolonial. The comparative approach through a transcultural lens which is called as 'transnational/ transcultural comparitivism' leaves behind the power politics untackled, unraveled and unsolved. It claims to provide a transcultural lens that is 'a perspective in which all cultures look decentred in relation to all other cultures, including one's own'. For a post colonial subject, to have a legitimate claim on the culture of one's "own", the Eurocentric legacies in the production of knowledge has to be addressed initially. Transnational comparitivism as a method to move away from the national boundaries lands at a space where the Eurocentric hegemony is the controlling factor of the whole concept of 'Transnationalism'. Transnationalism and transculturalism is something that is applicable only in a space where equality exists.

The scholars such as Engler Schulze, Helff criticizes that post colonial approaches tend to understand cultural dynamics "in terms of classical dichotomies such as colonizer vs. colonized or centers vs. peripheries and obsessively remain tied to notions of cultural difference, dissidence, subalternity and marginality . The very space created by the notions of difference, subalternity

and marginality is from where a comparative methodology has to be formed. It is from where the power politics of western comparative literature, western theoretical models, and exclusionary policies are to be contested and problematized in order to have a comparative literature frame work of Post colonial space.

'Nation' is affirmed as a category of consolidating people but the excesses and atrocities of chauvinist nationalism has to be questioned. It was 19<sup>th</sup> century comparative literature which brought national literature as a comparative category but later It has become one of hierarchizing comparison and concept of 'nation' in contemporary postcolonial theory is no longer an uncontested realm. In such a context, it depends on what we are comparing something with on the larger areas and layers of power. Indian literature cannot be posed as representing a nation in opposite to any European narratives as it is 'Literatures' and not 'Literature'. Posing 'Malayalam poetry' representing regional literature from Kerala is also problematic as written by S Joseph in 'A Letter to Malayalam Poetry'. Even if the written literature is asserted from the periphery, the exclusion of oral narratives occurs. For European comparative Literature, Transnational is becoming a liberating one coming out but for Post colonial nations, it is more of Notion of looking into the existing structure.

The identity, situatedness, position and other affiliations are very important factors for writers who write from a post colonial space. The very transformation of this space to a transnational/ transcultural one would question the very existence of their literature, authenticity, experience and the purpose. If its purpose is to nullify the dichotomies, the question is, Is this nullification possible at all even in conceptual level in the era of neo colonialism and power structures, knowledge systems etc yet to be unraveled. The deterritorialized, denationalized concepts are very much suitable for privileges ones and not for the post colonial writers in the context of comparative literature. In transnational comparitivism, the postmodern tendency to treat all literatures as a kind of meta-language on the a-historical perception of contemporary theory has proved to be

inadequate. What is urgently needed is a commitment to understanding literatures connection to and elucidation of the socio-cultural context from which it springs. In this context, transnational comparativism is inadequate in all terms as comparative literature is more political and has become a tool to assertion in post colonial spaces.

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