

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## SOCIAL IMAGINATION IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: A REMEDY FOR LITERARY MYOPIC ABERRATION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the role and function of social imagination within a comparative framework in literature. Prior to delving into the depths of the topic it is rudimentary to state the contents of the paper. Key topics include a definition of literature and the impulses behind literature, the elements of literature, the purpose and significance of comparison of literatures in this world of globalization in general, application of social imagination to harmonize the literatures, its prominent and active role in widening the perspective by accommodating all the cultures and literatures through translation and, finally the scope and limits of social imagination.

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### Literature-Impulses behind and elements of Literature:

It is a universally known fact that literature is the representation of social life. It is an expression of the most profound and felt experience of people in life through the medium of language. It instructs, inspires and allures the readers, yielding to them a certain aesthetic satisfaction and pleasure by virtue of its form. Besides, it quickens the imagination of its readers, and awakens a response in every human being of every race.

There is universality in literature that humanizes the whole world, by sensitive and responsive people (called 'writers') who are influenced by the human and social environment of

times. A desire for self expression, an interest in people and their doings, an interest in the world of reality in which we live and in the world of imagination which we conjure into existence and our love of form as a form – are the four main impulses behind every literature.

While these impulses have led to the evolution of various forms of literature such as poetry, essay, fiction, drama, etc, irrespective of what the form of literature is, there are four elements commonly found in all forms of literature that makes it a special entity and a discipline that is capable of drawing the attention of everyone with certain aesthetic values. They are

- I. 'The intellectual element' –it is the thought which the writer brings to bear upon his subject and it is also this same thought that he expresses in his work. This intellectual element is the foundation upon which a critic bases his critical study.
- II. 'The emotional element' –it is the feeling (of whatever kind) which his subject arouses in him and which in turn he desires to stimulate in us. This is called as the affectation that is felt by the readers.
- III. 'The element of imagination'- this is really the faculty of strong and intense vision with which the writer treats his topic and makes us to imagine the same within the historical and social environment that he has created.
- IV. 'The technical element'- this is the element of composition and style involving the structure, the plot and the like.

The dominance of each of these elements distinguishes literatures of different ages and movements. Thus the impulses behind each literary work and the elements constituting every literature are the same but with a degree of dominance of one over the other that distinguishes it from one form to the other. Also, human nature is same all over the world. So, its expression in different literatures is bound to have deep seated similarities and affinities. To focus attention on them in a systematic way, Comparative Literature can be sought as a refuge. It develops a clear consciousness of a scheme of relationships between them. That itself emerges as a remedy against mental confusion and an insular point of view. Because of these commonalities constituting any literature, they are comparable.

Purpose of Comparative Literature:

Comparative literature originated, with the term "Comparative Literature", in the real sense in Great Britain, though there were other overlapping terms earlier like world literature, universal literature, weltliteratur and international literature; and though there have been comparative evaluations of writers and their respective writings among and within themselves as a nation. It took its form in the nineteenth century against the narrow nationalistic scholarship that lived in a closed world

and considered their own literature incomparable and other literatures as uncultivated and barbarous.

Comparative Literature is assuming very firm place among the present disciplines as it takes comparative method in a serious manner, looking for certain universal features in literature. Longinus' contribution was remarkable to this study. He gave a wider outlook suggesting the universal nature of the phenomenon, which takes cognizance of literature outside the Greco-Roman tradition. As literature is the most humanizing force, the work of each writer has to be studied as a whole, 'as a part of man's universal creativity, and that universal spirit in its manifestations through world literature', as remarked by Tagore.

In recent years, with the concept of globalization - in Indian terminology the concept of 'Vasudekakutumbam'- there have been radical changes in the reception and consumption of literature. The impact of globalization on literature is manifold, with both positive and negative associations. The publishing industry has itself become more globalized and consolidated into multinational media conglomerates. Writers are being international, which means they are being freed from domestic limitations, their reception losing its centre and allowing an opportunity for the readers to interpret it. When people become exposed to literature from other countries, their culture inevitably changes. To illustrate, when a European reader takes a look at the new stories coming out about the situations in the East, he tries to extend his vision beyond his own surroundings and culture or, when a student goes to study from the East to the West, the result would be an assimilation of both the cultures, at least to some extent, stretching his perspective beyond his own culture.

Literatures of the world can be regarded as the common heritage of mankind. Despite the circumstantial and surface differences, literatures have the comprehensiveness to include every aspect of human experience. A comparative study of literatures would be artificial or mechanical when done with a stress on the externals of the work considered. Initial surface skimming is good, but it is the essence, the 'deep structure' study that has to be made to bring out the similarities and differences

between the two literatures taken up for comparison. An unusual tolerance, uncommon competence and uncanny outlook with unbiased scrutiny is demanded by the comparist. It is only then that he can appreciate the deeper relations between the theme, form, culture and aesthetic excellence of the work.

Social Imagination: To Reveal Positive Perspective:

It is here that Social Imagination plays its significant role in comparative literature. Social imagination can be defined as the capacity to discern the relationship between large scale social forces and the actions of the individuals. It is rooted in activism and gives no scope to fantasy. It allows one to understand and predict the behaviour of others as per their culture, makes sense of abstract ideas and to imagine situations outside one's immediate daily routine. It bridges the relationship between literature on one hand and the areas of knowledge and belief and cultures on the other hand, and explores the literary world beyond one's confines.

The pioneers of comparative literature in India, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Sri Aurobindo, favoured the synthesis of Indian and European approaches by looking at Europe or the western world from an Indian angle of thinking. Comparative literary scholarship sans social imagination merely degenerates the study and reduces the whole work to prove that one's own nation has assimilated or understood a foreign master more fully than other. Social imagination goes rightly with the principle of "no debts" in the comparison of literatures and makes the study free from debtors and creditors. No nation can think as superior or inferior to other nations in its literature.

Comparative literature is a multidimensional study with diversified components, housing multitudinous themes like cultures, folklore studies and genres. It introduces works from a wide range of cultures, mostly in English translation, offering a path to develop general strategies for reading literatures across cultures. Culture can be learnt through literature. But a complete understanding of literature, and of the capacity of literature to illuminate meanings in human culture, cannot be had from the study of just a single literary tradition. Literature is firmly and

intricately bound to social contexts. These two points widen and deepen the perspective, by leading to an upheaval in comparative literary studies with social imagination working positively to understand the literatures that are not one's own.

While comparative imagination and sociological imagination are used by the writer to explain what is distinctive about their society by using foreign perspective and to see how social causation operates in society, social imagination is not from the writer's angle. It is operational at the comparist's level. The latter makes one to respond and adapt to globalization on the one hand and localization on the other hand. It provides a site or methodology of confluence, advocating the validity of the existence of those local languages, cultures and literatures that once existed but now have become history with shrinking of the globe and flattening of the world.

At the same, social imagination establishes points of affinity between masterpieces of different literary traditions on comparison. It is not restricted to actual historical contacts alone. It is helpful in comparing a masterpiece with the lesser work and the good work with the not so good work. It makes the comparist to interpret human existence, which he had experienced himself, as it confronts him from outside. With this (imagining), he projects all his inner experience into other human beings or cultures and the result is amazing. He understands the unfathomable alien depths of another being or another culture which is beyond the limits of his own. This achievement, through social imagination, of interpreting another culture in literary studies, is a sufficient distinction. The recurring characteristics that are common in these cross-cultural studies and the peculiar characteristics could be brought out.

Another aspect of social imagination is to capacitate a person to imagine as he crafts visions and takes actions towards social change. One who is exposed to both urban life and rural life prefers topics that involve current events, teens' issues, or politics. They may even gravitate towards literary projects that offer opportunities to address real life issues. This suggests that those who are writing such issues are inclined or may have a possibility to confront social injustices. Their social critique can then stimulate their 'social imaginations' or

capacitate to picture their streets, schools and communities as difference.

Social imagination involves three patterns in understanding the different cultures through literature. They are positivism, objective idealism and dualistic idealism. Culture is one thing that is distinct in its own way. It cannot be globalized like other areas by taking a global image beyond any geographical or political topology that is triggered by the current process of globalization in almost all areas of human activities beyond the confinement of race, gender, religion and language. When culture is handled for globalization, it loses its very foundations of race, religion and language on which it stands. Hence only certain cultural items can be globalised but not culture as a whole. So, what is necessary in this situation is a process of cultural reciprocation. It is the very slogan and foundation of comparative studies in the whole range of intellectual pursuit, ignoring any 'centrism', or the predominance of the East or the West. This reciprocation, that is made possible with social imagination, will forge healthy understanding of different intellectual ideas and doctrines without any aspirations for universalism. This avoids the utilizations of cultural globalization.

There is an increasing worldwide cross-fertilization and interpretation of different cultures. It is time that these two cannot be ignored. Attention must be paid to these two global phenomena. "The traditional leitmotiv of cultures that one profoundly embedded in nationalism is increasingly being challenged by new modes of post-national or even cosmopolitan citizenship". This is a global tendency observed. It is towards differentiation and heterogeneity. These tendencies are driven by new notions, experiences and expressions of cultural identity. In this sense, contemporary art can be restored to, worldwide, as a laboratory for building and exploring new hybrid world views. This is possible with social imagination and by taking the hybrid cultures from the global literatures.

This view combines both juxtaposition of parallels from different cultures and a construction of an integrated, organic perspective in the areas of learning in comparative literature. A wider perspective can be visualized through social

imagination and the cultural binaries can be abolished. The central issue is the abolition of cultural binaries like the superior versus inferior, white versus black, the Eastern versus Western, etc. It is here that a limit has to be drawn in social imagination. While social imagination brings about a synthesis in the world literatures, care has to be taken that it should not be extended too much to over-interpretation and over-emphasis on the trivial and the banal.

The process has to be applied only as far as the 'factual contacts' (rapports de fait) is concerned. There should be no room for presuming that social imagination is meant to reveal only those with which the comparist is familiar in the cultures of other people. If there is anything obscure in the process, it has to be understood with a right perspective by a correct way of clarification and not by a wild social imagination that is detrimental to the understanding of the subject. It has to be underscored that every one cannot interpret everything under the sun with social imagination.

The success of applying this process lies in striking a perfect balance between the literature on one hand and the large scale social forces and the action of the individuals on the other hand. Though it plays a very important role in the study of Comparative Literature, its boundary has to be drawn to give a proper comparative literary analysis of the subject under consideration.

Conclusions:

Thus social imagination works from multiple perspectives, playing a productive role in comparative literary study to bring about a universal solidarity. In this fast changing global scenario, it enables us to generate a critique of the exclusive practises that are practised in diverse societies and cultures. By doing so, social imagination capacitates one to view beyond the individualistic perspective in literary production. This can be called a 'world view' (weltanshaunger). It is a coherent set of bodies of knowledge concerning all aspects of the world. This coherent set allows the people to construct a global image of the world to understand as many elements of their experience as possible.

Social imagination projects this world view as patterns of understanding or interpreting life. It is perceived as a map that people use to orient and

explain, and from which they evaluate and act, and put forward progresses and visions of the future. When this concept is imbibed by the comparists, it not only makes them observe other literatures and therefore cultures (because 'culture', in its widest sense can be taken to older phrase 'quality of life', and literature, history and the media can be safely called as the co ordinates of the fields of cultural studies) with a wider perspective, but they can also successfully shed away the narrow inhibitions of literary pride of one's own literature from among the readers. The literary myopia- that makes people to envision and to look at their own literature as the best – can be totally checked when a good portion of thinking in the mind is allotted to social imagination. Literarily social imagination can be the best remedy for a short-sighted vision that refuses to go blind beyond one's own literature and its merits, and becomes blurred to see the other literatures in the positive- a defect called literary myopic aberration.

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