

How to 'Do' Comparative Literature?

Answers Claudio Guillen in *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* Debaroti Chakraborty¹

The whole cannot be put together by adding the separated halves, but in both there appear, however distantly, the changes of the whole, which only moves in contradiction - Theodor Adorno.

Such has been the contested history of the discipline of Comparative Literature. More than a field of study, Comparative Literature has perhaps been and continues to be a method that addresses several issues in question. The more fragmented ideas of art, human experience or nationalism had become, the more Comparative Literature has made itself available as a channel of dialogue between these fragments. Perhaps, for theoreticians, it has been an arduous task to lift the mist surrounding the very crucial question: What is Comparative Literature? Susan Bassnett offered a simple answer bestowing it with a tripartite dimension - "it involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literature across both time and space". This being the basic premise of Comparative Literature there are other fundamental challenges that it is confronting since more than a century: Whether Comparative Literature is a method of studying literature or is it a discipline in its own rights? What does one 'compare' in Comparative Literature? What can be the literary end of comparison of texts across culture? What is the object of study of Comparative Literature? If individual literatures have a canon, what could be a comparative canon? How much is the knowledge of different national and regional languages essential to the study of comparative literature? How authentic can translation render itself as a tool of studying Comparative Literature? While these issues hover along the margins of Comparative Literature, it became increasingly important to do 'comparative Literature', i.e. to develop it as a method rather than debate about its nomenclature and legitimacy. Since recognized as *weltliteratur* by Goethe in 1827, dismissed as a 'non-subject' by Benedetto Croce in 1903, celebrated as a cultural equivalent of the movement towards a United Nations Assembly by Wellek and Warren in 1949, acknowledged as the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country by Henry

Remak, noted as a mode 'to assert national cultural identity' by Ganesh Devy, to Susan Bassnett's declaration that 'Comparative Literature as a discipline has had its day' in 1993, a network of scholarly discourse has situated Comparative Literature at its centre. Thus, in the twenty-first century, it is imperative, if I may say so, to understand why Comparative Literature has always been in the midst of such political activity when studied across the coordinates of space and time.

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Claudio Guillen, an acclaimed comparatist, takes this up as the central question in his book *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, published in 1993. He is thinking about Comparative Literature at a juncture when it has emerged out of a series of debates, when it is still shrouded by waves of unresolved dilemma, when it is threatened to be replaced by disciplines like Cultural Studies or Translation Studies. Guillen emphasizes that since time writes itself into literature or any other form of art, the disjunctures of space, the sense of discontinuous time, of a partitioned self, a collection of heterogeneous fragments of a whole constantly challenge the idea of a monolithic holistic experience. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's words from his essay 'The Storyteller' - "But if today 'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing". Benjamin, here, is talking about a historical conjuncture characterized by its own modes of productions and social formations that signal a temporality which exists in constant flux, a fractured state of self that results from a lack of communicability, an absence of shared experience that is symptomatic of a particular type of modernity. Claudio attempts to represent this modernity, understand the dialogue between fragments, capture an idea that is essentially plural through Comparative Literature. Thus he says "Comparative Literature has been and is an intellectual discipline characterized by the posing of certain problems that only comparative literature is in a position to confront. The encounter with these problems, these questions, some that we have not discovered, is what reveals the specific nature of comparative literature and vindicates its historical continuity." In the first section of the book he touches upon several crucial contradictions that are invested into the study of Comparative Literature, which in a way situates the discipline along its historical and theoretical framework. The second part of the book is geared towards the methodologies of Comparative Literature and an schematic categorization of the directions that this field of study achieves. Claudio Guillen engages in the already prevailing network of scholarship and branches of literary history, subscribing to them, extending them, challenging them or deconstructing them, in his enterprise of understanding the discipline from his posited perspective. Relevant to the core idea of Claudio Guillen's inquiry into comparative Literature is his definition of the comparatist as "one who dares to pester friends and colleagues, not just once but over and over." This conveys a sense of constant questioning, of working along

129 contradictions that never allow the walls around the discipline to settle. In accordance with the focus of the French School, Guillen asserts that Comparative Literature as an activity is a mode of literary communication. He attempts to analyze the characteristics of this literary communication, how genres, themes and forms interact within this channel, and eventually undergo metamorphosis. He is definitely hinting at contact across cultures, lending Comparative Literature with not an international characteristic but a supranational one. The distinction between the international and the supranational is one of the key issues in Guillen's case for Comparative Literature. Supranational as opposed to international implies a channel of communication that transcends the

influence of borders held by nations rather it emphasizes on a point of departure that is not pivoted in national literatures, nor in the interrelationship between them. The supranational identity of literary history signifies a phenomenon in which a dialogue and 'mutual illumination of art' takes place along a different principle that is beyond the empirical contact of national identities. This supranational characteristic is perhaps better explained through the dialectic of the local and the universal that faces a comparatist. The dilemma between the local and the universal exists in overlaps with quite a few set of binaries like the particular and the general, the one and the many, the individual and the system through which one has to approach the historiography of Comparative Literature. These polarities are relevant when we are thinking of literary history and its journey as a channel of communication in which traits, influences, trends and images of one work or of one author resonates in the other. The crucial question that faces a literary historian is how to study these resonances? Claudio Guillen reiterates Octavio Paz when he explains that a work of art is primarily hinged upon two definite coordinates: on one hand it is the ground, the people, the moment that produces it while on the other it relates to the wider movements that characterize the world, the literary expressions of similar historical configurations across cultures. Garcia Marquez enunciates in his Nobel prize lecture that through his writing he attempts to connect, to forge a solidarity amongst cultures that of have gone through similar patterns of colonial battering, of historical exploitation that is non-communicable. His writing stems from his own social positioning as a writer, as a witness of the historical moment of his land but the purpose of his art is achieved once the *self* is in a dialogue with the *other*. It is this perception of the *otherness* in each literary act that repeat the tension between the local and the universal which configure the discipline of Comparative Literature, becomes its internal structure as well as its object of study. In the post-modern era, when the conception of the self is a fractured one, when experience is nevertheless contradictory, nor can there one single sense of reality neither one complete Truth. Thus

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Guillen explains that the polarity of the local and the universal is enmeshed with the debate of monoism and pluralism. Comparative Literature is saddled with the responsibility of being dialectical, of charting a literary history from the conception of literature that is not a finished premise but a dynamic process, of literature that is more precisely a body of 'cultural tools'. A defining quality of Comparative Literature is its inherent methodology that on one hand emphasizes on dialogue between certain fundamental structures of literatures with distinct linguistic and national configurations through time and on the other change, evolution and historicity of literature and society across space. Both the channels allow themes, genres and images to travel across the temporal and spatial coordinates. Comparative Literature posits as its objective the crucial question of how to study literature? Since literature is a body of 'cultural tools', the narratives of twentieth- century cannot have the completeness of a primary epic. Why? Because the sense of the world has changed, there is no unitary notion of

the ideal world or the ideal hero, there multiple layers of reality and thus of reading

Historically, France is the precursor of the study of Comparative Literature that started in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Abel Francois Villemain, a noted scholar, engaged with the questions of Comparative Literature in 1828 and 1829. The emergence of this approach coincided with the literary period of Romantic French poetry. After the Napoleonic wars, the idea of cultural supremacy of France, its pride in national literature marked the study of Comparative Literature. An interesting historical paradox emerged from here: As a number of modern literatures came to be recognized ,the idea of a unitary poetics of literature broke. With the steep sense of the rise of nationalism ,an internationalism also marked Comparative Literature. The term *Weltliteratur* enunciated by Goethe in 1827 came to be gradually enhanced. If it is translated as “literature of the world”, it makes possible the dialogue between the local and the universal, the one and the many that to this day forms the basic premise of Comparative Literature. The most important aspect of it is that of literature which talks of the world, of deepest experiences, of images that signify nature and sensibilities across cultures. This bestows literature with its essential supranational quality.

Taking it up from here, how does the French School feed into the study of Comparative Literature. Claudio Guillen rather calls it the ‘French Hour’ signifying a period of time stretching from the nineteenth century to the end of Second World war when the French comparatists dominated the field of Comparative Literature. They, distinctively, focused on the study of connections between national literatures ,the phenomenon of influence, transmission and communications. They were majorly concerned with the study of images(imagology), study of reception as communication and the study

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of international literary relations with of course France as either the “giver” or the “receiver”. The role of intermediaries became important during the French Hour as the focus was directed towards reception studies. Thus came forth the theoretical distinction between the *fortune* and *success*- the influence, readership ,sale were identified as the writer’s fortune while success was understood as a quantitative category of fortune measured by the number of editions, adaptations, translations of work.Lacunae like the positivist conception of literary influences i.e looking only at the uninterrupted flow of one component into the other, atomism i.e isolating a singular work as the sufficient object of study of the French Hour allowed for the American Hour to set in after the Second World War. Contradictory to the French hour, the American Hour gathered scholars from different origins to work on the same soil .It focus on the universal humanizing nature of literature and the other arts added a much needed orientation to the study of Comparative Literature. The Second World war had devastated European civilizations and thus confines of narrow nationalism began to be refuted. Interdisciplinary studies, an equivalent of the dominant cultural phenomenon of the melting point theory

acquired primary focus

Following the Second World War and the dominance of the American School of Comparative Literature the major directions or classifications of the field of Comparative Literature became vivid. The study of genres or genology, the formal proceeding or morphology, the study of themes or thematology, the study of literary relations or internationality and the historical configuration or historiology may be listed as the primary methodological tools of Comparative Literature.

Genres form a categorizing unit of literary studies, looked upon as models with particular markers that can be placed with literary systems or polysystems to understand the evolution of different forms. What fuels the evolution one genre from another, or the dominance of a particular genre at a moment in history. Guillen notes that a writer might find the existing genre to be inadequate for his creative sensibility or may be his sensibility finds home in a structure that existed much before in historical time. These structures of feeling stretch the boundaries of an existing genre or makes a previous genre evolve according to the artistic need. A structure might also have certain elements that can be recovered by significant elements, characters, behavior or emotional attitude. Again each genre has its efficacy pivoted to a historical time that is in turn characterized by specific lived realities and modes of expression. These currents criss-cross to form a literary genre or make one disappear. One may be able to categorize literature from a diachronic perspective through the journey of genres. It is important to note that when we talking about the evolution of genres and their disappearances across time , we are considering the process of contact and contract across time. The

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modalities that extend the markers of a genre are also based in story of reception, in which the structure of feeling of the time and the horizon of expectation of the readers implicate the genre. So a genre, like the European novel of the nineteenth century, is not an isolated entity but it is part of a whole- part of a complex web of alternatives, options, confrontations of models, an assimilation of elements across time. For a comparatist, the a study of genre may thus reveal how it travelled across literary models embedded in time, why it drew upon certain formalistic elements for the creative expression of its sort, how a similar genre that is marginal in one culture is dominant in another. This also widens the field of literary study, not just restricting it to the study of European models. It is a plurality of paradigms. Guillen qualifies genres as “conventional models” that comprise the thematic as well as the formalistic elements. While the form is always in dialogue with the content, the study of forms is designated as morphology. He suggests certain stylistic literary devices such as *dialogue*, *digression*, *defamiliarization* as elements of a form. A digression may purposefully signify something or signify nothing in a narrative .There is no pure form because he emphasizes that a narrative always has an interplay of forms. While examining forms there are several enmeshed levels of stratification

like that of the phonic, the grammatical, the prosodic, the poetic, the theatrical and others.

The study of themes or thematology is intrinsically linked to genology or morphology. Thematological study is relevant to the comparatist depending on the historical panorama available to him and the significance of intertextuality that allows him to connect representations of similar themes in other texts. Themes in their study are identified either as “structuring theme”, “significant theme” or “inciting theme”. A conceptual understanding of the terms like theme, motif, image, situation, type, *topoi and commonplaces* form the bulk of thematology. Images are explained as significant visual entities like, the whiteness of Moby Dick, that is a code in the narrative. There are certain symbolic scenes or situations like the descent to the underworld in epics, the flattery of the seductress that are lined to genres across cultures. Then there are moral, social or professional types like the fool, the miser with specific narratives and characteristics. The themes are thus active or passive: that what the writer draws from the world and then modifies, transforms or overturns to say what she wants to say. There has been a debate over the concepts of primary theme and principal motif. Scholars like Trousson claim that motif precedes theme. Thus the situation of a man between two women, conflict between two brothers is the basic situation or motif. An individualization, particular expression of this motif is theme. Frenzel names it in the opposite direction. What comes out of it is a passage from the general to the particular, how a preliterate sketch, an idea is

aesthetically treated in literature. Thus, the journey of the theme of rebellion to the motif of Prometheus or vice-versa.

All of these methodologies call forth the domain of literary relationship or internationality. How genres interact across historical time, how a themes travel across cultures, how literary systems flow into one another is a matter of influences and literary relations. Pertinent to the study of comparative Literature are questions of what makes the diffusion of a work possible, what is the object of study in *intertextuality*? The concept of intertextuality is not just a detailed study of external influences, presence of biographical evidences but rather implies resonances of a deeper structure. Thus, while talking about literary relationships Claudi Guillen re-asserts that “every text is an intertext”. It contains a number of texts at the level of social language, cultural codes, formulas, rhythmic models and literary systems. Thus translation is a process within this chain of literary contact, a channel of communication. The last appendage co-related to each of these is the narrative of continuities and discontinuities of genres, themes and forms- we are moving towards the concept of historiology. Literary history is based on the fundamental concepts of periods, currents, school, movement and etc. The obstacle is to move out from the confines of specific countries and look at it from a holistic perspective. An overarching dilemma facing the field of study is the distinction between the history of literature and literary history. Perhaps re-iterating a few questions evoked by Guillen is a mode of launching into this discussion. What are the intertemporal forms that determine the continuities and discontinuities? What narrative tactics do literary histories draw upon? What do they have in common with fictitious or “invented” histories? Two contrasting models respond to the dilemma. One is the model of discontinuity that stresses on how principle characteristic dominate one literary period for a ceratin number of years and then fade. The other model stresses on continuity, the flow of time, the plurality of styles, themes ,genres that emerge out of contacts and disagreements as well. Thus two aspects of literary periodization become specific a) it is a horizontal model based on diachronic study b) a literary period is a structures interrelation in which constituents flow from an earlier period, modify and evolve towards the future. The dynamism of this structure relates to Claudio Guillen’s point of departure in understanding the goal of comparative literature. He says “the goal of comparativism is to identify, order and study supranational and diachronic structures”. Structures because they present a plethora of alternatives, options, since they evolve from the examination of more than one civilization or from an exploration of divergent cultures. The responsibility thus rests on Comparative Literature to constantly evolve models of alternative models of literary history that are not euro-centric.