

The Idea of Comparative Literature in India

By Amiya Dev

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Madhurima Mukhopadhyay¹

This book was first published in the year 1984 by Papyrus, Kolkata. It was subsidized by Jadavpur University out of a UGC Grant. It is a collection of few occasional papers written at various times for seminars and conferences and divided into seven sections.

The first section, *Literary History and Comparative Literature: A Methodological Question*, deals with looking at a single modern Indian literature from a comparative point of view. Taking examples from Bengali literature, it tries to validate whether that is a suitable method or a method distinct from that in the single literature to understand literary history. It also asks if there is a need for it to understand the history of single literatures. Examples from Indian literary history reveal two ways in which Comparative Literature can be indispensable to it, one, in the fixing of relations and analogies between the different Indian literatures and two, in the discerning of structures in the histories of the single Indian literature. Dev mentions that he was approaching literary history not as individual structures of texts, but as conglomerate structures and then he would relate the structure to the context. Taking a few examples he mentions that the extra-Bengali aspects in each of the texts from western literature on the one hand and on the other hand from Sanskrit-Pali-Prakrit was not just a matter of coincidence and it was the function of literary history to unravel it. However varied be the sources and the knowledge of such sources, they do not fall into a pattern within the single literary method. But without doubt it can be stated that Comparative Literature has a method of its own distinct from that of single literatures. Relations to other literatures cannot be studied in any other way. It falls under the category of influence/impact/effect, as a branch of comparative literary method which is given the greatest importance by the French school. Literary history is surely related to socio-political and economic history, but Dev suggests, we have to arrive at it rather than begin from there. 'Westernization' and 'Indianisation' can be better understood in relation to the law of variation operating in the case of Indian writers in English because firstly, they are writing in a western language; again, they are consciously Indian in their themes and imagery. The main problem here is the problem of identity. This

¹ 1. Madhurima Mukhopadhyay is a research scholar in Women Studies, Jadavpur University.

evident duality in theme and form can be best analyzed within the Bengali literary history in terms of duality of influence/impact/effect.

The second section on *Comparative Indian Literature* defines and analyses the issue. Beginning with a hypothetical parallel between Comparative Indian Literature and Comparative Western Literature, Dev proceeds to explain the concept of the former in comparison to the latter. The former is Comparative Literature in a multilingual situation, the other, Comparative Literature in a diverse world of many languages. One is comparative and the other has to work out its comparisons. In a multilingual situation as in India, there cannot be a true appreciation of a single literature in absolute isolation. So, Comparative Indian Literature stands on firm ground – the very concept of Indian Literature is comparative. Proceeding to discuss the influence/impact/effect on Third World literature from an altogether alien literature, Dev mentions when a whole literature comes into contact with another literature, history assumes a major role. Comparative Literature in the west may not need this degree of history but Comparative Literature in the third world does. In the case of Comparative Indian Literature, an involvement naturally emanates from the multilingual situation, which is part historical and part aesthetic. For some Indian literatures there was a second involvement even before the third world situation arose, an involvement with Persian and Arabic, which is historical but also aesthetic. The uniqueness of Comparative Indian Literature lies in the fact that it has to handle the multilingual and the third world situation. In the adaptation of Comparative Literature, we should reflect this uniqueness, Dev suggests.

The section on *Comparative Western Literature* tries to see whether English or any other western literature can be read in a purely single literary form. Dev also examines the curious situation of English studies in India here. Dev highlights the importance of aesthetics and not only literary history. He highlights the question of identity of literature. What should be English literature? The English produced by the English people or the literature written in the English language? In India, there has not been any pure English for historical reasons. Scholars have begun as pure English scholars without committing to their own identity but have finally ended up as traditionalists or conscious Indians. This is especially true of the Third World situation but generally valid too. Taking examples of Madurai Kamaraj University and Krishnadevaraya University, Dev states that their introduction of Comparative Literature courses effectively placed the discipline within the English map of India. But the

discrepancy in the status of the two languages – English as superior and one’s own literature as inferior—cannot let us forgo the western exposure.

The Relevance of Comparative Literature to the English Studies in India: An Undelivered Lecture, deals with two major agenda for persuasion by the author. Firstly, English studies in India are necessarily concerned with the Indian response to English which can be handled by Comparative Literature alone. Secondly, English studies as such claim some Comparative Literature partly to assess its rapport with other literatures and partly to provide a solid critical standard. The incidental persuasion would be that doing literature in translation is not all that poor a pedagogy. By response, the author means both reception and survival. In cases where a certain relationship is explored, there is no questioning the methodology, for ‘response’ is in every way Comparative Literature. The second persuasion has two basic critical approaches, historical and authentic. No single literature studies can stay untouched by another literature. A single literary history also deals with its relation to other literatures. Pure and uncontaminated English literary history is inconceivable. Aesthetic affinities and aesthetic contrasts are a matter pertaining to method. Literature is not language alone, it is also experience. In making the necessary historical and aesthetic comparisons one needs to resort to translations. A literary text is not just a phonetic system but a semantic system. It may not be possible to approximate the sounds of a text in another language. Since meanings are not all embedded in sounds, it may be possible to approximate the meanings of a text in another language. Quite a bit is lost in translations but certain things are retained. Dev concludes by stating that his main intention was to justify English studies and then truthfully carry out the aesthetic responsibilities. There wouldn’t be much loss in the process but one could gain much.

How to do Comparative Indian Literature: The Question of Methodology deals with two ways of dealing with Comparative Indian Literature. One is monoliterary, in which the prime focus is a particular Indian language and in a multiliterary context where the concern is two or more Indian literatures. All monoliterary studies have a scope for comparison. A monoliterary study in a multilingual context is different where it is not only cognizant of its historical relations with other literatures, but cultural homogeneity that give an extra weight. The prime methodology used in such a situation is influence/impact/effect and the implied reception/survival that gives such a study a primary rationale for comparison. In Indian monoliterary studies, we are doing Comparative Literature not for the sake of superior

pedagogy but for the sake of particular literary histories. It is merely the methodology made indispensable because of the various impacts, this is the secondary rationale. In comparative Indian multiliterary studies, Comparative Literature is the primary rationale. Multiliterary studies are not just studies of two or more literary histories or aesthetics together, but are studies also of their interrelations, of genology, historiography and thematology and the influence/impact/effect they share. Collation of two or more literatures can help probe the aesthetic question.

Dev divides his chapter on *Towards the Formulation of a Comparative Indian Literature Syllabus* into two parts to frame a comprehensive syllabus, the Monoliterary CIL, and the Multiliterary CIL based on the Jadavpur model. For the Monoliterary CIL syllabus, a two-tier structure can be framed as a theoretical approach to Sanskrit and translations from Sanskrit to Bengali. The western impact on Bengali cannot be limited to a two-tier system, so a generic approach is taken including translations and adaptations. As to the content of these papers, Dev refers to the Jadavpur model of purely text-based one, the criticism-cum-text based one and the one mainly contextual. In the case of translations-imitations-adaptations there is naturally some room for doing texts in parallel, and this is the fourth model. He suggests that for the under-graduates, the first and fourth may suit best, for post-graduates the second and for M.Phil the third. For Multiliterary CIL, two or three literatures can be approached in terms of CL methodology – in terms of historiography, impact/relations, genology and thematology. Proximity of languages cannot be the sole rationale for clustering, so arbitrary or exploratory clusters could also be thought of. Dev tries to elucidate the logic of the CIL syllabus rather than actually frame a comprehensive syllabus.

The Idea of Comparative Literature in India deals with how the author conceives of a syllabus containing both CIL and CWL. Speaking elaborately on the syllabi, it may be necessary to make a clearer distinction between ‘introduction to CL’ and ‘problems of CL’. The introduction should contain a broader and more general consideration of methodology with an attempt at definition. Problems arise when we think of generic and thematic transplantations and acculturations. However, the prime problem of CL lies in its definition. Dev also mentions, ‘literature and other arts’ and ‘literature and ideas,’ which are also considered to be a part of CL. But these diverse fields can only be successful if there is communication.

Indian literature has always been multilingual and multiliterary and, therefore, comparative, without having any definite methodology. Comparative Indian literature, after the western school, has been the model for the Indian scholars like Sisir Kumar Das, Amiya Dev and Swapan Majumdar. In fact, for some reasons no strong need for an Indian school or even methodology has been felt. The pursuits of Indian comparatists contain in them outlines of Indian Comparative Literature. The trend was established by Amiya Dev in the book discussed above and also by Swapan Majumdar in *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions* (1987). For instance, Sisir Kumar Das, in his *History of Indian Literature*, forwards a model of Indian literary historiography. He stresses the significance of tradition as the core concern of literary pursuits in India, and thereby suggests that its study should form an integral part of comparative pursuits in India. Moreover, he practices precisely what he preaches in his monumental work, *A History of Indian Literature*—the literary history of Indian literature should be written by following Indian models, he seems to argue. His younger contemporary, Swapan Majumdar, in his *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions* (1987), speaks of the ‘specificity of national literatures in the non-European/American Comparative Literature from the Third World. By stating this, Majumdar gives a new Indian dimension to national literature. He adds a new and radical perspective to Comparative Literature that can be put in the Indian School of Comparative Literature, though it might also be put in the larger category of Third World Comparative Literature.

The basic purpose behind discussing these traits of Indian Comparative Literature is aimed at finding the essential attributes that form the foundation of Indian literature on which the potential Indian Comparative Literature can be based. Moreover, the future of Comparative Literature would to a large extent depend on recognition and study of various literatures other than major literatures, different schools, like Indian Comparative Literature, their literary and cultural traditions, ethos and specificities in different parts of the world. Moreover, the future of Comparative Literature would be to a good measure dependant on the relationship between these literatures/schools and its ability to respond to developments in other disciplines.