

*Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches*

Chandra Mohan ed.

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*Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches*, edited by Professor Chandra Mohan, was published in 1989, almost thirty years after the first Department of Comparative Literature in India had come into existence at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, in 1956. The discipline of Comparative Literature was by that time no longer new, and several theories had already been propounded as to how to approach the subject. As the name of this particular book suggests, it attempts to capture and provide an overview of the ‘current’ approaches. The book puts special emphasis on Comparative Literature in India, a specialized form of comparatist approach which was begun by scholars like Dr. Amiya Dev in his *The Idea of Comparative Literature in India* (1984), and K. M. George in his anthology *Comparative Indian Literature* (1984).

*Aspects of Comparative Literature* tries to work out, by collecting the essays written by various comparatists across nations, a definition of the discipline of comparative literature and examine how significant it is in the Indian context. The noted American comparatist, Professor Henry Remak, in his foreword to this book stresses the fact that different cultures and the comparisons between them become the entry-point to study comparative literature. His particular emphasis is on the cultures of Asia and Africa, two continents where the diversities lend a unique unity to their cultures and hence, literatures.

The ‘Introduction’ to the book is provided by the editor. Professor Chandra Mohan introduces *Aspects of Comparative Literature* by saying that as a discipline Comparative Literature has not been able to attain a generally accepted definition and that the twenty essays have been brought together in order to reflect upon the central problem—what is comparative literature. He provides a brief synopsis of the twenty essays, how theories such as structuralism and deconstruction are employed in the study of comparative literature, and how transmission of literatures across cultural barriers is possible only through comparative literature is discussed in the introduction.

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The book is divided into four separate parts, each consisting of a group of essays clubbed under a heading or broader theme. The first three parts deal with theories and criticism, while the last part is based on the analysis and interpretation of literary texts.

The opening essay which alone stands without being clubbed under any heading is Professor Sisir Kumar Das's 'Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective'. Professor Das provides the readers with a detailed historical account of how Indian Literature has developed historically and how in the process of its evolution comparisons between literary works composed in different Indian languages became inevitable. Classical Indian languages—Sanskrit and Tamil—had managed to remain free of each others' influences, but the modern Indian languages, particularly under the colonial rule, could not afford to do so. The development of Indian literature is based on the influence and impact the various Indian languages had on each other. Tagore's idea of 'Visva Sahitya', Sarojini Naidu's presidential address at All India Writers' Conference in 1945, and Dr. Radhakrishnan's famous saying—"Indian literature is one though written in many languages", all paved the way for a unified concept of Indian literature, which can be studied only by the process of comparing one Indian language literature with another. Thus Comparative Literature in India developed as a natural phenomenon, something which was bound to be. The essay traces some of the details of Comparative Literature programmes at various Indian universities, and ends on the note that the future of Comparative Literature in India lies in studying Indian texts and contexts by using the comparative methodology, which implies the emphasis should be on literature, and not on theories of studying literature.

The first category termed '**Trends and Approaches**' consists of six essays on the modern trends of Comparative Literature study both in India and the West. The first one is 'Newer Trends of Comparative Studies in the West' by Gerald Gillespie. In this essay Prof. Gillespie, Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University, U.S.A., identifies five trends of approaching Comparative Literature in the West since World War II. The first trend according to him is the accelerated crumbling of national frontiers in literary theory and interpretive practices. Crosscurrents of native tenets and habits clashing with pedigreed schools of critical theories were becoming common across the United States as well as the European mainland. The second trend is the decline in the prestige of literary history. The third trend is the rejection of the notion that creative authors are the organizing centre of literary institutions or that the main concern of

literary studies should be the interpretation of works of art as units and documents of literary history. The fourth one is the widespread refutation of aesthetic considerations as truly significant and the expanding interconnections between literary studies and social sciences. The final trend is towards the assumed 'scientific' approaches taken to study literature. Prof. Gillespie goes on to elaborate the effect of these trends on comparative literary studies and also focuses on the roles played by structuralism, semiotics, deconstructive criticism, postmodernism, neo-Marxism and reception aesthetics in the study of comparative literature.

The second essay under this category is Dr. Amiya Dev's 'Towards Comparative Indian Literature'. Dr. Dev's essay begins by questioning the category termed 'Indian literature'. He puts forward the view that there is no Indian literature, there can be only Indian literatures, and that there should be a methodology to approach them with. This methodological study of Indian literatures is termed Comparative Indian Literature. He goes on to define these methodologies—historiography, genology and thematology. Dr. Dev also points out that the two volumes of Comparative Indian Literature edited by K.M. George has assembled Indian literary works diachronically, whereas a synchronic study is more required for full-proof comparisons. The essay ends on the proposition of a separate school of Comparative Indian Literature, distinct from the earlier existing ones of the French, the American and the East European.

The third essay 'What is Comparative Canadian Literature?' is by Professor E.D. Blodgett of the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Alberta. Professor Blodgett's specific problem of considering the two literatures of Canada, English and French, as a viable unity leads him to a certain realistic stance on the rationale for Comparative Literature. The two aligning themselves, at both creative and critical levels, with English/American and French literatures respectively leave the idea of "Canadian Literature" high and dry. Blodgett finds common ground in establishing parallels through themes, through a common national mystique and identity and the conditioning forces of climate and encounters between human beings and the elements of nature. He concludes that there is no 'mainstream' serving as a universal and that the proper perspective would be—"The literature of Canada belong to *weltliteratur*."

The fourth essay, 'Contemporary Comparative Literature: A Soviet View' by N.I. Konrad looks at the problems of Comparative Literature in a Soviet perspective. Professor Konrad, an academician at U.S.S.R, begins his essay by declaring that there are two types of literary works—works belonging to a particular country, and works brought into that country from

literatures of other countries. He speaks of the growth and development of Comparative Literature as a discipline across the countries of Europe. He goes through the historical details, the significance of diachronic and synchronic study of literatures, the roles played by emitters, receivers and transmitters in this cultural exchange, and how the theories of *success*, *fortune*, *influence* help in studying the discipline.

Stephen H. Arnold's 'Comparative African Literary Studies: A New Discipline' is the fifth essay under this category. Professor Arnold of University of Alberta, Canada, traces the evolution of the academic status of the study of African Literatures, and tries to find out whether the study of African Literatures is a separate discipline or is it merely a specialization. He refers to the debate of the 1950s and '60s over what language is appropriate for African literary creation, and feels that the heterogeneity of African literatures raises the question as to what constitutes the essential 'Africanness', and what can be termed as truly belonging to the corpus of 'African Literatures'. Prof. Arnold concludes that both Comparative Literature and African Literatures have fought for long time and reached a status where they can be treated as distinct disciplines.

Professor Chandra Mohan's 'Comparative Indian Literature: Recent Trends' is the final essay of the first category. Professor Chandra Mohan's essay is a mine of information regarding Indian literature and how it can be read in comparison only. This essay is very similar in theme and tone to that of Dr. Dev's essay. Professor Chandra Mohan refers to all those books and articles which spoke of the idea of national literature, beginning from Sri Aurobindo's *Foundation of Indian Culture* (1953) to Sisir Das' and Amiya Dev's essays on the idea of comparative Indian literature. By citing how India's multilingualism has added to the rich variety of her literature, how the various language-literatures have influenced each other and hence should be read in conjunction with each other, and how translations have facilitated this process to a great extent and even added new dimensions to the study of Indian literatures have been discussed in great details in the essay.

The second part of the book is '**Thematology and Literary Criticism**'. It consists of four essays. The first one, Professor K. Chellappan's 'Thematology in Comparative Indian Literature: Matter and Method' discusses themes, motifs and images in literature in general and the main themes in Indian literary texts in particular; how 'Comparative Indian Literature' is possible through the study of the common themes used in Indian literary texts. He talks of the major motifs—the quest motif, the mother archetype and the heroic themes prevalent in all Indian texts

before going on to draw attention to the tell-tale difference between the powerful archetypal images of the Indian imagination and those of the West.

The next one, D.W. Fokkema's 'Towards a Methodology in Intercultural Studies' tries to work out a methodology for Intercultural Studies since he considers the role of 'cultural relativism' in Comparative Literature' a crucial one. Beginning by defining cultural relativism, the essay proceeds to legitimizing methods of studying intercultural texts because cross-cultural dialogue is the basis of studying Comparative Literature as a discipline.

'Criticism and Literary Taste in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century India: A Study of Certain Trends' by Dr. D. Premapati is the third essay under this category. It lights up a significant nineteenth century phenomenon, the evolution of Hindi and Urdu as a result of the colonial policy of divide and rule. He analyses how Bankim Chandra Chatterjee helped the emerging unitary character of Indian literature to drive deeper roots and, on the other hand, how rootless Indian-English writing has mostly been.

In the next essay, 'The Commonwealth 'Period' and Comparative Literature', Professor G.N. Devy questions the very concept of 'Commonwealth Literature' and challenges its established interpretation. He argues that there cannot be any unified method or a single theory with which Commonwealth Literature can be approached. Since the British perception of Commonwealth Literature is bound to be very different from that of the Africans, only a common time frame (the period of colonization) cannot successfully define the term 'Commonwealth Literature' which is far from homogenous and thus the use of comparative method in its study is questionable.

The third broad category is termed **Tradition and Modernity**. Two essays are part of this group—'The Concept of Tradition: Yeats, Eliot and Dwivedi' by Indu Sena and Vinod Sena, and 'Towards Modernity: The Hindi and Urdu Short Story' by Sukrita P. Kumar. Indu Sena and Vinod Sena begin their essay by referring to T.S. Eliot's concept of tradition as a major force working on any writer. After briefly talking about the notion of tradition in Eliot and W.B. Yeats's works, they proceed to present Dr. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi as a key figure in the Indian literary scene. A traditionalist to the core, Dwivedi's works embody that Indian identity—more aspired for than realized—which helps us understand how foundations for that same unitary sense of Indian literature came to be laid.

Dr. Kumar's essay looks at the origin and development of the genre of short story in Hindi and Urdu as a result of Western influence. It further supplements the view that Indian writers even

after facing a Western exposure to modernity preferred to establish a coherent link with their own roots, and thus reveals a new facet of human existence in Indian fiction.

The last category **Analysis and Interpretation** consists of seven essays. The opening one, 'Beyond Interpretation or the Business of Rewriting' by Andre Lefevere defines and clarifies 'rewriting', which in turn puts all literary activities—reader response, interpretation, assessment, translation—in a new perspective. It makes criticism itself a form of re-writing, opening another avenue of approaching Comparative Literature. Lefevere launches his concept of 'inter-face' writing where one literary system impinges on another through criticism and translation. The concept of re-writing is a much needed approach for comparative study.

The next essay is Professor Indra Nath Choudhuri's 'The Change in Society and the Problem of Aesthetic Value in Modern Hindi and Bengali Drama'. This paper is a perceptive study of the impact of the contemporary social changes in Hindi and Bengali drama. It also talks of the resultant effect of this impact on the aesthetic value system which in traditional criticism determines the literary importance of a dramatic artifact. At the same time it is a critical insight into the contemporary study of comparative Indian literature.

Dr. O.P. Juneja's 'Domesticated English: The Language of African and Indian Fiction' is a comparative study of the use of English in the works of African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, and their Indian counterparts like R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and others. He concludes that unlike the African authors, the Indians have not been able to "interiorize" and domesticate English to a great extent. They have tried to bring in the flavor of their local languages to it, but have been far more unsuccessful than their African counterparts.

Dr. Juneja's essay is followed by 'The Urdu Premchand: The Hindi Premchand' by Dr. Harish Trivedi. This essay is a comparison between the Hindi and Urdu works of Premchand, the Indian literary genius of the nineteenth century. His transition from one language (Urdu) to another (Hindi) raises questions which have implications of wider relevance to the comparative study of Indian literatures. It also makes readers of Indian literature think of the implications of the colonial forces which led to the schism between Urdu and Hindi, making them affiliated to particular religious groups. As a writer Premchand was forced to move from a smaller and declining language into a more widely spoken and vigorous one for more money and more readerships.

Sri Satendra Singh's 'The Urban Experience: The Indian Novel' gives a comprehensive account of Indian novel's massive dependence on urban experience and city-related themes. Starting with Bankimchandra's *Indira*, he examines how Indian novelists from Premchand and Chandu Menon to Bhabani Bhattacharyya and Bharati Mukherjee have deliberately chosen urban settings for their novels.

The second last essay, 'Women and the Early Indian Novel' by Jayanti Chattopadhyay presents a portrayal of women in the early Indian novels in almost all the major Indian languages. The essay illustrates how the portrayal of the Indian woman has undergone a sea-change from the days of Bankim's *Durgeshnandini* and how the dilemma of the Indian woman was expressed with a parallel stream of attitude in most of Indian literatures

'The "Otherness" of Literature: Tensions in Critical Positions in a Colonial Situation' by Professor Swapan Majumdar is the final essay in this book. Professor Majumdar's essay tries to draw a distinction between the terms 'contact' and 'encounter' in a colonial situation. According to him the former is a relationship between two cultures under normal circumstances, and the latter is a relationship forced under a particular historical situation, in India's case colonization. However, India has uniquely been subject to both contact and encounter, and Professor Majumdar concludes that since India has absorbed a good deal of the European 'Other' in her own self, Europe's attitude of the big-brother has also softened with the passage of time.

By bringing together the views of scholars engaged in comparative literary studies across the world, *Aspects of Comparative Literature* tries to provide a comprehensive view of the discipline which has unfortunately not been able to get a strong foothold in the academic world as yet. As Professor Chandra Mohan has stated in the Introduction to the book, it has an air of 'openness' to interpretation and response and is not entirely theory-bound which makes the book more approachable and understandable.