

A Response to Steven Totosy de Zepetnek's "About the Social Relevance of the Study of Culture and Literature"**Ipshita Chanda¹**

Steven Totosy's theoretical repositioning of Comparative Literature in western academic circles owes its scholarly and ideological thrust to his efforts to maintain direct links with Comparative Literature practices globally. It is from this quintessentially cross-cultural location that Totosy takes the theoretically formulated position of the comparatist. The comparatist in this case is distinguished by his ability to operate across cultures, stepping carefully along the lines of sense and sensibility all the while attempting to maintain the necessary self-reflexivity that causes him to proclaim that Comparative Literature espouses 'inclusion of the other' as an ideology. While in full sympathy with Totosy's position and with full belief in the sincerity of his politics, I would differ, from my location in the discipline of Comparative Literature in India, with some points of vocabulary. This difference arises because the words we use to best describe our situation sometimes resonate differently when put into operation methodologically and culminate in a separate politics. Hence, the idea of Comparative Literature as a discipline that proposes to study the 'other' backed by the ideology of inclusion, finds an ambiguous reception in a historically marginalised location i.e., the 'third' world or the 'post'colonial space. If the history of this marginalisation and hence the politics of the nomenclature are invoked, then one finds oneself, despite full agreement, on the 'other' side. Indeed, when one's location can be reclaimed by ideology alone, one has been effectively 'othered'.

So it is from a different position within the 'global' discourse of our discipline that I engage with Totosy's theoretical formulation of the 'new' Comparative Literature, and in so doing, a fundamental question appears: is there any 'universal' method for Comparative Literature? Does

that method in any way reflect an inherent politics, such that we do not have to separately state that the ideology of inclusion characterises our practice and our thinking? I make no attempt to propose a final answer to this question. I shall only refer to a few exigencies in conceptualising the relative location of producer, text and reader and consequently, the method followed by comparatists to understand their own moment and milieu in a pluricultural society. My submission is that conceptualisation of critical location and the actual practice of reading, rather than separate statements of ideology, are more effective to demonstrate the inherence of inclusion in comparative methods. In other words, as comparatists from all over the world have pointed out (Figuiera) our discipline demands that part of our pedagogy involve learning something from the other, be it a language or a dance form, theoretically or practically. In that sense, Cultural Studies differs in its ideology: it does not demand this, content rather to ‘study’, and in rather more magnanimous or politically correct) circumstances, understand the other. How this will be interpreted in the global discourse of the discipline remains open to discussion, but that Totosy’s theoretical and practical engagements have made this discussion possible, speaks for the value of his work.

Having said that, I shall take issue with some specific points of vocabulary, as already indicated. For example, Totosy differentiates the old from the ‘new’ Comparative Literature saying that the former was hampered by its limitation to national languages. So why should the ‘new’ comparative literature take as part of its subject, “one or more national language and literature”? The Indian comparatist will have to point out that the practice of reading in her location is often across language and literary cultures: some languages share a script, some languages are institutionally written in different scripts, and some which had no scripts have now the choice of a number of scripts of other languages in which they may be documented. How in the circumstances are we to define national language and literature? Do we need the adjective ‘national’ at all in the study of

literary cultures? Where is the boundary of a nation? Also, in a multilingual society, what are the dynamics between ‘mother tongue’ and ‘other tongue’? What are the characteristics of colonising languages and languages of power? Does the description ‘marginalised’ mean the same across space and time? Unless there is clarity on this, the practice of this ‘new’ Comparative Literature will be difficult in a pluri cultural society like India’s. And if we focus on the word ‘new’, then we may ask whether classical texts written in Indian languages, where more than one language was used, and the derivation of a text in a local language from the same material in a classical language forms a large part of the literary dynamics of many an Indian language, can we seriously take this perception and method as characteristic of the ‘new’ comparative literature? A method of literary reading which demands some expertise in bilinguality or multilinguality and an understanding of phenomena like the difference of social position as reflected in linguistic registers, the use of specialised registers etc. cannot exactly be included under ‘new’ practices. What Totosy characterises as the ‘advance’ of Comparative Literature in the peripheral locations is nothing more (or less) than what scholars of Indian language literatures made visible in the global discourse of the discipline, as distinct from the single literature based practices that were earlier identified with the discipline in India.

Comparative Literature in India is still in the midst of a process to differentiate its existence from single literature studies on the one hand, and craft a methodology for reading the multilingual literary cultures that comprise the Indian literary system, on the other. But we have reached some clarity on what Comparative Literature means in our multilingual, pluricultural situation. Comparative Literature offers a useful repertoire of tools to study inter-relationships between literary cultures and place the generative process of a textual reading in this context, rather the additive approach of comparing x to y. One of the seniormost scholars in our field in India used to demand from students at examinations, and from paper readers at the national association’s meetings

alike: simple comparisons between a and b will not do. Given this background of the practice of the discipline for the last 56 years, we may claim that 'our' understanding of the practice of the discipline differs from that in the west because we begin with multiplicity, and need tools to live in it. The 'old' and the 'new' in nomenclature may hence be useful for understanding the practices across the west, but have little relevance to Indian situations. This is one of the points of difference that may be marked between the practice of Comparative Literature in the location from which Totosy writes, and his reader, the student of Comparative Literature outside the metropole.

Except that the trials and travails of the metropole are rather different from those of what Totosy designates as the periphery, and the advances he singles out may not always be looked upon as such by those who are engaged in effecting them.

But we may ask whether the vocabulary of a general theory ought to be amenable to varied interpretation. Many a keyword that we use in academic exchange and in the formulation of 'general' theories being open to interpretation, reveal the location from which the theory is produced: and conscious attempts at inclusion are susceptible to being thus subverted by the very words we deploy.

It is at this level that I would object to Totosy's recuperation of 'cultural studies' within the frame of the comparative on the easy and absolutely truthful submission that since texts are located in culture, the study of the culture is undeniably necessary, following the same method that comparative literature uses to study situations of contact. The comparative method of reading texts requires location of the text in its nesting culture: but it also requires the location of the reader and the producer in an inter-relational dynamics of contact and reception, out of which a comparative reading is produced. That this is not the method of culture studies cannot be stressed too much. Besides, a comparative reading is one 'from below': by which we mean that the text is not open, in a

comparative reading, to the critic's choice of her own theoretical repertoire according to her ideological proclivities. Our discipline's object of study is the process of textualisation: across time, space, media. There is a habitus for this study—the text and its process of becoming is located. The cultural process of its production and reception, the creation and recreation of its identity and its form are parts of what the comparatist is called upon to study: but what does this have in common with the way in which 'Culture Studies' is 'done'? The inclination of Cultural Studies for literary and social critical theory standing in for method, and ideology substituting for knowledge has been dismantled by practising comparatists in the west as well. And it would be appropriate to reiterate here that Comparative Literature, unlike Cultural Studies, demands that the student-subject learn something from the other: at the very least, a language. What Cultural Studies demands of its student is not on my agenda here, simply because it would be difficult to determine, independent of what all academic disciplines fundamentally demand.

It is because of this that I can limit myself to two cheers and stay with Comparative Literary Studies. The method offered can be used by many emerging disciplines as they are called in the language of state educational funding. We may extend hospitality to Culture Studies within our disciplinary boundaries, but will Culture Studies acknowledge our generosity, or are we trying to enter the space of fashionable critical technology simply to refurbish the image of a 'dying' discipline? Again, in the west, that may be the case, and again, Totosy's prescriptions may be (and have been through his own practices) profitably applied in that location. In India the project of Comparative Literature in the present is to evolve a pedagogy to suit the task of understanding and living in a multicultural multilingual society. Culture Studies may help in recuperating the 'other': but we are as yet unsure how the other can be lived with following any one of the theories that study cultural phenomena rather than lived practice, process and language.

Notes

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