

The Western Hegemony and the Crisis of Comparative Literature

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Abstract: Comparative Literature has been in the verge of crisis for the last few decades; some seminal questions have been posed against it pertaining its subject matter and executed methodology. The emergence of Area Studies, Postcolonial studies has raised objection against the epistemological hegemony inherent in its entity. In the backdrop of such objections the present paper would try to analyze the issues critically with a historical and futuristic approach. The investigation of the posed crisis against Comparative Literature would chiefly be internalized from the perspective of the Western hegemony and the ideologically nurtured binary of Western Literature and Non-western Literature.

Key Words: Crisis, Comparative Literature, Hegemony, Western, Europe

An artificial demarcation of subject matter and methodology, a mechanistic concept of sources and influences, a motivation by cultural nationalism, however generous-these seem to me the symptoms of the long-drawn-out crisis of comparative literature (Wellek 162)

This is how Rene Wellek (1903-1995) has expressed his concern on the emerging crisis of comparative literature in his essay *The Crisis of Comparative Literature* (1958). The contemporary comparative literature study, in his view, has been narrowed down to merely the *foreign trade* of literature where a particular work of literature is investigated only in terms of source and influences which in turn prevents the work to be investigated in totality. Indeed it reduces comparative literature to an unrelated fragments preventing from being a meaningful whole in its entity. Wellek has not put his dissatisfaction on the disability of setting the subject matter of study in comparative literature alone, his concern to the methodology is equally serious. Reading a work only in terms of foreign influences is not rewarding method; again overwhelming dependence on mediatory phenomenon of translation and being astray by the glamour of the writers are some sensitive issues preventing comparative literature in becoming an independent discipline. The third point put forth by Wellek is the side effect of the patriotic motivation overtly observed in the comparative literature studies all through the West:

“Still, this basically patriotic motivation of many comparative literature studies in France, Germany, Italy, and so on, has led to a strange system of cultural bookkeeping, a desire to accumulate credits for one’s nation by proving as many influences as possible on other nations or, more subtly, by proving that one’s own nation has assimilated and “understood” a foreign master more fully than any other” (169)

This Western hegemony has been reflected in ignoring the local cultural and historical contexts and the issue of differences while investigating the non-Western literatures from the Western lens and hence literature has been hailed merely as a universal phenomenon.

The first phase of the development of comparative literature, represented largely by the French school, emphasizes the study of source and influence, cause and function. This positivist approach of study came under severe attack as it in the view of its critic turned comparative literature merely to a *foreign trade* of literature. The French comparatists ignore the textual and stylistics aspects of the texts, rather they are concerned with the study of cultural transfer positing France either of the poles i.e. either receiver or giver exclusively led by the desire of proclaiming French superiority. American school in view of the accused limitations of the French counterparts takes a comparatively liberal approach emphasizing on textual analysis along with parallelism, intertextuality. The scope of comparative literature has been widened up by redefining the discipline by expanding its boundaries beyond literature alone. The definition put forward by H.M. Remak is indicative:

“Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country and the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts (i.e. painting, architecture, sculpture, music.), philosophy and history, the social sciences (politics, economics, sociology) the sciences, religion etc. on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression.” (3)

Emphasis on the study of affinities and parallels among literatures and other artistic forms of exemplification of human experiences is dependent on the assumption of universality. Simultaneous emphasis on the textual analysis overlooking the historicity is also a serious matter of concern in American School which posits some serious reactions later on. Again the emergence of literary theory has created innumerable possibilities of cross national literatures; but reading the Non-Western texts from perspective of Western theory can't always be justified as plausibility of such comparative studies presupposes literatures as a universal entity suppressing differences. The use of the term *universal* by the Western comparatists has been severely condemned by their non-Western counterparts. Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) has put that the use of the term denotes “*a symptom for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe*” (9). This hegemonic nurture of narrow binary of West and Non-West seems to be fatal:

“Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead. The narrowness of the binary distinction, the unhelpfulness of the ahistorical approach, the complacent shortsightedness of the literature-as-universal-civilizing-force approach have all contributed to its demise.” (Bassnett 47)

This Western hegemony prevailed in the comparative literature studies has severely been questioned by the post colonialists; Susan Bassnet is one of the pioneers of the debate who has investigated the significant positioning of postcolonial studies and translation in the sphere of comparative literature studies. For Bassnet, “*problematic of language and national identity*” is the common concern of comparative literature and postcolonial studies. This problematic of language and identity has seriously been addressed by Gayatri Spivak (1942-) in her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003). Spivak boldly argues to remove from the “*Anglophony, Lusophony, Teutophony, Francophony, et cetera*” and urges reconstruct comparative literature by substituting the difference of *nations vs areas*: “*Area Studies related to foreign “areas.” Comparative Literature was made up of Western European “nations.” This distinction, between “areas” and “nations,” infected Comparative Literature from the start.*” (8) The hegemonic ideological border nurtured between First world based Comparative Literature and Area Studies based on third world has thus been questioned for which in her words “*comparative*

literature remains imprisoned within the borders it will not cross(6).” The production and circulation of knowledge about the literature, culture, history etc of the far east has always been done from a Eurocentric lens; the study of the literatures and history of the decolonized countries have also been done from the perspective of the colonial legacy and the whole process has been criticized as the “*colonialism of European national language-based Comparative Literature* (10).” Spivak proclaims the need of turn to the primary site of the production of knowledge and here a transformed Area Studies would help Comparative Literature in her view:

Comparative Literature and Area Studies can work together in the fostering not only of national literatures of the global South but also of the writing of countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when the maps were made. The literatures in English produced by the former British colonies in Africa and Asia should be studied and supported. And who can deny the Spanish and Portuguese literatures of Latin America? Yet the languages that were historically prevented from having a constituted readership or are now losing readership might be allowed to prosper as well, even as the writers contribute to our need for languages. We do not need to map them. Together we can offer them the solidarity of borders that are easily crossed, again and again, as a crossing borders permanent from-below interruption of a Comparative Literature to come, the irony of globalization (15-16)

Debunking the hegemonic standing and crossing the borders are the ways forbidding Comparative Literature from being a dead discipline. The inclusion of non-canonical non Western works for comparative studies has been plead by critics like Frank J Warnke in the essay *The Comparatist's Canon: Some Observations*, as canon in literature itself is a hegemonic construct by the West.

In the age of globalization and multiculturalism, the borders among the nations are becoming shadowy; more or less literature of every country bears some international and cross-national sensibility. Hence defining and confining literature merely within the border of a nation seems to be absurd and outdated. The idea of World Literature has been gaining newer pace and many scholars point to world Literature as the future of Comparative Literature. Robert J. Clements in the article *World Literature Tomorrow* has referred three stages in the evolution of Comparative Literature: the first one is the Western Heritage, second one East –West Literature and in his view, “*World Literature is the logical third stage of comparative literature*” (181). Though this may seem to be a probable option, yet the epistemological hegemony of the term, *World Literature* must be remembered simultaneously. In the article, *Worlding Literatures between Dialogue and Hegemony*, Marko Juvan has aptly proclaimed the problem with World Literature today: “*Conversely, among the established meanings of Weltliteratur (world literature) the one that most explicitly tends towards the notion of hegemony is the concept of world literature as a canon of the greatest artworks of humankind, since in most of its historical realizations the international canon reflects and empowers the dominance of White, Western, and men's literary production.*” The emergence of interdisciplinary schools like Cultural studies, ethnic studies, area studies, post colonial studies has posed some serious challenges putting forth the limitations pertaining the ambiguities of subject matter and methodology. Unless and until comparative literature crosses the border in the real sense of the term and gives up the hegemonic perspective it would definitely be succumbed to extinction.

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