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Does the Discipline of Comparative Literature Really Win its Battles? : A Critical Study

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Abstract: Post-colonialism is both political and comparative in tendency. Postcolonial studies always treat cultures in their relationship to each other; by definition they require a comparative approach. From the postcolonial perspective, the ancestry and identity of the discipline of Comparative Literature is purely European. This identity is figured out as implications of its colonialism, its history of exclusion, and its suppression of indigenous languages. Haun Saussy's 2003 draft report began with the statement that "Comparative Literature has, in a sense, won its battles" whereas Susan Bassnett asserts, ten years earlier, that "today, comparative literature in one sense is dead" (47). The paper explores whether the discipline of Comparative literature is really dead or won its battles.

The discipline of Comparative Literature has been developed in Europe and USA since 1920s. But the emergence of the term 'comparative literature' can be traced again back which Susan Bassnett discusses in the article "Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century".

The term 'comparative literature' only started to emerge early in the nineteenth century when the discourse of national literatures came to the fore; there was no sense of comparative literature in the eighteenth century and previously, when scholars read across languages and disciplines were loosely defined and interconnected. (10)

The question of the European origins of comparative literature deserves some attention, as it has often been the focus both of identity claims and of disputes about the legitimacy of that identity, and not only in Europe. In this sense, 'Comparative Literature', born in nineteenth-century Europe is already tainted from its origins. The original innovativeness of comparative literature, which pursued to examine literature trans-nationally

in terms of themes, movements, genres, periods, zeitgeist, and history of ideas, is obsolete. Now it needs to be rethought in the light of writing being produced in emergent cultures. Actually the discipline has taken over the activity of comparative analysis between cultures and literatures.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, in a collection of essays, *Death of a Discipline*, argues that the field of Comparative Literature should move beyond its Eurocentric origins to pave a way forward for the discipline from its decline (6). A new comparative literature is in need to destabilize the tendency of dominant cultures to subjugate others (100). Such a discipline should move beyond the strictures of Western concepts. Now the stipulations of comparison are always European concepts which pose as universal values, resulting in the colonization, appropriation, distortion, or doing violence to non-European texts and traditions. The most sustained critique of East-West Comparative Literature to date is probably Takayuki Yokota Murakami's *Don Juan East/ West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature*. The basic postulate of this book is that all East-West comparisons are always already fatally flawed, because the terms of comparison are always Western concepts.

Now Translation Studies becomes a principle discipline with Comparative Literature its subsidiary subject area. The present globalized world looks 'world literature' as one that can be read in English translation rather than Comparative Literature that depends on multilingual expertise. Globalization has triggered a remarkable change in the status of English over other languages and launched a new epoch in the linguistic history. Most of the mandarin speakers in the world are natives. But in the case of English, most of the speakers are non-natives. This explains why English occupies a singular position and acquires the prestige of a 'world language' among other languages. It becomes a language which people use to communicate with others outside their own linguistic community.

With globalisation translation process to English language has been augmented and regional language literatures are translated more into English than any other foreign languages. With globalization the homogeneity of culture leads to the death of the discipline of Comparative Literature. Linguistic homogenization is a consequence of global imperial domination. Comparative Literature, through translation process, entertains the neo-colonial practice of homogenisation of language for cultivating benefits from the translation to English language.

A translated text is being borne across the world. Any translated work is not the exact representation, but a mediated access of the original work. The singular experiences of each nation or community cannot be translated without losing its essence. So the cultural purity along with the linguistic purity is contaminated in translation. Hence, in Comparative Literature, how can the comparison of cultures be possible through translated works in English? Most of the works taken for comparison are either English or translated into English. This involves turning literatures of the non-West into saleable exotic objects. Multicultural and Postcolonial literatures thus become what Aijaz Ahmad has turned ‘fetishized commodities’ (Ahmad 127).

Comparative Literature has to cross the national or linguistic boundaries. Both Bassnett and Spivak have given the death notice for a discipline born out of the European nineteenth-century. This discipline should give prominence on various regional literatures, its reformulation of the perception of literature itself and its focus on a direct rapport between literature and regional identity. This would give way to a new, more open, lively, politically aware understanding of the discipline beyond its Eurocentric historical definition, and its relocation in the wider field of the study of intercultural processes. Translation Studies has furnished the principal space in the comparative studies. But according to Bassnett, now comparative literature becomes a sub-section of translation studies.

The most recent crisis faced by Comparative Literature is to redefine it as a “multi-cultural or multi-lingual” discipline and relocate it in the wider field of the study of intercultural processes. This has demanded expanding the discipline beyond the margins of Europe and America, and highlighting difference, which is ‘differance’ in Derridean terms or ‘planetary’ in Spivakian terms, rather than universality. This gives a political dimension to Comparative Literature. This discipline still continues its fight for institutional recognition and survival with English Department. In many colleges, the discipline of Comparative Literature survives under the shade of English literature. This victory of English departments turns out to be, in effect, a kind of death for Comparative Literature by dispersion.

Comparative Literature becomes a sprouting field. When the Eurocentric nature of the discipline is analysed, more specifically, almost no faculty positions are made for the teaching of non-European literatures

in Comparative Literature programs. Moreover, its claim to universality is only to define the national literary tradition of “Essential Englishness”. The viability of English departments’ appropriation of the world is that in many institutions the smaller and therefore vulnerable Comparative Literature programmes and the similar discredited area studies could be colonized by them.

The English departments are able to accomplish an effective imperialistic campaign of their own in the process of supposedly unveiling racist oppression within literature. In the process, by professing to contend imperialistic mind-sets of the past they are actually waging a disciplinary and institutional hegemonic incursion in the present. Most significantly, they propagate the notion that one could conceivably decipher the world in translation. They do not need Comparative Literature’s linguistic proficiencies or an expert’s acquaintance with particular national cultures and histories.

The English departments emerge as faux-disciplines whose experts can commemorate cultural difference and hybridity and speak in unanimity with the Other without ever having to take part of their actual struggles. They can achieve a profitable specialization without too much endeavour or need for political, hypothetical and cultural research. So it is very crucial to interrogate what is behind gesticulations that assure to re-establish the degrees of cultural and linguistic peculiarity to the discipline of Comparative Literature (Srivastava 15).

Spivak contemplates Comparative Literature as the most promising methodological combinations as an interdisciplinary subject, and recommends to draw together comparative literature with area studies and thereby to build an association between the humanities and the social sciences. According to Spivak, any aspect of comparative literature which declines to be included in this process of replenishment is susceptible to extinction. The reaction to this most recent “crisis” has been an endeavour to reformulate Comparative Literature as a “multi-cultural/multi-lingual” discipline. This has involved widening the discipline beyond the frontiers of Europe and the Americas. In the wake of Said’s *Orientalism*, this latter type of study directed ultimately to the appraisal of all East-West studies as a new form of colonialism: western theory as the colonizer, other literatures as the colonized/controlled.

Conclusion:

Globalization cuddles many booby traps of colonialism and the growth of Comparative Literature is now interpreted as a neo-colonial device of control of English and English literature. This neo-colonialism is experienced not through any violent political stratagems as the imperial nations performed before, but by gradually and quietly confiscating the market of English language as well as culture. The existence of English as a global language is a by-product of imperialism. The market strategies for the sale of literature and the creation of new literary canons in the name of internationalizing literature are seen as imperialism of a very innovative kind, which can deceive as well as hoodwink the world into believing in democratic relationships and egalitarian power relations.

One should re-ponder today the very premises of one's understanding of the discipline. The most imperative step to renew Comparative Literature is to liberate the discipline from the other institutional channels under which the discipline survives in many countries. In fact, the rebirth of Comparative Literature with a post-colonial grounding is unavoidable to restore the standards of cultural and linguistic specificity and identity to the discipline. Otherwise the discipline will amalgamate into other institutional straits which results in its death.

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