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Redefining Comparative Indian Literature: A Critical Reading of Amiya Dev, Sisir Kumar Das and Ayyappa Paniker

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Abstract:

Indian Literature is a mosaic construction of different languages and cultures. Comparative Indian Literature as a discipline underwent a long struggle to break away from the clutches of orientalist ideology that it derived from its origin in the colonial context. The Western yardsticks of Comparative Literature are thoroughly inadequate for our purpose as it fails to address many of the complex factors which are the vital part of Indian culture. Amiya Dev, Sisir Kumar Das and Ayyappa Paniker attempt to identify the factors that limit Comparative Indian Literature as a discipline and deny its possibility of being genuinely interdisciplinary. This paper addresses the increasing demand for a new critical apparatus. The article proposes that Comparative Indian Literature must develop its own methodology which could be termed as Comparative Indian School.

Keywords: Comparative Indian Literature, Multilingualism, Methodology

India is a country of immense linguistic diversity and thus a country of many literatures. To speak of an Indian literature in singular is problematic. The very term 'Indian Literature' shows the homogenization of differences in the name of unity. This fails to address the diversity and distinctness of literatures in India. This pseudo commonality/ oneness is an ideological and political tool. It is an inevitable part of both the colonial and the postcolonial perspective. The former is characterised by a reductive, homogenizing approach and the latter found in the motto of Sahitya Akademi: "Indian literature is one though written in many languages". These image formations (India/ Indian literatures as one) result in stereotyping.

According to Amiya Dev, Indian literature is neither a simple unity as the hegemonists of the nation – state persuasion would like to be, nor a simple diversity as the relativists or post structuralists would like it to be. To him Indian literature is neither "one" nor "many" but rather a systematic whole where many sub systems interact towards one. That is, Indian literature is neither a unity nor is it a total differential.

Amiya Dev refutes the Eurocentric notion of one world literature. To him, the European idea of Comparative Literature is governed by its imperialist ideologies. India on the other hand tried to resist this European reductive, stereotypic and homogenizing approach. He defines world literature as

The sum total of texts available to him at that moment, including translations. It is absurd to claim that we all have the same world literature. We shall all be fools of time to say that world literature is one and same everywhere.(Dev12)

Comparative Studies of Indian Literatures tend to assume that Indian literature is a unified category. This hegemonic and unified view has already been questioned by several scholars. E. V. Ramakrishnan in his essay "Grounds of Comparison: The Crisis of Comparative Indian

Literature” analyses three factors that led to the demolition of the unified notion of Indian literature. Primarily, the post structuralist theories had questioned the legacy of Eurocentric assumptions in all disciplines. Secondly, the social scientists in India had begun using literatures produced in Indian languages. This resulted in the emergence of new readings where literary texts were located in various narratives. Thus Partha Chatterjee, Sudhir Chandra, Gopal Guru, Gail Omvedt, Ashis Nandy provided insights into various contexts that constitute literary texts in Indian languages. Thirdly, the emergence of women’s writings and Dalit literature necessitated critical perspectives that questioned the unified view of Indian literature. Works like *Women Writings in India* (1997) edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita documented traditions of writing that were never part of the canon. This questioned the uninterrupted tradition of homogenous Indian literature. Taken together, these three developments redefined the very term Comparative Indian Literature(Ramakrishnan24).

AmiyaDev asks “how strong is the comparatists’ commitment to their first language literature or to the literature they live amidst?”(13). According to Dev, one has to read the poem first, taste and try to get under its skin before tracing out Bethoven, Eliot or any other reception. The comparatist should link his comparison with the literatures around.

Ayyappa Paniker also addresses the insufficiencies of Western approach to Comparative Literature in accommodating Indian social ethos and aesthetic preoccupations, and the immediate need for an Indian approach. To him, Comparative Literature is:

“An abbreviation for the comparative study of two or more literatures written in different languages or belonging to different countries or cultures. Through comparison and contrast it tries to discover what is common to all literatures, as well as to understand what is unique to each literature, work or author”.(24)

Panicker’s notion of Comparative Literature has to be questioned. He tends to assume that comparative literature is the comparative study of two or more literatures. Here, we have to scrutinize the very idea of literature. Couldn’t it be a comparison between a work of literature and a film, or a sculpture or a painting or music? Why do we always insist on maintaining an irreducible specificity of literature?

To him, universalization in literature can be attained through *sadharanikarana*, which is “universalization of the individual, the regional and the particular”(24). This runs parallel to T. S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality where he says “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”.

India is a country of immense linguistic diversity and thus a country of many literatures. Indian literature is a mosaic of all the regional varieties. Thereby the totality as well as the variations on the basis of different languages should get reflected in its comparative approach. Panicker points to the need to evolve an Indian approach that addresses all these complexities. To him, “The essentially Kaleidoscopic richness of Indian literary experience itself seems to call for a comparative approach” (25).

Panicker illustrates how the borrowed Western approach to Comparative Literature is inadequate for our purpose. Western life and literature is founded on the concept of a nation status with a single race, a single religion, a single language and a more or less monolithic culture. Diversity, on the other hand, is the very life of Indian concepts. There is no scope for homogeneity as found in the West.

Panicker addresses various phases through which Indian literature underwent. There are two major traditions from which the languages of North and South India emerged: the Sanskrit heritage and the Dravidian heritage. Scholarly works such as *Natyasastra*, *Dhvanyaloka*, the works of Ahinavagupta, Viswanantha, Mammata, Kuntaka, Vamana, Dandin, and others are based on the poetics formed by vedas, puranas, epics, poems and plays written in Sanskrit. *Tolkappiam*, *Nannuul* are developed on the critical and aesthetic insights provided by the Sangam poems and epics like *Cilappatikaram*. These inheritance from the past have to be blended with the later historical periods such as the impact of Islam and Perso- Arabic contacts which have substantially affected Indian aesthetics, especially that of literature, music, painting and architecture. The Indian society also underwent a massive creative interaction with the Western thought and art. The West with its contributions in modern science and technology have considerably affected and modified our aesthetic sensibility. The colonial impact had several unpleasant consequences also. This paved way for the emergence of a postcolonial aesthetics that makes us closer to the cultures of Africa, Latin America and South East Asia. This mental conditioning is something that Indian art, literature, theatre, sculpture and painting is trying to revolt against and outgrow. Our approach has to be modern so that we can incorporate the developments in the West. At the same time it has to draw inspiration and sustenance from its own past, especially Sanskrit and Dravidian traditions. These traditions are two folded. One is based on the traditional recorded and currently available material of the high tradition and classical literature. Other is the unrecorded fragmentary elements of the indigenous low traditions, in other words, the folk and tribal heritage.

According to Panicker, the Indian mode of Comparative literature has to be inclusive to five different basic elements.

- 1) The classical elitist tradition – Sanskritic – Dravidian.
- 2) The folk or tribal traditions.
- 3) The impact of Europe/ Islam/ Christianity and other pressures.
- 4) The western impact
- 5) The postcolonial – third world identification.

Panicker explains how the western notion of literary genres created certain critical problems in incorporating the eastern literature. A Western scholar, particularly one believing the infallibility of Eastern critical canons, will usually define the term “epic” on the basis of Homer’s *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and then incorporate Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He may perhaps broaden his concept a bit to include *Beowulf*. They either dismissed oriental literatures as necessarily inferior or pleaded for a different set of canons for their evaluation. When he turns to the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, he will start applying the same yardsticks. The western notion of the epic is based on the concept of a single nation with a single race, a single religion, a single language and a more or less monolithic culture.

Thus the sprawling, multi branched, and internally diversified, Indian epics often incorporate several self contradictory narrative traditions like the many *Ramayanas* and *Mahabharatas* we come across in India. Every region in India boasts of many *Ramayanas*, one more inventive than the other. There is no exact parallel to Indian notion of the epic/ itihasa/ purana/ mahakavya in the western literature. The western concept epic does not help us to understand the structure or design of Indian puranas or similar works This makes it thoroughly incapable of containing and understanding our literatures.

Similarly we don't have the tradition of elegy/ lyric/ ode. They have a rooted tradition, a history of growth and development in the west and can be perfectly justified in western literatures.

The Sanskrit tradition of drama known as *dasarupakas* won't help us to understand Shakespeare or Ibsen. But will certainly help us to understand and the works of Kalidasa and Bhasa and other Indian playwrights.

We find western literary movements and currents of ideas inadequate and misleading when gets applied to the Indian scenario. Attempts have been made to describe Indian writers as classical, romantic, neoclassical, modern and the like. But even in the west they are not always very precise. The same writers may sometimes belong to the romantic and classical tradition. For example, Shakespeare is a classicist, romanticist and also a realist. Eliot claimed to be a classicist, but Herbert Read has argued that he was a romantic. The classification gets more complicated when applied to Indian writers. During the colonial period it was a fashion to use Western concepts in order to claim mastery over the master. The purely Indian terms such as *rasa*, *dhvani*, *touryatrika*, *tinai*, *akam*, *puram*, came to be used less and less. We have to contemporary as well as Indian. It is therefore necessary to stress the fact that Indian culture is mosaic and not a monolith. It promotes variety as a sign of vitality. As Pankier says,

The process of indigenisation- Indianization has to be undertaken with a degree of fairness and sense of justice. It should be based on a broad understanding of the history of Indian literature. (29)

Sisir Kumar Das always wished if we could rename Comparative Literature as "Literature" and give attention to textual affinities across civilizations. In his work, *Unworldly Dialogues*, Das shows how the dialogue of Sita and Helen can help us understand much Valmiki and Homer as well as the ethos of the two cultures. Likewise David Damrosch has put Oedipus and Sakuntala together by emphasising the common motif of fate. The curse in *Oedpus Rex* and *Abhinjana Sakuntalam*, being the irreversible condition in the one and conditional punishment in the other. To him, Sophocles is closer to Kalidasa than to many later dramatists in the West. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's "Sakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona" is another example. Chatterjee tried to evolve a new critical frame work within literatures. The most significant outcome of this critical approach was the abolition of all nationalistic considerations in literary evaluations. He compared Kalidasa with Shakespeare, Vedic hymns with the nature poems of Byron and Shelly, Bhavabhuthi with Shakespeare, and also compares *Kumarasambhava* with *Paradise Lost*. This gave a new direction to our literary studies. He presented a new universe of literary discourse unfragmented by languages, and nationalities. He also argued for a poetics which will account for all diversities.

Sisir Kumar Das explains how the Eastern literatures created certain critical problems for the Western readers particularly those believing the infallibility of Western critical canons. They either dismissed oriental literatures as necessarily inferior or pleaded for a different set of canons for their evaluation.

Das in his essay, "Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective" questions the false impression about the autonomy of languages, themes and genres. He also shows how the study of literature demands a look beyond one language and one culture. The scholars of Sanskrit plays studied Sanskrit along with Prakrit literatures. The kings and the priests speak Sanskrit; the women used Sauraseni Prakrit, the people of working class

Magadhi and the songs in Maharashtra. This reflects the multi-lingualism of the society and the functional hierarchy of these languages.

Sometimes these interactions between neighbouring literatures resulted in the growth of new genres, themes and occasionally styles. One of the evidences of such interactions between two languages is to be found in the growth of *Manipravalam* – a hybrid style composed of Sanskrit and Malayalam. This later developed into a rich body of literature. Another artificial language is *Brajabuli*, which was extensively used in 16th century Bengali poetry. It was a hybridization of Maithili, Bengali, Assamese, and Oriya. Such experiments went beyond the linguistic boundaries of one particular literature. Influence of Persian can be seen on various Indian literatures through translations and adaptations of Persian texts. In this respect, themes, forms, and even styles were imitated. A new language, Urdu, emerged out of the interaction between Persian and Khariboli, a form of Hindi. Urdu grew into a supple and sophisticated instrument of literary expression by the end of 17th century. Many great Urdu poets borrowed themes and motifs from Persian and grafted them into this new Indian language. They also imported a considerable number of poetic forms and metrical structures. Some of them were also welcomed by other Indian languages.

The first person to plea eloquently for a comparative study of literature and that too as an academic discipline in India was Rabindranath Tagore. The newly established National Council of Education / Jatiya Siksa Parisad (1906) founded by some of the leading men of the time to create a parallel system of education, invited Tagore in 1907 to speak on Comparative literature. The title of Tagore's lecture in Bengali was "Visva- Sahitya", meaning world literature. It is interesting that Tagore used the English Expression "Comparative Literature" to explain what he meant by world literature. The first department of Comparative Literature came into existence fifty years later in 1956 at Jadavpur University. Budhadewa Bose who founded this department was not much concerned about its methodology. The belief that every literature is not only distinctive and should be studied in isolation persists with many. Thus the discipline was vehemently opposed by universities and many scholars of eminence. This general resistance from single literature disciplines have averted the spread of this discipline to other major universities. In 1958-59 the Bengali department of Calcutta University included courses on English Romantic poetry and selections of Sanskrit literature in its Bengali MA programme and called it Comparative literature. Sisir Kumar argues that no one thinks about a full-fledged Comparative Indian Literature. He concludes the essay by saying,

The future of Comparative Literature in this country will naturally be directed towards an intensive study of various Indian literatures in main, but so long it realizes that its texts and contexts are Indian, its methodology comparative, but its main subject is literature, it will serve the cause of Comparative literature. (Das 29)

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