

Comparative Literature and 'Comparitism'

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Ramakrishnan, EV, Harish Trivedi, Chandra Mohan, eds., *Interdisciplinary Alter-natives in Comparative Literature*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2013, pp. 260, Rs. 750, ISBN-13: 9788132111009.

"History is natural selection," pronounces Rushdie in his novel *Shame*, ". . . [when] new species of fact arise, old saurian truths go to the wall, blind-folded and smoking last cigarettes!" Comparative Literature seems to have come perilously close to this inexorable process of "natural selection"—being kin to this "saurian" pedigree—that its eventual demise has been forecast, somewhat cheerily, by Harish Trivedi and Gayatri Spivak. Since "history loves only those who dominate her," insists Rushdie (p. 124), it is now world literature as a new genre, and its cohorts—the post-colonial studies/translation studies—that dominate the conceptual supermarket!

The volume under review contains nineteen essays under five sections and represents a variety of viewpoints on Comparative Literature. The first section discusses the problems inherent in Comparative Literature (CL) as a genre. The second, in the words of EV Ramakrishnan, "deals with issues of transnational and universal categories. The third section portrays the making of the canon and its relation with the discourse of the nation, the fourth views the region as an interspace between various cultural narratives, while the fifth goes deeper into the making of the regional/national from the perspective of the pre-modern oral traditions."

One of the editors, Ramakrishnan, begins the volume with his introductory, a well-articulated, comprehensive essay "Comparative Literature: Changing Paradigms" and recalls how CL has been at the crossroads for quite some time because it privileged a Eurocentric view of literature. It had no place for works produced in Asian or African literary traditions. Moreover, it was a question

of unequal power relations across cultures which had thrown up a number of ideological issues: for instance, the global south hasn't had the chance of getting into the globalized world with their cultural products! The inquiry gains both range and depth, and lends a timely relevance to the present volume.

Essay after essay, the message comes through clearly, unequivocally. The editors sound a grim warning to CL: if you want to stay in business, reinvent yourself, develop a "lexicon of analysis" in tune with the new historicist, post-structuralist ambience which would enable you to deal with "transactions between the literary, cultural and the political in all [their] multivalent ways to bring about a paradigm shift in its practice" (p. 15). That is Ramakrishnan. On the other hand, Harish Trivedi in his second introductory essay "Comparative Literature, World Literature and Indian Literature: Concepts and Models," sounds not too sanguine about the health of CL, which being right now in ICU, prompts him to explore various strategies for its resuscitation. He comes up with two models of excellence, both radically divergent, but remarkably well-suited to the patient, one by Sisir Kumar Das and the other by Sheldon Pollock. It was unthinkable sometime ago that a single author could write a history of Indian Literature "until Das wrote his three volumes." However this doesn't turn out to be a post-structuralist enterprise: on the contrary, Das had planned to write "An Integrated History of Indian Literature"—something smacking the unity of a nation-state! How can anybody envisage an "integrated" history comprising what is Indian, the polyvocal, polysemous, amorphous, (non)-entity! But for Das India was "a single cultural universe," and its literature "governed by a common poetics" (p. 28).

Sheldon Pollock has a different take on this: his edited volume is consistent with the post-structuralist ideology of culture as discontinuous, disintegrated and

fragmentary, but singularly sensitive to the local, the ethnic contexts wherein the indigenous, the folk and the classical, all intermingle in their "disjunct" moments which, in the words of Trivedi, "would yet represent and serve to sum up the essence of that literary tradition" (p. 29). Is this some kind of a double bind: be 'singular' yet reach out to the universal! To break free of this "bind" you need strategies of a different kind. That's where, according to Trivedi, Pollock succeeds.

Without any theoretical embellishments, N'gugi in a recent essay captures the core problematic of CL through a metaphor from Blake, that is, to see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour. This metaphor from which arose his notion of "globalectics", in a way, sums up the entire effort that has gone into the compilation of this volume! The essays in the volume talk avidly, eloquently about the necessity of CL opening up, renewing its concerns and crossing borders to reach out to other language cultures, the other ones less known perhaps, even the smaller ones whose voices need to be accommodated in its purview. This take, however, is nothing new except perhaps that it appears with a new emphasis if one were to remember Edward Said who in the 1980s posited his notion of "travelling theory": that theories and ideas travel. First they are born in "a set of special circumstances," then enter discourse and travel across various, diverse contexts and eventually get transformed in their new homes (pp. 226-227). CL needs to do precisely this 'transversing,' migrating if it is to survive as a discipline—except that it should stay away from culture studies which, Gayatri Spivak characterizes, is "monolingual, presentist, narcissistic" (p. 22). Go "planetary" and "learn from below," is Spivak's *sutra*!

David Damrosch pays homage to Sisir Kumar Das in his essay "Literary History in a Global Age: The Legacy of Sisir Kumar Das." Das, he claims, offers a model of global historiography, but then one can also discern, in Das's enterprise certain "inner tensions" that remain unresolved. However Das is able to "work out the basic terms for the writing of global literary history," and trace those "interactions and interconnections" that emerge, say, in world epics such as Gilgamesh, the Mahabharata and the Homeric epics. These "literary patterns are far more durable than linguistic ones," claims Damrosch (pp. 42-44). He finally seems to settle for a notion of world literature, "so ... innocent of theory and so ... user-friendly" as Trivedi puts it (p. 22), that encompasses "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language." That is, CL as a discipline is already dead and is subsumed in World Literature (WL) — a phrase that Goethe coined rather proleptically in the 19th century. A

prediction realised and legitimized by Tagore whose vision always had a universal dimension though rooted in Bangla folk/ethnic traditions. The question still haunts many: does WL concept lead to de-personalization, de-nationalization?

PP Ravindran who rightly points out the Eurocentric bias of World Literature (WL) in his essay "Literature as Supermarket . . ." is not very optimistic about the marginalized local cultures finding their legitimate voices heard in this new genre, subject as it is to the globalizing forces. Consequently, the comparatists have to face "major challenges" against these forces, argues Sieghild Bogumil in her essay 'A New Ethics of Comparative Literature . . .,' and shows through analyzing works of Kafka and Celan, how to evolve the basic terms of dialogue with the other. Dorothy Figueira in her article 'The Subaltern Can Speak . . .' questions the notion of the 'subaltern' not being able to 'speak,' that is, deprived of the means to articulate her condition. She feels the need to attribute agency to the subaltern. TS Satyanath in his essay 'World Literature in the Context of Indian Literatures' envisages "multiple canons" of WL and instantiates the well-known Kannada poet Kuvempu as constituting his own canon of World Literature comprising Virgil, Dante, Milton, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Tulasidasa, Firdausi, Kamban and Aurobindo.

Section three deals exclusively with Tagore. Amiya Dev in his inspired essay 'Tagore as World Literature' says as much and then proceeds to memorialize those epiphanic moments that occur in the poet's stories "during his sojourn in Eastern Bengal." The canonical universalist Tagore apart, the real Tagore lives in his "regional and ethnic elements that inform his world vision." In the true spirit of WL, Amiya Dev views Tagore as someone who lives his poetry, who legitimately claims his position in the company of Schiller, Goethe, Tolstoy and Gorky. For Indra Nath Choudhuri, Tagore comes through as presenting the Feminine in its totality, not as transgressing the traditional womanhood, but as embodying the female power in his essay 'Letters of Tagore and His Notions of the Feminine.' This image, Choudhuri reconstructs through Tagore's letters to various women who figured closely in his life including the special relationship he had with his sister-in-law. For Jasbir Jain, in her essay 'Theorizing Resistance and Creativity,' the notion of resistance is built into the act of creativity, as a result of multiple forms of oppression, like 'fatwas,' exile that societies often impose on artists. Controversies surround writers like Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen and MF Husain, Girish Karnad, Patwardhan, to name a few. She cites instances of plays, films, documentaries, which resist the surrounding

oppressive culture and attempt to "unearth the meaning of what we can value." Is Orientalist legacy something that hides somewhere in the cultural evaluations of artworks, one wonders!

Yes, Orientalism comes up with another face. It proceeds to valorize print culture as against the original manuscripts of the precolonial archives, argues Balaji Ranganathan in his essay 'The *Gita Givinda* and the problems of Orientalistic Representation.' The colonial modernity, by giving us a printed text, say, the *Gita Givinda* in translation, "occasions a rupture" with the ancient manuscript tradition which had once nurtured the Indian cultural context founded on "miniature painting, music, drama and dance," till about the 19th century. Bhalchandra Nemade in his essay 'Indian Literature and Universalism' doesn't mince words. In WL, he declares, there are only "Western standards," no universals. And if this is going to be the reality, if marginalized literary cultures of Asia and Africa find no adequate space in WL, then WL may not survive. If the editors sounded the death knell for CL, Nemade squarely sounds it for WL! Both genres in a way are found by several writers complicit in being so pronouncedly Eurocentric and limited in vision. And practitioners in the two genres, of East or West, both need to undergo

introspection and effect radical paradigm shifts in order to be locally, globally relevant. If both the genres are guilty and suffer from inadequacies, it's time they both merge and then look for a new nomenclature!

To sum up, Comparative Literature may die as a discipline, but comparative ways of thinking will always live and move across critical space, configuring new strategies in order to keep 'comparatism' alive and vibrant. The riches comprising this volume of varied lines of inquiry cannot be covered adequately in a review. Here's God's plenty for the reader to ponder over the many-layered interiors in the web that networks both the genres. Read or browse, you will land in an aporetic condition when asked to choose one over the other!

(A cautionary note: Sage publications, seemingly in the interests of economy has set the entire text in minion as it were, 6 point or even less, that the reviewer literally had to use a magnifying glass to read especially the quotes which appear in mini print!)

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- Rushdie, Salman (1983). *Shame*. U.K.: Jonathan Cape.
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