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M.E.G.-15

Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice

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By: Kshyama Sagar Meher



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**Sample Preview
of the
Solved
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Papers**

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QUESTION PAPER

June – 2023

(Solved)

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE : THEORY AND PRACTICE

M.E.G.-15

Time: 3 Hours]

[Maximum Marks: 100

Notes: Answer five questions in all. Question No. 1 is compulsory. All questions carry equal marks.

Q. 1. Explain with reference to context of the following:

(a) Day will be erased in night

The ground's surface will extend outward
The new moon will be swallowed
in eclipse, and the mind in meditation will
be completely absorbed
By the void inside it. What clothes could be
so beautiful, or more sacred?

Ans. Context: These lines are taken from Lal Ded's poem *Vakh*.

Explanation: Vakh 3 highlights the power of meditation that completely absorbs the mind, eclipsing all other thoughts. We reach a new state of being as the universe convulses as the mind empties itself. The new clothes symbolise a change – of a oneness with the universe. It removes all barriers and “the day will be erased in night”. There will be change in the mind's geography. “The ground's surface will extend outward,” in a vast expansion of one's spiritual condition.

(b) Unbreakable, O Lord,

Is the love
That binds me to You :
Like a diamond,
It breaks the hammer that strikes it.

Ans. Context: These lines are taken from one of the *Bhajan* by Meera Bai.

Explanation: The poem portrays an eternal “unbreakable” bond of love between the worshipper and the God with similes like the hard glittering quality of the diamond which breaks the hammer “which strikes it.” She makes her relationship with Krishna inseparable, inexpressible like “the polish in gold”, and “the lotus in water.”

There is total reciprocation as he lives in her and she lives in him. The willing loss of identity is captured in the image of “the bird gazing all night at the passing

moon” and the voice softens again even as it commands, “O my Beloved Return.”

Meera Bai's songs is also a defiant expression of a woman's desire to find her own life. Like Lal Ded's expression of passionate love for God, Meera Bai also expresses her passionate relationship with Krishna.

Both reject worldly comforts and status as wives to establish their own separate identity. Both display traits of rebellion when they actively reject all familial bonds. They turn away from the mundane pursuit of happiness through domestic drudgery and humiliation and find passion in poetic expression and social acceptance through a spiritually ecstatic life.

(c) I beg of you all
one

favour :

If you should see my lord anywhere my
lord white as jasmine
call out
and show him to me.

Ans. Context: These lines are taken from one *Bhajan of Shiva* From Akka Mahadevi.

Explanation: In her poetry Akka Mahadevi refers to Shiva as “...my lord white as jasmine,” or, as in the previous poem, “Lord Cennamallikarjuna”. Through her poetry, Akka Mahadevi also expresses her emotions of being torn between being female and at the same time as being human. Her yearning is expressed by her desire to transcend the boundaries placed on her as female and human to achieve true union with Shiva.

(d) In happiness nor in sorrow, am I
Neither clean, nor a filthy mire
Not from water, nor from earth
Neither fire, nor from air, is my birth

Ans. Context: These lines are taken from poem ‘Bulla ki Janna’ by Bulleh Shah.

Explanation: In this song, Bulleh Shah rejects all institutions which bind people down and which create barriers and differences of caste, creed and religion.

Bulleh Shah says the Mosque, the Jewish temple, the Vedic claims, the intoxication of wine as a means of spiritual search and experience, are of no meaning and use to his rebel spirit.

He questions the condition of being asleep or awake, of sorrow and happiness. It is the same plaintive cry of Tukaram's and of Lal Ded. The constant refrain of "I know not who I am" subsumes the distinctions created and destroys the egotistic self as he surrenders himself to the knowledge of the oneness of God.

(e) I have looked on God as one who sees everything, on bright and dark days, alike.

God is like a father with his child, who both feels and gives pleasure at the same time.

Good acts and bad acts vanish.

Ans. Context: These lines are taken from Sant Tukaram's poem *Abhang*.

Explanation: Hungering for the divine, Tukaram rejects any desire for food. He is only starved for a glimpse of the beatific face of God. Food signifies sustenance of the physical self which is not the goal for him. Only God whom he calls Janardana is the object of his worship. God for him is omniscient. He sees equally the bright day and the dark night, meaning both happiness and sorrow. The fatherly figure of God balances all pain and pleasure, all good and bad. Only "God's Glory" is accounted for.

**(f) I live in You
Like the bird
That gazes all night
At the passing moon,
I have lost myself dwelling in You**

Ans. Context: These lines are taken from one of the *bhajan* by Meera Bai.

Explanation: Meera Bai's songs is also a defiant expression of a woman's desire to find her own life. Like Lal Ded's expression of passionate love for God, Meera Bai also expresses her passionate relationship with Krishna.

Both reject worldly comforts and status as wives to establish their own separate identity. Both display traits of rebellion when they actively reject all familial bonds. They turn away from the mundane pursuit of happiness through domestic drudgery and humiliation

and find passion in poetic expression and social acceptance through a spiritually ecstatic life.

(g) At first they tried to make him eat some mothballs, which, according to the wisdom of the wise neighbor woman, were the food prescribed for angels. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the papal lunches what the penitents brought him, and they never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man that in the end ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience.

Ans. Ans. Context: These lines are taken from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings*.

Explanation: This is the story of a couple, Pelayo and Elisenda, who find an old man with wings washed up from the sea into their courtyard. Alarmed at first, they call the neighbours to deal with the situation. They considered the old man as an angel, because of his wings, and so call the local priest. The priest is unable to tell them anything definitive and instead writes to Rome for an answer. Meanwhile, the couple prosper by charging money from the people thronging to see the angel, but since he shows no expected 'angelic' behaviour, people soon lose interest in him and after some time the old man flies away.

Magic, which cannot be explained by normal, universal laws, is the signaling feature of a magical realist text. The winged old man is the only magic in the story. The other supernatural being in the story is the woman who had supposedly turned into a spider.

The wings are the only thing magical about the old man. Otherwise, like a shipwrecked old man from some foreign land, he is mundane, sordid and uninspiring. The spider woman is outlandish, exotic and amazing. The people soon tire of the old man because he does not respond to them and because he doesn't have anything like supernatural. In describing the old man ordinarily and the spider woman extraordinarily, Marquez says something here about magic itself. Inserting the spider woman in the narrative aids in making the magic of an old, winged man seem real. This illustrates what we told you in the previous unit – the way in which the narrative is constructed provides a realistic context to the magical events.

Sample Preview of The Chapter

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Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice

Block-I : INTRODUCTION

What is Comparative Literature?



INTRODUCTION

Literature is a verbal representation of human experience. It is a self-expression of a writer. When a reader develops a taste and sensibility, he begins to feel patterns, recurrent features and motifs. He recognizes in them the expanding horizon of literary representations. This chapter will help you to become an informed reader.

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

ORIGINS, DEFINITION AND SCOPE

Since the 16th century, the Latin term '*comparativus*' was in use. The term *litteratur ecomparée* came into vogue in France in the 19th century. Later Abel-François Villemain in Sorbonne used this combined term. In English, Matthew Arnold used 'Comparative Literature' for the first time in a private letter in 1848. In his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford in 1857, Arnold talked about the connections between literatures of various countries.

In 1827, German writer Goethe used the term *Weltliteratur* and observed that "Different nations acknowledge each other and their respective creations" and a universal world literature has existed for a long time. He also talked about "World literature".

Referring to Indian Aesthetics, Amiya Dev says "*Rasikas* of the active kind put their readings together into possible patterns. It is out of these patterns that a system may emerge."

The system may be called comparative literature because the patterning is involved with more than one literature. Susan Bassnett, the British scholar and

historian of comparative literature, says we do not start with comparative literature, but we may end up with it.

For example, when we read an English version of the *Ramayana*, we may be impelled to think of Valmiki's epic in the original or Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* or Kamban's *Ramayana* in Tamil. Thus, Bassnett says when we start reading we move across frontiers, making associations and connections.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

Comparative literature got academic status when the chairs were for the subject established in universities in Europe and the US in the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, many European scholars moved to the US and tried to track motives, themes, types and other elements in various literatures.

Paul Van Tieghem, of the French school, differentiated between comparative literature and general literature. Comparative literature refers to the study of interrelations between two literatures while general literature is concerned with the movements and fashions which sweep through several literatures. Fernand Baldensperger, leader of the School, had no use for comparisons which did not involve "A real encounter" that has 'created a dependence'. The French insistence on two elements banned many prospective areas of comparison as "Exclusion Zones". French and German authors can be compared, but not a Canadian and a Kenyan, for the latter two write in English.

Another problem that emerged from the French dogmatism is the reduction of comparison to a study of sources and influences, causes and effects, ignoring the totality of a work of art. Besides, the approach was

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author-centred and hence excluded oral literature, anonymous literature, folk literature and other types of literature.

This strict approach along with the tendency to dominate, led to what Wellek called the “*Crisis of Comparative Literature*” in 1959. In the 1960s, American school emerged as a more liberal school, pursuing the study of the relationship between literature and other areas of knowledge, arts and belief.

According to H.H. Remak, who led the school, the influence studies should focus on “What was *retained* and what was *rejected* and *why*; and *how* was the material absorbed and integrated”. The school focused thematic parallelism and not the historical and generic aspects. Thus, while the “Old World ‘comparative literature’” stressed on documenting sources of influences in terms of national consciousness, the “New World ‘comparative literature’” saw its task in “transnational terms”.

Since the 1970s, Comparative Literature has developed certain important theoretical concepts. Discovery of “Analog and parallel processes of literary evolution” helps to explain “Historical and social laws of universal validity”. Analogy, contrast, reception and influence are the nodal points of comparison in a systematic juxtaposition of phenomena from different literatures.

Claudio Guillen has talked of the possible confusion between influence and textual similarities, asking the comparatist to study how the transfer happens. Ulrich Weisstein has called for a nuanced study of “influence” and “reception” leading to “survival.”

Since the 1980s, expansion of literary theory into the larger theoretical realms of social sciences has happened. Scholars (most of them European exiles and emigrés in the US during the inter-war and post-war period) have called for periodical reports on the issue of ‘professional standards’: Harry Levin’s in 1965, Thomas Greene’s in 1975 and finally, Bernheimer’s in 1993.

ANTI-EUROCENTRISM AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: THE CHALLENGE OF POST-COLONIAL THEORY AND STUDIES

In the 1990s, post-colonial studies had impact on the comparative literature. In 1993, in her book *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Bassnett cited Swapan Majumdar’s contention that the critical tools borrowed from the West are not necessarily suitable for the study of all literatures. She noted that African, Asian and Latin American critics too shared this view; and especially identified the domain of periodization in comparative literature studies.

According to Bassnett, European/Western comparative literature studies deliberately avoided socio-economic or political issues and overlooked factors of invasions, colonization, economic deprivation, which provoked a violent reaction in other parts of the world. She stated that “Comparative literature is a political activity, part of the process of reconstructing and reasserting cultural and national identity in a postcolonial period”.

EUROCENTRISM – THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

In *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (1992) and *In Another Tongue: Essays on Indian Literature in English* (1993), Ganesh Devy has the following views:

- India, which has been multicultural and multilingual for centuries, was superimposed a monocultural model of literary excellence by European, especially English, scholarship.
- Modern Indian languages, which developed from early medieval times, from Sanskrit and Tamil respectively, were ignored by even the Indologists of colonial times.
- These languages, which he called *bhasas*, produced a rich literary repertoire over a thousand years, especially in the genre of *Bhakti* or devotional literature.

Swapan Majumdar, who raises the question whether Indian literature is singular or pluralistic, had the following remarks:

- Besides political identity, there are other determinants of a national literature.
- Indian literature does not mean “A mere compendium of several regional literatures” and a scholar should begin with “the most close at hand literature” as the core of his “comparative praxis”.
- English/European periodization is not compatible with the quality of India’s literary output.

In the Middle Ages, considered as the Dark Ages in the West, India saw the prolific contribution of luminaries such as the Alwars, Nanak, Kabir, Jnanadeva, Mira and Tulsidas.

- A comparative space was created by the rich haul of literature from different parts spread through the circulation of copies, minstrels’ singing, itinerant scholars moving between places, creating.

- Sisir Kumar Das, in comparative literary chronology *A History of Indian Literature 1800-1910* in 1991, had the following observations:
- Indian literature differs from each other. Even in one work, different languages and dialects were used, as in Sanskrit plays.
- ‘Manipravalam’ style emerged in South Indian languages because of a fusion with Sanskrit. Urdu developed from the contact of Persian with Khariboli.
- Comparative criticism started by Western Indologists widened the scope of comparative literary studies. It resulted in the call of Rabin-dranath Tagore, in 1907, for ‘Visvasahitya,’ which he rendered as comparative literature.

Interliterariness

In the post-colonial era, the issues on comparative literature have become more complex.

Post-colonialism asserted national identity as a counter to colonial domination, which erased the identity of a nation, a people, its culture by committing “Epistemic Violence” and helped a nation to place its own canonical works and alternative genres in opposition to European history and historiography. Postcolonial literature has some problems. The abstract concept of nation and national unity was unable to do justice to the concrete differences in terms of language, culture, literature, so obviously present in various regions. Hence, the need for a sensitive understanding of a postcolonial resistance to European comparative literature, with its model of genealogy, thematology, literary history, literary criticism, genetic studies, influence and reception studies and canon formation.

Marian Gálík talked about ‘interliterariness,’ as a comparative tool. ‘Literariness,’ the basic quality of all literature, becomes ‘interliterariness’ when its features “Transcend the boundaries of individual literatures” in terms of “intensity, variability, mutual relations, or affinities”. For examples, the treatment of the epic women Helen, Sita and Draupadi. ‘Literariness’ concerns one region, its language; it becomes ‘interliterariness’ when it goes beyond zones, regions and other linguistic barriers.

For example, Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, both in northern and southern retellings, depicts Ahalya as languishing, living only on air (*vayupakshanirahara*) after being cursed for adultery by her sage husband;

while another southern retelling (*Dharmalaya*) turns her into a stone (*silabhutva*). Kamban in Tamil also describes the curse similarly, drawing perhaps from ancient Sangam poetical versions of Ahalya’s story.

Amiya Dev talks about “the notion of interliterary process and a **dialectical** view of literary interaction” as a way out of the impasse of abstractions like unity, diversity and national literature. Gurubhagat Singh’s concept of “**Differential Multilogue**” denied the very idea of an Indian literature. However, Dev recognizes “*a sensus communis*” of a broadly cultural kind present wherein a comparatist must find his ‘situs’ or location of theory. He underscores the existence of an interliterary condition in India, long before “its manuscript or print culture”.

GLOBALISATION VERSUS PLANETARITY

In her call for a new comparative literature, Gayatri Spivak proposes a model of ‘planetarity’.

- ‘Manipravalam’ style emerged in South Indian languages because of a fusion with Sanskrit. Urdu developed from the contact of Persian with Khariboli.
- It removes Eurocentrism, postcolonialism, neo-nationalism and even cultural studies.
- Comparative Literature and Area Studies can work together in retrieving even countless indigenous languages.
- ‘Collectivities’ will “cross borders and figure themselves as planetary rather than continental, global or worldly”.
- It accepts “an open future” or “a definitive future anteriority, a ‘to come’-ness, a ‘will have happened quality’”.
- ‘Planetarity’ is “best imagined from the pre-capitalist cultures of the planet”.

In response, Bassnett had the following observations:

- Planetarity is against globalization.
- Through translation, new ideas and genres have come into the tradition.
- The discourse of global flows enables a comparison of exchange and transfer in literary and philosophical spheres.
- Theories of cultural capital and its transmission can be a productive comparative method.

Spivak is more concerned with ‘to-comeness,’ while Bassnett is with ‘has happened-ness’. Both of them focus on “the role of the reader”.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Bernheimer's 1993 report found that the term 'literature' may not be adequate as our subject of study as comparatists due to "An increasingly apparent porosity of one discipline's practice to another". According to Bernheimer, the space of comparison today involves the following:

- Artistic productions studied by different disciplines,
- Various cultural constructions of their disciplines,
- Pre- and post-contact cultural productions of colonized peoples,
- Gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine or sexual orientation defined as straight and those defined as gay,
- Racial and ethnic modes of signifying,
- Hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analysis of its modes of production and circulation.

The old world contextualization based on (i) author, (ii) nation, (iii) period and (iv) genre has been displaced in the expanded fields of discourse in the New World by (i) culture, (ii) ideology, (iii) race and (iv) gender.

Incorporating these new ways of reading and contextualizing is the problem for comparatists.

Zepetnek's proposed a model that changes the nomenclature 'Comparative Literature' itself into 'Comparative Cultural Studies'. It defines Comparative Cultural Studies as a field of study where selected tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with selected tenets of the field of cultural studies and is performed in a contextual and relational construction and with a plurality of methods and approaches, interdisciplinary and if and when needed, including team work.

According to Gail Finney, today, students take pains to acquaint themselves with the theoretical apparatus of one or more "Non-literary disciplines or bodies of thought," which, three decades ago, graduate students were ignorant of, preoccupied as they were with literary history and literary texts. She considers, this "Hybrid Program" as the order of the day in the 21st century.

UNIT END QUESTIONS

Q. 1. What is the relation between the study of Literature and Comparative Literature?

Ans. Comparative literature refers to the study of interrelations between two literatures while general literature is concerned with the movements and fashions which sweep through several literatures. Comparative Literature has developed certain important theoretical concepts. Discovery of "Analog and parallel processes of literary evolution" helps to explain "historical and social laws of universal validity". Analogy, contrast, reception and influence are the nodal points of comparison in a systematic juxtaposition of phenomena from different literatures.

Q. 2. Explain the three categories of General Literature, World Literature and Comparative Literature.

Ans. General literature refers to a verbal representation of human experience or a self-expression of a writer. World literature is the literary works produced all over the world. Comparative literature refers to the study of interrelations between two literatures.

Q. 3. Briefly describe the origins of Comparative Literature in the West.

Ans. The origin of comparative literature may be traced to the use of the term *Weltliteratur* in 1827 by German writer Goethe who noted that different nations acknowledge each other and their respective creations and a universal world literature has existed for a long time. He talked about "World Literature".

In Britain, Matthew Arnold for the first time used 'Comparative literature' in a private letter in 1848. In 1857, he talked about the connections between literatures of various countries in his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford.

Universities in Europe and the US in the late 19th-century set-up chairs for comparative literature. In the early 20th century, many European scholars moved to the US and tried to track motives, themes, types and other elements in various literatures.

Comparative Literature has developed certain important theoretical concepts since the 1970s. Discovery of "Analog and parallel processes of literary evolution" helps to explain "Historical and social laws of universal validity".

Since the 1980s, expansion of literary theory into the larger theoretical realms of social sciences has happened. Scholars (most of them European exiles and emigrés in the US during the inter-war and post-war period) have called for periodical reports on the issue of 'professional standards': Harry Levin's in 1965, Thomas Greene's in 1975 and, finally, Bernheimer's in 1993.