CHAPTER 1

Comparative Literature and its significance

Comparative literature heralds as a discipline in its own right. Comparative study of literature as a scientific study of the various features of the different literatures of the world in a comparative perspective is relatively a late development. The history of comparative literature is hardly hundred years old. Still some critics want to say that comparative literature is as old as literary criticism.

Comparative literature is considered, now a-days, a very useful and important study. Today, the modern scientific developments have made the world very small for which the mutual contacts among various cultures have become inevitable. With the globalization and interdisciplinary studies, the changes have also been occurred in the field of literary studies which have affected the birth of comparative literature. Literature is one, bereft of its place, time and language. Dr. Radha Krishnan, an esteemed scholar has also agreed that there is a unity of outlook as the writers in different languages derive their inspiration from a common source and face more or less the same kind of experience, emotional and intellectual. Inspired by this ideology and because of the necessity of analyzing different literatures of the world, comparative literature has been born. Comparative literature adopts all the world literature as one. The tendency of adopting all the world
literature as one, is not made forcefully or emotionally, rather it tries to analyze the characteristics, the source, and the relation of it with the other literature systematically. In the course of this analytical and comparative study, the universal characteristics of literature have been evolved. Comparative literature is formulated to encompass the total achievement of literature in the entire world. It has established itself as an academic discipline. Comparative study of literature has now become an important subject of research amongst students, teachers and scholars of the world.

Comparative literature is itself a not creative literature like the short story, poem and novel; the basic theme of comparative literature is the comparison. Comparison is the main tool for the study of more than one literature. Eliot says that comparison and analysis are the chief tools of the critic. Comparative literature is necessarily a field of study in comparison. Comparison may be used in this kind of literary study to indicate affinity, tradition or influence. Affinity consists in resemblances in style, structure, mood or idea between two works. A work of art cannot be analysed, characterized and evaluated without recourse to critical principles. Comparison and contrast are the tools which help in forming the method of comparative criticism. Since comparison may be made from formal and stylistic or historical or sociological or other points of view, comparative criticism cuts obliquely across the other types and might reasonably be taken as a subdivision of each of them. But, it does have a sphere of its own. The term ‘comparative’ properly refers to criticism that jumps the boundary lines between regional and national literatures. In a single literature school a
great deal of such criticism is incidental, but in comparative literature, it is systematic. Moreover, comparative criticism involves a large field of literary study and encompasses other forms of human expression having a bigger perspective. Questions about literature in comparative literature lead to questions about cultures, structures, orders of language, relationship between literature and society and the history of the human imagination and intellect.

The term 'comparative literature' has been first used by Matthew Arnold, an English poet and critic in 1848. However, he had used the term in a private letter. It is also said that Matthew Arnold for the first time coined the phrase 'comparative literature' while translating Ampere's use of 'histoire comparative'. In 1886, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, a barrister of Ireland for the first time, wrote a book named 'Comparative Literature' and thus he paved the way in course of the study of comparative literature. Later on, in 1901, H.M.Posnett wrote an essay named 'The Science of Comparative Literature', in which various analyses had been offered regarding comparative literature. It will perhaps be no exaggeration to say that Posnett's attempt to study the real nature of comparative literature is the first attempt in the world. This subject has been established as an independent subject in the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century though even from the 16th century in Europe a vast preparation for it was created. At that time the Europeans acquired the knowledge about the other countries like China, Japan, India and the countries of the East-Asia. That the European languages and the Sanskrit language of India are produced from the
same root language, has been discovered while discussing about the various world languages and that inspired the European thinkers to make focus upon the study of the various literatures of the world instead of discussing their own literature. Their changing attitude to literature as to the medium of expression of universal feelings bereft of time and places, led them to study the literatures of the foreign countries. As a first attempt, they started to study the different languages of Europe, like as, the languages of France, Germany, England and Italy and tried to search the unity among these languages. Instead of mono-literary study, a vast scope has been developed for the study of different languages of the world which mould the relationship among the languages. Starting even in the 16th century, mainly in the countries of Europe, comparative literature has expanded into the other countries of the world and now the importance of comparative literature has been developed.

Though comparative literature has been established now as an independent academic discipline, many experiments, discussions and research work has been still continuing upon this area. Comparative literature has been well established in specifically the western countries. It will be worthwhile to mention that for the first time, in Cornell University of America, comparative literature has been established as a separate department among the world itself. The importance of comparative literature as an academic discipline has been vast growing among different places of the world. Almost in one hundred universities of North America, almost all the universities of France and in the universities of German, Italy, Russia, Austria, Switzerland,
Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, comparative literature as either as a complete department or as a part included with the other department has been well established. It was in the late 1920s and the early 1930s that comparative literature emerged on the literary scene of Chinese literature. Wen Yiduo believed that Indian literary influence consisting of Buddhist fiction and drama was a major influence on China.

French scholars, in particular stressed that comparative literature dealt with the history of international relationships between literatures. Some scholars of comparative literature focused on the mutual infiltrations in subject-matter, thought, books or feelings between two or several kinds of literature. In the famous Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the United States, Rane Wellek delivered a challenging address entitled ‘The Crisis of Comparative Literature’. This address was the result of his lifelong involvement with comparative literature. It rather pained Wellek to observe that some scholars confined comparative literature to the study of ‘foreign trade’ between the literatures of two countries. Van Tieghem’s proposition of comparative study as the study of the mutual relations between the literatures of two countries was also opposed by Wellek. Wellek emphasized the identity of comparative literature as a genre of literary research transcending all boundaries of language, ethics and politics. It aimed to study all genres of literatures from an international angle implying that all creative literary writings and experience were bound by an intrinsic unity. Rene Etiemble, a famous French scholar of comparative
literature very much endorsed Wellek’s stand that comparative literature was a form of ‘humanism’ and, hence, should be regarded as the common spiritual wealth of all mankind and as an independent entity.

The progress of comparative literature as a discipline in India has been very tardy. This tardiness in the gaining of grounds of comparative literature has its genesis in socio-political and economic contexts. It can perhaps be admitted by everyone that when comparative method of literary studies was gaining momentum in the West, India was in a state of foreign domination which resulted the slow development of comparative literature in India as compared to that of West. In India though very little work has been done in this direction, still the process is continuing. Jadavpur University of Calcutta is the pioneer university as far as comparative literature is concerned as an independent department. In 1956, for the first time in India, in Jadavpur University, the curriculum of comparative literature has been started. After studying comparative literature, Buddhadev Basu, an esteemed scholar, has heartily felt the importance of comparative literature and established it in Jadavpur University. After that many universities in India have included the curriculum of comparative literature in their course study. Of late, Dibrugarh University of Assam has also included the study of comparative literature in their course form. Now it is seen that some English departments of Indian Universities like Delhi, AMU, BHU, Agra, Jadavpur, Madurai, South Gujarat, Surat, Sambalpur, and Vishwa Bharati have introduced comparative literature in courses of study at M.A. level. Delhi University also has an M.Phil programme in Comparative Indian literature.
Madurai University has an English and Comparative Literature Department instead of English department. South Gujarat University at Surat has also founded a Comparative Literature Department.

It is true that Indian literatures are multiracial and multicultural. It heralds basically two fold approaches to comparative literature in Indian context. One is international and other is intranational. The influence of European writers on the Indian writers and vice versa and the influence of Indian writers of one region on the other Indian writers of another region are discernible in Indian context. The phase of international area shows the influence of Eliot, Whitman, Hemingway et al upon Indian writers and the phase of Intrnational side includes Premchand’s, Bankim Chandra’s, Tagore’s influence on Fakir Mohan Senapati and Sanskrit poet’s influence on Nissim Ezekiel. Therefore it is easily discernible that any Indian national literature cannot be understood as a singular entity.

Though many discussions have been done in the study of comparative literature, still, perhaps, no proper definition of comparative literature has been evolved yet. About comparative literature, it has been said in Webster’s Encyclopaedie Unabridged Dictionary of the English language,

“The study of the literature of two or more groups differing in cultural background and usually, in language, concentrating on their relationships to and influences upon each other”1.

Guyard has defined comparative literature as the history of international literary relations. J.M.Carre has opined that comparative literature is a branch of literary history. All these definitions have failed to cover all the areas of comparative literature. Removing all the limitations, Rene Wellek has tried to establish comparative literature as the latest innovation in the study of literature. Trying to establish its nature, Wellek has said,

“...the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of relationship between literature on the one hand and the other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the art, philosophy, history, the social science, the science, religion etc. on the other hand.”

Wellek has tried to mention all the areas of comparative literature. He said,

“It will study all literature from an international perspective, with a consciousness of the unity all literary creation and experience. In this conception comparative literature is identical with the study of literature independent of linguistic, ethenic and political boundaries. It cannot be confined to a single method, description characterization, interpretation, narration, expalanation, evaluation are used in its discourse just as much as comparison.

Nor can comparative literature be confined to literary history to the

exclusion of criticism and contemporary literature. Criticism as I have argued many times, cannot be divorced from history, as there are no neutral facts in literature:

The three main branches of literary study-history, theory and criticism-involve each other, just as the study of national literature cannot be divorced from the study of the totality of literature, at least in India."

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, however, contend:

"Yet neither of these differently formed adjectives is very illuminating, since comparison is a method used by all criticism and sciences, and does not, in any way, adequately describe the specific procedures of literary study. The formal comparison between literatures-or even movements, figures and works-is rarely a central theme in literary history, though such a book as F.C. Green's 'Minuet', comparing aspects of French and English eighteenth century literature, may be illuminating in defining not only parallels and affinities but also divergences between the literary development of one nation and that of another."

Wellek and Warren have found out three different senses with the term 'comparative literature'. Firstly, comparative literature may mean the study of oral literature, especially of folk-tale themes and their migration: of how and when they have entered 'higher', 'artistic' literature. Oral

literature being an integral part of literary scholarship cannot be separated from written literature. The interaction between the oral literature and written literature can be perfectly and accurately studied through comparison. The study of oral literature helps the literary scholars to delve deep into the origin and the rise of literary genres and devices. Secondly, comparative literature helps in the study of relationships between two or more literatures. In reality, one literature cannot be distinguishable from another literature though they are written in different languages like Oriya, Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, Urdu etc. Thirdly, comparative literature identifies ‘world literature’. The concept of ‘world literature’ has been introduced by Goethe’s ‘weltliterature’ which means all literature should be studied and taken as one. The spirit of literature encompasses the concept of ‘world literature’. It does not confine itself within narrow linguistic cultural and regional lines. It would be worthwhile to mention that it was with this notion in mind that Goethe gave the concept of ‘world literature’. Matthew Arnold was also against the concept of narrow national literature only. He worried about the danger of confinement to one’s own national literature. Arnold advocated the mastery of one great literature.

There is not any definite method for study of comparative literature. Though there is not any definite method to study comparative literature, it is true that it differs from the study of single literature. For the real study of comparative literature, no method is sufficient and enough. Rather than the methods, the objectives and aims of comparative literature should be given importance because importance and aims only can lead to a new direction in
the study of comparative literature. Generally, the three influencing forces
in the study of comparative literature mainly are historical, aesthetic and
socialistic. The historical forces give importance upon the study of literature
through the historical angle. The aesthetic forces are connected with the theory
which helps in studying literature in totality as well as it tries to portray its
aesthetic sense. The socialistic outlook is the reflection of the social
condition of literature. Though there is not any definite method of study
of comparative literature, still, it can be said that comparative literature
studies both the history of literature and theories and criticism and so the
method used to study comparative literature cannot be confined to
'comparison' alone. Various methods including description, the portrayal
of characteristics, interpretation, narration, explanation and evaluation should
also be used in addition to 'comparison'. Comparative literature
encompasses a large number of devices, including induction, deduction,
description, interpretation, synthesis and counter-evidence. It will be no
exaggeration to say that comparative method is something of a much wider
canvas.

Comparative literature involves a comparative assessment of two
literatures. It is almost seen that no comparison seems possible at first sight
because every literature in its wholeness appears to have its own distinctive
caracter with specific features of its own. Making a comparative study of
more than one literature is not an easy task. In making comparison, there
are always chances of over-emphasis, both in respect of the similarities
and differences found amongst different literatures and cultures. So in making
honest objective and sound comparison extremist tendencies are to be avoided. The sound comparison will only be possible when the researcher is very honest, impartial and neutral to the study of the main points or features of various literatures. Being an academic discipline, comparative study of literature, inspite of being a comparative description of various features, should also to some extent be an evaluative and critical study and the evaluation should be done with an open mind.

The term ‘comparative literature’ does not have any connection with nationalism. It is not born with the issue of nationalism. It has been claimed that comparative literature has risen much against nationalism. C.D.Narasimhaiah has expressed his view in this way,

“...in fact the whole concept of ‘comparative literature’ is said to have arisen as a reaction against the narrow nationalism of many historians of French, German, Italian and English literatures.” \(^5\) Comparative literature liberates the works confined within social content and national characteristics of a work. It aims at transcending national boundaries of different literatures so that it can be placed in the universal framework of ‘global literature’.

It has already been stated that comparative literature in today’s age of globalization, has an important role since it gives the scope of studying more than one literature. In the Indian context also comparative literature is of great value. It will perhaps be needless to say that Indian literature is a fine

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synthesis of different regional literatures. It is therefore, comparative study of different literatures can be of great help in understanding the essence of regional literatures. Comparative study of literature is a means of mitigating the growing trend of violence, secession and intolerance among different regions of the country. It turns people closer and provides them an opportunity to understand one another. Such attempts strengthen the emotional bond and help preserving the composite culture of India.

The onset of twentieth century has seen the flourishing of comparative literature worldwide—particularly in countries with multilingual base. The scholars have come to recognize comparative literature as an important discipline of literature which transcends the narrowness, provinciality and parochialism of national and general literatures. In a country like India comparative literature studies is the need of the hour as it will broaden the outlook of people on Indian literature as well as promote the cause of national integration profoundly.