

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Theory and Practice

Edited by
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INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY
SHIMLA

in association with

ALLIED PUBLISHERS

New Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Lucknow
Bangalore Hyderabad Ahmedabad

Foreword

Even though Comparative Religion and Comparative Philosophy have failed to make much headway in our country it seems to me that there is every hope that Comparative Literature will fare better. I shall never cease to have faith in the civilizing power of literature, for who is there who does not love to hear a good story, or who does not respond to the magical rhythm of poetry? The role of literary studies in a liberal education needs to be rethought by university men and women in our day, and somewhere in those studies the comparative perspective must find a place since there are many cultures and many literatures. I may perhaps mention that the Institute of Advanced Study has chosen Comparative Literature and Comparative Religion as areas of special study in its current programme, in the belief that work in the universities can well be supplemented by research activities in these fields.

A brief word next about the word 'comparative'. I recall an important point made by Joachim Wach many decades ago when he delivered the Barrows Lectures in Calcutta on what he called the Comparative Study of Religion and where I was privileged to be present. He said that we needed to remember that neither religion, nor philosophy, nor literature could be comparative. It was our *study* of these subjects that was such. This orientation set a new trend as far as religious studies were concerned. The French adjective 'comparée' used in phrases like 'philosophie comparée' pinpoints through grammar the *activity* of comparing. It is we who engage in this activity, and comparing, needless to say, presupposes in-depth knowledge of the constituents compared.

This reminds me of a childhood problem which, although at first sight rather naïve and elementary, I believe still dogs us. I refer to our early examination experience of questions of three types—questions in which we are asked either to compare, to contrast, or to discuss. I must confess that I always preferred being asked to 'discuss'. Although questions on com-

parison looked easier, I found that it was in fact not so. If you describe X first, and then Y, you face the hurdle of repetition when you put the two together, and the whole exercise often falls flat. Sometimes the examinee is asked to compare *and* contrast, and there too the task of arrangement is deceptively simple. I suggest that the same problems still arise at the research level and that this is why the whole question of a *framework* for studies in subjects like Comparative Literature has become so crucial.

While students of literature have always been able to cross time, comparatists are in fact asking us to cross space as well. It is true that *intertextuality* shows itself in many contemporary works, and this is particularly the case whenever complexity is regarded as a virtue. In this connection I would like to make a plea for *contextuality* in literary studies. For example, I should hope an Indian student of Racine would know quite a lot about French classical drama, history, civilization and the rest.

It strikes me that, in India, a sort of pendulum often operates between allegiance to what is regarded as *suddha* (call this purism if you will) and the assimilative ethos. Applied to our present concerns, this takes the form of single language allegiance and on the other hand a desire to absorb the best/the latest, from wherever it may come. These can alternate in one and the same individual at different times. Put in more simple language, the new, the alien, is quite often digested. But after this has happened there may be a sudden and even bitter reaction against the element assimilated. If the comparatist can help us overcome some of these phobias it will be all to the good.

The pendulum effect apart, two other images come to mind. One is the lens or filter idea. We so often use the familiar as a lens through which we see the other. I do not speak of analogy here, for this is a far more rational process. Since many of us wear glasses, this leads me to my second image. It was in the context of comparative religion that the late John Robinson, in his Teape Lectures delivered in Delhi a few years ago, used the idea of bifocal vision. This might be an idea congenial to the comparatist. We need to look closely and also need long sight. It is indeed a misfortune to be short-sighted. Anything which prevents us from being that, whether

comparative literature or any other comparative study, should serve us well.

The difficulties that face the comparatist are, I feel, symptomatic of the modern Indian's attempt to grapple with the intercultural heritage to which he is heir. Cultural confusion, complexes about Indianness, retreats from some aspects of westernization along with total absorption of certain other aspects—all these are symptoms of the same syndrome. The comparatist can widen our horizons and provide us with tools with which we can delve into both the nation-wide and the world-wide heritage to which we are all heir.

Comparative Literature as a discipline should enable us to savour the richness of the literatures *within* national boundaries and also help us to go *beyond* those boundaries. In this way it is a discipline which bears a dual responsibility. The besetting dangers of our times are parochialism and regionalism on the one hand, and xenophobia on the other. If educated people succumb to either or both of these, there can be no hope for the country. Comparative studies take their stand on the appreciation of otherness and the delightful discovery of what is akin. I hope that the contributions in this volume will work towards an extension of sensibility and an enlargement of sympathy, belonging as they do to a discipline which can help to expand the understanding of the common reader, and, at research level, provide fresh insight into both commonality and difference in the many mansions of literature.

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