

Reinventing Comparative Literature

My reference point is the latest book of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak 'Death of a Discipline' the main focus of this book is how to create a new comparative literature (CL) in response to the rising tide of multiculturalism and cultural studies and to spell out the intellectual mission of the discipline than to spelling out requirements.

I have in this short paper taken up all those issues which worry her such as historicity, area studies, multiculturalism and cultural studies in the background of globalization.

I am a little worried about a statement which she makes in the book. Being an activist scholar she is very forth right in her criticism as we have seen in the book with reference to area studies, cultural studies and even multiculturalism when she takes a stand she does not vacillate and stick to it.

She has shown her hostility towards area studies, multiculturalism because they are used as political handles by the developed countries but then she makes a conciliatory statement in the book and I quote,

“I am advocating a depoliticization of the politics of hostility toward a politics of friendship to come and thinking of the role of CL in such a responsible effort.”

Why this conciliatory move? Is it because with age she has mellowed down or is it because CIA is threatening by making dossiers of all those teachers of American Universities who criticize the American policy and Bush for his unholy war in Iraq.

I do not know, may be one day we will know. In the meantime let the ghost dance.

We all thought like Gaytri Spivak in the beginning of our career that C.L. should be world embracing. In 1906 Tagore used the term *Viswa Sahitya* for C.L. The idea was initiated by Goethe when he coined a term *Weltliteratur* for the study of literatures of different countries together.

That was an era when the mental horizon of Europe has been considerably enlarged with the discovery of desperate areas of culture and literature particularly of the middle Eastern countries and of Asia which included India, China and Japan.

We were also convinced that C.L. should include the open-ended possibility of studying all literatures, with linguistic rigor and historical savvy. More than that the effort was to find out a universal oneness in the

study of literatures of the world. In the Indian situation it became easy because in the Indian way of thinking the essence of the individual or the particular is no more than universal by virtue of which the individual or the particular is grounded and realized.

Comparative study of literatures was primarily a study of similarities. So was influence study – influence as inundation covering everything or as whetstone which sharpens the influenced text or affinity study and even using polygenetic method to find similarities between two or more incongruent texts or characters like Hori of Godan, by Prem Chand, Indranath of Srikanta by Saratchandra Chatterjee, Sashi of Putual Nacher Itikatha by Manik Bandopadhyay or Dr. Riu of Plague by Camus. All these studies of similarity ultimately aimed at creating a universal structure of oneness.

Initially CL was accepted as a universal category but at the same time this notion of a universal construct was opposed by many. Their observation was that if one wanted to do CL i.e. study of more than one literature one was immediately pulled back to history, however, formalistic study of literary works may keep comparatist away from history.

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to literary history which are

- 1) the traditional and simplistic literary histories which posit a clear and unambiguous relationship between the literary text and the historical background and
- 2) the deconstructionist approach which denies the validity of a relationship.

The work of the Marxist-Oriented theorists like Fredric Jameson, of feminist scholars and New Historicists are important in this regard in that they avoid both extremes, perceiving accurately the weaknesses inherent in them – namely excessive simplification.

Jameson's slogan is "always historicize."

He is interested in the relations that subsist among texts, their represented worlds and the internally represented worlds of readers.

He sees interpretation as an effort to uncover formal qualities as well as the ideological structure of a given text.

This of course, involves the interpreter's ability to forge inter-connections between a given text and the various other narratives through which we come to know history and society.

What is interesting to observe about Jameson's conceptualization is that he does not totally ignore or brush aside questions of textuality. He proposed the following formulation that history is not text.....but it is inaccessible to us except in textual form. Literary explication should involve an act of deconstruction; but the deconstruction should move beyond the analysis of figurality in verbal discourse to an acceptance of the fact that texts are in Edward Said's term "Worldly" and inextricably linked to the living actualities of society, history and politics.

In fact this whole issue of universality sans history reflects a political bias and smacks of racism. Chinua Achebe in his essay on 'colonialist criticism' says that in the nature of things, the work of a western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. Jameson's opinion, which is no doubt inadequate and slanted, describes the 3rd world literary works, as national allegories, which have nothing to do with universal cosmopolitanism. And so Chinua Achebe says that he should like to see the word "universal" banned altogether from the discussions of African or to add Indian Literature until such time as the people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world.

In the process of including all the world Area studies were made a part of the Comparative Literature of the West which were primarily related to foreign areas. Spivak is right to say Area Studies were established to secure US power in the cold war. Even today, they are tied to the politics

of power and their connections to the power elite in the countries studied are still strong. The 'other' of the Area Studies in the West is an inalienable entity external to one self is both a source of terror and an object of desire. Sartre's famous statement 'Hell is the other' carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defines one's identity as identity against the other either to be appropriated or to be destroyed. But the Western mind knows well that if he succeeds in completely subjugating the 'other' the identity of his own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing.

In CL as Spivak mentions liberal multiculturalism is on the agenda of CL for sometime and cultural studies are also on the rise. Cultural studies is also, as a matter of fact, "the politics of identity". It is also a diversification of CL achieved by including mass culture, tabloid press or soap operas or study of football crowds of house – music parties or Discourse analysis or study of the relation between public meanings and private experience.

The very fact that in many parts of the world the discipline of CL is now defined as cultural studies indicate the broadening of its scope. The days of cultural complacency are over. No more can we be content with a self-ascertained sense of cultural superiority. The inclusiveness and expanded scope of comparative literature liberate us from cultural prison and helps us to develop a bigger perspective where more than judgement understanding through dialogue has become the axiom of comparative literary studies.

One can say the same thing about multiculturalism. Spivak says that liberal multiculturalism has been on the agenda of CL for sometime. Mark the word 'liberal' because multiculturalism otherwise in the post-industrial society in America, Canada, Europe and England is used as a political weapon, a method of ruling a country of people of different cultures and ethnicity and is used with a purpose.

The issue of multiculturalism is related to the notion of global village.

But as world citizen of this village we realise that this is a creation of Western civilization, a point in the relentless process of westernization of the globe; the terms and conditions for living and participating in the life of this village are laid down by the West.

We, who live in India in homes and forests, sometimes even on the pavements of the roads of metropolitan cities are being asked and goaded to want to be living in this village as world citizen primarily for two reasons:

- 1) We matter as a potential market. Infact WTO, GATT, World Monetary Fund are all tools to conscript us as world citizen for the benefit of West and its market.
- 2) We are now asked to be partners in the war with terror started by USA after 9/11 but the war has now turned into an unholy war.

Hence acceptance of multiculturalism has become a strategic necessity. It is also a strategy for the functioning of democracy which is based on a single vote system.

The principle is, we rule and they the lesser breeds may get on with their little live and breedings.

Master wouldn't dream of intervening unless something is done that might undermine his place at the top, in which case all this cultural relativism goes quickly through the window. If Master wanted he would talk highly about Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh and a few others but would be careful not to give them a space in their history of literature and if at all given not in the main body but in a side chapter and the writings in translation of our best writers of bhasas like Takazhi Shiv Shankar Pillai, Prem Chand, Tara Sankar Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay or Ananthamurty would not be read as literature per se but as pieces of sociological or anthropological study of the Indian society.

Hence when Spivak speaks of liberal multiculturalism she is, infact, not talking about it as a political doctrine with a programmatic content nor a philosophical school with a distinct theory of man's place in the world but as a perspective on or a way of viewing human life. After all she knows it well the demand for multiculturalism is a rebellion against the intellectual arrogance of the Western man.

Hence liberal multiculturalism is to undo the metropolitan multiculturalists efforts to turn the world's others into identitarians or nationalist as says Jameson or class as explained by Aizaz Ahmad.

In a multicultural situation the demand for separate identity is symptomatic of the desire for self-realization rather than an ultimate objective itself. Each group is just saying, give us our space, in which we can feel we belong, give us our culture, our religions with which we can live with others and with honour. Recent banning of head scarf of the Muslim women or turban ban of Sikh community in France indicates a tendency to uphold and support only what is valued in only what is practiced in their culture and entertain a biased approached towards what is valued in other areas. The idea of 'good life' is no more confined to one's family, society or country but is related to people who are not seen as tools of exploitation but as persons who are equally informed, responsible and creative. In fact multiculturalism is used as a counter globalizing means to neutralize homogenization, appropriation or cooption which the global players want to achieve for making maximum profit or what countries like America wants to create – a politically and culturally homogenous melting pot entity. Under any kind of division between centre and margin between us and them, it is difficult for the world to survive but at the same time, particularly, in the emerging conditions of global markets and the communications, desires for a unicultural polity can be harmful to minority rights and cultural difference. It creates hierarchical multicturalism instead of equalitarian and liberal authoritarian polity. It is not integration or assimilation of the minority with

the majority social group but the feeling of community which needs to be revived to gap between the centre and the margin.

The last point is that instead of accepting Spivak's proposition to create a new CL to lead us out of a restricted disciplinary circuit (however she says there is nothing new about the new CL) a new vision of 'comparativity' in Indian context can be created to help us in reinventing CL in Indian context which was, infact, initiated by Sisir Kumar Das in 1991 by publishing his history of modern Indian Literature in two volumes.

Sisir babu's reinvention of CL in Indian context actually meant to redraw the contours of Indian Literature as a category including in it oral, folk, tribal and dalit to give it a new totality.

In Indian context oral, tribal or folklore are not the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life worthy.

Dr. K.M. George in his two volume history of comparative Indian Literature added a lengthy chapter on Indian folk literature but it was just an addition not an acceptance of folk in the totality of Indian Literature. Oral/folk literature could not be resurrected from its marginality. It was for the first time Sisir Kumar Das in his two volume history of modern Indian Literature recognised oral/folk literature as a strong voice of the literary tradition of India. While describing the literary scene after British crushed

down the 1857 war of Independence Prof. Das reveals that there was a complete silence in the Indian Literary world about the war of Independence and if there was any voice to be heard that was only of praise for the British as described in the *Kasidas* of Mirza Ghalib or in the Gujrati poems of Narmad or Bengali by Ishwar Chandra Gupta. But at the same time some kind of an ambivalence was very much perceptible in their writings and hence Narmad writes also about *desh*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta writes satirically about British raj and Ghalib bemoans the tragedy of the situation prevailing during that time.

However, the bards of oral poetry gave vent to their feeling of anger and frustration against the British during that period of silence and subjection. This oral voice became a constant refrain later for the Indian poets to write poetry of revolt and freedom which became a major thrust in the making of Indian Literature. Orality or folk is never marginalised in India, it is always accepted as an alternative tradition and alternative is never understood as 'the opposite'. Here in India the glory of 'mainstream' literature rests not by marginalising but by accepting oral or folk as complementary.

At the same time one should make an effort to recreate comparative criticism particularly because in the modern times we moved from Sanskrit poetics to Western theory by ignoring the bhasa traditions of literary criticism in Tamil, Marathi, Kannada, Hindi and also in other bhasas – Every bhasa has a continuous history of literary expression guided by its own

inner dynamics and hence Sanskrit heritage and bhasa heritage need to be seen in terms of a historic continuity.

Moreover the formalistic theory of Literature of Sanskrit poetics or the modern theories of Western poetics are totally insufficient to analyse and explain the *dalit* (protest) and *gramin* (rural) literary heterodoxy.

Dalits now challenge the tone and content of the existing literary canon created by the *shastra* protagonists and decentralize the whole process of literary movement. It creates an alternative aesthetics and extends the linguistic and generic possibilities of literature. Dalit critics like Sharan Kumar Limbale want to establish a poetics of the margin in its own rights independently of *savarna* initiatives. They want to reject the centre and in the process want to affirm the importance of a moral radical deconstructive path. Hence the literary theory in modern India need major innovations to give it efficacy and that will be the real reinvention of Comparative Literature.
