

SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN INTERDISCIPLINARITY: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND MUSLIM WOMEN'S WRITINGS

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Studies in literature can be divided into two, one studying literature in terms of literary aspects of the texts and the other studying literature in terms of its relation to other texts. In the first method, literature is studied as a self-sufficient, self-contained entity itself, as an autonomous, auto telic, coherent body of knowledge. Such an approach to literature, often, not only restricts it from its freedom in reaching beyond any national boundaries, but also limits its reach from relating with other forms of disciplines.

The second method to study literature is that of relating it with other disciplines. Chandra Mohan puts it in her essay 'Literature, Arts and Social Sciences: Interdisciplinary Comparative Advantage', "under the aegis of comparative literature, the study of letters have become progressively more interdisciplinary as well as inter-literary" (Quest of a Discipline, 2012:213). Adding to her point, she states that literature is not just art, but is something more than that; something which extends itself outside the texts so as to sketch the different forms of human experiences beyond any disciplinary boundaries. Borrowing Barricelli and Gibaldi's ideas on interdisciplinary she asserts that it would be myopic to have rigid separation of disciplines which would lead to counter productiveness (213).

Contemporary writings and reading practices have gone far from the traditional ways of approaching literature undermining the traditional concept of the disciplinary boundaries. In her *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Susan Bassnett states that "Comparative literature involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literatures across both time and space" (1993:1). This definition of comparative literature suggests that the study of comparative literature will not be complete without reaching out to study texts that are produced in different languages and cultures. It is interdisciplinary because it deals with texts across cultures which obviously lead to a study of socio-cultural factors in the production of a text. Taking such a stand, Susan Bassnet quotes Henry Remak in her *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*:

Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion,

etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression (1993:31).

Following this perspective on literary studies, we can no longer consider literature as separate and independent from other disciplines. In his *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* Bart Moore Gilbert talks about the “importance of studying literature together with history, politics, sociology and other art forms rather than in isolation from the multiple material and intellectual contexts which determine its production and reception” (1997:54). The above said definitions make enough room for different types of studies and analysis such as the influence of literatures to one another, the psychological parallelism of different writers and the cultural similarities and differences of various cultures. It also promotes the studies like the study of the impact of a philosophical, religious, political or scientific idea on a literary work. So many factors other than just aesthetic elements contribute towards the production of any particular work.

Studying literature in relation with other disciplines such as history, politics, sociology and psychology has aroused certain amount of debates and dilemmas among the academicians. There are those who argue against it, and those who see its merits and demerits, possibilities and limitations. The notion of Interdisciplinarity varies when it is encountered by different scholars. The French school of comparatists was keener in observing the factual contacts between the authors compared. On the other hand, American school of comparatists gave the subject the notion of interdisciplinarity. Charles Mills Gayley, one of the prominent figures in American school of comparative literature, in 1890s, formulated an American model of comparative literature in his paper entitled ‘what is comparative literature’ (1903)

by insisting on the importance of psychology, anthropology, linguistics, social science, religion and art in the study of literature. ... Gayley and fellow American comparatists looked to a model that involved interdisciplinary work. Literary study was part of a network of related subjects which nourished one another and were part of the organic structure that was culture (Susan Bassnett, 1993:33).

This suggests that the American perspective on comparative literature was based from the start on ideas of Interdisciplinarity. The notion of Interdisciplinarity was a result of the thought that literatures did not evolve in isolation from one another and the study of a single literature more often than not obliged one to look beyond one’s own language and literary tradition. The necessity for a wider perspective involving more than one language and one literary tradition was felt in different periods of history whenever two literatures came into contact (Das, 1989:1).

The statement above mentions that there was a certain amount of confusion or dilemma on how to deal with texts of different cultures and different literary traditions. Indeed there were occasions in every society where different cultures and traditions came into close contact with one another, like that of European culture with Indian culture, Persian culture with Arabic, Greek and Roman cultures. All such occasions create challenges to people in dealing with different languages and literatures. Such a situation necessitated the study of literatures in relation to one another, which is the basis of comparative literature today. Harry Levin, in his *Grounds for Comparison*, suggests that “comparative literature has opened a way out of these dilemmas” (1972:69) because comparative literature goes beyond the confines of disciplinary boundaries as well as national boundaries. He is of the opinion that within the confines of a single literature,

one can trace neither the evolution of forms nor the history of ideas which necessitates the need for a field of study which encompasses disciplines other than just literature.

By being receptive to interdisciplinary approaches in the field of comparative literature, and by going outside the canonical structures, comparatists have proved how different forms of writings, such as novels, autobiographies, fiction and poetry from various parts of the world can interact with the political, economic, and socio-cultural domains of different societies on a transnational level. Such an endeavour is further enhanced in the field of comparative literature by extending its boundaries so as to include the cultural aspects of literary texts. Approaching literature from a postcolonial perspective, every text and every literature can be considered a cultural production of a particular time. Recent developments in the field of literary studies took the texts from the notion of literary texts being just pieces of aesthetic endeavors into something which carry political, cultural, historical and sociological aspects with it.

Thus, every text is considered inextricably related to the socio-cultural background of its production. By paying attention on these socio-cultural and historical factors behind the production of a text and thereby giving it a more cultural/historical dimension, comparatists can bring out the literary works' relationship to wider and broader aspects of understanding cultures that is often defined in national terms. Mary Louise Pratt in her essay 'Comparative Literature and global citizenship', proposed that Comparative Literature could become interdisciplinary and multicultural by including "expressive culture" in its purview (Pratt, 1994: 63). The term 'expressive culture' encompasses the different forms of cultural expressions in arts, painting, music, drama and other performance arts, spoken and verbal expressions that communicate or express the socio-cultural, ideological, political, aesthetic and personal aspects of living. These kinds of expressions are to be evaluated not just for their aesthetic functions, but for their political and ideological functions as well.

At present, literatures of any kind, especially women's writings, often deal with the discourses of gender relations in terms of religious, ethnic and social concerns. Women's visibility, space and boundaries are well set and limited by the hegemonic patriarchal authority and they are expected to function only within that boundary. In most of the literatures where the lives of women are problematised, women are considered 'subaltern'. These writings are keen to show how women have been kept voiceless for ages in main stream literature and how in these works they attain emancipation. The women protagonists of these fictions often resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and aims.

Women writers deal with multiple issues from patriarchy to religion. Muslim woman writers, Black feminists, and postcolonial women writers deal with the problems of women in third world. The lives and the problematic situations of third world women are not represented by white women writers. In that sense, women's writings can't be indexed as just literary works. It has to be studied and read in terms of its political purpose. It is purposive and its aim is to redefine the notion of being a woman and to challenge the stereotypes imposed on them.

Religion is always an issue when it comes to literature. Writers have dealt with the notion of religion in different styles and approaches. Whenever a writer interprets religion, it becomes a problem and a matter of controversy. Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* are examples for such kinds of writings. Nawal El Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) depicts the miserable life of a Muslim girl in Egypt. Sadaawi's novel is explicitly political as its aim is to question certain patriarchal norms in Islam and thus to advocate for a timely reformation. In her writings, she explores a host of topics from women's oppression at the hands

of recent interpretations of Islam to the role of women in African literature, from sexual politics of development initiatives to tourism in a post-colonial era.

Setting my essay against these deliberations on Gender and Interdisciplinarity of Comparative literature, here I attempt a critical approach to the contemporary literary practices. Being continuously condensed in the field of literature for its dearth of publications or its eccentric religiosity, Muslim women's writings hardly found in the mainstream literary repertoire. This Failure of our academia to act with the prudence and deference prompted me towards bringing in this idea of a Comparative gender studies. The literary texts for the analysis are to be taken from different parts of the world where there are sufficient contributions in the field of Muslim women's writing. In its methodology and perspective, the study is directly linked to the field of comparative literature. Being a discipline which encompasses different types of texts that are produced under different circumstances and cultures, comparative literature is concerned with the studies across the world including the writings that discuss the issues of gender and religion. This study presupposes a situation where contemporary Muslim women's writings are under constant scrutiny and surveillance by the patriarchal and religious authorities. In such a context, this study is grounded in the vexing relationship between the religion and feminism.

Thus, the proposed study starts with an assumption that when women live and write under constant oppression and denial of voice, their writings should mostly be a reflection of their sufferings which can bring out the intricacies of power relations in the society. My argument in this study centres on the point that we should learn to uncover the existence of a range of specific writings on women's issues which would prod us to look into the strategies and structures of power exercised in the various instances of everyday resistance and subordination. Such a method of approaching women's writing, I propose, will make us enable to think beyond the binaries of resistance and subordination. Such a study which is proposed here can also benefit from its comparative methodologies in analyzing the various techniques and strategies used by these writers to bring out the complexities of power relations in Muslim societies. It also privileges us to record the strategies of un-reading/re-reading the patriarchal interpretations of religion that have historically secured their subordination to male authority.

Using its interdisciplinary aspects of comparative literature, this study can further explore and study the intricacies of power relations in any society integrating Foucault's concept on power and resistance to examine how far resistance can be a 'diagnostic of power'. It can further be elaborated to pursue the possibility of theorizing a Universal Islamic Feminism in the light of the 'Ummah' concept among Muslims. It will be advantageous to trace how these texts try to fictionalize the ideologue of Islamic feminism and also to critique the strategies writers use in their attempt on a conscious intervention in Islamic ideologies. This study, being under the label of comparative literature makes it possible to draw its strategies from other disciplines such as sociology and philosophy from which this study supposedly is going to benefit to a greater extent.

Following the arguments of theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod about the necessity of using theoretical concepts that are relevant to the practices and assumptions of those cultures, I propose a method of study that includes the subversions and power relations in these texts with the logic of Islam and feminism. These novelists draw immensely from Quran and Hadith which has to be seen in the light of the theory of intertextuality as a re-reading of both these official documents of Islam.

Comparative literature, with its quality of being interdisciplinary is inclusive of all these approaches which are indispensable in the study of literature. Comparative literary studies can provide enough room for these kinds of studies and approaches. Like any other interdisciplinary study, comparative literature as an interdisciplinary body of knowledge is also susceptible to criticism. For instance, when it allows psychologists to have a psychological approach to literary studies, the literary scholars may wonder whether approaching literature psychologically or in any other disciplinary method would simplify the study or not. It is sure that while bringing different disciplines together, a comparatist risks being too general and broad which may lead to vagueness in the study. However, we choose to take such a risk “because we are convinced that interdisciplinary research answers questions that individual disciplines, each investigating their own areas, cannot find answers to” (*Thematics: Interdisciplinary Studies* 2002: X).

Interdisciplinarity has become not just an option but an indispensable approach to the study of literature in order to cope with a rapidly changing world in which the ideas of nation and nationality, the notions of cultures, languages, history and identity are under constant transformations. Paying attention to the interactions literature makes with other forms of arts and disciplines, the comparatists should study the socio-political, cultural and intellectual contexts of literary writings without losing the comparative and literary emphasis, a study which preserves the literary and comparative aspects of the texts would be proper in order to appreciate literature in a larger perspective including more literatures beyond the national and linguistic boundaries. In such a context, comparative literary methodology can be of use not only to develop an aesthetic sensibility across the different national experiences, but also to study literatures across cultures.

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