Book Review / Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta.

**Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies.**


The title of the volume *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures and Comparative Cultural Studies* brings forward a few conjectures – that it will deal with comparative literature, world literatures and comparative cultural studies within the same framework, that it has a particular stand on the debate on world literatures, emphasizing the plural form as it does, and that cultural studies within the framework would necessarily be comparative - and most of the essays do abide by them. Comparatists, particularly from certain parts of the world still feel that despite the path-breaking formulations of David Damrosch and others working in the area of world literature, the focus on world literature would be detrimental to the larger interests of comparative literature by shifting the focus from many other kinds of relational work in the field and also because there lingers in many cases the concept of two different world-orders and notions of centres and peripheries and their reiteration may reinstate hierarchies. Incidentally, to many practitioners the political project of comparative literature is important - political from a large perspective, as dealing with human rapport in accordance with the definition of the word by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* and this despite the often expressed belief in a few of the essays in this volume that comparative literature with its roots in philology and its philological concerns is necessarily apolitical in nature. This however, is not the case and the call for comparative literature to go back to philology today, on the part of Edward said for instance, is also made from the vantage point of an understanding of philological concerns as very deeply linked with world-orders.

The volume then brings forward the reassurance that there can be a realignment between the pedagogy and practice of comparative literature to world literatures on the one hand, and comparative cultural studies on the other. In India, as perhaps in
other parts of the world as well, literature departments that were moving towards comparative literature turned to cultural studies in the not so far away past. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek has been arguing for more than a decade now that it would be in the best interests of comparative literature to shift its focus to cultural studies and demonstrated through examples from various fields how a method based on empirical and systemic study would be beneficial not just to the discipline of comparative literature but to the humanities at large, suffering as it does from institutional neglect and financial deprivation. In this text he, along with Louise O Vasvári, argues more strongly in favour of comparative cultural studies, situated at the crossroad of many disciplines, more a “metadisciplinary idea”(11) than a unified field of study and hence with greater potential for removing the shackles of Eurocentrism and ‘nation orientation’ of comparative literature while also resolving the question of world literature studies without compromising the larger interests of comparative literature. Their focus in the area of comparative cultural studies is on new media and digital humanities to a large extent and in this context one has to mention Tötösy de Zepetnek’s laudable endeavour for free access to humanities scholarship through the more than a decade long sustenance of the open access online clc web journal. The articles, particularly in the section on theory, to a large extent, validate the shift to comparative cultural studies and most of them are revised versions of articles from the clc web journal.

The second editor of the volume, Tutun Mukherjee, goes back to the time-honoured principal of comparative literature, that of building relationships with other texts and contexts, where she emphasizes ‘ex-centric subject’ positions and the need for comparative literature to make space for them. She also sees a new future for the discipline as it moves into the global south. That the discipline had moved into the global south is a statement made again and again in the last decade or so and an attempt has also been made to corroborate the statement by taking up statistical data regarding, for instance, the number of books published in different places of the world, having or not having the term ‘comparative literature’ in the title during a particular span of time by Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O Vasvári – but such statistics need to be studied against the large number of publications generated in the field of literary studies in the last few decades in some of the countries of the global south. Comparative studies in literature had been in existence in many of the
countries of the global south for a considerable period of time and there is perhaps a
token increase in the number of departments that are focusing just on comparative
literature. Also as Gerald Gillespie notes, “institutionally, apart from Mainland
China, the discipline of comparative literature remains most wide spread in the U.S.-
although mostly at Ivy League and thus private – universities and at a few state
universities” (364). The point perhaps lies elsewhere, in the question of how an area
of dialogue could be generated between work that is being carried out in the so-called
global south and the so-called global north and then again, how a genuine core of
interest could be created in the so-called global north regarding work in the field in
the global south. Even in this volume for instance, as a reader from the so-called
south, there is the lingering sense of an absence despite the varied fare that is
offered. The reader for instance, gets to know what the Indian comparatists are not
doing and not what they have been doing except in a few cases. This is not a
comment on the very important article by Anand Balwant Patil on comparative
literature in India in the volume, important because of his statement on literary caste
politics beginning with the personal, and proceeding to local as well as global place-
making (307), but a general statement on gaps of communication that continue to
exist even in the globalized interconnected era as far as the voice of the global south
is concerned.

The theoretical section begins with an essay by Dario Villanueva who makes a strong
case for the systemic studies approach to comparative cultural studies along with a
return to philological and interpretative aspects of literature to bring back meaning
at the centre of humanities studies again. In order to make his point he takes to task
Derrida, Hillis Miller and others on the one hand for having displaced meaning from
the study of literature, and quotes Said on the other, to state that postcolonial studies
and cultural studies had brought in their wake a plethora of jargons and hence to
clear the space, he argues, it would be necessary to bring in a new comparative
cultural studies based on contextual and systemic approaches practiced by Siegfried
J Schmidt and others. Schmidt’s work, he states, also has affinities with the work of
Itamar Evan Zohar, Pierre Bourdieu, Niklas Luhmann and Juri Lotman. While his
call for a systemic and contextual approach has much relevance, the case would have
been stronger without the denigration of certain important twentieth century schools
of thought that struck at the roots of Eurocentrism and opened up various avenues of
thought, not the least of them leading to nuanced approaches to all that constitute otherness, an issue that Villanueva advocates has to be taken up with a certain “militant attitude” (59). Many of the essays that follow draw upon the works of deconstructionists, postmodern and postcolonial thoughts to move forward with new postulates.

The series of articles in the section on theory are written from diverse perspectives relating both to comparative literature studies and in a general sense to the study of the humanities and the social sciences and hence to cultural studies in an interconnected manner. There is an essay linking education and culture by Ronald Soetaert and Kris Rutten who advocate creating a rhetorical awareness through pedagogy in order to show how language constructs reality and also to introduce “perspectives on perspectives” (71) in the curriculum where different discourses, disciplines and ideologies are mediated thereby creating a space for comparative cultural studies in education related courses. There is again an essay by Rik Pinxten arguing for a comparative cultural anthropology as a complement to comparative cultural studies, showing the relevance of comparison as reflective thinking and practice and also upholding a model of multimedia performance as a basis for the study of literature and culture.

Comparative literary history, an important area that needs to be revisited as a core component of comparative literature, is taken up in two important essays An essay by David Marno highlights the importance of the early comparatist Meltzl de Lomnitz’s work in the context of literary history, and suggests that one again needs to link philosophy of history with literature where history, ontology and aesthetics would complement one another leading to a more comprehensive approach to literary history. There is a second article on comparative literary history by Slobodan Sucur who takes the reader through the different debates on the construction of a literary historiography and the problems involved in conceptualizing a history of literature on the basis of methodological frameworks and theoretical assumptions as many of them are being legitimately questioned - the notion of certain terms like modern, enlightenment etcetera related to period, or postmodern contention with historical evidence, for instance - and proposes the use of a geometrical model with its three-dimensional approach as a solution. The models, he suggests, " would
probably emerge from a subtle and self-conscious analysis that may deal with literature per se, certain textual features, or even the notion and nature of medium and communication" (96). There is a great deal of caution that he incorporates in his proposal and suggests that a preliminary beginning would have to be cautiously "verified or disproved within larger contexts" (96) - an important statement for comparative projects in constructing models in general.

Two essays in this section have a very specific focus. The first is by John D Pizer and he writes about a course offered by him on world literature where he works on the premise that an inbuilt dialectic between too much and too little familiarity enables an enhanced comprehension of 'otherness'. The second is by Roberta Capelli focusing on the composite and palimpsest nature of medieval literature that calls for multiperspectival as well as systemic approaches and therefore, argues Capelli, is a subject that could best be approached within the framework of the digital humanities. Capelli also calls for teamwork and cooperative alliances as do several other scholars in this volume, an urgency that had been felt at least since the time of Bernheimer's volume in the study of comparative literature, but that seems difficult to implement and therefore again calls for some serious soul-searching on the part of comparatists the world over.

Some of the other essays in the section take up traditional areas that comparative literature has engaged with for several decades now or since its very beginnings. One such area is that of comparative literature and interart relations where Anke Finger advocates the study of the comparative history of the arts on a global scale, tracing dialogues and communications between the arts and calls for a redefinition of the area by including new technologies and multi-media and questioning boundaries between each. She takes up Steve Tomasula’s “multimedia novel” (133) TOC as an example to raise several questions related to what literature in electronic form is and opens up a horizon of thoughts in the area. Similarly Elke Sturm Trigonakis writes of a new Weltliteratur based on hybrid texts and their historical dimensions in contemporary world literature and her essay may be read as complementing the series that is being brought out under the auspices of the ICLA Committee on Mapping Multilingualism in World Literature by Alfons Knauth in collaboration with other members. Natalie Melas too in her essay on comparison and postcoloniality
foregrounds comparison as a mode of cultural relation, a space of inclusiveness and non-hierarchical transversality (202) and thus holding great promise, but at the same time underlines the generalized equivalence brought in by the ever-increasing factor of commodification that again renders the space of comparison ambiguous.

There are then essays on gender and translation in relation to comparative cultural studies. Ana Lozano de la Pola in her essay on gender and genre in comparative literature and cultural studies reads Judith Butler and Jean-Marie Schaeffer together to posit her thesis that comparative feminist studies in comparative cultural studies “consists of understanding gender as a constant ‘work in progress’ “(145) where repetitions and transformations contribute to an understanding of both continuity and rupture as also in the case of genre studies. In another essay, Paulo Bartolini addresses the field of translation studies and brings to the foreground the third space that he identifies as a "potential" zone, taking off from Giorgio Agamben’s nuanced understanding of the "potential" where languages and cultures interact, where one has not arrived, but is still a wanderer, where "losing oneself, one might even find oneself" (159). As a critique of negative Western attitudes towards the wanderer, of erring, the essay touches upon issues that extend the area of translation studies to larger horizons and therefore towards fruitful comparative cultural studies.

Werner Wolf who has the last word in the section on theory goes into the definitions of mediality and (inter)mediality and looks at ways in which (inter)mediality may be integrated into frameworks of literary studies. In fact, literature, he points out, functions as an interface for all other media. While a stronger awareness of intermedial concerns present in literary studies is the call of the day, he suggests it would be misguided to compromise literary studies in favour of cultural studies. “After all, it is the study of literature that constitutes one of the best contributions to the elucidation of (inter)mediality as well as culture at large past and present” (214).

The next section gives an account of the state of the discipline of Comparative Literature in ten different regions and languages while an essay by Isaiah Ilo situates contemporary African Literature in the context of World Literatures. The regions are Latin America, Russia, Central and East Europe, United States and India while the languages are Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Iberian Spanish and Portuguese and Italian and the accounts are written by Sophia A McClennen, Alexandra Berlina and
Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Gerald Gillespie, Anand Balwant Patil, Marie-Thérèse Abdel-Messih, Xiaolu Wang and Yan Liu, Anne Tomiche, Oliver Lubrich, Maria Teresa Vilariño Picos and Anxo Abuín González, and Mauro Pala respectively. Apart from a rich source of information, the essays together showcase the wide range of possibilities of the discipline, its integrated link with histories of the regions and its moments of ambiguities, crises and success.

The last section offers examples of contemporary work in the area and deals with the universal of motherhood and African literatures and cultures (Remi Akujobi), a study of Joyce from the point of view of world literature and his reception, positive or negative, in India and in the works of Raja Rao and Borges (Bhavya Tiwari), the shifting hinterland in Roberto Bolano’s work (Stacey Balkan), the motif of fleeing in Xinjiang Gao’s work (Mabel Lee), Arab fiction and migration in the work of Yahya Haqqi and Tayeb Salih (Ikram Masmoudi), the role of translation in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender studies with reference to Edward Prime-Stevenson’s work (Margaret S Breen), the notion of life in the work of Giorgio Agamben relating it to a tradition bordering on aesthetics (Carlo Salzani), aesthetics, opera and alterity in Werner Herzog’s 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo* (Jacob-Ivan Eidt), an intermedial reading of Nina Paley’s animation film *Sita Sings the Blues* (Ipshita Chanda) and a report on a course engaging with the connection between Balzac’s understanding of representation in Dutch painting and his own realist representational work (Janet Moser).

The arguments made in favour of comparative cultural studies could be acceptable to all though not at the cost of comparative literature studies. However, as Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári clarify, the former is a field of study while the latter is a discipline with a history. The point again is well taken while questions related to institutional organization and the naming of departments remain. Further, cultural studies today is quite an institution in its own right with each region perhaps having its prerogatives in charting out its field of studies in keeping with its historical demands as also in the case of comparative literature. There is again a problem when Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasváristate “ideally, comparative cultural studies utilizes English as the contemporary *lingua franca* of scholarship” (17). This reviewer once had the experience of being a part of a debate related to the
replacement of cultural studies for comparative literature in the national test for eligibility for college and university teaching in India that fortunately did not take place. Students from hundreds of departments doing literature in their own languages, who now sit for the examination, would have been barred from doing so because English, and not only the language but whole knowledge systems in the language, would have been foregrounded and this would have been the case even with comparative cultural studies utilizing English as the sole language of scholarship.

Comparative literature has been doing cultural studies since its inception without mentioning it as such, but as the volume effectively suggests, there is a need for asking new questions related to literature and culture in keeping with historical demands and integrations and changes in systems of communication. The volume is a most timely and welcome addition to the series of books on the subject. One only wishes that there were less typographic errors in the volume. The multilingual bibliography at the end will also be of great help to scholars in the field.

Note


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