

RESEARCH ARTICLE



COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LITERATURE AND INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Prof.Dr.Jeyashree G.Iyer

(HOD, Department of Business Communication, Dr.Ambedkar College of Com. & Eco., Mumbai.)

ABSTRACT

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Literary scholars are always in quest of parallels, analogues and antecedents for better understanding. World is suffused with varied culture groups with different ideologies. In a heterogeneous society understanding and respecting the ideology and practice of other culture becomes indeed very essential for maintaining peace and harmony. Literature registers the manifestations of culture and practice of a contemporary society. Poems, short stories, novels and drama are the important literary forms that give key to better understanding of a society. The paper deals with the need and importance of Comparative Study of Literature today to promote intercultural understanding. In the past, religion was the parameter to analyze different cultures but literary scholars have shifted the paradigm of Comparative Study of Literature to shared practice and ideologies of a particular group.

Keywords: Comparative, Literature, Ideology, Culture, Society.

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INTRODUCTION

Language and Religion play a major role in formation of a culture. Literature is one of the medium that propagates tenets of a religion. Hence to understand the nuances of a religion, it is essential to peruse the classics of literature which had laid foundation to the power of verbal expression. Literature is one of the powerful paraphernalia that provides relevant information about a culture. World is suffused with array of culture groups adopting varied traditions and practices. Hence for peaceful and harmonious society understanding and respecting other culture groups is very essential. The Comparative Study of Literature is one of the significant fields that facilitate intercultural understanding. The scholars who are in pursuit of the comparative study of literature ought to be free from prejudice and parochial attitude.

Gayathri Spivak in her book *Death of a Discipline*¹ observes that a new comparative literature is essential to 'undermine and undo' the tendency of dominant cultures to appropriate emergent ones' in other words the study needs to go beyond the paradigm of western literatures and societies. Literary scholars pursuing the study of comparative literature is in constant quest of eliciting similarities and dissimilarities between two significant literary works. The study attempts to evince intercultural relations between the two literary works. This attempt further aims to take cognizance of notable literary works produced in different languages around the world.

Comparative study in transnational context requires the scholars to be conversant with the background of culture and society in which the select texts have been produced. Themes, myths, social and religious movements are some of the major areas to be encompassed by the scholars. The field of comparative literature is bombarded with the terms of regional literatures, national literatures, international literatures and world literatures. Every region, every nation has its own culture and practice which in turn is reflected in the significant literary texts facilitating to comprehend the nuances of a culture and society.

LITERATURE

The word culture is derived from the Latin term *cultura*, which means cultivation; connotatively the term refers to the mental development of human beings. Metaphorically speaking, human mind is an uncultivated land which needs seeds of thoughts and intellectuality for better growth. The word cultivation means growing certain herbs or plants. As plants need water and sunlight for its growth, human minds need various tools for intellectual development. Hence the development of humans is based on primary and secondary source. Primary source of the humans stems from first-hand experience and secondary source stems from the knowledge gained from books. World is a galaxy of countless religions and in the past, religions played a vital role in determining a civilized society based on the intellectual and spiritual development of the people.

IMPACT OF RELIGION ON LITERATURE

The tenets of religions are preached through discourse or literary forms. Poetry, short stories, novels and drama are the different forms which register social, political, religious movements of the contemporary society. *Bhakthi* literature is one of the major sources that instilled culture and civilization in a society. The Indian term *Bhakthi* refers to spiritual texts produced to propagate a religion. Though the world is permeated with different religious groups, the tenets of all religions aim to produce a civilized society.

For instance, Tamil literature during Sangam period deals with the concepts of Hindu religion. Auvaiyar, who has been extolled as the grand old lady of Tamil poetry had penned poems in praise of lord Muruga, the Hindu God projected as a small boy. This small boy symbolizes growth of knowledge. The *vel* which resembles a sword, is an object positioned in the right hand of Lord Muruga. The sharp edge of the *vel* signifies knowledge and wisdom. Lord Muruga is worshipped as the God of Tamil language. It is believed that the Tamil language is venerated by Lord Muruga. Tamil poems on Lord Muruga exemplify the richness of Tamil poetry. Poets are inspired and ruled by divine sensation and have effused their emotions



and feelings in their poems. *Thirumurugatrupadai* is the anthology of poems sung in praise of lord Muruga.

Bhakti literature flourished during the medieval period of Tamil Nadu and Alwars' *Divya Prabanda* and Nayanmars *Thevaram* are the most widely read poems written and sang in praise of God. Alwars are the *Vaishnava* saints worshipping Lord Vishnu as the supreme deity and Nayanmars are the *Saiva* saints, worshipping Lord Shiva as supreme deity. Even though the literary history of Tamil Nadu registers the conflict between the Saivaites and Vaishnavaites, the divine poems emerged during this period emanate and share the mystic experiences of the writers. The literary scholars of this period had translated the literary works from Sanskrit and penned their works in Tamil to reach the general public. Thus, the literary taste of the people is churned by the sense of emotions and feelings of love and respect for the Almighty from cultural and religious perspectives.

The feelings and emotions pertaining to the ecclesiastical subject are universal. As Sanskrit in India, Latin was the only language of theological and didactic works. In twelfth and thirteenth centuries in England, one of the prominent religious and didactic works is the allegorical poem, *Le Chasteau d' Amour*, written by Robert Grosseteste. This poem is written in praise of Virgin Mary and many aspects of Christian theology are presented through an elaborate allegory of castle and its defenders. The Middle English period of Prose and Verse has been influenced by French owing to the Norman Conquest in England in 1066. The Norman Conquest imposed French-speaking ruling caste on English which facilitated the enrichment of the English language owing to the influence of the affluent French.

One of the remarkable writers of the Middle English period is Richard Rolle of Hampole, the fourteenth century mystical and devotional writer. Rolle's work is remarkable as it deals with the movement of devotional piety, despite being blamed for using his lyrics as a medium to demonstrate his personal bias in religious matters.

Thus, literature both in English and Tamil produced during the medieval period had a strong impact on religion. Humans at the beginning of the civilized society took cognizance of the emotion of love and affinity and they shared and imparted their feelings through literature. They at first expressed their love through devotional poems and prose. They established a comfortable communion with supernatural power and attempted to guide a group of people with certain principles. Different religions preach various human virtues to be adhered for betterment of the society.

Surendranath DasGupta, opines, "If you read two poems of two master poets or see two paintings of two master painters, the distinction and individuality are unmistakable, yet they are indescribable. So also the cultures of two nations may not be definitely described but may easily be distinguished, traced and illustrated in their concrete spiritual activities". (Dasgupta, 357). Nevertheless, in spite of the diversity of religion and culture, the religious poems focus on fundamental spiritual contents of spreading love and goodwill, preaching values and virtues to lead a peaceful life. When a message is sent through an art, it effectively reaches common people. Hence religious poets effuse their emotions and feelings of love and gratitude to spread goodwill.

The comparative study of religion paves way to understand the context of literary works facilitating to respect other cultures. To bring the multilingual texts for the study, translation studies play a major role. Translation brings out important and major works produced in regional languages to world literature. Jahan observes, "Every translation in literature is a comparative function. It is time when in a multilingual polyglot like India, translation study should be accepted...." (Jahan,67). Though many scholars do not approve of translation studies, it does have a major role to play in comparative study of literature. The principles of Christianity spread fast only after the translation of the holy text Bible. Bhagavat Gita is widely read by the scholars all over the world. Former President Dr. Abdul Kalam has quoted the verses of Gita in one of his lectures.



Susan Bassnet thus asserts the significance of translation, "Translation studies had been developing as a distinct discipline through the 1980s, employing methodologies that drew upon research in linguistics and comparative literature...." (Bassnet, 13) The Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters, is an organization dedicated to the promotion of literature from the regional languages of India Founded on March 1954.

CONCLUSION

Although critics are dubious about the standard of comparative literature, literary scholars do accept the fact that comparative literature plays a predominant role in strengthening intercultural relations by unearthing precious literary works from various parts of the world which had been marginalized by the imperial culture. With the advent of modern technology, Culture Studies has developed into a multifaceted discipline where shared interest and shared ideologies gain more significance. The scholars of comparative literature are expected to be conversant with the context of the significant texts pertaining to its culture and society.

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