

Volume - 5 | Issue - 9 | March - 2018

# RESEARCH DIRECTION



International Recognition Interdisciplinary Research Journal

Impact Factor  
5.17230018

ISSN  
2321-6488

## THE NATURE AND MOTIVES OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LITERATURE



Research by



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**Editor - In - Chief - S.P. Rajguru**



ISSN 2321-5488

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A Multi-Disciplinary Peer-Reviewed International Research Journal

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Vol.- 5, Issue - 9, March - 2018



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## THE NATURE AND MOTIVES OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT:

The present century is pre- eminently suitable for studies in comparative literature. The purpose of such study is to discover common areas shared by the writers in different literatures. It discovers the common areas shared by the various writers in different literatures, and points out certain resemblances in some respect between them. So, comparative literature has been considered as a link between the writers in different literatures. One can analyze the qualities of a work more effectively by comparing it to others in different languages. In fact, comparative literature examines literary relations in more than one language through an investigation of contrasts, analogy, influence or influence and points out literary relations and communication between two or more groups that speak different languages. In the present research article an attempt has been made to explain the nature, sources and motives of the comparative study of literature.



**KEYWORDS :** literary relations and communication , study of literature.

### INTRODUCTION:

The present century is pre- eminently suitable for studies in comparative literature. The purpose of such study is to discover common areas shared by the writers in different literatures. Comparative literature discovers the common areas shared by the various writers in different literatures, and points out certain resemblances in some respect between them. So, comparative literature has been considered as a link between the writers in different literatures. In fact, the process of comparison is the natural function of reason. Even in our everyday life comparison is implicit in our response and behavior. It, thus, seems to be a normal and inevitable mental process. Hence, the study of appreciation of literature in a sense is always comparative. The present research article attempts to explain the nature, scope and motives of the comparative study of literature.

### NATURE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE:

In order to get a clear view of the term 'Comparative literature', it is better to go through some of the familiar definitions of it. In his book *Discriminations: Further concepts of criticism* Rene Wellek remarks: The term 'comparative literature' has given rise to so much discussion, has been interpreted so differently and misinterpreted so frequently, that it might be so useful to examine its history and to attempt to distinguish its meaning in the main languages. Only then can we hope to define its exact scope and content (1).

He, then, explains the history of the term 'Comparative literature'. His starting point to the concept of the term is lexicography. While giving the history of the word 'Comparative' Rene Wellek says:

'Comparative' occurs in Middle English, obviously derived from Latin 'Comparativus'. It is used by Shakespeare, as when staff denounces prince Hal as 'the most comparative, rascalliest, sweet young prince.'



Francis Meres, as early as 1598, uses the term in the caption of 'A Comparative Discourse of our English Poets with the Greek, Latin and Italian poets. (2)

If we think of the history, the word 'Comparative' occurs in the title of the several books composed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century writers. Rene Wellek has quoted the titles of some of these books, such as William Fullback's *A Comparative Discourse of the Laws*, John Gregory's *A Comparative Anatomy of Animals* etc. However, we do not get the reference of the combination 'comparative literature' in these books. Rene Wellek Quotes:

Here the main idea is fully formulated, but the combination 'comparative literature' itself seems to occur for the first time only in a letter by Matthew Arnold in 1848, where he says: 'How plain it is now, though it attracted attention to the comparative literatures, for the last fifty years might have instructed anyone of it, that England was in a certain sense far behind the Continent (3).

But this was a private letter not published till 1895, and 'comparative' means here hardly more than 'comparable'. In English the decisive use was that of Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett. Posnett, in an article 'The science of comparative literature', claimed to have first stated and illustrated the method and principles of the new science, and to have been the first to do so not only in British Empire but in the world. Obviously this is preposterous; even if we limit 'comparative literature' to the specific meaning Posnett gave to it. The English term cannot be discussed in isolation from analogous terms in France and Germany." (3)

The term 'comparative literature' has been defined by various writers and scholars in different ways. Rene Wellek has quoted some of the definitions of 'comparative literature'. At first he quotes the definition of Van Tieghem, a French critic: "The object of comparative literature is essentially the study of diverse literatures in their relations with one another" (1970:15). Secondly, he quotes Guyard and J. M. Carre: Guyard in his handbook, which follows Van Tieghem closely in doctrine and contents, calls comparative literature succinctly 'the history of international literary relations' and J. M. Carre in his preface to Guyard, calls it "a branch of literary history, it is the study of spiritual international relations, of factual contacts which took place between Byron and Pushkin, Goethe and Carlyle, Walter Scott and Vigny, between the works, the inspirations and even lives of writers belonging to several literatures (1970:16).

In addition to the definitions mentioned above there are other attempts to define the nature and scope of comparative literature by adding something specific to the narrow definition. Rene Wellek quotes one of these definitions and says, "Less arbitrary and more ambitious is the recent attempt by H. H. H. Remak to expand the definition of comparative literature. He calls it 'the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of relationships between the literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and culture such as the arts, philosophy, history, the social sciences, the sciences, religion etc. on the other hand.'" (1970:16)

In the words of Wellek himself we can understand clearly the nature of the term 'comparative literature'. According to him, the view 'comparative literature' has been propounded and defined by its perspective and not merely by any circumscribed partition within literature. It will study all literature from an international perspective, with a consciousness of the unit of all literary creation and experience. In this conception comparative literature is identical with the study of literature independent of linguistic, ethnic, and political boundaries. In explaining the methods of comparative literature, he says:

It cannot be confined to a single method: description, characterization, interpretation, narration, explanation, evaluation are used in its discourse just as much as comparison. Nor can comparison be confined to actual historical contacts. There may be as the experience of recent linguistics should teach literary scholars, as much value in comparing phenomena such as languages or genres historically unrelated as in studying influences discovered from evidence of reading or parallels. (1970:19)

The above discussion of the term 'comparative literature' illustrates that comparative literature implies a study of literature which uses comparison as its main instrument. It would be the comparison of two or more similar or even dissimilar areas or forms or trends within literature. It would be the comparison of two or more works in two or more languages within the same country. It would also cut across the national boundaries and points out the similarities and parallels regarding the forms or trends in the works of the writers of two different countries. It would also compare the skill of the author in handling a certain literary form in different languages in the world to discover the underlying element of unity in diversity for getting a global view of literature. However, the term 'comparative literature' can be strictly used when taken into consideration items from two or more literatures representing a separate language and different national tradition.



In the book *Theory of Literature* (1956) Rene Wellek and Austin Warren have discussed the nature and scope of the comparative study of literature. According to them:

In practice, the term 'comparative' literature has covered and still covers rather distinct fields of study and groups of problems. It may mean first, the study of oral literature, especially of folk-tale themes and their variations; of when and when they have entered 'higher', 'artistic' literature. This type of problem can be relegated to folk-lore, an important branch of learning which is only in part occupied with aesthetic facts, since it studies the local civilization of a 'folk', its costumes and customs, superstitions and tools, as well as its arts. We must however, endorse the view that the study of oral literature is an integral part of literary scholarship, for it cannot be divorced from the study of written works, and there has been and still is continuous interaction between oral and written literature (1946-47).

### SOURCES AND INFLUENCES:

The study of sources and influences has importance in comparative literature. It implies the study of analogy and tradition which can be defined as resemblance in style and structure, mood and idea between works. In the words of Wellek and Warren:

The most obvious relationships between works of art – sources and influences-have been treated most frequently and constitute a staple of traditional scholarship. The establishment of literary relationships between authors is obviously a most important preparation for the writing of literary history. If, for instance, we want to write the history of English poetry in the eighteenth century, it would be necessary to know the exact relationships of the eighteenth-century poets to Spenser, Milton and Dryden. A book like Raymond Haven's, *Milton's Influences on English Poetry*, a centrally literary study, accumulates impressive evidence for the influence of Milton, not only assembling the opinions of Milton held by eighteenth century poets but studying the texts and analyzing the similarities and parallels (257-258).

Wellek and Warren were of the opinion that though there are some abuses of this method, it is a legitimate method and cannot be rejected. According to them by a judicious study of sources, it is possible to establish literary relationships. They further point out: "the relationship between two or more works of literature can be discussed profitably only when we see them in their proper place within the scheme of literary development. Relationships between works of art present a critical problem of comparing two wholes, two configurations not to be broken into related components excepts for preliminary study" (258).

### GENRES, MOVEMENTS AND PERIODS:

Literary genres, movements and periods are equally important fields of comparative study of literature. In the case of literary genres Wellek and Warren say, "Theory of genre is a principle of order; it classifies literature and literary history not by time or place (period or national language) but by specifically literary types of organization or structures" (226). The theory involves the supposition that every work belongs to a particular kind, such as epic, drama lyric and prose. It is also used for the different categories of the particular kinds mentioned above. In the literary history of modern period genre theory is clearly description. It doesn't limit the number of possible kinds and doesn't prescribe rules to authors. It supposes that traditional kinds may be mixed and produced a new kind (like tragic-comedy). The comparative study tries to find out the similarity between the genre theory laid down by Aristotle or traditional genre theory and modern genre theory and establishes the relations between them. It also establishes the relationships between the various kinds of literary forms in different languages. In the book *Theory of Literature* Wellek and Warren point out:

The history of literary genres and types offers another group of problems. But the problems are not insoluble, and, despite Croce's attempts to discredit the whole conception, we have many studies preparatory to such a theory and themselves suggesting the theoretical insight necessary for the tracing of a clear history. The dilemma of genre history is the dilemma of all history; i. e. in order to discover the scheme of reference (in this case, the genre) we must study the history; but we cannot study the history without having in mind some scheme of selection. ... The history of genres is indubitably one of the most promising areas for the study of literary history. (260-261)

### Motives of Comparative Literature

The motives of the study of comparative literature can be various. However, it is done with a view to use it as the most useful technique of analyzing work of art. One can recognize the qualities of a work more effectively



by comparing it to other works in different languages. In fact, comparative literature examines literary texts in more than one language through an investigation of contrasts, analogy, prominence or influence and points out literary relations and communication between two or more groups that speak different languages. Secondly, one can take a balanced view of literary Merit. Thirdly, literature cannot be studied as a separate entity and it must be studied in relation to other literatures.

Comparative literature aims at studying different national traditions. A set of characteristics of national traditions constitutes national character or spirit. The group of characteristics may not be found in single individuals but in a whole community in a country. In the study of comparative literature common and different aspects of the community can be considered in comparison with the common and different aspects in another country. Thus an attempt can be made to define the spirit of nation reflected in the language and literature.

In different language at different times, natural human phenomenon has been the subject of literary work. In spite of the common personage and or situation, each work can be an independent work of art. The comparative literary study considers the impact of translation. But it is hardly possible to point out the impact of the work of art upon another work of art. In this sense Rene Wellek points out that a work of art is never caused by another work of art. However, the study of impact or influence implies the study of analogy and tradition. Here analogy can be defined as resemblance in style and structure, mood and idea between works.

### CONCLUSION:

The comparative study seeks to find out the relations between genre, movements, periods, themes, or aesthetic elements in different literatures. It also leads to discovery and revaluation of great literary figures of both countries. It takes note of particular social problems, philosophical conviction, political movements etc, because these aspects undoubtedly influence literature. Of course, the basis of the comparative study of literature is nationalism. In comparative study one can draw similarities and parallels between the works of art in different languages. But it is very difficult to show that a particular work of art is caused by another work of art. It is pointed out by Rene Wellek that the whole concept of comparative study is very often vitiated by narrow nationalism. In his opinion, "Comparative literature surely wants to overcome national prejudices and provincialisms but does not therefore, ignore or minimize the existence and vitality of the different national traditions. We must beware of false and unnecessary choices: we need both national and general literature, we need both literary history and criticism and we need the wide perspective which only comparative literature can give."<sup>17</sup> In short comparative literary study is pursued in a spirit of intellectual curiosity.

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2017-1869 Impact Factor

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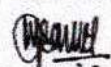
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