



## Comparative Literature: Some Critical Observations

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### Abstract:

*Comparative literature as a discipline implies transcending the frontiers of single languages and national literatures. For a comparatist, any literature is basically a literature which has to be studied with reference to other literature, or literatures. The purpose of the study is to explore parallels and contrasting structures in Hardy and Pendse's novels and to find out how they have used region as a prominent paradigm to present human and universal predicament of man. Besides, the one of the principal objectives of the research is to find out the reasons for the need and scope of regional novel in the rapidly changing global world of today and its deterioration in the context of world literature. The issues of nationalism, centralism, regionalism and localism have rarely been so prominently discussed. What is to be 'British' or 'Irish' or 'Indian', and the issue that whether these are still relevant questions now preoccupy a great many people. There is perhaps a growing cultural and ecological sensibility among the people only to be identified and established locally or regionally, rather than nationally. After Goethe's proclamation in 1827 that national literature did not mean much anymore and that the time for world literature was approaching, literary studies all over the world have gradually been moving towards deprovincialization, towards working together for a better literary and social consciousness.*

**Key Words:** Comparative Literature, Research Methodology, World Literature, Regionalism

The comparative study of literature started when Goethe spoke about *Weltliteratur*. In a conversation with Eckermann in 1827 (January) Goethe said 'National literature is now rather an *unmeaning* term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, everyone must strive to hasten its approach.'<sup>1</sup> Goethe did not tell us how to hasten the approach of world literature nor did he say what exactly he meant. But we assume that by *Weltliteratur* he meant the memorable works in all languages of the world rather than assemblage of all literatures. Mathew Arnold larger used the term "comparative literature" in one of his letters in 1848. According to Arnold everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration: no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures<sup>2</sup> According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren the term 'comparative literature' is troublesome and Arnold was apparently the first to use the term in English'.<sup>3</sup> Arnold speaks not of a discipline but of a plurality of "comparative literatures". He declares that no single literature is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures. George Saint bury describes Arnold as "the very first (English) critic to urge the importance and the necessity of comparative criticism of different literatures in a systematic and an impartial manner"<sup>4</sup>(?).



Comparative literature has been recognized as a distinct discipline only in the recent decades. The assumption of a comparatist is that no work exists in isolation and the theory that a work of art is an autonomous entity is fallacious. Each work of art can be traced back to sources and influences. The impact of two prominent Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is invariably found on the Indian life. Influence is the significant phenomenon in the history of literature. Influences play an important role as links within a network of inter-related works. In America, the transcendental writings of the mid-nineteenth century were greatly influenced by the Indian philosophical and religious thought. It was the American trade with East India Company that acted as a 'media' for the import of Indian thought to America. The ideas of Hindu philosophy were deeply reflected in the writings of Emerson, Alcott and Thoreau.

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The impact of Western literature on all the Indian languages and literatures were greatly influenced by the spread of English education and the consequent rise of nationalism. This led to the introduction of new literary genres like the novel, short-stories, essay and biography in the Indian languages. The growth of regional fiction could be closely associated with improved levels of literacy and the expansion of the reading public during the later nineteenth century especially in Europe. The establishments of primary and secondary education, expansion of training colleges, universities, and mechanism institutions fostered mass readership of fiction during this century. During the war periods the nationalist emphasis got heightened; the older interior ways of life were threatened economically and the psychological landscape of the growing readership of the regional literature was strongly affected. Comparative literature emerged as a new discipline to counteract the notion of autonomy of national literatures. Its ultimate goal is to visualize total literary activities of man as a single universe. The minimum requisite of a comparative study is to start with at least two literatures, but this binary concern is hardly sufficient to meet the full demands of comparative literature, which views literatures produced in all languages and in all countries as an indivisible whole. A comparatist has to extend the area of investigation not only beyond one language and literature, but to as many as possible.



A comparatist is hardly in position to exercise any aesthetic judgment in choosing the best works in all the languages of the world. He is concerned mainly with the relationships, the resemblances and differences between national literatures; with their convergences and divergences. He has to work within a rigorous framework to avoid subjective predictions and personal preferences. But at the same time he wants to arrive at the certain general understating of literary activities of man and help create a universal poetics. The works of Hardy and Pendse compared in the present study enabled this researcher to show the parallels and similarities, dissimilarities and diverging structures in their narratives and they have used region in order to present the universal predicament of man. It has been discovered in the present study that the regional novel is one type of a novel different in degree. Emphasis is put on a region or regions in a regional novel and it facilitates the regional narrator a means or a medium in order to reach beyond a region or regions and speak about universal human predicament. So, the region could serve as a parameter and yardstick to assess characters, to unearth their psycho-dynamic dialectics, to understand the socio-cultural and political realities and present universals of human predicament and values. Using the comparative methodology the researcher has made attempts to identify the literary paradigm that the world regional literatures cross the boundaries of languages, nationalities, cultures, regions, places and times. The study of regional narratives, thus could lead us to cross-cultural and multi-cultural and interdisciplinary realms.

It was in this context that Goethe wanted the common reader to come out of the narrow confines of his language and geography to enjoy the finest achievements of man. The comparatist also wants to come out of the confines of his language and geography, but not so much to identify the best in all literatures to understand the relationships between literatures in their totality. His goal is 'World Literature', not in the sense that Goethe and Rabindranath Tagore had used it, but in the sense of all literary traditions. The comparatist knows that comparative literature is a method of investigation while world literature, as Goethe meant, is a body of valuable literary works.

The validity of comparative Indian literature can be argued from two different directions. Indian literatures produced in Indian languages like Hindi or Tamil, Marathi or Assamese, alone provide that solid ground to start with. Literature deals with concrete, not with abstractions. It is born of language and yet it goes beyond language; it is nourished by a culture. Any attempt towards a literary cosmopolitanism neglecting the literature of literatures that are components of a cultural history is bound to turn into dilettantism. The lesson we must learn from the Western comparatist is the lesson of vigilance against dilettantism. Our comparative literature must be comparative Indian literature because nothing else can be the basis for our literary study. This is not chauvinism, but only an affirmation of the relation between literature and people. We cannot study literature as a body of impersonal knowledge without any relation to the people or to the time to which we belong.

Multilingualism is a fact of Indian society and of Indian literature. This multilingualism appears bewildering to the foreign students of India. But the literary history of India is a multilingual literary activity. Different languages not only have interacted with each other giving rise to new literary styles, but they have also given birth to a new language and literature such as Urdu. Writers have not only used two languages simultaneously, their mother tongue and classical language, or a foreign language along with their native speech, but switched from one



language to another, from Urdu to Hindi, from Oriya to Bengali, from Marathi to Kannada or from English to Bengali. But what is perhaps more significant for the student of literature is the frequent interactions between India and other civilizations. The relations between India and Greece, or India and China have yet to be investigated by literary scholars. The impact of Perso-Arabic literature on Indian letters, an impact which had its beginning with the arrival of Sufi saints, and the interaction between Persian and various Indian literatures, encourage the Indian student to go beyond his geographical confines. The historical contact between two civilizations, the Indian and the Middle Eastern and later on the European, makes it imperative for any serious student of Indian literature to study the literary traditions of other countries. Any student of single Indian literature is obliged to go beyond his own literature and quite often to study his own literature in relation to a literature belonging to a different civilization. The comparative study of English and Marathi author would be significant in this perception.

The comparative study of Thomas Hardy and S. N. Pendse would be useful in this direction. The converging and parallel constructs in both Thomas Hardy and S. N. Pendse's fiction provide solid ground for the comparative study. Both Thomas Hardy and S. N. Pendse were engaged in portraying their immediate past regional life of their times and both were writing for their urban and semi-urban reading public. They were very popular as well among their readers. Both have been nostalgic writers; they were sentimental about their immediate past. While Hardy was writing, the Victorian Wessex folk life was on the way to extinction. Hardy was very sentimental about the vanishing of Wessex traditions, customs and the folk ways of migratory labourers. His Wessex novels are an effort to bring back the Wessex through his fictional works. This was one of the principal forces of Hardy's creative imagination to bring back the vanishing rural community into his fictional works.

Pendse's Arcadia could be discovered in his childhood life. Pendse was able to get his Arcadia in the triangle of Harne coast. This region has bloomed with natural richness; coconut trees huddle and crowd together. Pendse passionately loved these Konkan people and that love and passion is seen flooding through his novels. The social and cultural life of the Konkan that Pendse coloured in his novels is unique and has receded into the cultural amnesia of Marathi mind of today. Poverty was its outstanding feature. The Konkan during the pre-independent era of Maharashtra was very much backward and so the pervading influence of the unique economical constraints is reflected in the particular era of the Konkan. Pendse depicted the Konkan region in his major works. Probably, as a pastoral need like Hardy, Pendse too indeed had a passion to record the vanishing past of Konkan which his childhood days experienced. Pendse's Konkan records the detailed descriptions of the places he has chosen for his novels: the region of Garambi, Murud, Murdi, Harne, Dapoli, Dabhol, Anjarle, all these blocks are geographically located in the erstwhile Ratnagiri district.

This is surprisingly the similar attitude of both these writers towards their respective regions. A number of analogical patterns have been found in both these novelists, although they happened to be writing in different periods, cultures, languages, and the perceptions of the times that they accumulated through their imaginative expressions are largely found closer to each other. It was in this context Pendse has been often regarded as 'the Hardy of Marathi novel'

Modern Indian literatures exposed to various thoughts, currents and literary traditions coming from various parts of the world can hardly allow any serious student to rest content with



the narrow world. Comparative Indian literature therefore not only justifies the need for literary study but also it provides the comparative study of literature with a new range and vision. The Indian contact with Western literatures is not confined to English alone. It is difficult to study literature like Konkani without a reference to Portuguese; for Portuguese had the direct impact on the Indian languages spoken in Goa. The innumerable translations from European languages, French and Russian in particular, in various Indian languages speak not only of enthusiastic response of an enlightened readership in our country but also recount the story of a deep relationship between those literatures and ours. The study of 'parallels' and that of 'simultaneities' do not necessarily lead to tracking down influences. For anybody wanting to trace the unique characteristics of a work unconsciously starts comparing it almost automatically with similar works. But an identification of similarities does not necessarily mean discovering influences. It would in fact be difficult to claim that literary influence has already been unequivocally defined.

For comparative literature, the challenge is twofold: to study the elements of the native literary tradition with reference to foreign influence, and to study the various national literatures in the context of reciprocal influences. It is needless to add that reciprocal relationship can only be appreciated on the basis of the perfect understanding of the common historical bond that plays the key role in the multilingual situation. Amiya Dev explains this peculiar situation with the analogy of 'a pattern of various colours with links if one looks for them'<sup>4</sup>. Rene Wellek enlists terms that enter into the field of meaning of 'Comparative Literature'. He makes an examination of literary texts (including works of literary theory and criticism) in more than one language, through an investigation of contrast, analogy, influence or a study of literary relations and communications between two or more groups that speak different languages. It breaks with the notion that one cannot be a comparatist unless one deals with more than one national culture.<sup>5</sup> Many would now reject conceptions of national character based on biological differences; but no one in this sense can refuse to recognize divergences due to the social, educational, geographical and historical forces that have shaped the different nations and their writers. Henry H. Remak expects comparative literary studies to perform: 'the studies of relationships between literature on the one hand and the other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts, philosophy, history, the social sciences, the sciences, religion etc., on the other hand'<sup>6</sup>. Investigation of such other 'areas of knowledge and belief' is indeed important for the illumination of literary facts. To see one poem, or one picture or one building is to have feeling for its qualities. To see another example of the 'same' thing, which being another work of art is of course not the same but only 'comparable' is to take the first step towards recognizing what is in each case good, original, difficult, intended.

Comparative literary studies are indeed a house with many mansions. These resolve themselves first, into studies of various forms of contact which authors and readers speaking one language may have had with works composed in another. This led to studies of the actions of 'mediators' and the 'fortunes' of various authors and the literary works in many countries. Such traces could be distinguished into the 'positive' borrowing, imitation, adaptation, direct quoting, allusion, impulsion towards new and original creations along similar line.

Secondly, it assumed that various forms of analogy pointing to the possibility that similar literary, social, cultural and psychological dynamics might be at work. Such typologies are useful



only, however, if we remember that no single factor ever works in isolation, that many of them combine, presuppose each other, in each individual case and that literary study ultimately concerns itself with wholes that can never be casually explained. What matters in the end is the uniqueness of the individual work of art. However, this uniqueness can be fully appreciated only when we know something of the traditions and conventions that have been accepted or modified when we are conscious of the earlier works an author has used and wants us to know about it.

A comparatist can help us to orient ourselves among these conflicting voices. He can show us the value, the specific contribution of each of the cultures he knows from within. He can explain what seems strange and unfamiliar to us by comparison and contrast with our own traditions. He can watch over the health of literature by studying translations, by showing their inadequacies where necessary and suggesting ways of improving them by demonstrating what they have missed. He can follow out allusions analogies, parallels, and historical connections wherever they may lead. He can study the role of literature in many different societies. He can trace the movements and transformation of ideas, while widening the narrow experiences to which our existence in space and time condemns us by opening up our emotional and intellectual enrichment, a vast storehouse of imaginative experience. He can increase our knowledge and at the same time enlarge our sympathies.

The comparison has certainly augmented to understand the universality of literatures written in diverse languages, cultures and different times, Both Hardy and Pendse portray family stories. Hardy's Wessex belongs to the nineteenth century southern part of England. Dorset is its centre. It was the period when the machine was introduced for the first time in the rural parts of England. The rural folk who were engaged in the traditional agricultural labour were threatened by the 'new ways of industrial agriculture' For Pendse, folk life has been a substantial part of his narratives. Pendse's prominent interests have been man, and his character, man woman relationship and what he calls 'Pure Man', the idealist sort of persona. He sets out to discover the intricacies of the region through religious convictions, fasting, gods or goddesses. Hardy's landscapes are humanized.

In the recent article, '*Towards Comparative Indian Literature*', Amiya Dev writes, 'Comparison is right reason for us because 1: we are multilingual and 2: we are the Third World.'<sup>7</sup> The fact of multilingualism is now more or less appreciated by Indian scholars. Dev points out in this paper that the tools of western comparison are hardly adequate to deal with our literary situation. For example, the categories 'influence' and 'imitation' and 'reception' and 'survival' need serious modification to suit the Third World literary situation of 'influence'. In the Indian context 'influence' is not confined to two authors or two texts but to the entire literatures involved with larger questions of socio-political implications. The Third World situation has imposed certain psychological restrictions on us. We learnt to venerate the language and literature of our colonial masters and were happy to be influenced by them and we applied them to our own literatures in order to gain respectability. In order to make literary studies free from these psychological restrictions, we need to look at our literatures from within, so that we can also respond to the literature of other parts of the world without any inhibition or prejudice. A study in comparative literature ought to lead us to a more comprehensive and adequate understanding of the works and their authors. Our idea of comparative literature will emerge only when we take into account the historical situation in which we are placed. Our journey is



not from comparative literature to comparative Indian literature but it should be from comparative Indian literature to comparative literature.

In the third world situation, we are under the impact and influence of the inevitable forces of globalization. There is every possibility that we shall be uprooted from our ancestral legacy and traditions. In fact, futurists have been already confirmed about the processes of deterioration of man being torn by his ties of his roots. In this context, the study of comparative regional literature shall at least help us to preserve our roots of convictions, faith and emotional and intellectual legacies. The comparative study of Hardy and Pendse's regional narratives is a step forward in this direction.

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