
Thinking Literature across Borders

Comparative literature, which developed in late nineteenth-century France, emerged to cross the geographic, linguistic, and political boundaries of European national literatures. The discipline's rise coincided with the growth of national identities across Western Europe. During this period, widespread nationalist ideologies fueled a fierce competition for cultural supremacy among European nations, including France. There, the emerging field of comparative literature developed as an extension of traditional literary history, greatly dominated by the era's positivistic philosophy. Influence studies were the dominant rhetoric of the French school of comparative literature, emphasizing multilingualism and historical documents. The research methodology was rigorously demanding. In essence, the French school was interested in what European literature had learned from others and had, thus, enriched their respective cultural heritage. However, this benign goal deviated from its original path and became Eurocentric.

In the second half of the 20th century, opposition arose on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. René Wellek criticized the French school for its historical approach and offered a new theory that emphasized literariness. To him, literature was a totality which included all national literatures, embracing the whole of humanity.

Following Wellek, Henry Remak boldly expanded the scope of comparative literature by introducing an interdisciplinary approach. This new model looked beyond national boundaries to compare literature with the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts. However, it took decades of scholarly practice for this innovative methodology to fully mature, as bridging different fields proved far more demanding than the discipline's initial, strictly literary phase. According to Remark:

The interdisciplinary, as against the international, side of Comparative Literature has asserted itself increasingly in the United States since the 1950's, starting with the Inter-Arts approach congenial with the literary-artistic priorities of

the New Criticism then reigning and other areas in the Humanities such as Philosophy, Religious Studies, Cultural Anthropology, and Historiography. It has then spread out, particularly since the second half of the 1960's, to excursions into the Social Sciences.¹ The basic premise of interdisciplinary and international, more recently inter-cultural studies, is identical: to locate, analyze, and summarize contaminations, affinities, and distinctions. By "disciplines" I mean theoretical demarcations of different genres and modes of human activity, experience, and curiosity reflected, in our case, in literature, first oral, then written. Written discourse, while losing some of the poetic/dramatic potential of oral speech, adds elements of wider dissemination, preservation, hope of permanence, promotes deliberateness, enhances a sense of responsibility, care, quality, control, structure. Re-reading writing conveys a perception of the whole, provides a measure of simultaneousness to successive experience, not unlike a musical score. Plato tells us in his *Symposium* that recorded works of art, intellect, lawgiving are not only the equivalent of but superior to the hope of physical immortality in which we indulge by procreating children. I need hardly point out that the historical/vertical continuity of *quality* is in clear and present danger in our increasingly disconnected, quantitatively alluring, canned communication – and entertainment-oriented culture – the reverse not only of the personal immediacy of poetic/literary speech but of epistolary literature which is nearing extinction, to the detriment of future historians. Competitive entertainment has clearly penetrated schools, colleges, and universities in my country and probably not only there. Imaginative literature and literary (especially historically oriented) scholarship on it have been under siege or indifference as "irrelevant" not only from the customary external but now also *intra*-professional constituencies, administrative and practising.

So we must face the question: what is the *raison d'être* of literature and its study in at least western and westernized culture? How existential are we in competing with or vitally supplementing contemporary socio/economic/political/ethnic/religious realities; business, technology, the amusement industry, the selling-and-buying vertigo in our society? What is – or was –

literature? (2002, 245-246)

Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978) transformed how scholars viewed colonial discourse, ushering in the postcolonial wave of the New Comparative Literature movement. This new paradigm allowed the "other", including women, racial minorities, and the subaltern, to challenge dominant narratives and write back against their former colonizers. It served as a vital corrective: for centuries under colonial hegemony, the literary and cultural heritages of these marginalized peoples had been devalued and suppressed to the point of denying their civilizational history. Under Western colonialism, Eastern subjects were portrayed as incapable of truly understanding their own history, language, and culture. Western Orientalists therefore assumed it was their duty to represent the "Oriental", a paternalistic stance that ultimately justified Western dominance over every aspect of colonial life. Ultimately, the colonized came to recognize themselves through the eyes of the Westerner. This sweeping generalization went so far as to categorize Eastern countries as "exotic", reducing them to strange, unknown lands defined by unfamiliar and seemingly irrational behavior.

As Robert Young (1990) and many others have noted, Edward Said's *Orientalism* undoubtedly opened the academic literary scene to the serious study of imperialism. It was both in itself a significant work of literary and cultural history and a self-conscious positioning of the very act of writing history within a larger context, a "strategic formation," as Said called it, that acquired "strength and authority" through its presence "in time, in discourse, in institutions" (1979: 20). Nevertheless, unlike the traditional (usually national) histories that have aimed to legitimize their literatures and cultures through a teleological narrative of progress and development, this history's intent was more to "de-legitimize" (Clifford 1988: 266), and fittingly its narrative took a different form—that of an insistent and repetitive witnessing of the constructions and consequences of imperial power. What it de-legitimized was the way the "*Orient*" had been represented in the discourses of the "West." In so doing, it inaugurated a field of research known as colonial discourse studies—the examination of "how stereotypes, images, and 'knowledge' of colonial subjects and cultures tie in with institutions of economic, administrative, judicial, and bio-medical control" (Loomba 1998: 47) (Hutcheon 2001: 91).

Stereotypes of the Oriental abounded in the colonial literature written by the colonizer's agents, such as missionaries, diplomats, travelers, and tradesmen. After the Second World War, this dynamic shifted dramatically as colonized peoples in Eastern nations, Africa, and South America began to reclaim both their geographical territories and their cultural heritages. Among these cultural expressions, literature was of primary importance. Yet, resisting cultural imperialism proved to be a deeply complex and challenging struggle. Postcolonial critics like Said, Bhabha, Spivak, and Ashcroft worked to raise the historical awareness of the subaltern, aiming to de-legitimize the harmful stereotypes that Western colonizers had constructed of the Oriental.

The process of decolonization opened the way for the revival of a more pluralistic and multiethnic world literature. In Africa, the most prominent figures of this shift include Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Adichie, and Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah. Under this new global paradigm, Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* evolved drastically. Crossing all political, linguistic, and geographical boundaries, it expanded to embrace the whole world. Today, comparative literature serves as the academic discipline that connects and unites all of humanity.

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