

## Sisir Kumar Das's "Comparative Literature in India:" Transcending Boundaries

RUKHAYA MK

Assistant Professor of English  
Nehru College, Kasaragod, Kerala  
India

India is a microcosm or miniscule cross-section of the world as it represents a plurality of cultures and languages. In an age of globalization, people export not only commodities but ideas as well. This is not new to a country that has upheld the concept of vasudaivakudumbakam. Nevertheless, social stratification informed by casteism has resulted in linguistic hierarchies in which languages like Sanskrit have been privileged. This privileging of languages have access to their literatures restricted to a select-few which it why it has backfired against the language, and consequently fallen out of currency and not acquired the status of a vernacular language. The condition of marginal languages remained pathetic as their literatures did not cross readership beyond a fixed geographical domain. Comparative literature in India has a major role to play as it addresses all the languages in this hierarchy, and places them side-by-side for comparison. Further, these languages and literatures enter into a dialogue subverting linguistic boundaries and the question of grand narratives.

Girish Karnad, for instance, is a playwright who has been often questioned for writing in English. U. R. Ananthamurthy called Indian English writers prostitutes as they traded their creativity for money. Karnad in his play *Broken Images* addresses this issue, as these various facets

were not actually broken images, but how this eclectic fusion of theme, setting and language could actually lend a coherent framework to encompass the diverse facets of language and literature. Comparative literature is the solution to fuse all of these into a discipline that will give rise to newer literatures while encompassing both grand and minor narratives into an organic whole.

Raymond Williams in his *Marxism and Literature* had stated how earlier literature was studied without reference to their histories, and it came in only with reference to the corresponding genres. This is because literatures initially were studied for their individual worth. The study of literatures under the typological study of genres exemplified that connections were limited to inclusion under the banner of a genre. Subjectivity is a prerequisite to interpretation; however, objectivity also has a major role to play as distance enables a better vision. "Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is the condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more"(Moretti).The goal of comparative studies does not entail only comparison or locating an external reference point. It also implies looking beyond one's tradition and language giving way to new terminologies and language as consequence of the same. India is a country blessed with a rich tradition of cultures and languages. Therefore, according to Das, the necessity of evolving a framework when two distinct languages/cultures encountered was inevitable. Das states in this regard:

There had been many occasions in every civilized society when different cultures and different literary traditions came into close contact with one another, and all such occasions did pose a challenge to man's exclusiveness. One can think of the Romans coming in contact with Greek literature, the Medieval Christian Europe with the Pagan Europe, Persian with

Arabic, Japanese with Chinese and Indians with the literatures of Europe. All these contacts have resulted in certain changes, at times marginal, and at time quite profound and pervasive, in the literary activities of the people involved, and have necessitated an enlargement of critical perspective"(S. K. Das 18).

Das asserts that differences did not deter from seeking affinities between literatures, and there arose a need strongly in the nineteenth century, though the process as such had begun long back in the embryonic stage in the nineteenth century. Perhaps Das points to this period in particular, as it was the time when colonialism reached its peak, and there developed pidgins bringing in two base languages together as the result of trade. There were also creoles, basilects and mesolects formed in the process.

Das asserts how there was nothing popular in Indian literary criticism like the syncrisis method that was in vogue in early Greek and Roman literature that was based on the principle of competition: parallelism manifesting in pairs. It was also a method of teaching based on competition through comparison. It is significant that ancient Sanskrit scholars and Tamil scholars did not analyze their literatures in relation to each other. Neither did they discern mutual influences. On the contrary, Sanskrit was studied with Prakrit functioning at the auxiliary level in literatures. In Sanskrit plays, different varieties of Prakrit had been attributed to the various characters probably lending them a sense of individuality. Thus, Das implies that these sub-dialects probably served the purpose of idiolects. These sub-dialects lent plurality to a language under the umbrella of a singular linguistic identity. The necessity of including diverse sub-dialects within the play exemplifies the need for diversity." The kings and the priests speak Sanskrit, the women the Sauraseni Prakrit, the people of the working class the Magadhi and the songs are invariably in Maharashtri"(S. K. Das 19).This again illustrates how the

hierarchy of the caste system also entered the various languages. It also proved that the restricting of Sanskrit to the upper strata prevented it from reaching a vernacular status, and hence led to the language being endangered in status. The fact that ancient writers utilized more than one language in the same text is proof enough that literatures transcended the boundaries of language. In the contemporary times, the use of a new language within a text entails translation or transliteration. In his "Death of Sanskrit" Sheldon Pollock states :

The disappearance of Sanskrit literature in Kashmir, a premier center of literary creativity, after the thirteenth century; its diminished power in sixteenth century Vijayanagara, the last great imperial formation of southern India; its short-lived moment of modernity at the Mughal court in mid-seventeenth century Delhi; and its ghostly existence in Bengal on the eve of colonialism. Each case raises a different question: first, about the kind of political institutions and civic ethos required to sustain Sanskrit literary culture; second, whether and to what degree competition with vernacular cultures eventually affected it; third, what factors besides newness of style or even subjectivity would have been necessary for consolidating a Sanskrit modernity, and last, whether the social and spiritual nutrients that once gave life to this literary culture could have mutated into the toxins that killed it. (Pollock 395)

It is of significance that the Buddhist and Jains constructed a corpus of literature where the vision took precedence over the medium. The question of the medium of language comes into question as relegating the same was often questioned by critics. Nevertheless, it does not address the question of literatures attaining a global status that would enable one to showcase one's culture to the world. Roland Barthes was never interested in engaging in literatures in translation, and wrote his body of literary discussions in French. In his self-portrait, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he describes himself as having

"little enjoyment or, talent for foreign languages...little taste for foreign literature, constant pessimism with regards to translation, confusion when confronted by questions of translators, since so often they appear so ignorant of what is regarded as the very meaning of a word: the connotation." It is significant that his voice reached the world due to his works in translation (Damrosch 112). As a wise man once said, 'A man's feet must be planted in his country, but his eyes must survey the world.' However, instead of language functioning as a dividing barrier in the case of Jainism and Buddhism, religion functioned as the uniting force encompassing all languages under the umbrella of religion.

The Buddhists and the Jains produced a literature in more than one language. But instead of dividing them in terms of the language employed in them, they viewed them as parts of one single literary corpus unified by one religious vision. Language remains as a significant tool for domination as well for division. This aspect is emblemized by the Tower of Babel where language remains a powerful means for uniting people, dividing them as well dominating over them. It was used by God to divide people with the tower of Babel, and the British to exert domination over the people by homogenizing them and subjugating them. Language has also given way to Caliban's curse in terms of the colonizers language as a mode of subversion. Nevertheless, modern interpreters state that the tower of Babel is to be viewed as an etiology of cultural differences, presenting Babel as the cradle of civilization, as opposed to Nimrod's hubristic defiance or other punishments meted out to the people (Hiebert 1, 4, 6).

Das mentions how Indian scholars thought the two languages Sanskrit and Prakrit were just two stages of evolution of the same language that were held together by a common cultural heritage and had the same constraints or principles guiding literatures. In all probability, it was supposed that Prakrit flourished in Southern India and was

closely affiliated with folk and ethnic Tamil literature. As pointed out by George L. Hart in his *The Relations between Tamil and Classical Sanskrit* (1976), it has been held that the *Gatha Sattasai*, an anthology of poems in the Maharashtri Prakrit, has associations with Tamil literature (S. K. Das 19). Das ascertains how Indian scholars in the ancient period did not endeavour to explore such connections between the two languages. Das has a clear insight into this phenomenon that may be owing to myopic tendencies and the lack of a framework to place literatures from two linguistic roots. Das forgets to mention that there were no appropriate frameworks to study identity politics that went beyond the frontiers of language in a country strongly informed by caste hierarchies, the subjugation of women and the suppression of the LGBT. And even when literature shifted from nation bases to identity bases it happened outside the discipline of comparative literature:

These were, in keeping with the politics of Theory, now primarily identity-centred spaces, aligned with Postcolonial Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, Gay Studies and so on ... It was rightly observed that the political possibilities of comparing literatures had shifted from nation-bases (the need to interrogate national politics while at some level accepting national boundaries) to identity-bases (the need to interrogate identity politics while at some level accepting identity-based differences), and that somehow this shift has taken place outside the disciplinary ken of Comparative Literature. (Gupta 103)

In the medieval period, Das mentions how a multiplicity of literatures penned in different languages encountered each other productively owing to their geographical proximity. Most of these had a common Sanskrit root plus the influence of Arabic and Persian. The Indian scholar in the medieval times had scholarship and affinities with Sanskrit "but rarely thought about the inter-relationship between the Indian literatures produced in younger languages like Telegu or

Malayalam, Marathi or Gujrati, Punjabi or Sindhi”(S. K. Das 20). Epigrammatic sayings or aphorisms prevalent during the times reveal the perceivers’ understanding of the literatures of the time written in various languages, and the connection between poets separated in time and space, owing to their circulation and comprehensibility. An instance is the ” saying in Andhra Pradesh—Vivamangal was reborn as Jayadeva, Jayadeva as Narayanatirtha, and Narayanatirtha as Ksettreyaspeaks volumes about the common reader's attempt to discover connections between four poets of different regions and of different time”(S. K. Das 20). Though one cannot place these poets in the chronological order in history, yet the striking similarity between *Srikrishna Karnamritam* of Vilvamangal and the *Gitagovindam* of Jayadev is thought-provoking. Besides, Narayantirtha and Ksettreyas, were poets, who penned in Sanskrit and Telugu in the seventeenth century and had remarkable similarities with Vilvamangal and Jayadeva in terms of theme and spirit. These connections were established on the basis of solid evidences as similarities could be the result of coincidences as well. These connections foreground archetypes or myths that exist in the collective unconscious of the people that can be explored through cultural anthropology and cultural studies. The need for cultural studies also necessitated the model of comparative literature, probably which is why in the “1980s and 1990s Cultural Studies began working across ethnic, linguistic and geopolitical boundaries not only with sociological methodologies, but also with close attention to texts (particularly mass media and new mediatexts) and with a particular awareness of the impact of Theory on literary studies”(Gupta 102).

Comparatists worked to encompass the similarities to a framework that studied similarities and appreciated the same. In the medieval times these, links could be deciphered instinctively as texts were written in different languages but shared a common subject, however, the failure to build upon

any critical approach to study them persisted. The encounters between the various neighbouring literatures led to the formation of novel themes and genres not to mention styles. A style namely *Manipravalam* bears testimony to this fact. The style was an admixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam, and translated as successful. Though the presence of such a hybrid language is discerned in Tamil and Telugu however it may be noted how in Malayalam alone Manipravalam evolved towards a literature of its own that critics took notice of how the phenomenon evolved from two different linguistic origins. Das points out how *Lilatilakam*, a treatise written in Sanskrit, deals with the linguistic nuances of Manipravalam. It is singular in Indian criticism for being the first work in Indian criticism that studies a literary phenomenon utilizing two languages and taking into account its linguistic roots. It is significant that it discusses the relationship between Manipravalam and Pattu (a parallel literary tradition derived from Tamil)(Ayyappanikkar 300), and laid emphasis on aspects that blended harmoniously. The composition of this dialect also reflected the way Aryan and Dravidian cultures were moving towards a synthesis, which is again the goal of comparative literature. Another 'artificial' language, Brajabuli, extensively used in sixteenth century Bengali poetry, and to some extent in Assamese and Oriya, was a hybridization of Maithili, the language in which Vidyapati wrote, and Bengali/ Assamese/ Oriya. Jnanadas (16th century), one of the greatest post-Chaitanya poets of Bangla literature and a prominent Vaishnav devotee, tried different language-media: Bengali, Brajabuli and an admixture of the two for depicting various aspects of Radha-Krishna love(Datta 1847). This again points to a need for diversity to counter monotony. Such stylistic experiments went beyond the linguistic boundaries of any particular literature and called for a more flexible, critical framework. Post colonialism also celebrates hybridity and cultural polyvalency through which the centre is dismantled



and whereby ethnic and marginalized literatures come to the fore. Said in his *Orientalism* shunned Eurocentric universalism where Western languages and themes gain precedence. In an Orientalist approach, the Eastern languages are a subtext to define the Western text. In such a stance, Comparative literature helps in subverting dominating discourses. This, Said affirms, will aid in the unlearning of cultural domination that Raymond William has termed the "unlearning of the inherent dominative mode" (Said 36).

Said has taught us that cultures are not autonomous, and histories not singular (Pickering 154). All are interdependent. Said was subject to both the worlds, one that *taught him language*, being born in a British Mandate territory and educated in Western Institutions; and at the same time situated him in a cultural exilic position to *curse*.

Das asserts how the advent of Persian and its apparent influence on Indian literature became prominent, with influence extending to Sindhi, Panjabi and Bengali as Persian texts were translated and adapted. It led to new formations in terms of themes. It saw the birth of a new language Urdu, that emerged out of the interaction between Persian and Khariboli, (a form of Hindi) and later evolved into a refined tool of communication towards the close of the seventeenth century. Urdu was further enriched with many great Urdu poets borrowing motifs from Persian and grafting them onto the language. Das has aptly used the term 'grafted' as the language grew along with time. This language was flexible to the extent that many poetic forms and metrical structures were imported into the same as some entered other Indian literatures. Noteworthy is the fact that Urdu in its less formalised register has been referred to as a *rekhtah* (ریختہ, [re:xta:]), meaning "rough mixture"(Masica 466). If Indian literatures had entered the academic curriculum in the medieval times, there would have been endeavours to establish a critical framework that eschewed

recourse to linguistic and geographical barriers. As the country entered the threshold of the nineteenth century, these languages attained the status of subjects to be studied as part of the academic curriculum. Nevertheless they were "compartmentalized according to their linguistic affiliations and a false impression about their autonomy had percolated too deep in the minds of many individuals"(S. K. Das 21). There was the realization of the handicap of insularity in literary studies in the nineteenth century that was prevalent in Europe, as well as India. Sanskrit as discovered by the European scholar offered a "new impetus to the growth of comparative linguistic and later comparative religion and mythology." It is of great significance that N.B. Halhed spoke of the similarities of Sanskrit with European languages as well as espoused the same in his *A Code of Gentoo Law*(1786). According to Das, this was well before William Jones spoke of the similarities between the Sanskrit language with Persian and Arabic, and Greek and Latin. One may recall that William Jones contributed considerably to this initiative of comparative literature when he was concerned with establishing kinship between the East and West through the study of Indo-European languages rather than creating distinctions, and had often made discoveries that would pave the foundation for anti-colonial nationalism. For, Indians at that juncture were just focused on their past and not a history (Kejariwal 233).

The new-found similarities in the various languages, myths and religious thoughts led to the establishing of universal archetypes by the Orientalists who hunted for further typified motifs and stereotypes that worked in favour of the blossoming of comparative literature.

Traditionally, too, Asian, African, and Middle Eastern literatures (when they were studied at all) were long relegated to the rubric of Area Studies. The European literatures were understood as both aesthetically autonomous and expressive of the "national genius," while texts from the non-West were read

more from an ethnographic, historical, or anthropological perspective than as works of literature in their own right. The field of Comparative Literature also endeavors, then, to overcome this division between "the West" and "the Rest" by combining the formal rigor of European literary studies with the interdisciplinary reach of area studies.(Why Comparative Literature?)

Das states how Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of India, in his introduction of Charles Wilkin's translation of Gita (1785), advocated for a comparative study of the Gita and great European literature. 'I should not fear' he wrote, 'to place, in opposition to the best French version of the most admired passages of Iliad or Odyssey, or the 1st and 6th books of our own Milton, highly as I venerate the latter, the English translation of the Mahabharata' (S. K. Das 22). Translation brought world-renown to a number of regional writers. In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin argues that translation does not conceal the original, but allows it to shine through, for translation effectively ensures the survival of a text (Bassnett 180).

Das points out that the need for studying the interrelationship of apparently divorced cultures was brought into question in the College of Fort William that came into existence for educating young civil servants. He underlines an instance of a student T. Macan, who "proposed to translate the Persian poem, "Shahnamah," and observed that the laws of poetic composition he had been familiar with in Europe was not "established or recognized in the Eastern world and consequently the rules of criticism founded upon these laws are wholly inapplicable to the writings of Firdoose"(S. K. Das 22). He goes on to elaborate that Firdoose's merits can be fairly judged by those well versed in the same language or relatively affiliated with the Eastern narrative in keeping with the language, customs, and laws of the ancient Persians.

Nonetheless, delocalizing narratives, that is one of the aims of comparative literature, does enable one to study them regardless of localized theoretical frameworks. David Damrosch points out in his book *What is World Literature* that a perennially universalized work is *Thousand and One Nights* that writers from the eighteenth century to Salman Rushdie and John Barth in the twentieth have taken as the 'fountainhead of stories.' Though largely the stories are set in Baghdad, it is an imaginary realm, and the selective translations published by Europeans aimed at delocalizing these narratives largely concentrating on the universal stories of Sindbad and Aladdin. Though it is named *Arabian Nights*, the characters are Persian, and incorporates tales from Persia, India and the Arab world as well, bringing in a conglomeration of motifs. The Book of Job is no exception in this regard(Damrosch 137).

It was a difficult scenario for the Western readers as they encountered Eastern literatures in the light of Western critical canons. Their inability to apply the same as a touchstone made them dismiss oriental works as inferior or demand new critical constraints to judge the eastern literatures. However, they felt the necessity for a new poetics that would address such a need. Lord Minto, after encountering the English version of *Meghadutam* in the nineteenth century by the celebrated Sanskritist H. H. Wilson stated :

The work of Kaleedas unfolded now for the first time to such distant generations as our own displays this uniformity in the characters and genius of our race which seems to write at once the most remote of regions of time and space, and which always gratifies the human mind to discern through the superficial varieties in which some slight difference of external or even intellectual fashions may even disguise it. In Kaleedas we find poetical design, a poetical description of Nature in all her forms, moral and material, poetical imagery, poetical inventions, just and natural feeling, with all the finer and keener sensibilities of the human heart. In these great and

immutable features we recognize in Kaleedas, the fellow and kinsman of the great masters of ancient and modern Poetry.  
(S. K. Das 23)

This statement marks the universality of letters that celebrates literature as the index and expression of human creativity. Writers like Kalidasa and Shakespeare who wrote universal stories and characters have survived the ravages of time. This assertion came in 1806 long before Goethe's conception of a world literature. It may be noted that Goethe's statement came at a time in early nineteenth century after the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire and nations were vying for position on the political map. The artist faced a crisis of confidence in such a context. (Raveendran 54). Also noteworthy is the fact that Saint-Beuve made a parallel statement fifty four years later by the time 'Comparative Literature' had been introduced by Matthew Arnold and the French Literature Comparé was utilized by Villemain in 1829. Saint-Beuve wrote, "Homer, as always and everywhere should be first, like a god, but behind him like a procession of three wise kings of the East, would be seen the three great poets, the three Homers, so long ignored by us, who wrote epics for the use of the old people of Asia, the poets Valmiki, Vyasa of the Hindus, and Firdousi of the Persians, in the domain of taste; it is well to know that such men exist and not to divide the human race"(qtd. in S. K. Das 23). Das relegates the fact that there is a trace of Eurocentric superiority in the statement, though it encourages comparative study. The belief of basic unity of the human race was a major driving force in the evolving of comparative analyses of religion and mythology in a context where they comprehended that God was universal and the various differences were just varying manifestations. Even modernism upheld this basic belief in the unity of the human race. Even the attempts at translating various literatures pointed to a bridging between various cultures.

With English elite education, the scholars in India also felt a need to reevaluate their own literature, particularly Sanskrit and Tamil. The impetus came from the inability of European scholars, who could not pass sound judgments on Indian Literatures. Even while comparative studies were made, these Western scholars spoke of the West as the originating point or influence for Eastern literatures. Whenever comparisons were made, they served as replications of the original as one talked about the Indian Shakespeare (Kalidasa) or the Indian Aristotle (Aurbindo). As Das foregrounds, Albrecht Weber, spoke of reflections of the *Iliad* in *Ramayana*, and Greek influence on Sanskrit plays. Likewise, G.U. Pope mentions in the introduction of the translation of the Tamil Classic *Kural* (1896) that there were similarities in the gnomic poetry of Greece and the celebrated Tamil couplets in their terse and aphoristic statements, in expression and emotion, epigrammatic wit and brevity, and theme and sentiment. He found a likeness with the proverbial style and war poetry of the Greeks, not to mention Latin elegiac verses. "There is a beauty in the periodic character of the Tamil construction in many of these verses that reminds the reader of the happiest efforts of Properitus" (S. K. Das 24). In the preface to the *Tiruvacakam* (1908), he pleads with Tamil scholars to engage with an English version of the religious verses as no literature can stand alone, according to him. Comparative studies did enrich the reading process, and also opened room for new schools of phenomenology. Studying texts in isolation, results in close-reading that would restrict the richness of the text from blossoming. It augments the text, and does not adulterate. Significantly, in the earlier times, Roman critics were critical of the process of intermingling of Greek and Latin elements. They felt it was contaminating in keeping with the etymology of the word 'contaminare' implying 'meaning to bring one thing in relation to another.' This was utilized for the interpolation from original Greek, and also the borrowing from other plays as

well. Questions arose about the validity of the veracity of literature with regards to imitation, adaptation and influence. Terence appealed for the right to contaminate and put forward the instances of Navius and Plautus. The opposition to this idea of contamination was not only what was to be used but also to what degree. There was the question of how pure literature could remain isolated from influences of other literatures particularly in the mid- nineteenth century by the pioneers of modern Indian literature that borrowed heavily from European literature. The question remains till date as to what is *pure literature* in a post-structuralist reading, as a sign is said to be of another sign, a text of another text and a context of another context: there is no transcendental signified. "In 1858, Michael Madhusudan Dutta wrote to his friends, 'Do you dislike Moor's poetry because it is full of orientalism? Byron's poetry for its Asiatic air, Carlyle's prose for its Germanism?' (S. K. Das 24). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1874 stood up for 'imitation' with ample evidences of literary history. His endeavour was not only to justify imitation but to embrace anything hitherto disregarded as alien. This can be viewed in the light of opposition between Platonic idealism and Aristotelian imaginative rendering. Likewise, Michael Madhusudan Dutta put forward the purpose for a new critical model or methodology as opposed to the model sustained by the idea of exclusiveness of national literatures. The contribution of scholars towards the shedding of this single focusedness towards national literatures, and the role of critics in comparative studies, contributed to the same. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee endeavoured to bridge these barriers in his essay "Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona" (1873). He had rewritten the *Ramayana* under the influence of Milton transforming the demons into the heroes (Paranjpe 60). In consequence, there was the weakening on the overtly exercised emphasis on national literatures that was again Platonic in perception as Plato had asserted that the ideal literature

contributed to the Republic. Bankim, the pronationalist, without any qualms ranked Shakespeare higher than Kalidasa, while comparing Vedic hymns with nature poems of Byron and Shelley, and likened the play *Bhavabhutito* ones by Shakespeare in his essay entitled "Uttiracharita." What is worth mentioning is that his findings do not seem far-fetched or the similarities incongruent as he focuses more literary techniques entailing borrowing and transcreation.

Das makes an astute comparison on writers like Basavaraj Naikar who comment on the similarities of these writers "showing the universality of vision and unity of human experience in spite of the cultural, racial, national and temperamental and exigential differences between the two masters" (Naikar 67). Likewise, Bankim Chandra finds similarities between *Kumarsambhava* and *Paradise Lost* with regards to the handling of the supernatural. Critics in the contemporary scenario may think differently about these essays. Nevertheless one may recall how Bankim Chandra called for a new path to literary studies as he proposed an all-encompassing discourse "unfragmented by languages and nationalities. One can talk about a literary genre or a form of a text in terms of distinctiveness with reference to other genres or forms or text, and finally can construct a poetics which will account for all diversities" (S. K. Das 25).

It may be noted that the first person to openly advocate the need for comparative studies of literature as an academic discipline in India was Rabindranath Tagore. Particularly, as he denounced nationalism and later tried to translate some of his works that came in for criticism (Hogan and Pandit 58). One may recall the celebrated lecture entitled *Visva-Sahitya* meaning world literature, when the Jatiya Siksa Parisad (1906), shouldered by some known names invited Rabindranath in 1907 to give a lecture on Comparative Literature. It is indeed significant that way back Tagore drew on the phrase 'comparative literature.' According to Das, it is reminiscent of



*Weltliteraturas* utilized by Goethe in 1827. This instance is significant as it was the "first pronouncement on comparative literature by an Indian writer"(S. K. Das 25). Das produces an abridged version of the essay by Buddhadeva Bose: Tagore speaks of Akbar and Elizabeth who worked towards a kind of universalism out of provincialism. Tagore's lines are significant in three ways. Firstly, he transforms this framework of comparative literature where numerous individual literatures merge into a universal whole. It functions as the analogue of the union of the *jeevatma* with the *paramatma* thereby rendering it into a spiritual experience. Further, he contests the so-called superiority of Science over the humanities. Robert Frost once said: "Science can measure height but not worth."Further, he sees its expansion from rustic or ethnic dimensions to a more broad-minded world view of literature.

When Tagore was speaking of comparative literature in was still in its infant stage in Europe and America and its entry into academic curriculum was strongly opposed by prominent academicians. Lane Cooper in the 20th century suggested that 'Comparative Literature' was a 'bogus term' that made 'neither sense nor syntax.' Das here fails to elaborate on Cooper's aversion to the same. Natalie Melas points out that Cooper pointed out the confusion between method and object in the 1920s and called for resolution of the problem through the designation 'Comparative Study of Literature' (Ferris 2).Neither did any of the British universities that posed as a model for Indian Institutions advocate Comparative Literature. The reason for this could be attributed to the Empire that wanted to remain one. Though there was the need to wider our horizons as postulated by Tagore from the 'narrow provincialism,' there were people who made contributions towards this larger perspective. Bhavya Tiwari states how Tagore becomes the figurative ambassador of the association in promoting the philosophy of comparative literature in India (Tiwari 41).

Tagore opted for the designation *vishwasahitya* as opposed to Tulnatmak Sahitya that was the actual translation of the comparative literature in Bengali calling for a supranational universality (Tiwari 44), and the first department pertaining to Comparative literature was formed in at Jadavpur University in 1956 fifty years later. The National Council of Education where Tagore delivered this talk is actually the ancestor of Jadavpur University. Tagore's embracing of comparative literature as world literature did not go well with many. However, some like Buddhadeva Bose do point out, 'large areas where two overlap, in intention if not scope'. His words are pertinent in age where disciplines are not only multidisciplinary or inter-disciplinary, but transdisciplinary as well. There have been several developments "in intellectual fields in terms of their social and cultural conditions of possibility, as science, economics, art history, legal theory; and historiography became objects of study by practitioners, as well as in critical and cultural theory. Examples abound: Stanley Fish made significant interventions in legal theory, Barbara Hernstein Smith in science studies, Hayden White in historiography, W.J.T Mitchel in art history to name a few"(Surin Part 5).

The curriculum at Jadavpur University followed the words of Buddhadeva Bose, who was the first teacher of the department to trace , 'the most intense moments in Western Literature, from antiquity to the present times' along with 'the living literature and the classical tradition of the native soil'(S. K. Das 27). We find a similarity with Eliot's conception of tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" where he states his perception of tradition encompasses the whole of literature of Europe to his own day *including the literature of his own country* as they form one continuous literary tradition(Eliot). And note how Bijay Kumar Das finds a parallel in an similar Indian poet Sri Aurbindo who was also renowned for poetry and seminal critical essays: "The work of the poet

depends not only on him and his age but on the mentality of the nation which he belongs to the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic tradition and environment it creates for him"(B. K. Das 89-90).

The need for a new discipline began from the second decade of this century with the proposal of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, after whose plan the first department of modern Indian languages in this country was founded in 1919, as he comprehended that focusing on any one of the Indian literatures would be "unwise and academically unsound"(S. K. Das 27). He advised Bengalis to also study other Indian literatures and envisaged a stage whereby Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Gujarat, Rajputana, and Punjab would be weaved into one garland. His concept of Jatiya Sahitya transcended the boundaries of individual languages and literature, where it was not the consequence of political consciousness or nationalistic demand. Deterrents to the phenomenon were linguistic chauvinism and academic complacency that compartmentalized the various languages and left lesser space for comparative studies, as in vogue with the Indian universities. Ironically, Bankim Chandra utilized the phrase Jatiya Sahitya (National Literature) in a narrower stance when he said that we have to refer to our own, Mitra's *Alarer Ghara Dulal*, the first novel in Bangla, and suggested not to go begging at the doors of English or Sanskrit but one's own soil (Bandopdhayay 28). Simultaneously with Sir Ashutosh's efforts in the University of Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo penned 'Indian Literature.' His attempt is relevant in terms of the visualization of Indian literature as an organic whole as conveyed by the Indian mind regardless of the multiplicity that did not lead to fragmented view of the same. Das says that this move was perhaps subversive towards the orientalist's fixation with Sanskrit that thereby marginalized other languages. Sri Aurobindo states:

Nor is it in the Sanskrit tongue alone that the Indian mind has done high and beautiful and perfect things; though it couched in that language the large part of its most prominent

and formative and grandest creations. It would be necessary for a complete estimate to take into account as well as Buddhistic literature in Pali and the poetic literature, here opulent, there scantier in production, of about a dozen Sanskrit and Dravidian tongues. The whole has almost a continental effect and does not fall so far short in the quantity of its really lasting things and equals in its things of best excellence the work of ancient and medieval and modern Europe. (S. K. Das 27-28)

The concept of an Indian literature was put forward by Sarojini Naidu as well in her presidential address at the first All India Writers' Conference organized by the Indian PEN in 1945. '... India is one and indivisible. While her children speak with many tongues', declared Sarojini Naidu, 'they can only speak with one undivided hear.' The concept of comparative literature in the Indian context therefore appears to be an analogue of the phenomenon of unity in diversity. This idea was reiterated by S. Radhakrishnan when he asserted 'Indian literature is one though written in many languages.' To add to the growing phenomenon, scholars such as V.K. Gokak, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Nagendra, not to mention the newly-founded Sahitya Akademi, tried to foreground the indivisibility of Indian literature in terms of a common rich cultural heritage. The Bengali Department of Calcutta University had English Romantic poetry and Sanskrit literature as part of its M.A. Bengali syllabus which it termed as Comparative Literature as early as in 1958-59. Nevertheless at that point of time, one could not think of a programme on comparative literature or Indian literature. The Indian Institute Of Advanced Studies advocated 'the acceptance of the reality' of the 'common denominator of Indian literature' that would lead to 'a wide base and healthy orientation to the study of various Indian languages and literatures' (S. K. Das 28). Notably a few years later, the Department of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi, headed by Professor R.K. Dasgupta began a course

called 'Comparative Indian Literature'. This gave the phenomenon currency and gained impetus in many universities. This has led to several discussions and seminars on Comparative Indian Literatures since 1976, with the question of treating it as an academic discipline and its relation within single literature departments. The question is not regarding the designation of Comparative Literature but the classification of the same as an area of literary study. Comparative literature in the Western context is focused on European literature, not only because of Euro- centrism, but also due to limited competence. "Comparative Literature provides a methodology, a wider perspective and a more catholic attitude to several literatures together"(S. K. Das 29). The Indian scholar had an inclination to link the various cultures within his geographical domain linked by cultural affiliations not driven by the fear of political or cultural isolationism. He has the autonomy to conglomerate European or African literatures, or Asian literatures into a scholarly universe as he had the amenities and proficiency. Comparative Literature is not limited to exploring a model for universal literature, as opposed to national literature. Comparative Literature is limited to "an exercise of discovering abstract universalities of literature." It explores literatures in their concreteness which is why the overall study of Indian literature is a subset of the superset of the academic discipline termed comparative studies Though the goal in the Indian context would be intensive study of an assortment of Indian literatures, it must realize that though the texts and are rooted in India, "its methodology comparative, but its main subject is literature, it will serve the cause of Comparative Literature"(S. K. Das 29). In Bharata's drama treatise *Natya Shastra*, one of the oldest theoretical works in Sanskrit reflecting on the Nature and concept of art, the author emphasizes that art unlike the four Vedas is democratic and social in purpose ; art integrates within itself music, dance, poetry composition and acting so as

to appeal to everyone while instructing through pleasure (Tiwari 45). Comparative literature has also given rise to cross-border literatures, movies, translations, and adaptations giving newer perspectives on older classics. Whether it be Edward Bond's *Lear* that was based on Shakespeare's *King Lear* that preached that a political problem did not have a personal solution. Or even newer critical approaches like cultural materialism marrying culture, theory and history, or New Historicism, the American version that encouraged parallel readings of the textuality of history and historicity of the text, transcending the boundaries of time and space. New Historicism by taking into question the minor details of history also challenged grand narratives. A remarkable instance or product of comparative literature would be Akira Kurosawa's *The Throne of Blood*, an adaptation of *Macbeth*; or our very own adaptation of *Hamlet*: Vishal Bharadwaj's *Haider*. It is a perfect example of how the medium (English-Hindi), Genre (drama-movie), setting (Denmark-Kashmir) is extended beyond boundaries, or the protagonist himself is transformed from an individual to the state. Vishal Bharadwaj himself stated: "Kashmir is the Hamlet of my movie." Comparative literature has therefore disproved Derrida when he said: "There is nothing outside the text."

## WORKS CITED

- Ayyappanikkar. *Medieval Indian Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 1977.
- Bandopdhayay, Saroj. "The Novel in Bengal: The First Steps." Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Early Novels in India*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002.
- Bassnett, Susan. "Literary research and translation." Correa, Delia da Sousa and W.R. Owens. *The Handbook to Literary Research*. New York: Routledge, 1998. 180.

- Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Das, Bijay Kumar. "Comparative Literature: Essays in Honour of Professor M.Q. Khan." Das, Bijay Kumar. *T.S. Eliot and Sri Aurobindo on Poets and Poetry*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002.
- Das, Sisir Kumar. "Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective." *Sāhitya: Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India* 1 (2011): 18-30. Web. 1 February 2015. <<http://www.clai.in/sahityavolume1-27feb2011.pdf>>.
- Dasgupta, Subha Chakraborty. "'True, No One has the Plan of the Edifice': Rabindranath's Concept of World Literature." Ramakrishnan, E V, Harish Trivedi and Chandra Mohan. *Interdisciplinary Alter-natives in Comparative Literature*. New Delhi: SAGE, 2013. 127.
- Datta, Amaresh. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. 1920. 17 December 2014. <[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/eliot/tradition.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/eliot/tradition.htm)>.
- Ferris, David. "Why Compare?" Behdad, Ali and Dominic Thomas. *A Companion to Comparative Literature*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Web.
- Gupta, Suman. "Institutional histories of literary disciplines." Correa, Delia da Sousa and W.R. Owens. *The Handbook to Literary*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Hiebert, Theodore. "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 29-58. Print.
- Hogan, P.C. and L. Pandit. *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003.

- Kejariwal, O.P. *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- Masica, Colin P. *The Indo-Aryan languages. Cambridge Language Surveys*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review* (2000). Web. 22 February 2015. <<http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>>.
- Naikar, Basavaraj. "Epic Dimensions in Pericles and Shakuntala: A Comparative Study." Bhatnagar, Manmohan Krishna. *Comparative English Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1999. 67.
- Paranjpe, M.R. "Tagore's Idea of 'World Literature'." Banerji, Debashish. *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century: Theoretical Renewals*. New York: Springer, 2015.
- Pickering, Michael. *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. Print.
- Pollock, Sheldon. "The Death of Sanskrit." n.d. *The Digital South Asia Library*. 24 February 2015. <[http://dsal.uchicago.edu/sanskrit/papers/death\\_of\\_sanskrit.pdf](http://dsal.uchicago.edu/sanskrit/papers/death_of_sanskrit.pdf)>.
- Raveendran, P.P. "Literature as Supermarket: Mapping World Literature Today." Ramakrishnan, E V, Harish Trivedi and Chandra Mohan. *Interdisciplinary Alternatives in Comparative Literature*. New Delhi: SAGE, 2013.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1978. Print.
- Surin, Kenneth. "Comparative Literature in America: Attempt at a Geneology." Behdad, Ali and Dominic Thomas. *A Companion to Comparative Literature*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Web.
- Tiwari, Bhavya. "Rabindranath Tagore's Comparative World Literature." D'haen, Theo, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadi. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2012. 41.



*Why Study Comparative Literature?* n.d. Web. 21 February  
2015. <<http://www.bu.edu/mlcl/home/why-study-comparative-literature/>>.