

***Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* Steven Totosy de Zepetnek (Rodopi:  
Amsterdam-Atlanta, G.A, 1998) Debarati Chakraborty<sup>1</sup>**

Starkly different from the existing literary scholarship especially in the area of theory in Comparative Literature, Steven Totosy de Zepetnek's *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* is unique by not only providing some solid theoretical aspects but also some much needed methodological tools to the present day discipline of Comparative Literature. According to F. Elizabeth Dahab, as mentioned in the preface of this book, it is "a work that takes into consideration the socio-cultural dimensions of literature and literary study without enrobing them solely in ideological constructs". A broad gamut of "applications" is taken from various sociological, psycho-cultural, anthropological, and historical reflections. Keeping firmly to the present scenario of Comparative Literature, Totosy, as a comparatist, feels the need of something new that should compliment the ever changing discipline, so that the discipline remains relevant to the attentive reader and scholars alike. The "New" Comparative Literature the author suggests is expertly nested in the framework of *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture*, in view of "the applicability of such an approach to textual, cultural, literary, and para-literary questions, areas, and problems" as the preface points out. With this "New" Comparative Literature Totosy make the discipline relevant to the present, instead of it becoming gradually redundant.

Totosy says that the discipline of Comparative Literature is a method in the study of literature. In order to elucidate this he points out two ways: first, Comparative Literature means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. According to him, Comparative Literature has "intrinsically a content and a form which facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and it has a history that substantiated this content and form" (13). Totosy introduces *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture*, a framework and methodology which is "theoretically innovative and methodically precise approach to study literature and culture" (14). He also demonstrates the applicability of the framework combination of the Comparative Literature and *The Systemic and Empirical*

*Approach* to various areas, texts, and the problems of as well as in literature. He wants the general public and the university administration to recognize the importance of the study of literature as a socially constructive and necessary educational and life force that should be paid serious attention. Differing from the notion that scholarly books must be readable books, he is of the opinion that scholarship should be performed in the form and content of "high" science and only after that should popularization happen. According to Totosy, the proposed type of Comparative Literature and the chiefly methodological framework of *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture* result in a combination

---

<sup>1</sup> Debarati Chakraborty is a PhD student of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. 122

where there is mutual enrichment of compatibility in theory, and, as he demonstrates, in application. He suggested a Manifesto of Comparative Literature which had ten general principles of the discipline followed by the obstacles these principles generally encounter in practice. Among these, most importantly, to him, “Comparative Literature means the recognition of and the engagement with the Other, may that be a “non-canonical” text (popular literature, for instance) or the literary and cultural aspects of another race, gender, nation, etc.” (30). Furthermore, he introduces a few frameworks—some useful tools that will help to underline his theoretical introduction. They include: (a) Theory of Empirical Study of Literature (Empirische Literaturwissenschaft) (b) Theory of the Literary Institution ^institution litteraire) (c) The Polysystem theory (d) Theory of the System of Written Text (systeme de l’ecrit) (e) Theory of the Literary Field (champ litteraire) and (f) Theory of Literature as System.

Totosy moves on to discuss literary readership and the context of literary canon in a context of cultural participation in the second chapter of the book. He focuses on an element of a theory of cumulative canon formation with reference to literary journals and magazines in Canada and Hungary. His theory of cumulative canon formation consists of theoretical as Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. According to him, Comparative Literature has “intrinsically a content and a form which facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and it has a history that substantiated this content and form” (13). Totosy introduces The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture, a framework and methodology which is “theoretically innovative and methodically precise approach to study literature and culture” (14). He also demonstrates the applicability of the framework combination of the Comparative Literature and The Systemic and Empirical Approach to various areas, texts, and the problems of as well as in literature. He wants the general public and the university administration to recognize the importance of the study of literature as a socially constructive and necessary educational and life force that should be paid serious attention. Differing from the notion that scholarly books must be readable books, he is of the opinion that scholarship should be performed in the form and content of “high” science and only after that should popularization happen. According to Totosy, the proposed type of Comparative Literature and the chiefly methodological framework of The Systemic and

Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture result in a combination where there is mutual enrichment of compatibility in theory, and, as he demonstrates, in application. He suggested a Manifesto of Comparative Literature which had ten general principles of the discipline followed by the obstacles these principles generally encounter in practice. Among these, most importantly, to him, “Comparative Literature means the recognition of and the engagement with the Other, may that be a “non-canonical” text (popular literature, for instance) or the literary and cultural aspects of another race, gender, nation, etc.” (30). Furthermore, he introduces a few frameworks—some useful tools that will help to underline his theoretical introduction. They include: (a) Theory of Empirical Study of Literature (Empirische Literaturwissenschaft) (b) Theory of the Literary Institution ^institution litteraire) (c) The Polysystem theory (d) Theory of the System of Written Text (systeme de l’ecrit) (e) Theory of the Literary Field (champ litteraire) and (f) Theory of Literature as System.

Totosy moves on to discuss literary readership and the context of literary canon in a context of cultural participation in the second chapter of the book. He focuses on an element of a theory of cumulative canon formation with reference to literary journals and magazines in Canada and Hungary. His theory of cumulative canon formation consists of theoretical as well as methodologically operational and functional aspects which prescribes the necessity of studying multiple and combined factors of the literary system so that one can arrive at an understanding of canon formation. Further, he elucidates that the systemic framework may be further problematized by paying attention to catacaustics between the four systemic categories (viz. (a) aesthetic communication between text/producer, (b) the processing of the text, (c) its reception and (d) its post-production processing) synchronically and diachronically. Totosy describes that in the process of canon formation, an important factor is the status of authors in a specific cultural system and he, at a length, describes the cultural participation and the production of literature drawing examples from two countries—Canada and Hungary. While discussing this, Totosy notes that the study of the ethnic minority readership is of value because it reveals some of the processes and the situation of cultural participation as a dialogue between minority and majority culture. According to him, the understanding of each other and of dialogue among ethnic minority groups on one hand, and the dialogue among ethnic minority groups and mainstream groups within a society on the other, is one of the main reasons for the notion of multiculturalism and cultural diversity, since the dialogue with the “Other” is a crucial factor in any society.

By adopting concepts and suggestions from Julie Thompson Klein’s *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, Practice* (1990), Totosy postulates a more precise taxonomy and approach of the two basic principles of interdisciplinarity— i.e. the comparative principle and the principle of method. He argues that intra-disciplinarity is involved when scholarship is kept within the postulated parameters, multi-disciplinarity is present when one scholar attempts to resolve a literary problem drawing on theoretical and methodological approaches to be found in more distant disciplines in the natural sciences and finally, pluri-disciplinarity prescribes a team-work of scholars working in different fields. Totosy, in this chapter, proposes that the study of literature will achieve its objective to advance knowledge in the context of interdisciplinarity if “the comparative and method principles are followed by application performed according to the tenets of operability and functionality” (82). He elucidates this furthermore by citing examples from literature as well as cinema, and concludes that although literature and cinema are two different media of communication, one written and passive and the other visual and active (moving), the mechanisms which are employed to represent reality in both media are similar. Furthermore, Totosy presents a case study where the literary text, a novel (Dezso Kosztolanyi’s *Edes Anna*, 1926) is analysed with the aid of pharmacology, thereby resulting in a dramatic reversal of established critical stands and practices of the same novel.

Totosy introduces a cultural perspective in more detailed theoretical and applied contexts in the chapter to come. He applies *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture* which demonstrates how a certain and specific point of view informs the analysis of literary texts from a specific cultural

space, and draws his example from East Central Europe. To him, his theoretical and pragmatic postulates involve the conflated and interconnected problematic of the (a) centre/periphery post-colonial paradigm in North America and in Europe and (b) the Canadian model of post-modern social discourse with regard to cultural diversity and ethnicity. Keeping in mind the theoretical considerations, Totosy suggests the parameters of “inbetween peripherality” and the “narrative of change” in the contemporary East European literature and culture. He further points out that “the lack of politics and history” is of great importance and it suggests an incisive change of narrative. He says that with *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture*, the ethnic minority lends itself as an obvious type of literary productivity where the centre/periphery paradigm of Comparative Literature might be used, since ethnic minority writing in general appears to be more often than not having difficulties in the overall canonization process owing to prevailing polyvalence conventions. He further adds that once the “systemic” positioning of the ethnic minority writing is performed, such texts already obtain a higher order of perception with regards to its more sophisticated analysis, and hence, possible canonisation, thus ensuring a readership.

If gender responsibility evolves into a human characteristic, other negative discriminations will either logically disappear, or they will be easier to combat, recommends Totosy. He offers a functional and operational framework of gender responsibility. In a further aspect of the Systemic and Empirical framework, Totosy demonstrates the comparative systemic relevance of content analysis where extra-literary factors like publication history radically alters established socio-political perceptions in literary history. He focuses his discussion on the texts of Hermann Hesse and Robert Musil. He tries to reveal in his analysis that male literary scholarship ought to pay more careful attention to works where men’s writing display “artistic sensibility and insight into social history with regard to women’s role in a patriarchal world” (193), with focus on feminist criticism. He further analyses a text in which a male author is most intimately involved and structures female sexuality and eroticism in a specific cultural milieu and then he connects this specific aspect of the author and his text to the publishing history of the text’s several versions.

Following his basic argument that methodology is an important factor of scholarship, Totosy argues that the attraction of the polysystem theory for the study of translation will be enhanced if and when the postulates of *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture* are applied. In addition, he presents an argument for the “merging of these two theoretical frameworks which then can be explicated and implicated for a functional use, that is, a taxonomy for the study of translation” (215). Here, he is of the opinion that “operationalism and functionalism should be a further extension of the notion of a harder “system”, in that they represent a methodological component, namely the focus on the “how” of literary study in general and here of the study of translation in the particular” (217-218). Totosy argues that “the polysystem theory is too “soft” in its systemic postulates, because it allows too much intuition and metaphorical presentation of analysis and consequently rejects the empirical postulate resulting in imprecise methodology” (219). He is of the opinion that if his suggestion of theory approximation is

followed, The Systemic and Empirical approach can offer a “harder” systemic postulate and a useful methodological perspective. He points out three factors of his operational, functional and methodological perspective for the study of translation—(a) the question of specialized taxonomy, (b) the focus on of methodological precision and (c) the application of the Systemic and Empirical approach in the study of translation, thus merging the already developed perspectives by the polysystem approach. He then presents a clear picture of the taxonomy for the study of translation.

Totosy connects reference frames of systems theory, literary theory, the literary system, and the information sciences which serve the purpose of generating discussion about a macrotheory. He presents an important question: How do the recent developments in the information sciences impact on the study of literature. To him, this question can be approached from two main perspectives: (a) one that focuses on a theoretical position(s) and (b) one that focuses on the operational and functional aspects. Though distinct from each other, these aspects, at time, tend to overlap, according to the author. Throughout the book Totosy argues that in view of the electronic and information revolution and its increased speed it is crucial that “the study of literature reevaluate and renovate itself” (248). To him, this new perspective of literature and pedagogy is systemic because it is presented in an “observing and rational, syste(mat)ic and organised manner, and at the same time it allows for a wide spectrum of the text’s exploration” (250). He also suggests that in addition to a systemic framework and methodology, more cooperation and interaction is necessary between technocratic and theoretical knowledge. He is interested in a tool called “the information highway” and how it impacts on and changes our communicative interactions and finally, its impacts and the resulting change which reorients the study of literature. Information technology itself, according to him, impact not only the primary activity, that of the social interaction, but also the activity of the study of literature. In his view, the information technology and all its ramifications impacts the study of literature in particularly one area—the area of audience (i.e. readership), who, ultimately, will affect the study of literature and literary theory if the readership of literature undergoes profound changes as to how literature is read and processed in the Western society. Whether advances in information technology will remedy the sorry status of data access is difficult to predict but Totosy’s opinion is that there will undoubtedly be an increase in literary scholars employing the information highway as a tool.

With the framework of a “New” Comparative Literature and “The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture”, Totosy postulates that it is important to decide “how” to do research and scholarly work. Providing a “Manifesto” for a New Comparative Literature, he tries to break free from the existing theoretical notions of Comparative Literature and applies his theory of “The Systemic and Empirical Approach” to a wide variety of literary and cultural areas of enquiry. Involving modern and contemporary authors and their works, Totosy analyse them using the various applications of the proposed “New” Comparative Literature. This book was very much needed since it helps one to combat two contradictory developments in the discipline of Comparative Literature—the “stagnation” in the already established centres in the U.S, France and Germany, and the growth of this in the central

European, Latin American and several other non-Western countries including India, where the discipline is becoming increasingly relevant.