

## The 'Unity and Diversity' Problematic: A Critique of Comparative Literature in India<sup>1</sup>

Ishani Dutta<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract:**

Amiya Dev's assertion that, "there is a major distinction between Comparative Indian Literature and Comparative Western Literature... one is comparative as such, the other has to work out the comparisons" (Dev, 1984, 15); not only requires to be deliberated upon, but also needs to be elaborated upon. In this regard, his claim that Comparative Indian Literature is "Comparative Literature in a diverse world of many languages", (Dev, 1984, 15) becomes significant and points to the fact that the 'Unity and Diversity' syndrome has been a major concern (over time) in the development of Comparative Literature in India; since it has brought forth the numerous multifaceted differences that mark the development of the discipline and its methodology in the country. If examined carefully, one will realize that it is only due to the presence of such complex differences in India, that it will be erroneous to push such a dynamic discipline into becoming a mere concept. Thus, in order to prevent the discipline from being driven into a state of stasis, (which inevitably brings up questions regarding whether Comparative Literature in India is a mere concept or a mere methodology, or an entire discipline), one needs to go back to the very basis of the 'Unity and Diversity' problematic, which will inevitably point towards 'Translation' and the issue of 'Untranslatibility' in the different languages and literatures of India.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature in India, 'Unity and Diversity', multifaceted differences, Translation, 'Untranslatibility'

---

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was published in 2019 in the CLAI Conference Proceedings of 2017 by the Centre for Comparative Literature, Bhasha Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Bolpur, West Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> Ishani Dutta is presently pursuing a PhD at the Centre for Comparative Literature, Bhasha-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati. Her research interests include 'Translation in Practice', 'Translation Theory', 'Indian Kavya Tradition', 'Nepali Literature' and 'Literatures of Canada'. She can be reached at [ishanidutta92@gmail.com](mailto:ishanidutta92@gmail.com).

## I

Treating Comparative Literature as a mere concept at a moment in the evolution of the discipline in India, when a number of fledgling Comparative Literature departments and centres are coming up across different states every year, will inevitably push both the discipline and the methodology (that this discipline develops and follows) into a state of perpetual stasis. Furthermore, such a supposition tends to negate the dynamism arising out of the necessity to make sense of, and deal with the numerous differences that are characteristic of the discipline. As has been exhibited over time, in the Indian context, such differences (based on location, caste, class, gender, religion, language, etc.) are as multifaceted as they are complex because of which they cannot be understood independently under any circumstances. Therefore the question: “Is Indian literature one or many, a single whole or a mosaic?; has been asked again and again, [because it cannot be denied] that there is a deep social, cultural and spiritual unity in the whole of the subcontinent that is amply evident in its literature... Though written in several languages in different ages under diverse social conditions, one can see a unique quality permeating the whole of Indian literature – what we may call the ‘soul’ of India” (Sharma, 2000, 7).

Having realized the above, Amiya Dev pointed out to the fact that, “India’s twenty-two principal literary languages themselves form a plenum comparable to that of European literature, and the different Indian literatures are always strongly coloured by the other languages in use around them. As a result, no Indian literature is ever itself alone: Bengali will be Bengali +, Panjabi Panjabi +, Tamil Tamil. [Hence] in a multilingual situation [such as in the case of India], there cannot be a true appreciation of a single literature in absolute isolation”<sup>1</sup> (Damrosh, 2003, 27). T R S Sharma further explains this by stating that though in India, “each language displays a seemingly different literature, each literature works within a system of references common to other Indian literatures despite its internal configuration based on specific socio-historical conditions. [This] notion focuses on certain recurring paradigms and patterns of concern and sensibility. It also points to certain common sources” (Sharma, 2000, 19). Keeping all these points in mind, the very basis of Comparative Literature in India can be rightfully summed up in the words of Sisir Kumar Das: “The very

structure of Indian Literature is comparative; its framework is comparative and its texts and contexts Indian.”<sup>2</sup> (Damrosh, 2003, 27)

Moving on, Amiya Dev in his essay titled “Comparative Literature in India” (1984), goes on to claim that it is equally problematic to speak of Indian literature both in the singular and the plural (if we keep all the above positions in mind at all times), because while the former approximation excludes all diversity, the latter tends to obscure diversity by overlooking “manifest interrelations” (Dev, 2000, 1). The issue raised by Amiya Dev contributes to the already existent anxiety that Rene Wellek had earlier talked about in his essay ‘The Crisis of Comparative Literature’ (first published in 1959). While criticizing the methodology forced upon the discipline by Baldensperger, Van Tieghem, Carre and Guyard; Wellek talks about how the growth of Comparative Literature depends on combating narrow nationalism by taking into account the “network of innumerable interrelations” (Wellek, 1973, 283). However, the question that arises regarding the present scenario of the newly emerging centres and departments of Comparative Literature in India relates to all that is at the very basis of their formation – which tends to forget the anxiety that Amiya Dev had been referring to.

The aim of this paper is to go deeper into the nuances of the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis by examining the extent to which it is addressed by the discipline of Comparative Literature and its methodology in India over time. At the same time, attempts will be made to come up with a possible solution by looking at ‘Translation’ (by going back to its very basis) of different languages and their literatures in India as a probable answer to the ‘Unity and Diversity’ syndrome. In respect to this, it will be inevitable for us to examine the issue of ‘Untranslatability’ of one Indian language and its literature into another.

## II

Some years ago I was struck by how many false things I had believed, and by how doubtful was the structure of beliefs that I had based on them. I realized that if I wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, I needed – just once in my life – to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations... I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself, sincerely and without holding back, to demolish my opinions (Descartes, 1969, 1).

The above lines from the “First Meditation” (translated from Latin) of Rene Descartes’ philosophical treatise, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (first published in 1641), begin by exhibiting a sense of profound anxiety about the structure of beliefs and its basis. They consequently go on to reveal Descartes’ conviction to deconstruct such a structure in order to transform it into a permanent foundation. The question, regarding whether Descartes can help in carrying forward a discussion about Comparative Literature in India might arise in one’s mind. However, there can be no better way, than to reminisce on Descartes’ assertion to describe the present situation of the discipline in the country – that involving immense anxiety on multiple grounds regarding its very basis, and which if not done away with, has an immense potential of turning into a crisis.

Equating the words ‘crisis’ and ‘Comparative Literature’ is however not new and was for the first time done at such a moment in the evolution of the discipline when the world was itself in a state of crisis, as can be known from Rene Wellek’s essay, “The Crisis of Comparative Literature”, wherein after realizing how Comparative Literature could neither establish a distinct subject matter nor a specific methodology, he called for a thorough re-examination as well as for “a thorough reorientation” of its aims and methods (Wellek, 1973, 290). This brought into light certain fundamental questions such as – what is Comparative Literature, what is its focus, what comes under its scope, and how does one do it. Susan Bassnett explains this in further details in the “Introduction” to her book, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993) by quoting Rene Wellek and by stating that Comparative Literature is still wrestling with the questions – “What is the object of study in comparative literature? How can comparison be the object of anything? If individual literatures have a canon, what might a comparative canon be? How does the comparatist select what to compare? [And finally] is comparative literature a discipline? Or is it simply a field of study?” (Bassnett, 1998, 2)

In order to find answers for the questions raised above, Rene Wellek heavily opposed Van Tieghem’s approach and went back to the age-old debate about Comparative and General Literature to prove that the basis for the former to qualify as a discipline or to get reduced to the position of a sub-discipline completely depends on how one defines it. Only if defined in the broader sense can Comparative Literature become an all encompassing discipline in itself as opposed to being defined in the narrow sense, i.e., merely by examining

the sources, influences, causes and effects of a single work of art (or several works) without investigating in its totality, which reduces Comparative Literature to the level of a sub discipline. Doing a thorough assessment of Wellek's claims reveal how perhaps the primary concern of the discipline has perpetually been the same – whether to be considered a discipline or not. And, clearly even today at a moment in its development in India when a number of fledgling Comparative Literature departments and centres are coming up across different states every year, the discipline is battling with the fear of being reduced to the position of a mere concept. Though every such department and centre of Comparative Literature in the country has fixed a methodology regarding how to approach works of art; there still remains immense anxiety regarding fixing a definition, which brings back the issues of the 'unity in diversity' thesis with an intensified immensity.

Going back to Descartes' "First Meditation", he further goes on to remark: "I can do this without showing that all my beliefs are false... My reason tells me that as well as withholding assent from propositions that are obviously false, I should also withhold it from ones that are not completely certain." (Descartes, 1969, 1) Such an assertion can well be connected to our previous discussion regarding the current position of the discipline in the country, which not only demonstrates how not all beliefs regarding the methodology of Comparative Literature are false, but also shows that to still struggle with the very basis of the discipline can hinder its progress in every way.

A 'concept' is a mere idea, thought or notion and cannot keep up the dynamic stance of an all-encompassing discipline. In this context, Jacques Derrida in his essay, "Who or What Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation" (2008) states that "an institution has a living and authentic origin, its living source of legitimacy, its intentional purpose, its grand design, its project, its *telos*, or its soul, and when this living purpose ceases to animate the community of subjects (here, researchers, professors, students), then there only remains, and not for long, a facade, a desiccated body, a sterile and mechanical reproduction." (Derrida, 2008, 23) At this stage in the evolution of the discipline of Comparative Literature in India, one must remember that we cannot merely do with a 'facade' or 'a desiccated body' because such an existence would further problematize the already existing problematic of 'unity in diversity' and its perspectives – which Amiya

Dev in the essay “Comparative Literature in India” declares as “the bases of Comparative Literature as a discipline in India” (Dev, 2000, 3).

In brief, the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis tries to deal with the immense linguistic diversity that exists in India, and which consequently gives rise to literatures written in these diverse languages; all of which are as much Indian. In this sense, the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis brings into the forefront the problems about the existence of Indian literature vis-a-vis Indian literatures and goes on to address the significant question regarding whether (and/or how far) such a nomenclature is appropriate. In doing so, Amiya Dev admires Gurbhagat Singh’s stance of deciding to use “literatures produced in India” as “an exercise in differential multilogue” (Dev, 2000, 3) instead of the terms, ‘Indian literature’ or ‘Indian literatures’. Amiya Dev also brings up the “notion of the inter-literary process and [the] dialectical view of literary interaction” (Dev, 2000, 6), without which there can be no discussion about the existence of the discipline of Comparative Literature in India. At this point, something which yet again arises is the fact that despite having found a certain direction from such stalwarts as Amiya Dev and Gurbhagat Singh on what approach should one take towards the discipline of Comparative Literature in India, we are still struggling not only with the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis, i.e., with “scholars of literature arguing either for a unity of Indian literature or for a diversity of distinctness of the literatures of India”, but also with what Amiya Dev calls “hegemonic apprehensions”. According to him, this means that “the designation Indian literature [is] eventually equated with one of the major literatures of India.” (Dev, 2000, 2)

What needs to be noted at this point yet again is how it is just as challenging to refer to Indian literature in the singular as in the plural. Like it has been stated above, this is because it is as problematic to exclude all diversity; as it is to blend together such diversity, subsequently obscuring it. However, the existing anxiety about the hegemonization of a literature (of what is perceived as a ‘major’ literature) now seems to have materialized to a great extent. This has happened despite numerous attempts by the Indian Constitution which has officially recognized twenty two languages in its eighth schedule, and by the Sahitya Akademi (established in 1954) which supports and publishes in twenty four Indian languages. However, this hegemonization is not merely a notion free of nuances or simply a general belief any longer. It is something very specific if one considers the ‘situs’ or in other words, what may be defined as the ‘site’ or ‘location’ of the concerned theory, (Dev, 2000, 4)

department or centre of Comparative Literature. What needs further mention is how certain Indian languages and literatures get more attention than others only due to the location of a specific Comparative Literature department. In most cases, this happens because of the presence of experts in that specific language and literature (or languages and literatures) who go on to address issues specific only to that language and literature.

What also needs to be noted apart from such factors as mentioned above) is – with the passage of time and with the development of Comparative Literature in India, the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis took a certain turn. This was evidently more of a bend towards ‘diversity’ as seen through the retort – “Indian literature is one because it is written in many languages”; to the Sahitya Akademi’s motto, “Indian literature is one though written in many languages.” (Dev, 2000, 3)

### III

The concern of this paper is to however, present a critique of, and consequently re-think the situation of Comparative Literature in India. Even though one cannot negate the problems of nomenclature put forth by the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis, as well as the “hegemonic apprehensions” cut across by cultural relativists; we still have not been able to arrive at a single solution of dealing with this diversity. By learning how to move away from a father figure (in relation to specific departments as well theories) and by legitimizing a literary creation by doing so, will help to provide a certain direction by causing a shift in the existing sensibilities.

On the other hand, a discussion about languages (and in this case, a field of study) can never be complete without deliberating upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “heteroglossia” which describes the twin forces that are at work in all languages – “centripetal (centralizing) and “centrifugal” (de-centralizing). Bakhtin claims that it is only the dialectic between these two forces which ensures that a language remains in constant flux (Bakhtin, 1981). A.K. Ramanujan also talks about the dialogic and the self-reflexive variants of reality in a frame, i.e., the “*desi*”, the “*marga*” and the “*videshi*”; as well as about the concepts such as, “context-free” and “context-bound” – which directly relate to the question of exchange between languages (Akshaya, 2004). In this sense, the search is for a field of study that will move away from the centre, but will still be more than a mere concept. Numerous theorists and comparativists have regarded ‘Translation’ as a possible solution, though no holistic

approach towards the same has yet been taken. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that the Sahitya Akademi was formulated for a specific purpose, i.e., by keeping the dissemination of different Indian literatures by translating them in various Indian languages, at its very basis.

Salman Rushdie asserts that “the word ‘translation’ etymologically comes from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. [He further goes on to say that for] having been borne across the world, we are translated men. [And, even though] it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; [he] clings obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained” (Rushdie, 1991). Rushdie’s impression has become extremely important for our times, and if we bear this in mind, we will come to realize that the relationship of literatures produced in India and ‘Translation’ is not new; though for the purpose of this paper, the foundation of the Sahitya Akademi will be considered as the beginning of a formal attempt towards the translation of literatures produced in India into other Indian languages.

However, the question that concerns us is not merely that of translation for the purpose of larger dissemination, but that of looking into the very problematic and politics of ‘Translation’ itself. In this regard, what needs to be mentioned is the fact that, ‘Translation’ has the ability to renew literary domains. This is because a literature re-invents itself through translation (a large socio-political reception takes place through the means of translation) in a larger socio-political context by providing the literature with both a new tone and a new vocabulary of experience. At the same time, through the means of translation, one is able to search for, as well as look at an absent language. Thus, in order to examine the very basis of ‘Translation’, one would need to look at it as a ‘mode’ and realize the fact that ‘Translation’ is not merely what we do with ‘other’ (both literal and the perceived ‘other’) languages but more importantly, what we also do with our language. This will establish the fact that ‘Translation’ is not merely a conventional transfer but a cognitive mode to know the ‘other’.

With the emergence of what Amiya Dev regards as Indian post-structuralism, almost all differences are homogenized – a major issue that has the potential to seep into the already existing politics of translation. To avoid this, what literatures produced in India need at this point is to go back to the very basis of translation itself and address the notion of ‘Untranslatability’. For a student in any existing department of Comparative Literature in India, the first crisis that should and must have already aroused is – why has

‘Untranslatibility’ still not been theorized? If examined closely, the phenomenon of ‘Untranslatibility’ not only looks at similarities or differences, but as much at cultural specificities and the need to retain those. Owing to the homogeneity of taxonomic structures, translating one literature produced in India into another, becomes such an exercise that automatically helps retain, and at the same time transfer cultural specific markers in another Indian language – an exercise that automatically in turn tries to deal with the ‘unity in diversity’ thesis.

Amiya Dev had mentioned how the motto of the Sahitya Akademi could be easily contested, and this becomes equally true for the proposed theory of ‘Untranslatibility’. Indian languages are many, though owing to the homogeneity of taxonomic structures, literatures produced in India have the potential to become one. In this regard, we can go back to Sujit Mukherjee’s claim in *Translation as Discovery* (1994) where, in his final word to George Steiner, he asserts how translation “creates the impression of a ‘third language’”. In doing so he makes a clear distinction between “a poem” and “its translation into another poem”, while the “third language” in this regard is that which “somehow reconciles” both the languages of the source text and its translation “in a tongue deeper, more comprehensive than either”<sup>3</sup> (Holmström, Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 1981, 4). On the contrary, as stated earlier, unless we look into both the problematic and the politics of translation by returning back to Hilaire Belloc’s summing up in his Taylorian Lecture in 1931, regarding how translation has, and perhaps never will be “granted the dignity of original work” (Bassnett, 1998, 139), we will never be able to holistically deal with the proposed theory of ‘Untranslatibility’ – which as has been realized throughout the length of this paper, has an instinctive capacity to if not fully solve but atleast address the ‘Unity and Diversity’ problematic to a great extent. This it does by looking at a language and a text in its entirety or in all its manifestations.

Thus, in this journey of Comparative Literature in India, which is yet to reach a specific destination, beginning our enquiry with these questions has the potentiality to solve its perpetual crisis by urging on its need to be looked upon as both a valid concept and a valid discipline.

**Works Cited:**

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: U of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bassnett, Susan. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Brandhorst, Kurt. *Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U Press, 2010.
- Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Dev, Amiya. *The Idea of Comparative Literature in India*. Kolkata: Papyrus, 1984.
- Derrida, Jacques and Eric Prenowitz. "Who or What Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation." *Discourse* 30.1/2 (2008). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389791>. Web. 27 Feb, 2018.
- Dev, Amiya. "Comparative Literature in India". *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.4/10 (2000). <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>. Web. 14 Feb, 2017.
- Holmström, Lakshmi. "Translation: Roles, Responsibilities and Boundaries". *Translation: Roles, Responsibilities and Boundaries*. Eds., Lakshmi Holmström, Sanjukta Dasgupta and Sayantan Dasgupta. Kolkata: CAS, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, 2012.
- Kumar, Akshaya. *A.K. Ramanujan: In Profile and Fragment*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004.
- Mohan, Chandra. "Aspects of Comparative Literature: Some Recent Trends". *Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches*. New Delhi: India Publishers and Distributors, 1989.
- Mukherjee, Sujit. *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation*. New Delhi: Allied, 1981.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991.

Sharma, T R S, ed. *Ancient Indian Literature: An Anthology, Volume Three*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000.

Singh, Gurbhagat. "Differential Multilogue: Comparative Literature and National Literatures". *Differential Multilogue: Comparative Literature and National Literatures*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1991.

Wellek, René. "Crisis of Comparative Literature". *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven: Yale U Press, 1973.

---

<sup>1</sup> First published – Dev, Amiya. *The Idea of Comparative Literature in India*. Kolkata: Papyrus. 1984. pp. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Damrosh quotes from – Mohan, Chandra. "Aspects of Comparative Literature: Some Recent Trends". *Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches*. New Delhi: India Publishers and Distributors, 1989. pp. 97.

<sup>3</sup> First published – Mukherjee, Sujit. *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation*. New Delhi: Allied, 1981.