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## Comparative Literature in Classroom: A Model

**Summary.** Many questions arise in the understanding of texts produced in different locales within the bigger ambit of world literature. It is here that the need arises to apply various modes of enquiry in understanding them. Comparative literature can become a common platform for understanding different cultures and literatures. The present paper is a modest attempt to introduce the concept of comparative literature to a fresh learner and then to evaluate literatures from two different contexts (Dalit and African American) together for practical purposes. A model is proposed for discussing comparative literature in the classroom. Thus, the paper becomes authentic and unique research, bringing theory and practice together.

**Keywords:** comparative literature, Dalit literature, African American literature, model

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### Introduction

The world, today, has come wonderfully closer. The patterns of liberalization, privatization and globalization have inspired people across the globe towards an increasing trend of co-operation and intervention, not only in the political and economic spheres, but also in culture and its various artifacts, especially literature. We are so open to the identity and opinion of the other that nouns like culture, history, literature, English etc. that have traditionally been used grammatically in the singu-

lar, are popularly accepted in the plural form today. In such a scenario, where many agents of civilization are becoming intertwined, there naturally emerges an urge to compare and contrast, and a need to place language and literature together under the microscope of comparative literature. The present paper is a modest attempt to introduce the concept of comparative literature to a fresh learner and then evaluate literatures from two diversified contexts together for practical purposes. Thus, the paper becomes authentic and unique research, bringing theory and practice together.

## Comparative Literature: A Brief Introduction

The Concept of Comparative Literature relates to the ideas of Goethe. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his *world literature (Weltliteratur)* project, chalked out the framework of Comparative Literature. Transylvanian Hungarian Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz's, the founding editor of the journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and Irish scholar H. M. Posnett, the writer of *Comparative Literature*, are among the founding fathers of this branch of human knowledge. The Russian Formalists also regard Alexander Veselovsky as one of the discipline's founders. Comparative Literature, in the words of Henry Remak, is

the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the fine arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression.<sup>1</sup>

The modern age expects certain new connotations from Comparative Literature, which is beautifully elucidated by Haun Saussy:

The premises and protocols characteristic of [comparative literature] are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion. [...] The 'transnational' dimension of literature and culture is universally recognized even by the specialists who not long ago suspected comparatists of dilettantism. [...] Comparative teaching and reading take institutional form in an ever-lengthening list of

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<sup>1</sup> H. Remak, *Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function*, in *Comparative Literature: Methods and Perspective*, eds P. Newton, Stallknecht, H. Frenz, London 1906.

places. [...] Comparative literature [...] now [...] is the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of the orchestra. Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

It will not be an overstatement if we describe comparative literature as the United Nations of literatures. In the present paper, a model is proposed for discussing comparative literature in the classroom. Various steps are given in a sequence:

### Step 1: Recapitulation

After a brief introduction of the concept of Comparative Literature, the following rubric will be given to the learners. For a better understanding of the concept and in order to attain the maximum level of SLOs, before taking this exercise in the classroom, the learners shall be advised beforehand to study the concept, nature and development of comparative literature with the help of authentic references in print and on the web.

#### **Rubric 1. Comparative Literature: Conceptual Understanding**

**Note:** Select the most appropriate option that matches the statement given in the 1<sup>st</sup> column from those given in the 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> columns, in each of the following.

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Note for the Teacher:** After 20 minutes the teacher shall read out the correct answers and the learners shall match their responses (the correct answers for Rubric 1 are given in Appendix 1). Accordingly, the learners shall evaluate their level of performance according to the following criteria:

Score 10-12: Excellent

Score 8-10: Satisfactory

Score less than 8: Revision Required

If 90% of learners reach a satisfactory level the class should proceed to Step 2.

### Step 2: Comparing Dalit Literature and African American Literature

In this task we shall evaluate the common traces and trajectories in Dalit and African American literature. In the preparatory activity, the learners' previous knowledge of Dalit and African American literature shall be refreshed.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore 2006, p. 24.

### Rubric 1. Comparative Literature: Conceptual Understanding

1.	Comparative Literature is	a comparative literary work	a literary work in two languages	a specific discipline	a literary phenomenon across the literary systems, languages and cultures
2.	Comparative Literature is	useful in publishing	useful in advertising	useful in librarianship	useful in publishing, advertising and librarianship
3.	Comparative Literature includes the study of	orally transmitted literature	written literature	performed scripts	all kinds of dynamic, contextual literature including oral, written or performed ones
4.	The nature of Comparative Literature is	rigid	flexible	a cursory acquaintance with great texts	referential
5.	The purpose of Comparative Literature is	to equip the reader with methodologies of reading	to equip & train the reader in the application of reading methodologies to cultural texts	to develop skills and insights regarding a particular discipline	to develop the ability to establish a particular purview
6.	Comparative Literature establishes	a relationship between art and culture	a relationship between science and religion	a relationship between literature, music & painting	a relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge, beliefs, all forms of art, sciences, religion, etc., on the other
7.	Comparative Literature is -	contextual study of world literature	consensual study of world literature	stipulative study of world literature	simulative study of world literature
8.	Comparative Literature is continuously connecting	a poem with a dance	a film with a novel	a photograph with an essay	all the previous options
9.	The term Comparative Literature is often exchanged with	history play	world history	world literature	cultural studies
10.	ICLA is	a society	a journal	a magazine	an association
11.	Modes involved in Comparative Literature are	inquiry through literary movements	investigation through history, theory and genre	understanding cultural significance and engagement in reading copious books	all the earlier options
12.	Comparative Literature is	transnational interdisciplinary and responsive humanities	a dialogic establishment	exploration of our past imagination	a diverse human condition

## Dalit Literature: A Brief Introduction

The term *Dalit literature* was used in 1958 for the first time during the first conference of *Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha*, held in Bombay (Mumbai). Inspired by the thoughts of thinkers like Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar, Dalit literature sketches the plight of the Dalit, a historically deprived class of society in the Indian social system. It is a major branch in contemporary Indian literature. Beginning in the Marathi language, Dalit literature became popular in various Indian languages like Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil etc. Its presence on the literary scene is visible in the post 1960 era. Dalit literature has become popular in English studies through translation of the major Dalit texts from Bhasa literature into English, and by original Dalit writing in English as well. Dalit literature can be compared with African –American literature in its depiction of social exclusion, segregation, injustice, and various forms of torture. Mohandas Naimishrai, Om Prakash Valmiki, Namdev Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Sharankumar Limbale, Sanjay Vitthal Baviskar, Madara Chennaiah, and Bama are some of the popular Dalit writers in India.

## African American Literature: A Brief Introduction

The term African American literature is used to describe the writing of Americans of African descent. These writers focus on social discrimination, slavery, exclusion, inclusion, social justice, black feminism and many other similar issues. It was around 1970 that African American literature emerged as a significant branch of the literatures written in English. It carries a rich African heritage, and also many tropes from African folk and cultural traditions. In the recapitulation part, Rubric 2 will be given to the learners.

### **Rubric 2: Comparing Dalit Literature and African-American Literature**

**Note:** Fill in the blanks selecting suitable options from the box

**Note for the Teacher:** After 20 minutes the teacher shall read out the correct answers and the learners shall match their responses (The correct answers for Rubric 2 are given in Appendix 2). Accordingly, the learners shall evaluate their level of performance according to the following criteria:

Score 15-20: Excellent

Score 10-15: Good

## Rubric 2. Comparing Dalit Literature and African-American Literature

pedagogic, repulsive, abominable, ethnification, African American, hegemony, equality, liberty, embryonic state, Africans, America, white denizens, African- American literature, racial discrimination, fraternity, reality, Varna, India, Dalit issues, both the literatures, realities

A comparative study of African American and Dalit literature can be particularly.....1..... as far as their forms are concerned. As far as the character of this comparison is concerned, both African American and Dalit literature are .....2.....and .....3.....While attempting a comparative study of African American and Dalit literature, there is a general pressure towards assimilation among various communities of the world, however, there is always a risk of increasing.....4.....in the minds of people of different cultures. Both ...5.....and Dalit literature have raised their voices against the.....6..... of the established class. Both African American and Dalit literature advocate .....7.....and .....8.....In comparison to Afro- American literature, Dalit literature is in its .....9.....African American literature is written by the.....10.....who were brought to .....11.....by the .....12.....as slaves to work on the plantations. The initial goal of .....13...was to abolish slavery which later turned into a struggle against .....14..... African-American literature has therefore been transformed from an expression of art to an expression of.....15..... Dalits were the victims of the .....16..... (class) system that prevailed in ...17.....for centuries. The literature on ...18 ..is known as Dalit literature. A comparative study of ...19 .. establishes them as two different .....20..... yet similar when it comes to sharing equality, freedom and brotherhood in asserting their identity against the establishment of their respective societies.

Score out of 20: ..... Name & Signature:.....

Score 8-10 Satisfactory

Score less than 10 Revision Required

If 90% of learners reach a satisfactory level the class should proceed to Step 3.

### Answers:

Rubric A: Comparative Literature: Conceptual Understanding

Literary phenomenon across the literary systems, languages and cultures

Useful in publishing, advertising & librarianship

All kinds of dynamic, contextual literature including oral, written or performed ones

Flexible

To equip & train in the application of reading methodologies to cultural texts

Relationship between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge, beliefs, all forms of art, sciences, religion, etc., on the other

contextual study of world literature  
 All the earlier options  
 World literature  
 An association  
 All the previous options  
 Transnational interdisciplinary and responsive humanities  
 Appendix 2  
 Answers  
 Rubric B  
 pedagogic  
 repulsive  
 abominable  
 ethnification  
 African American  
 hegemony  
 equality  
 liberty  
 embryonic state  
 Africans  
 America  
 white denizens  
 African-American literature  
 racial discrimination  
 fraternity/reality  
 Varna  
 India  
 Dalit issues  
 both the literatures  
 reality

### Step 3: Scaling the common traits

Now we shall analyze two poems by two major poets from the literatures in question. These are *White Paper* by Sharankumar Limbale and *Negro* by Langston Hughes.

Sharankumar Limbale's *White Paper*, addressing the plight of Dalits in India, shows strong similarities with the *Negro* as far as the motif is concerned. In this poem the narrator demands fundamental rights as a human being. It shows the plight of the Dalit class in India. They have been deprived of their human rights for ages. The poet

writes, "I do not ask/for the sun and/moon from your sky/your farm, your land,/ your high houses or your mansions/I do not ask for gods or rituals,/castes or sects/or even for your mother, sisters, daughters./I ask for/ my rights as man."<sup>3</sup> The poem is a vivid portrayal of the emotions emanating from the downtrodden class called Dalits. The Dalits have lived their lives in utterly inhumane situations. The views of noted Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki are appropriate to share here. In *Joothan*, his autobiography, he shares with the readers, "My village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The situation was very bad in Dehradun and in Uttar Pradesh, in general, at a time when I saw well-educated people in a metropolitan city like Bombay indulging in such behaviour, I felt a fountain of hot lava erupting within me."<sup>4</sup>

The Dalits were not only deprived of their fundamental rights as human beings but they were also regarded as demeaning objects, or grave pollutants. To quote again the lines of Sharan Kumar Limbale, "Each breath from my lungs/sets off a violent trembling in your text and traditions/your hells and heavens/ fearing pollution./ Your arms leapt together/to bring to ruin our dwelling places./You'll beat me, break me,/loot and burn my habitation/But my friends!"<sup>5</sup>

The second work taken for the purpose of comparison is *Negro* by Langston Hughes. The plight of the African American has been successfully translated by the poet. Hughes begins the poem, "I am a Negro:/Black as the night is black,/Black like the depths of my Africa."<sup>6</sup> The emotion intensifies in the lines: "I've been a slave:/Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean./I brushed the boots of Washington."<sup>7</sup>

But the obstacles created by the unfavorable colonizing forces are challenged by the courage and vigor of the protagonist who achieves realization in the words:

I've been a worker:/Under my hand the pyramids arose./I made mortar for the Woolworth Building./I've been a singer:/All the way from Africa to Georgia/I carried my sorrow songs./I made ragtime./I've been a victim:/The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo./They lynch me still in Mississippi."<sup>8</sup>

These assertions prove he is a master of all. His personality proves to be a perfect blend of finer sensibilities and finer traits in equal measure.

Langston Hughes belongs to the group of the poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. He supported the associates of the Harlem renaissance who were ex-

<sup>3</sup> Poem by S. Limbale titled *White Paper*.

<sup>4</sup> O. Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, transl. A. P. Mukherjee, Kolkata 2003, p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> Poem by S. Limbale titled *White Paper*.

<sup>6</sup> Poem by L. Hughes titled *Negro*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

pressing racial pride through art, music, and literature. *Negro* is a true portrayal of the history of African Americans who have gone through the phase of trials and tribulations. The race is portrayed as comprise slaves, workers, singers and victims who have suffered many forms of discrimination and exclusion. Thus, it becomes a moving poem which shows the trials and travails that African-Americans have braved throughout history. The poet gives a vivid description showing the torture of the masses and it becomes a saga of the pain and exploitation of the downtrodden not only in a specific country but across human civilization in different parts of the globe.

If we compare the plight of the human being as reflected in both the poems in question, it is deplorable. Both the situations simply make a mockery of the very first article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which proclaims that, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Many important questions arise in the understanding of the texts, produced in different locales within the bigger ambit of world literature. It is here that the need arises to apply various modes of enquiry in understanding them. Comparative literature can become a common platform for understanding different cultures and literatures. The present model will certainly contribute to this.

## Literature

Remak H., *Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function*, in *Comparative Literature: Methods and Perspective*, eds P. Newton, Stallknecht, H. Frenz, London 1906.

Saussy H., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore 2006.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A/RES/3/217 A.

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<sup>9</sup> Art. 1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A/RES/3/217 A.

