

REVIEW ESSAY

DE-EUROCENTERING COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: TÖTÖSY DE ZEPETNEK AND MUKHEREJEE'S PLEADING FOR COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDIES

Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Tutun Mukherejee (Eds.). New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India, 2013, pp. 528, ISBN: 978-93-82993-50-6.

Comparative literature is changing face with new inputs by its practitioners in the part of the world where it originated. North American Comparative Literature (fundamentally Eurocentric and nationalistic) has been visited upon by proposals from celebrated comparat(iv)ists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak of Columbia and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek of Purdue.

Spivak, despite the conspicuously intimidating title of her book (*Death of a Discipline*) which came out in 2003, not only takes notice of change in sensibility and reception with regards to the Euro-Anglocentric leaning of what she calls old Comparative Literature, but also she does not remain idle; she suggests Comparative Literature to be torn away from its original moorings and be geared towards areas studies. Since 1998 when he authored *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, Tötösy de Zepetnek has been advocating a new Comparative Literature with extreme ties with peripheralized cultures of the world (which he calls interculturalism / interculturality)¹ in view of buttressing the grounding of the discipline as heart of the humanities. He puts this under a new formulation, Comparative Cultural Studies. The 2014 book by Totosy de Zepetnek inscribes as a continuation of this advocacy.

¹ In “The New Humanities: The Intercultural, the Comparative and the Interdisciplinary,” Tötösy de Zepetnek writes, “Europe would do itself great service to abandon all types and versions of nationalism and [cultural] essentialism and adopt, instead, interculturalism based on a regional approach instead of the sovereignty of nations.” See “The New Humanities: The Intercultural, the Comparative, and the Interdisciplinary.” *The Global South* 1.2 (2007): 49.

Edited by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Tutun Mukherejee, *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures and Comparative Cultural Studies* not only stands as a reassertion of Tötösy de Zepetnek's belief in coupling Comparative Literature with Cultural Studies as a way of offering a lifebuoy to the moribund discipline, but also as a way of freeing Comparative Literature from the straitjackets of European and Anglo-American ethnocentrism. If Tötösy de Zepetnek's 1998 book surveys the discipline in terms of theory, methodology (as well as laying out the prospects of the new roads to tread in the field), and shows the necessity of ascribing a place of prominence to interdisciplinarity, gender, and translation theory and criticism, the new book makes the promise of providing a sort of State of the Humanities² by dealing with Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies.

The book is divided in four parts. Part One is titled "Theories of Comparative Literature, World Literatures and Comparative Cultural Studies" includes fifteen (15) articles. As the reader may realize, on this part rests the book theoretically speaking as the book's title derives from there and vice versa. It provides perspectives on Comparative Literature in its interactions with culture (in the same of cultural studies), history, philosophy, anthropology to cite but these. Fundamentally, this part shows the discipline of Comparative Literature and World Literatures operating comparatively in our globalized world today compared to its very much criticized Eurocentric focus. Also, a place of pride is accorded to World Literatures (the plural must be emphasized) in view of taking distance from Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Weltliteratur*³, which, despite its

² Instead of the "State of the Arts" understood to be the highest level of general development and/or achievement in terms of a device, technique, and/or scientific field at a particular time, I prefer the "State of the Humanities" because this book spans over three major areas found more or less in Comparative Literature and considered to be a full-fledged part of the Humanities.

³ "I have something higher in mind, which I want to indicate provisionally. Everywhere one hears and reads about the progress of the human race, about the further prospects for world and human relationships. However that may be on the whole, which it is not my office to investigate and more closely determine, I nevertheless would personally like to make my friends aware that I am

pretense of alterity-inclusiveness, takes Europe as the center, that is, the start and the end of the world.

Ultimately, Comparative Cultural Studies which is defined as “a combination of tenets of comparative literature and cultural studies – minus the former’s Eurocentrism and national approach – and including the ideological orientation of cultural studies” (*Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies* viii), is further advocated. In the lead article of the theoretical section, Tötösy de Zeptenek and his co-author Louise O. Vasvári explain that Comparative Cultural Studies rests on inter- and multi-disciplinarity and offers an opportunity to insufflate a blood to the combination Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies as the latter seems to be plagued by monolingual construction” (p. 15). They submit that for this discipline to be an activity of sound and relevant scholarship with global presence, it will also have to be inclusive of new media technologies and more importantly understand the activity of comparat(iv)ism from a new light: “To ‘compare’ does not – and must not – imply hierarchy, that is, in the comparative and contextual perspective it is the method used rather than the studies matter that is of importance. Attention to other cultures is a basic and founding element and factor of the framework of comparative cultural studies. This principle encourages an inter-and transcultural and interdisciplinary dialogue [to be] understood as inclusion, which extends to all Other, marginal, minority, and all that has been and often, still, is considered peripheral and thus an approach against all essentialism” (p.16). The importance of this contribution by Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári resides in its content – the plea for a new Comparative Literature – and the massive bibliography sometimes drawing from the various articles included in the book.

The second part of the book is titled “Comparative Literature in World Languages.” This section is inclusive of eleven (11) contributions in Comparative

convinced a *universal world literature* is in the process of being constituted, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans” (Goethe qtd by John Pizer, p. 215).

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Literature. This part covers literary studies in Russian and other Eastern European languages, Indian languages, Arabic and Chinese, in short languages other than the only English, French, German languages. Although all these articles are written in the English language, they nonetheless almost all (except for Gerald Gillespie's "Comparative Literature in the United States") deal with are the language-cultures of the different regions of the world. "First World and Third World literatures"⁴ are all put together through the prism of comparative literature. Clearly, this makes the point that Euro-/Anglocentric monopoly on the discipline needs to be shelled.

The third part, "Examples of New Work in Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies" includes works furnishing approaches in Comparative Literature and/or Comparative Cultural Studies in the areas of Diaspora, gender, and language among others.

Ultimately, the book offers a multilingual bibliography of books in the three areas of literary studies, which in actuality must be read as new Comparative Literature.⁵ The thing is that Comparative Literature is gathering force and momentum in the world outside its traditional bastion. As the authors write, "[...] current advances of comparative literature in 'peripheral' regions are a result of the impact of globalization and thus a sophisticated construct with both traditional and new ideas and approaches, as well as immanent relevance [...]"(p. 5).

Works like this timely compound of thirty-four articles are hard to come by especially in a time when the discipline of Comparative Literature is under attack after

⁴ For the sake of argument, I am borrowing from Jameson's binary phrasing of literatures and civilization from the Marxist reading he entertains on texts by China's Lu Xun and Sembene Ousmane from West Africa's Senegal. He speaks of "Third-world texts [...] necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: [...]" (Jameson 69). I am also aware that there is no such thing as First or Third World literature, a claim that introduces the assumption of undifferentiated and homogeneous "First or Third world" and of course the ensuing hierarchy between these so-called worlds.

⁵ The bibliography is also available online; it is updated periodically and is available at <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/comparativeliteraturebooks>>.

defenders of disciplinary rigidity find it unsupportable that barriers are crumbling; the discipline and its new mutations and ramifications (inter-, multi- and pluri-disciplinary approaches to language, culture and society), one must recognize, are stripping experts. Clearly, the aim is high and practical steps are being taken to reach the goal.

We only wish that the book had included more African contributions from the variety of graphies and phonies of the African continent (French, English, Portuguese, and national languages) to show the diversity the authors require in order to debunk the belief that Comparative Literature is exclusively European and therefore Eurocentric. Even articles in other national languages other than those gathered could have contributed largely to the idea that Comparative Literature is up for taking in newer blood and take the shapes of the world gone global. Also, the only contribution dealing with Africa is in English and about West Africa's Nigeria. Balance of treatment commands that where "African Anglophony" is given a space of expression, that Teutophony, Francophony, Lusophony, and use of national languages⁶ in Africa be also given similar attention. Thus, notion of World Literature as well as the discipline of Comparative Cultural Studies rightly advocated by Tötösy de Zepetnek will find a good resonance with the other parts of the world ostracized for obvious (neo-)imperial and (neo-)colonial reasons.

By and large, the editors have done a great work of gathering a large pool of contributions of various shapes and stripes, thereby showing that the potential of moving the center⁷ does exist so long as the will to do so exists. If Susan Bassnett takes notice of

⁶ By national language, I refer to the languages spoken by peoples or communities sharing the same century-long values and traditions. These peoples being nations, their languages are simply national languages as opposed to administrative and/or official languages in use in former colonized countries of Africa and elsewhere. Speaking of the inclusion of Africa in the project of perennialization of Comparative Literature, there is no doubt that there is literature in African national languages like Kiswahili, Somali, Amharic, Hausa, Mande, etc.

⁷ I borrow this expression from Kenyan author and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose book goes by the title *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, by which he seeks to stress "the need to move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world" (Ngugi xvi)

the almost moribund nature of Comparative Literature in her oft-quoted sentence⁸– the anachronism and irrelevance of the discipline as it used to stand in Euro-America –, she nonetheless asks nothing more than reaffirming Comparative Literature under a new guise: “Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. [...] We should look upon translation studies as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as valued but subsidiary subject area” (Bassnett, 161). Like Bassnett who looks towards Translation Studies, and Spivak who reaches for Area Studies⁹, Tötösy de Zepetnek is turning to Cultural Studies. The specificity of Tötösy de Zepetnek's and Mukherjee's call resides in their fight against, I believe, Euro(-logo)centrism¹⁰ in the globalized village. This is the point Zepetnek makes in his “The New Humanities”: “Comparative literature (and comparative cultural studies), conceived in interculturalism, based on the basic tenets of the comparative approach and practiced in interdisciplinarity, and employing the advantages of new media technology, could/would achieve such a global presence” (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2007: 62).

Undoubtedly, Tötösy de Zepetnek, on his own with his previous works and now through his collaboration with Mukherjee, has proven his disposition to build on old

⁸ She writes: “Comparative literature in a sense is dead” (Bassnett 47).

⁹ “For the discipline, the way out seems to be to acknowledge a definitive future of anteriority, a ‘to come’-ness, a ‘will have happened’ quality. This is a protection from self-destructive competition for dwindling resources. It is also a protection from losing the best of the old Comparative Literature: the skill of reading closely in the original. [...] We need to consider the resources of Area Studies, specifically geared for what lies beyond the Euro-U.S” (Spivak 6).

¹⁰ I am using a combination of Ludwig Kalges' coinage known as “logocentrism” and Eurocentrism as defined by Samir Amin. Klages speaks of the tradition of Western philosophy seeking to situate the word spoken or written, or the act of speech in the only West, thereby excluding any other being even when the latter is capable of voicing meaning sounds. (See *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, p. 326.) “Eurocentrism” has been defined by Samir Amir in a book by the same name as “Eurocentrism is a culturalist phenomenon in the sense that it assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time” (Samir Amin vii).

Comparative Literature not through mere lip service. He sees the need to tap into the combined forces of the social sciences and the humanities by way of drawing on methods and theories from literary studies, sociology, history, cultural anthropology, communications studies, and economics, among others: this is cultural studies. I only wish that the book under review could have furthered and buttressed the points that Tötösy de Zepetnek makes in his 1998 *Comparative Literature*, where he lays the groundwork for his call to interdisciplinary and intercultural investigations in view of shelling the Manichean division¹¹ of literary/cultural mapping of our world. In other words, the concept of World Literature, whether in the singular or the plural form (creating a polyvocal and polycentered mapping of literatures of the First World and so-called Third World), is reminiscent of the apparently inclusive and yet still Eurocentric appeal Goethe made a long time ago.

Also, Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee, even if this is an edited book, could have addressed Spivak 2003 accusation that: “Academic ‘Cultural Studies’, as a metropolitan phenomenon originating on the radical fringes of national language departments, opposes this with no more than metropolitan language-based presentist and personalist political convictions, often with visibly foregone conclusions that cannot match the implicit political cunning of Area Studies at their best; and earns itself a reputation for ‘lack of rigor’ as well as for politicizing the academy” (Spivak 8). After all, their newborn came out a decade or so after Spivak’s critique of Cultural Studies. They will and should invent an opportunity to do so in order to clear the way for quicker

¹¹ I have in mind here Frantz Fanon’s description of the colonial world as being “Manichean world” in his *Les Damnés de la terre* (The Wretched of the Earth) and, of course, the beautiful study that Abdul R JanMohamed did on the colonialist literature and discourse as being mired in some Manichean allegory. For example, JanMohamed writes, “Even the works of some of the most enlightened and critical colonial writers eventually succumb to a narrative organization based on racial/metaphysical oppositions, whose motives remain morally fixed but whose categories flex to accommodate any situation” (JanMohamed 61).

acceptance of the plea they have been making. This is, and I very much hope so, a *partie remise*, as the French would say.

As a continuation of a plea for an expanded and more inclusive Comparative Literature – New Comparative Literature or Comparative Cultural Studies –, which Tötösy de Zepetnek started in the late 1980's, this edited book stands as a very positive addition to comparat(iv)ist scholarship for the mere reason that the editors drove their message home.

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