



University of Peshawar

Available on Gale & affiliated international databases



AsiaNet
PAKISTAN

Journal of
**Humanities &
Social Sciences**

JHSS XIX, No. 2, 2011

Globalizing Comparative Literature

Saiyma Aslam

Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Travelling of ideas, trends, movements and people is a reality of the age of globalization. With the publication of 'Travelling Theory' by Edward Said (1983), the concept of travel or travelling theories has achieved immense importance and recognition in various disciplines. This paper aims to explore the potential the 'Travelling Theory' offers in globalizing comparative literature. It investigates whether the travelling theory holds promise for destabilizing Eurocentric Canon and expanding the frontiers of comparative literature. It explores the mechanics involved in fast dissemination of theories to suggest that comparative literature has indeed become global. It also highlights the forces which delimit dissemination of comparative literature written in regional languages at an international level. The article suggests, as central to discussions in globalizing comparative literature, the need to initiate polyvalent dialogue from various geographical, cultural, ideological, racial and religious contexts, strengthening the commonalities and celebrating the differences in an atmosphere of mutual indebtedness for a noble cause of peaceful living.

Keywords: cultural and literary traditions, adaptations and transformations, globalization, dialogue, translation, dissemination.

Introduction

Globalizing comparative literature is necessary to cap on the potential globalization holds for fast travelling of theories, works, and individuals. This becomes imperative to counter the forces that overlook or mask heterogeneity and creative/critical potential of many cultures in favour of those commanding information technology and economy. Globalization is a two edged sword with the potential to strengthen as well as weaken the literary, social, and economic potential of different countries due to their unequal access and control over the chief globalizing trends.¹ Comparative literature finds itself squarely at the centre of this tension. It holds potential for becoming global as it is, since its inception, a multidisciplinary programme crossing national and linguistic boundaries. However, at the same time, it has to confront the Eurocentric Canon² strengthened by long established supremacy of intellectual and philosophical discourses generated in the West to ensure literary traditions of other regions equally partake in redrawing the frontiers of canon formation. The need to investigate different literary theories to find a new consilience³ for establishing comparative literature in a globalized context impels the researcher to trace the potential offered by 'Travelling Theory'.

"Travelling Theory" by Edward Said (1983) introduced the concept of travelling of theories which move to other geographic lands or temporal periods from their point of origin and undergo resistance and adaptation, transformation and development in contact with the new cultures on the way to claim theoretical status. Said's "Travelling Theory" helps confront Eurocentric Canon supremacy by asserting active role to the cultures who may have borrowed foreign influences. Said asserts that travelling of ideas in the form of acknowledged or unconscious influences, creative borrowings or wholesale appropriations (Said, 1983: 226) are important for the nourishment of cultural as well as intellectual life. Even the concept of borrowing for him is a critical activity where readers and writers are governed foremost by their theoretical standpoints and in turn are empowered to overcome the constraints of their immediate intellectual environment (Said, 1983: 241). The most important contribution of Said is in distinguishing theory from critical consciousness — the potential which the researcher finds central to using travelling theory for globalizing comparative literature. Theory is understood in the context of its production which may later be compared to other locations where it is incorporated for use. Critical consciousness is the

awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. . . [as well as] awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict. (Said, 1983: 242)

Said regards a critic's job as highly important in not only providing resistance to a theory, but also opening it up towards historical and social reality, human needs and interests (Said, 1983: 242). As such all theories including those emanating from the West have to be studied in terms of the developments they undergo in the culture of arrival. According to Said, an idea or a theory passes chiefly through four stages. First, it moves from the place and time of its inception. Second, it traverses a distance through encountering pressures of various contexts to enter new space and time conditions. Third, in the new context of arrival it encounters a set of conditions of acceptance or resistance resulting in its introduction and toleration. Fourth, the fully or partly accommodated or incorporated idea is transformed by the local uses in a new time and place (Said, 1983: 226-227). Said develops this theory in the context of theories that travelled and ultimately arrived in Great Britain via Paris from Hungary. Critics such as Clifford (1998) and Boer (1995) believe that the development of theory as Said (1983) delineates is linear in time and direction and does not reflect the polyvalent dialogue initiated on account of travelling of ideas to and from various theoretical positions. Clifford, in "Notes on travel and theory", comments that Edward Said's four stages of a travelling theory following a linear path of immigration and acculturation ignores the ambivalent appropriations and resistances that characterize travel of theories and theorists between places in the First and Third worlds (Clifford, 1998:5). Boer recommends that departure from one point to another ought to involve also a return because otherwise "[i]f a round trip ticket is not included in the deal, we might rather speak of emigration" (Boer, 1995:110).

Comparative analyses should highlight specifically the adaptations, modifications, and transformations theories or ideas undergo in the context of arrival. The need is to make these theories and literary developments travel back to the sites of origin to assert the agency of receiving cultures and their contribution in further enriching them. Moreover, comparative theorists should highlight areas where literary values developed in the western literature owe inspiration from other literary cultures that are still marginalized. The two-way investigation can assert literary value of marginalized literatures. This requires highlighting the originality and critical

consciousness of the lesser-known writers even where they are borrowing or transforming influences from the Eurocentric traditions. It necessitates also highlighting the contributions of the lesser-known yet important literary figures in the established theories or the potential they still hold for further consolidating these. In this discussion highlighting the need to make contributions by and to the Eurocentric canon does not mean committing the mistake which Rey Chow argues many comparative theorists make by making comparisons only to a body of European texts which implicitly means acknowledging the superiority of European texts over the non-European ones. The comparative studies suggested above are required if comparative literature has to successfully renegotiate theoretical framework of the discipline. By encouraging the comparative studies in the areas suggested above, renegotiations are possible in the sense of what Boer explains, “problematization of hierarchies and inequalities in power relations, and on questioning the hegemony in setting the agenda” (Boer, 1995:117).

The debates of comparativists and travelling theorists are centered on similar preoccupations. Comparative literature highlights similarities and differences in literatures produced in different corners of the world and also points out distinctive contributions made by different literary traditions that were, are or could be taken up and developed by other literatures. The focus is also on how literary traditions of different literatures can help redraw the frontiers of canon formation. Of particular significance is the widespread recognition to move comparative literature beyond its western origin and make it a productive arena of scholarly work on all literatures around the globe. By so doing, comparative literature will also attain a true theoretical status because as James Clifford, in *Notes on travel and theory*, rightly states that “[l]ocalization undermines a discourse's claim to "theoretical" status” (1998:2). The manifesto of ‘Travelling Theories and Travelling Theorists’ given by Clifford & Dhareshwar (1989) in the preface to *Inscriptions*, thus rightly reflect this situation in emphasizing that:

Theory, by definition, is more than a local act. While it is enmeshed in specific traditions and locales, and while it is marked by the site and condition of its production, its purview is extensive, generalizing, comparative. If theories no longer totalize, they do travel. Indeed, in their diverse rootings and uprootings, theories are constantly translated, appropriated, contested, grafted. Theory travels; so do theorists (1989:1).

The concerns important to comparative literature also lay central to the debates of travelling theorists investigating the development of certain theories as they cross time and space barriers as well as tracing of intellectual similarities and borrowings in the works produced at different times or locations. The findings and interests of comparative literature and travelling theory thus overlap. Earl Fitz's "Internationalizing the literature of the Portuguese-speaking world" reveals that Helene Cixous' "l'écriture féminine" stems in fact from her discovery of Clarice Lispector's *Água viva*. Fitz asserts that "an important writer working in Portuguese has not only been largely ignored (or misinterpreted) on the world stage but, in this particular case, denied the widespread recognition that is due her for providing the prototype of one of the twentieth century's most important literary theories" (Fitz, 2002:446). The influence of Goethe's *Faust* on Byron's *Manfred* via its French translation by Madame de Staël is just one instance out of the myriad of such travelling of ideas, in this particular case between three major European languages. Even theories develop, as discussed above, through interaction of theorists from various theoretical and geographic landscapes. Clifford goes so far as to comment that Marxism developed a theoretical status as Marx developed his deep awareness of the situation in Rhineland in critical perspective of experiences garnered from his travels to Paris, the political centre of Europe, and thereafter to Manchester-London, the emerging source of industrial-commercial dynamism. All theories are being debated and developed by theorists of different regions and periods. Travelling theorists are interested in tracing the developments of different theories and ideas when they are modified for local use.

Edward Said's "Travelling Theory" thus introduced the concept of travelling theories and theorists resulting in transnational dissemination of literary works and theories. The travelling of ideas from various geographic, cultural, and linguistic locations develop a polyvalent dialogue where literary and cultural productions enter in dialogue in parity or compete for greater parity. Comparative literature as an interdisciplinary field stressing for greater dissemination of different literary and artistic creations across different cultural, linguistic and geographic boundaries in fact presumes the concept of travelling as a prerequisite. Since the publication of travelling theory and particularly in the age of globalization, travelling is inflated to include, apart from travelling of individuals, fast circulation also of theories, works, influences, forces, and ideas. Travelling theory has also increased interest in tracing the trajectories various cultural, political, economic, religious, and intellectual phenomena took in reaching their current state, as well as their networks of interaction and interdependency. It is not surprising then to also encounter studies

highlighting equal participation of different cultures in the development of World civilization. Tyler Cowen highlights this factor as:

If we consider the book, paper comes from the Chinese, the Western alphabet comes from the Phoenicians, the page numbers come from the Arabs and ultimately the Indians, and printing has a heritage through Gutenberg, a German, as well as through the Chinese and Koreans. The core manuscripts of antiquity were preserved by Islamic civilization and, to a lesser extent, by Irish monks. (Cowen, 2004:6)

Cowen also highlights that all civilizations throughout history are multicultural products resulting from international exchange of goods, services, and ideas. Western supremacy as the leading civilization is deconstructed also when the developments it owes due to other civilizations are considered:

To varying degrees, Western cultures draw their philosophical heritage from the Greeks, their religions from the Middle East, their scientific base from the Chinese and Islamic worlds, and their core populations and languages from Europe. (Cowen, 2004:6)

When the world civilizations are built upon shared experiences, developments, and modifications, it is impossible to neatly divide all scientific, literary or cultural phenomena in terms of absolute debtors or creditors. Eurocentrism appears anachronistic in front of the world developments due to globalization. With the intensification and acceleration of social and cultural exchanges, technological flow of information, easy and accessible modes of travelling, territorial divisions and canon frontiers are becoming less absolute. In the literary domain, this globalised trend of mutual borrowings, influences, and increased communication have become very pronounced and is reflected, as Clausen (1994) states, in the phenomenon of 'international writer' such as T.S. Eliot, Malcolm Lowry, Janette Turner, etc. who can be fitted only imperfectly into a single nation's literary heritage. Moreover, as he points out, even the most nationally specific historical material has become international literary property as manifested in just few of the examples mentioned by him: the Australian Thomas Keneally and the Englishman Richard Adams wrote novels about the American Civil War, the American Thomas Flanagan published two novels about the Irish struggle for independence and Stanley Wolpert wrote a novel about the assassination of Gandhi (Clausen, 1994:62-63). In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Angles detailed this cosmopolitan character to consumption and production which has forced the

nations to depend upon material and intellectual productions from distant lands. They discerned a remarkable development of a 'World Literature' as national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness was becoming impossible and intellectual creations of individual nations were becoming a common property (as cited in Tomilson, 1999:76). Despite this, why is it that still Eurocentric canon and literature produced in the western world is more influential even at a time when globalization offers immense possibilities for free circulation of capital, commodities, cultures, and literatures. The people now are free more than ever before to choose from the diverse cultural and literary products. The following observation will appear commonplace to many privileged individuals:

Only in a world of globalized culture can I collect nineteenth-century Japanese prints, listen to the music of pygmy tribes, read the Trinidadian author V. S. Naipaul, and enjoy the humor of Canadian Jim Carrey, while my neighbors pursue different paths of their own choosing. (Cowen, 2004 :128)

The privileged may enjoy this diverse access. However, this remains an individual endeavour motivated in large part by the position and access of the individuals. An individual living in an advanced metropolitan centre may have access to various cultural artefacts, literary creations and visual media, but his freedom is only limited to choose from what is being offered. What about those cultural and literary products that fail to reach capitalist metropolitan centres from other parts of the world? This leads investigation on multiple levels. Why are some products disseminated more quickly and marketed more effectively than others? Why certain products fail to offer their uniqueness in this multicultural world? What pressures hinder this movement? Who benefits or loses then? How far is it right that the advanced western nations and the Eurocentric Canon dominate still for having better marketing standards and facilities and ensuring fast dissemination of their products? Moreover, the western world adds far less foreign cultural and literary products in the canon to give a glow of neutrality where their products are shown dominating naturally in an equal and fair participation, a trend that requires investigation. To answer these concerns, it is pertinent to investigate the mechanics involved in fast dissemination of theories and works and also the forces which delimit dissemination of comparative literature written in many national or regional languages at an international level.

Exploring the mechanics involved in the fast dissemination or otherwise of works is pertinent to ensure comparative literature becomes global. The process of

dissemination of a work undergoes, as Knapp (2005) states, in “Race, class, gender: Reclaiming baggage in fast travelling of theories:”

highly overdetermined processes involving constellations of politico-institutional power and opportunity structures, markets and survival strategies, linguistic hegemonies as well as unevenly distributed phantasies and prejudice about the use and exchange value of the works one has not yet read and of the necessity to read them (Knapp, 2005: 251)

Factors like translation, effective media and publication opportunities greatly influence the transnational reception of a work. Translations are unavoidable for comparative literature aiming to “compare different kinds of poetics, and not just different variants of European poetics in its historical evolution” (Lefevre, 1995:3). Moreover, translations function as a type of intercultural communication increasing the audience of a particular text across linguistic barriers. Effective media representations of the significance of works written in different national or regional languages increase the chances of their translations in other languages and so their reception by foreign readers. The role played by mainstream publishing houses in the international dissemination of such works cannot be overlooked. A work selected by international mainstream publishing houses that are multinational corporations reaches more destinations than the one accepted by a localized publishing agency. A work written or translated into English has more chances of being published by leading publishing houses than those translated into other languages. Above all, publication of a work depends also on factors external to the literary merit of the work and more responsive to the cultural perceptions of the consumer society. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn reveals that the Euro-American cast asserted upon the literary works of American- Indian writers truly reflects the pressures writers of other nationalities also face for publication in the West. American Indian writers face questions that relate more to the taste of the foreign to-be audience than the intent of the writer. They confront questions such as “how can you make this story more accessible to the ‘general American reader’? (an agent’s query)” and “how and why is it that you use an Indian language word or phrase at certain places in your narrative ...? (an editors’ query)”(Cook-Lynn,1993: 27). Nawal el Saadawi considers an irretrievable damage is done to the philosophical wealth of the former colonies where London assumes the sole right to decide the works to be translated and the writers that ought to be introduced to the world. Saadawi says:

London only translates the Indian or Arabic literature that it pleases and that corresponds to its view of India and the Arabs. Thus the greatest of Indian or Arab literature is not translated in London. It remains shut up in the local market and does not reach the international one (Saadawi, 1992:130).

Indian, Arab, South Asian or other resident writers from other world regions have not had the same privilege to be received as great writers like their western counterparts. In “Why keep asking me about my identity?”, Saadawi points out the western publishing houses choose those works for translation which conform to the stereotypes prevalent in the West about that culture or wherein there is room for misinterpretation and accentuation of the exotic and the strange. In this situation the modern novels produced in Africa and the South which deal with the reality of relations between Africa and the North or with gender and class are not considered suitable for consumption in the North (Saadawi, 1997: 130-131). The hegemony maintained by the West in selective consumption and popularization of literary works from other cultures leads to misperception and myopic and distorted projection of cultural values of the nations. The misunderstanding generated thus between different cultures is also responsible partly for the polarization we observe in the world.

For comparative literature being translated, the issue of true depiction of the content of the work and intent of the author is very crucial. Any translation undertaken keeping in view the literary requirements of the target culture and audience may efface important cultural values of the original text and thus affect its individuality and literary value. Any translation that effaces the individuality and historical concreteness of a work even when it transcends geographic and linguistic barriers does not benefit the objectives of comparative literature which conforms to the rule Bassnett succinctly states:

Implicit to comparative literature outside Europe and the United States is the need to start with the home culture and to look outwards, rather than with the European model of literary excellence and to look inwards. (as cited in Chow, 2004:303).

Translations that occur amidst incapacitating restrictions when the content and style of works are forced to conform to the tastes and understanding of the target audience, who are not acquainted with the original language and civilization, fail to impart the true spirit of the original. In situations where the work is translated for a

foreign audience by a person foreign to the cultural system in which the book was written or contextualized, translators may take certain liberties which jeopardize the real focus of the work. Fitzgerald translated *Rubaiyat of Umer Khayyam* and during the translation process took many liberties with the subject matter, which he justified in a letter to his friend E .B. Cowell as: “It is an amusement for me to take what liberties I like with these Persians who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really want a little Art to shape them”(qtd. in Lefevere,1992:75). André Lefevere believes Fitzgerald would have never dared to take such liberties with classical Greek and Latin literature because these were considered prestigious in the Western literature. On the other hand, no such reservation hindered him from taking liberties with the Persian literature as Lefevere justly explains “Persian and, by extension, Islamic literature were and are seen as marginal, “exotic,” and can be treated with much less reverence” (Lefevere,1992:75).

Under these circumstances the sinuous web of misrepresentation and mistranslation has to be checked to adequately represent the comparative literature. Unless this happens, comparative literature cannot highlight the distinctive literary values of different literatures. In this regard scholars and professionals residing abroad are required to play an active role in translation, dissemination, and true reflection of their literature in the countries of their abode. They should project their indigenous literary traditions in enriching theory and practice in comparative literature. These writers, scholars and professionals must not submit to the phenomenon Tim Brennan termed “Third-World Cosmopolitans” living abroad as no longer tied down to national affiliations and interpreting the "homeland" from the vantage point of privilege (qtd. in Parker, 1993:66). Even western reviewers choose such literary voices as the interpreters and authentic public voices of their region. Scholars and critics residing abroad must present their literatures confidently and truthfully for comparative literatures to partake in introducing diversity of literary traditions and approaches, *recontextualise* Anglo-American and European perspectives, interrogate canon formation, *reconceive* canon and, as Bernheimer Report to ACLA recommends, produce “non-canonical readings of canonical texts, readings from various contestatory, marginal, or subaltern perspectives”(Bernheimer et al.,1993). The scholars living in advanced countries and having direct access to the latest knowledge and technology should cooperate with the local groups. Nawal el Saadawi, in “Why keep asking me about my identity”, urges that this form of

North-South networking can do a lot in many fields, help resist marginalization of the millions back home, and also build up a global solidarity from below. She says

Step by step they can participate in creating a global force from below, an alliance of peoples united in a universal human endeavour which is able to respect cultures and identities and yet unite in struggle for true democracy, justice, peace and a better future for all people (Saadawi, 1997:131).

Of particular importance is Brooks' assertion, in "Comparative languages and literatures: A not so wild idea", that every culture has its tricksters, flawed heroes, different frameworks for storytelling, aphorisms, folk sayings, wise fools, treacherous friends, anthropomorphic beasts, kind monsters and these need to be searched out in all literatures and made readily available. She particularly raises a pertinent issue especially significant to those studying abroad and surrounded by foreign culture, language, and literature. She believes if such students can "find library books with their own languages and literatures and cultures highlighted, surely they will accept themselves and their cultures, and so will those who work with them" (Brooks, 1988: 35). This suggests the need to ensure that the literary and cultural texts of different regions in translated and untranslated form appear in standard teaching anthologies and in other forms and the media (Moon, 2004:338).

Travelling Theory suggests a new theoretical perspective for undertaking comparative studies which are sensitive to cultural, religious, ethnic and regional perspectives. By suggesting that theories and ideas cross linguistic, temporal, and geographic boundaries and take shape in the context of arrival, travelling theory suggests existence of polyvalent dialogue in different disciplines that needs to be in harness with the comparative literature. Komar suggests that "[b]y constantly challenging the latest icons of theory and by comparing them to other possible strategies, comparative literature as a discipline is constantly forced to renew itself" (Komar, 1995:291). I cap this statement by adding that travelling theory and travelling theorists can facilitate comparative literature in this constant pressure for renewal in this age of globalization.

Notes

- ¹ Globalization involves economic, political, social, cultural and technological dimensions. It involves transnational processes that allow the economy, politics, culture and ideologies of developed nations to penetrate the developing countries. Information technology is another aspect of globalization where information flow has greatly sensitized the general public about their rights and their inclusion in the social and political processes. For complete information on it, read Steger, M. B. (2003). *Globalization: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.; Tomilson, J. (1999). *Globalization and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ² Eurocentric Canon takes the literacy and cultural standards of the Western arts and literature as the basis for passing evaluative judgments on non-western literatures. It grew out of the historical process of western colonial and economic dominance and has in turn provided an ideological justification for that dominance. The categories and approaches used in the European academia help to maintain the political and intellectual superiority of Europe. For an insightful account of Eurocentric Canon and Eurocentrism, read Gheverghese, G., Reddy, V., & Searle-Chatterjee, M. (1990). "Eurocentrism in the Social Sciences." *Race & Class*, 31(4).
- ³ Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines the term as the linking together of principles from different disciplines especially when forming a comprehensive theory. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998) by E.O. Wilson explores the methods that could unite the sciences and at the latter stage unite them with the humanities. This synthesis of knowledge from different specialized fields of human endeavour could comfortably be established among the different literary theories to ensure comparative literature becomes global. The potential 'Travelling Theory' offers is a modest step to find out that consilience.

References

- Bernheimer, C., Arac, J., Hirsch, M., Jones, A.R., Judy, R., Krupat, A., Capra, D. La, Nichols, S., and Suleri, S. (1993). "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century". American Comparative Literature Association Report on Professional Standards. Amherst: ACLA, University of Massachusetts.
- Boer, I., Moors, A., & Teeffelen, T. V. (Ed.). (1995). *Changing Stories: Postmodernism and the Arab-Islamic World*. Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Brooks, C. K. (1988). "Comparative languages and literatures: A not so wild idea." *The English Journal*, 77(5), 34-36.
- Chow, R. (2004). "The old/new question of comparison in literary studies: A Post-European perspective." *ELH*, 71 (2), 289-311.
- Clausen, C. (1994). "National literatures in English: Toward a new paradigm." *New Literary History*, 25 (1), 61-72.
- Clifford, J. (1998). "Notes on Travel and Theory." *Inscriptions*, 5, 1-7.
- Clifford, J., & Dhareshwar, V. (1989). "Preface to travelling theories and travelling theorists." *Inscriptions* 5, 1-2.
- Cook-Lynn, E. (1993). "The American Indian fiction writer: Cosmopolitanism, nationalism, the third world, and first nation sovereignty." *Wicazo Sa Review*, 9 (2), 26-36.
- Cowen, T. (2004). *Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- El Saadawi, N. (1992). *My Travels Around the World* (trs. S. Eber) London: Minerva.
- El Saadawi, N. (1997). *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. London: Zed Books.
- Fitz, E. (2002). "Internationalizing the literature of the Portuguese-speaking world." *Hispania*, 85(3), 439-448.
- Knapp, G. A. (2005). "Race class gender: Reclaiming baggage in fast travelling theories." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12 (3), 249-265.
- Komar, K. L. (1995). "The state of comparative literature: Theory and practice 1994." *World Literature Today*, 69(2), 287-292.

- Lefevere, A. (1995). "Introduction: Comparative literature and translation." *Comparative Literature*, 47(1), 1-10.
- Lefevere, A. (1992). *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulations of Literary Fame*. London: Routledge.
- Moon, M. (2004). "Comparative literatures, American languages." *ELH*, 71 (2), 335-344.
- Parker, K. (1993). "Home is where the heart... lies." *Transition* ,59 ,65-77.
- Said, E. W. (1983). *The world, the text, and the critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tomilson, J. (1999). *Globalization and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.