

---

## INTRODUCTION: MULTICULTURAL COMPARATISM

---

In the last decade, Indian and other non-Western literatures have begun to work their way into the mainstream of English and American literary study. Not unrelated to this, there has been a more generalized interest in placing works of literature—both Western and non-Western—within broader cultural contexts. However, comparative studies involving non-Western works have remained relatively narrow, focusing almost entirely on contemporary literature in European languages. Moreover, much of the critical work in this field has concentrated exclusively on colonialism and the attempts of Anglophone and Francophone writers to respond to European cultural hegemony through anticolonial or postcolonial writings. Thus, with a few exceptions, mainstream comparatists have paid little attention either to indigenous literary traditions in non-Western countries or to the range of noncolonial issues important to contemporary non-Western literatures.

Our broad goal in assembling this collection is, then, to think more encompassingly about comparative literature, to consider a wider range of similarities and differences, interactions and reactions, in order to understand better both the artistic form and the social import of any literature. To this end, we have designed the volume to present an overview of the major issues—aesthetic, political, and more inclusively cultural—that define or should define a comparative field of study. Our more narrow goal in this collection is to advance comparative work in the specific area of South Asian literature. Literature of the Indian subcontinent is particularly appropriate for broadly comparative study because it includes one of the oldest literary traditions in the world and, even

more importantly, because it includes the most fully developed and the most sophisticated tradition of poetic theory prior to the modern age.

Work in comparative literature may proceed in one of two ways. First, it may examine literary works, traditions, etc., in parallel. Partially modeled on the important linguistic work of Noam Chomsky, Joseph Greenberg, and others, this approach considers similarities (and, to a lesser extent, differences) in the properties and structures of diverse traditions, focusing in particular on those properties and structures that arose independently. This approach is most obviously relevant to pre-colonial works. However, colonial and postcolonial literatures that retain indigenous elements may be fruitfully studied in parallel with Western or other literatures as well.

The second approach examines works, traditions, etc., in sequence. This approach, already common in the comparative study of European literatures, focuses on historical relations—not only what one tradition has taken from another, but also what it has rejected or transformed. In the case of former European colonies, this form of study most often seeks to locate such interactions within the cultural matrix of colonial domination, though it may also invoke aesthetic or other contexts. Moreover, its focus has typically been on non-Western responses to Western literature (whether as colonial imitation or anticolonial “writing back”—on the latter, see, for example, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). However, it may just as readily examine the effects of non-Western literatures in the West (on the model of, for example, Martin Bernal’s important cultural/intellectual history, *Black Athena*).

The value of the parallel approach is in isolating both cross-cultural constants and cultural variance, allowing us to see what is common across unrelated literatures and what is idiosyncratic to given literatures; at its best, this sort of study allows us insight into both our shared humanity and our cultural diversity. The value of the sequential approach is that it allows us insight into the historical interaction of cultures; at its best, it helps us to understand the historically defined particularities of different cultures as well as their often surprisingly intercultural origins and development.

The following essays may be divided roughly along these lines. The first essay, by Hogan, touches on both approaches to comparative study in an overview of political and aesthetic issues. The next six essays take up the parallel approach more narrowly. Ebbesen, Chari, and Lehmann draw on precolonial Indian literature and poetics in order to address some broad, theoretical issues.

Pandit, Holland, and Chaudhuri turn to specific works—pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial, in that order—to examine common structures that are not the product of historical interaction. The interview with Anita Desai provides a sort of transition between the parallel and the sequential, for Desai discusses both “universal” literary concerns—of the sort isolable in parallel studies—and her own historical situation as an Indian novelist drawing upon European literary models to write about India. The next three essays take up the sequential approach. Saha examines the nexus of translation, the central point of literary contact for different cultures. Swann considers two approaches to theater, one Indian and one European, in connection with the impact of Eastern drama in the West. Pandit looks at contact in the opposite direction, examining one Indian response to European colonial literature and culture. The interview with Bhabha provides another transition, this time between the narrowly literary concerns of the earlier chapters and the broader sociopolitical issues that are important to any sequential study and that are particularly crucial in the context of colonial and neocolonial hegemony. In a final essay, Ashis Nandy goes further in this direction and examines the possibility of a truly postcolonial culture, taking us from the relatively narrow topic of literary relations to the larger and more pressing issue of understanding and restructuring the culture in which literature can arise and function.

More exactly, Patrick Hogan begins the volume with an analysis and criticism of the dichotomizing view of East and West. Maintaining that an emphasis on difference has distorted our understanding of both Indian and European literatures, Hogan argues that a more circumspect study of cultural difference should be complemented by two sorts of study: reconstructive work on common ancestors of Indian and European literary forms (on the model of historical linguistics), and, even more importantly, the isolation of literary universals (on the model of universal grammar).

Jeffrey Ebbesen takes up a similar theme, though with a very different method, in his discussion of Indian and European conceptions of authorship. Employing deconstructive principles, he, too, argues against a dichotomizing view and concludes that Eastern and Western notions are both more similar to one another and more internally different than has previously been recognized.

Turning from the author, first to poetic form, then to the audience, V. K. Chari considers the theory of genre in Indian poetics, emphasizing the ways in which aesthetic response was more im-

portant to Indian writers than merely formal properties. Chari notes both differences and similarities between Indian and European theories, going on to employ Sanskrit theory in rethinking not only Indian, but European problems in this area.

Moving from author and audience to the artistic and communicative medium that links them, W. P. Lehmann examines the dominant views of language, particularly literary language, in India and the West. Specifically, Lehmann argues that these traditions are diametrically opposed on the nature of linguistic representation—an opposition with significant consequences for literary study. On the other hand, Lehmann notes that the dominant Western conception is present in India and has been for many centuries, while the dominant Indian conception has held a strong minority position in the West.

As already noted, the following three essays turn from theory to practical criticism, while retaining the focus on parallelism. In the first of these essays, Lalita Pandit examines two similar, but historically unrelated dramas: Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. As Pandit points out, these two plays, and other Sanskrit and Shakespearean romantic tragicomedies, share a range of generic properties. Rather than outlining these in general terms, Pandit concentrates on a common theme of considerable political and psychological importance in both India and Europe: man's paranoia about woman's infidelity, his consequent brutality toward her, his subsequent remorse, and his final fantasy of her as a purified and romanticized savior.

Holland, too, takes up common psychological and political motifs, in this case looking at Oedipal structures and the theme of religious belief in Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (a film based on P. K. Mukherjee's novella of colonial Bengal).

In a final study of parallelism, Una Chaudhuri considers the issue of postcolonial exile from the perspective of deconstruction. Concentrating, like Holland, on Oedipus and a recent South Asian film and returning us to the issues of linguistic representation raised by Lehmann, Chaudhuri argues that both *Oedipus the King* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* effectively deconstruct the identitarian metaphysics of presence so frequently associated with a romanticized view of home, especially as presented in realistic drama.

Again, the interview with Anita Desai functions as a sort of bridge between those essays adopting a parallel approach and those engaging in a sequential investigation. Half German and half Indian, writing about India but in English, Desai embodies what

postcolonial critics and theorists have referred to as the "hybridity" of the colonial/postcolonial writer. Yet Desai is perhaps less concerned with her European and Indian influences than with a sort of common fund of themes (e.g., the struggle of the individual against large impersonal forces) and techniques (e.g., cyclical structure) on which she draws in crafting her novels.

Turning to the sequential approach, P. K. Saha examines what is perhaps the most fundamental issue in cross-cultural literary influence: translation. He carefully distinguishes cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic impediments to adequate translation, illustrating each variety with examples from Bengali and Sanskrit. He then goes on to suggest a number of practical, though necessarily partial solutions to the problem of translating Indian literature into English.

Darius Swann takes up Eastern influence on the West, considering the more particular issue of similarities between *Nautankī* theater and the drama of Bertolt Brecht. While Brecht was not directly influenced by *Nautankī*, he was influenced by another Asian form of theater: the Chinese opera. Swann examines not only the similar antirealist techniques that derive from Brecht's interest in Eastern drama, but also the very different aims toward which these techniques are used in Brecht and *Nautankī*. As Swann emphasizes, *Nautankī* retains a classical Indian concern with the emotional effect of the drama, a concern at odds with Brecht's pursuit of the "alienation effect."

In the following essay, Pandit takes up an Indian response to colonial European literature. Specifically, she considers Tagore's *Gora* and its precursor *Kim* in order to explore the problem of Indian cultural identity after British colonization. Identity is perhaps the most widely thematized topic in postcolonial criticism, and *Gora* is a particularly crucial text on this topic, for, in this novel, Tagore sought to portray the impossibility of complete indigeneity and, simultaneously, the indecency and injustice of full Westernization.

The last two essays return to broad theoretical concerns. The critical currency of the term "hybridity" is to a great extent the result of the writings of Homi Bhabha. In his interview with David Bennett and Terry Collits, Bhabha reconsiders this influential notion in relation to a variety of more contemporary issues, from multiculturalism in the academy to the Rushdie affair. In each case, critically stressing a politics of signification, he seeks to isolate an internal disruption that indicates that widely presupposed cultural unities are deeply disunified.

Probably most comparatists and writers on postcolonial literature would agree that literature only arises, is sustained and disseminated, within the structures of a more encompassing culture. For example, Pandit's and Bhabha's discussions of identity and hybridity clearly presuppose this point. In the case of a former colony such as India, the question of the form of that culture is particularly pressing. In the final essay, Ashis Nandy turns to this larger issue. Arguing for the primacy of culture over statist politics, he sets forth a specifically Indian alternative to the current hegemonic and Western structures, which operate to stifle the human and cultural aspirations of most people throughout the world today.

Nandy's essay should remind all of us that, though many of the most crucial political issues may be broadly cultural, they are not necessarily narrowly literary. Nonetheless, what we read and teach, and how we read and teach it, have political repercussions. It is our hope that the following essays will help to encourage a broadened study of comparative literature, more rigorous attention to both the similarities and differences between Indian and European traditions, and a fuller understanding of the historical relations between these traditions. On the other hand, our aims are as much aesthetic as they are political. Thus we hope equally that the following essays will foster in readers a fuller appreciation of the beauty of Indian literature—an appreciation that is itself, perhaps, not without political consequences.

---

## Bibliography

---

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. 2 vols. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987.