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CONCEPTS OF LITERATURE: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE BY HENRY GIFFORD (AN ARTICLE REVIEW)

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Professor Gifford in his book aims at discussing the perspectives and characteristics of comparative literature in depth as he considers the study of this area in specific as a “natural product of any effort to understand modern poetry and contemporary literature” (2). He mentions Eliot and Ezra Pound as good representative of the cosmopolitan literary themes in their works. The process of interpreting any comparative works requires on part of the reader to be an insatiable and knowledgeable enough to comprehend and grasp fully the overall meaning of any given literary work.

In the forward, Gifford identifies comparative literature as an “area of interest rather than discipline” (3). Also, he refers to Goethe’s welt literature, main principle of comparative studies which is the free way of thinking without any restrictions and beyond borders. In this regard, the author emphasizes the role of CL students who should be broad – minded, well-educated, and imaginative to understand fully the poetic products in the field. In the book, the European literary works along with the classics are tackled and compared with the American and British ones. Sometimes foreign works need to be translated which is in return another pivotal and challenging process to bring together all these literary works from

all over the word and crystalize them to have a meaningful and fruitful comparisons among these literary works. As a result, any comparatist may face many pitfalls or obstacles in his comparative study, yet when he understands the principles of this area in depth this will open the horizon for many other fruitful studies in CL to investigate deeply. So the study of CL is an endless chain of thinking and innovation that one may leads to the other. Gifford’s book falls into six chapters in which each chapter presents main idea about CL.

In chapter one entitled “The Education of Modern Poet”, the author sheds lights on Ezra Pound’s poems and introduces him as one of the pioneers in literature who may inspire the comparatists and trigger their imagination when reading and contemplating his works. Pounds literary poems have enriched almost all comparative studies due to their great significance and universality. Ezra Pound is presented in this chapter as a privileged poet due to three main reasons. Firstly, he is an American poet. Secondly, his literary poems are meaningful and deep. Thirdly, he is very influential writer.

As an American poet his poems were characterized by simplicity and familiarity in the sense that he uses a very inspiring

language that might be easily acquired all over the globe. He thinks freely as reflected in 1914, when he wrote passionately about Americans, stating that classic works like Egyptians, Chinese, and many others should be tackled and revived interchangeably. Ezra Pound is distinguished as a brilliant poet simply because his contributions are related to the world literature, unlike his companions. For example “The Cantos” is a modern American poem characterized by its universality. Also, he is influenced by the Victorian poetry then the Italian along with Homer. He uses Haiku and Noh play to create world literature. However, many critics regarded Pound’s poems lack centre or decentred therefore, they called him “translation poet”. But, in fact his main goal is to look for the inner traditions in literature around the universe as he called it “a criticism of poetry based on world poetry on the work of maximum excellence, a criticism which must be done by those who have the tools in their hands” (8). So to understand Ezra Pound’s literary works one must be familiar and acquainted with foreign literature as part of his experience.

It is worth noting that both Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot are famous for their interest in reviving the classics since they keep referring to the old literary works, myths,

and allusions in their modern poems i.e. “The Cantos” by Pound, Dante is presented and introduced again to modern generation or “modern conscientiousness” and recognized by modern readers who may be not fully aware of these classical legacies left behind by the ancestors which need to be revived and spotlighted every now and then “an educated man will need to follow Pound into these foreign literatures, so that they become living part of experience” (12). Additionally, Pound uses Haiku as main technique to “the natural-object” i.e. “super –position” via using one idea over the other in the sense that he adapts Haiku as an imagist. Aiming at linking and intertwining all periods of times all together, Ezra Pound adds a new “stream” to the western poetry since mingling the European classics in the Eastern ones might risky endeavor, yet the advantages are also worthy to undergo such a challenge to enlarge the readers comprehension and reception to world literature. As a result, when reading Pound’s poems scholars will get acquainted easily with the Chinese traditions and other exotic cultures.

As for T.S.Eliot, the reference to classical allusions in his poems is very important and essential and a new way to write out of the box to revive the past and enrich the modern text, especially when mentioning

the pillars of poetry who belong to Greek or Roman empire. Eliot believes that our present time is never inseparable from the old one. Both Eliot and Pound attempted to spread their works beyond borders and way beyond their country. For them world literature is “a mingling of recession national soil” (15) by “mixing moments in human civilization when relating them closely and skilfully regardless the Hebraic stream in one single consciousness that leads to an internal and everlasting literature” (15). The outcome of such mixture i.e. modernity and classics would beautifully make literature irresolvable within the passage of time.

Moreover, Pushkin exerts a great influence by the French poetry along with Byron, Shakespeare, and Scott. Goethe in return endeavors to melt and unify all varied literary works in one canon. Also, Mathew Arnold states that the impact of European and American literature is less than the Greek and Roman. He shows interest in the German, Italian, French, and Russian writers like that of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. In this book, Gifford states that D.H. Lawrence is the most controversial and insatiable writer among others as he celebrates Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Hemingway, and Forster. Eventually, to study the impact of one poet upon the other requires knowledge and patience but

any difficulties might be faced by any comparatist will lead him at the end of the tunnel to an insightful survey and very illuminating outcomes.

In the second chapter entitled “national accent and traditions” focuses mainly upon the importance of human sense in studying CL, especially the eye and the ear. The reader's eye, which maps and visualizes the common characters among two or more writers like the main themes, ideas, and patterns. Whereas, the reader's ear may serve as a good and useful tool to distinguish the national accent of the literary works. Eric Auer Bacht traces the tone of the work and “movement of syntax” could easily be figured out and highlighted the “continuity and changes” in any text. Critics who use their senses i.e. eyes and ears to search for “inner traditions” that govern unique national literature, may judge these works on top of other local products. Eliot discusses the influence of Hawthorn upon James in his essay “The Hawthorn Aspect”. He traces implicitly the inner traditions in the targeted texts. In this regard, the “inner traditions” were depicted in Emily Dickenson's poems, who is the product of her time and age and she attempts to write her poetry out of her personal experience but the puritan influence is always clear in her poems and might be sensed strongly by

any keen reader. Dickinson is an American poet who reflects the “New Englandly” poems. It is believed that Emily Dickenson and Robert Frost are “new England poets”. Both write in clear, smooth, and understandable language but they tend to convey hidden messages in their works. The former tries in her poems to mix many contradicted images i.e. “abstraction and sensation”. Dickenson uses “the duality of English language” to express her dual mindset. She combines “Shakespearean manners, Latin ideas, and Saxon-reception”. Tate says that Emily Dickinson is deeply influenced by the puritans and any recipient may figure out that in her poems “She writes American but see New Englanderly”.

In Yeats’ essay “Poetry and Traditions” 1907, the idea of writing Irish poetry is clarified and stated plainly. Admitting that that despite the easiness of English language, there are still sophisticated “meaning and implications” as he expresses symbolically many Irish traditions in light of European literature. Therefore, Yeats’s way of thinking was impacted by “Ang-Iresh culture”. The author of the book emphasizes the idea of relating the inner-traditions by Dickinson and Yeats lead to create “national accent then make language supra-national”. The process of generating national poems

needs “local-base” i.e. Shakespeare might be traced back to middle ages but not modern America.

Robert Lowell in his poem “The Quaker Graveyard” laments the death of his cousin modeled by Lycidas from Milton’s poems. The American poets exerted deep influence by European poets but they “cannot ignore strong voices of their traditions”. Lioneel, the critic, says that no poet can “escape the cultural background that brings the poet into being”.

Accordingly, any composed poem has close affinity to its mother language as long as it conveys the implied and hidden meaning easily that would definitely affect the reader emotionally and spiritually. Gifford in his book provides a very large number of names and pots compared to others like Antonio Machado, the Spanish poet who constantly mixes his poetry with the 15th century literary works to give it “ground-base”. His “Marinque” depend on Castilian Accent or tongue which enabled the Spanish to read the poems easily since some of the Spanish readers may not be well-familiar or acquainted with other accents or tongues.

The third chapter of the book entitled “The Mind of Europe” deals with the impact of the classics upon modern literary poems specifically the Greek and roman legacies

left by literature's pioneers at that time. It is believed that Europe has a distinguished national and cultural identity. However, many voices claimed that Europe is a "combination of Atlantic, and Urals cultures" but the fact remains that European culture existed and continued to be despite all contradictions and challenges as it developed since the Roman Empire and the Christian church. Ben Johnson and Samuel Johnson believed that "the scholars and men of letters" played a pivotal role in the society to enlighten the readers and present literary works that serve noble causes. Even Mathew Arnold says that "men of letters like the Greek, Roman, and Hebrew". The author of the book claims that almost all classical studies diminished into one branch among many other fields including the classical languages turned to be dead as described by many critics "the dead languages that changed into foreign ones". According to Mathew Arnold the study of CL requires hitting upon the following "Mediterranean past, Hebrew religion, Greek myth, Latin philosophy, and Decorum" for instance Pop's poems inspired by the Roman literature. For Ben Johnson, human history is the same all over the world Greek, Roman, Chinese, and Easterners share many characteristics in

common i.e. the French revolution mirrors that of Rome.

The author mentions poets like Poe and Dryden who used Greek and Roman images in their poems to support their readers with useful and insightful historical background about classics because modern readers cannot understand the old languages which were considered dead and foreign as stated earlier. It is worth noting in this chapter that Virgil's works had a great and obvious impact upon Dante's "The Divine Comedy" the middle ages' masterpiece and Milton's poetry as well. The adaptations of Virgil may burden any poet, yet it is considered a natural process for them since they believed that English language and Greek or even Latin one are intertwined all together and "the English language belongs to Latin heritage". One of the Virgilian terms like "mediterranean" is adopted by Forester. Natural piety used by Wordsworth as a reference to the rural gods as indicated centuries back to the Aeneid in which the term Piatas is used to imply the "right relation with gods". By the end of the chapter, Gifford defines the term "Decorum" which is originally a European word that means "controlled-exaggeration" when "restraint and hyperbole meet". The decorum is derived from Latin poetry.

In chapter four entitled “Notes on Translation”, the process of translation is defined as two edge sword that may either give life to the targeted text or butcher it. In order to translate any literary text one should be well-educated, impartial and not biased, has a strong sense of professionalism to convey the message of the translated text correctly. Any translator should know his limits for example Gide’s translation of *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* had adopted Shakespeare’s “tone to tone and spirit to spirit”. When Tolstoy’s *Anna karnena* along with *Sin and Punishment* translated into many languages were well received and best read all over the world i.e. these novels became universal after being translated. However, many critics argued that the translated original versions of both novels lost their beauty, form, style, and even author’s sensations. Gifford mentions some advantages and merits behind translating literary works in the sense that the translated texts gain more popularity and fame. As a result readers who belong to different communities and cultures would have the chance to read the masterpieces in their own mother tongues i.e. *The Metamorphosis*. So translation might be a tool for the “survival of the text”. Mathew Arnold’s rejected the idea of translating poetry simply because “the power of the

poet lies in his manners, not in his words taken separately”. Accordingly, the translator should keep and preserve the unity of the text, coherence and cohesion along with the texture of the original literary work. To sum up the advantages and disadvantages of translation process, the author of the book states that “translation holds together the body of the world literature, and helps to keep the language a live and supple”

Chapter five entitled “comparative studies at the university” tackles the inseparability of literature from that of philosophy and history. Classics tend to very complicated and difficult, therefore, in the undergraduate schools the students are taught the classical masterpieces in simple translated language to enable the students to understand these literary works easily and facilitate the process of education in general. The students are required to read Spenser’s “Faere Queen”, Dante’s “The Divine Comedy”, and Boccaccio. the emphasis lies heavily on teaching all literary legacies left behind even the Russian like those novel’s by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. As a result, comparative studies are used as an essential tool to enrich the American literature. Gifford continues in spotlighting the obstacles of graduate studies like tracing the influence of classics upon modern writings and

relate them all together to create a comprehensive relation that bridge the past and present, for instance, the medieval & modern interests. Despite all challenges the fact remains that indulging in the study of CL would definitely expand the knowledge of any comparatist scholar.

The last chapter, the sixth, entitled “American literature- the special case” reflects that the American imaginary mind differs from the rest of English which drives to extremes with an impatient absolutism. Modern American literary

pillars are Faulkner, Hemingway, and Beats poets were very distinguished in their own of writings. The comparative sense is distinguished by its sense of singularity of the American sense. Some critics studied the new crystalized America literature along with the Russian, French, Italian, and Latin. “it’s unquestionable with the mind of Europe that we should approach American literature and practice binocular vision of Tocqueville writing on democracy in America”. The critics and scholars never skipped the European impact upon the American literature.

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