

Study Materials on Comparative Literature - 4

II MA English Literature (2017 Regulations)

Topic:
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Crossing the Borders"

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“Crossing the Borders” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is considered as one of the most acclaimed postcolonial critics living today. She is regarded as an important figure in Comparative literature well, because she has written extensively about it, and she has occupied positions as professor and chair of comparative literature in different Universities in America. The essay, “Crossing the Borders” is the first chapter of Spivak’s well-known book, *Death of a Discipline*. Spivak’s book consists of three chapters, all of which are speeches she delivered in 2000 in the Wellesley Library lecture series at Irvine. Through this book, Spivak declares the death of comparative literature as a discipline thus drawing attention to the urgency to develop “a new comparative literature.”

Spivak primarily finds fault with Comparative literature as a discipline taught and practised in American Universities, as it is centred on “Europe and the extracurricular Orient”. She argues that, by being Eurocentric, Comparative Literature cannot claim worldwide scope as a discipline. She clarifies that the discipline of Comparative Literature as pursued in various American universities often does not accommodate subjects that fall under Asian Studies, African Studies, Latin American Studies, in an apparent display of Eurocentrism. She thinks that the discipline of comparative literature needs to cross the predefined disciplinary borders in order to become relevant and accommodative of the languages and cultures beyond Europe. Spivak also thinks that the renewal and reformation of comparative literature were necessitated by developments like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rising tide of multiculturalism and cultural studies.

In “Crossing the Borders” Spivak sees possibilities of border crossing among disciplines like Area Studies, Comparative literature, cultural studies and ethnic studies. While doing that she examines the circumstances that led to the creation of Comparative Literature and Area Studies in American universities. While acknowledging the need for expanding the scope of comparative literature, Spivak sees many changes coming in the way of Area Studies as well. According to her “Area Studies were established to secure U.S. power in the Cold War” whereas “Comparative Literature was a result of European intellectuals fleeing ‘totalitarian’ regimes.” That is, there are explicit political aims behind the creation of these disciplines. While Area Studies serves as a platform for creating knowledge on strategic ‘areas’ in the world, and to maintain America’s control over these regions, Comparative Literature was

established to serve the interests of the intellectuals who left their totalitarian regimes in different parts of Europe and sought refuge in America. She writes:

Area Studies were founded in the wake of the Cold War and funded by federal grants, backed up by the great foundations, especially Ford.... To meet the demands of war, scholars of diverse disciplines *were forced* to pool their knowledge in frantic attempts to advise administrators and policymakers...

Area Studies was thus established to enable the scholars to relate to foreign “areas”, whereas Comparative Literature opened up possibilities of comparative studies of literature from Western European nations. Spivak poses questions on the very distinction between (the privileged) ‘nations’ covered by Comparative Literature and knowing of the distant (other) ‘areas’ initiated by area studies. She seems to suggest the subtle objectives and aims that worked behind these disciplines. She differentiates between the origins of comparative literature and area studies thus:

If the “origin” of Area Studies was the aftermath of the Cold War, the “origin” of U.S. Comparative Literature had something of a relationship with the events that secured it: the flights of European intellectuals, including such distinguished men as Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek, Renato Poggioli, and Claudio Guillén, from “totalitarian” regimes in Europe. One might say that U.S. Comparative Literature was founded on inter-European hospitality, even as Area Studies had been spawned by interregional vigilance.

It is apparent that the origins of comparative literature and area studies exemplify the distinction of Europe from its others in the American academy. It is in this context that Spivak proposes transformations in the realm of Comparative Literature. She wants Comparative Literature to move away from the confinement of western European languages (“Anglophony [English], Lusophony [Portuguese], Teutophony [German], Francophony [French]”) in order to develop an interest in languages of the Southern Hemisphere, as suitable for study under comparative literature. In her opinion, languages of the Southern Hemisphere are to be looked at as active cultural media, rather than considering them as objects of cultural study (under Area Studies).

Spivak proposes a depoliticization of these two disciplines and strengthening of comparative literature as world-embracing. Such comparative literature will be able to accommodate not only the areas covered by area studies and comparative literature previously but also to explore the open-ended possibilities of studying all literature from across the world with reference to their original language and history. Thus, Spivak's vision was to transform into a level playing field.

Spivak's proposal to expand the scope of Comparative Literature by bringing into its realm subjects covered by Area, Studies, ethnic studies and cultural studies amounts to a conglomeration of subjects that are studied under humanities and social science. For instance, while Area studies belong to social sciences, comparative literature is part of humanities. Her suggestion is to explore the possibility of the border crossing between social science and humanities so that such a union would benefit both these disciplinary areas. However, in order to facilitate a meaningful exchange between these disciplines, both these disciplines need to be transformed from the way it is practised. She clarifies that "Without the support of the humanities, Area Studies can still only transgress frontiers, in the name of crossing borders; and, without a transformed Area Studies, Comparative Literature remains imprisoned within the borders it will not cross."

At the heart of the essay, Spivak emphasizes her conviction that "Comparative Literature must always cross borders". It is through these border crossings that Comparative Literature can be made relevant in the changing times. The foremost step in this direction according to Spivak is depoliticization of the disciplines. That is the politics of hostility alluding to disciplines like area studies and comparative literature need to be replaced with a politics of friendship. Spivak cites Derrida's politics of friendship to illustrate how social sciences and humanities can work together and complement each other. Thus, "Comparative Literature must always cross borders".

Points to Remember:

1. "Crossing the Borders" is the first chapter of Spivak's book, *Death of a Discipline*. The book consists of three essays. All of which are lectures she delivered at Wellek Library in Irvine, USA, in 2000.
2. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak declares the death of comparative literature as a discipline thus emphasizing the urgency to develop "a new comparative literature."

3. Spivak finds fault with Comparative literature as taught and practised in America because it was centred on “Europe and the extracurricular Orient”.
4. She argues that by being Eurocentric, Comparative literature no longer has the expected worldwide scope as a discipline.
5. The renewal of comparative literature was also necessitated by developments like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rising tide of multiculturalism and cultural studies.
6. Spivak sees possibilities of border crossing among disciplines like Area Studies, Comparative literature, cultural studies and ethnic studies.
7. “Area Studies were established to secure U.S. power in the Cold War” whereas “Comparative Literature was a result of European intellectuals fleeing ‘totalitarian’ regimes.” That is, there are explicit political aims behind the creation of these disciplines.
8. Spivak wants Comparative Literature to move away from the confinement of western European languages (“Anglophony [English], Lusophony [Portuguese], Teutophony [German], Francophony [French]”) in order to develop an interest in languages of the Southern Hemisphere, as suitable for study under comparative literature.
9. In her opinion, languages of the Southern Hemisphere are to be looked at as active cultural media, rather than considering them as objects of cultural study (under Area Studies).
10. Spivak’s proposal to expand the scope of Comparative Literature by bringing into its realm subjects covered by Area, Studies, ethnic studies and cultural studies amounts to a conglomeration of subjects that are studied under humanities and social science.
11. Spivak emphasizes her conviction that “Comparative Literature must always cross borders”. It is through these border crossings that Comparative Literature can be made relevant in the changing times.