

Study Materials on Comparative Literature - 1

**II MA English Literature
(2017 Regulations)**

**Topic:
Rey Chow's "A Discipline of Tolerance"**

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“A Discipline of Tolerance” **Rey Chow**

Rey Chow opens her essay, “A Discipline of Tolerance”, with reference to a call for papers released by the Department of Comparative Literature, Emory University in 2009. The call for papers gives a long list of topics that apparently display openness and tolerance of the discipline of Comparative literature. It is apparent that as a discipline comparative literature is redefining its boundaries, and thus deviating from its old priorities. In other words, Comparative literature is undergoing a process of subject de-formation and subject re-formation.

The list of topics in the call for papers mentioned above includes such diverse topics as “comparative literary history; literature and the languages; world literature, translation, and globalization; colonial and post-colonial literature; deconstruction and its legacies; hermeneutics; gender, sexuality, and eroticism; drama, theatre, and performance; the history of the discipline; philosophy and religion; psychoanalysis, trauma, and testimony; visual arts and architecture; technology, media, audio-visual culture; sociology, anthropology, and political economy; history and historiography; geography, geology, and ecology.”. Rey Chow feels that the call for papers form of interpellation expects the respondents to agree with the list and agree to participate as a comparatist, on the one hand, and it is an indicator of what comparative literature does. She considers this seminar as an attempt to self-define the boundaries (or a lack of fixed boundaries) of the humanities in general and comparative literature in particular.

According to Rey Chow, the Open-Ended nature of the list in the call for papers reminds one of Foucault's invocation (*The Order of Things*) of Luis Borges' classification of animals purportedly found in ‘a certain Chinese encyclopaedia. The classification defies all previously known order of things. Likewise, the list of topics given in the call for papers defies all similarity and comparability in western thought. Moreover, as Rey Chow writes, “the act of piling and bulleting indicates that many more items can be added and that this is a potentially endless and fenceless field, for which no attempt at self - delineation and self - limitation will suffice.” In her view, comparative literature seems to undergo a process of subject de-formation.

In fact, Foucault, while discussing the changing order of things, was trying to establish his view that the idea of Man (human beings) as we understood was a recent invention and this idea is fading gradually. In a similar manner, many conventions in Comparative literature are changing. In Chow's words, “As the subject (matter) of comparative literature undergoes

deformation, a new type of subject formation seems simultaneously to be taking place, alongside a new type of agenda.”

According to Chow, the changes in Comparative Literature is to be approached with references to Erich Auerbach’s idea of the “fundamental shift in the conceptualization of the human in the Western literary canon, that he discussed in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Erich Auerbach sees a transition from the Judeo – Christian perception of humanity to a more secular one “overcoming of the boundaries imposed by religion, culture, and language – in sum, of ethnocentrism.” In Auerbach’s observation, the Judeo – Christian approach to human beings presented a conception of truth that was tyrannical, where their claims excluded all other claims. The transition Auerbach talks about is from the tyranny of sacred claims to truth citing that the Judeo – Christian conception of truth was grounded in the originary act of exclusion. While doing away with the Judeo – Christian perception of the world and humanity what comes out is “a demand for an egalitarian, cosmopolitan approach to human languages and cultures.” It is this polyphonicity or the condition of tolerating all other cultures and their values that enables the re-formulation of Comparative literature as a discipline. Rey Chow explains that Comparative literature’s “efforts at self - reform, in recent years, from its previous Europe - dominant foci to “world, ” “ global, ” or “ planetary ” literature, with compellingly argued emphases on distant reading, circulation, translation, postcoloniality, subalternity, and world republicanism.”

Thus, Rey Chow presents that recent developments in the discipline of Comparative Literature indicate that the discipline is moving in an “increasingly democratized setting, a setting aptly dramatized by the list of possible conference paper topics” given in the call for papers mentioned earlier. Comparative Literature has become “a subject whose humanity is reconstituted by civility, the ability to coexist peacefully with others across classes, cultures, and languages; in sum, a tolerant subject.” Rey Chow also finds that the recent changes in Comparative Literature are also indicative of the discipline’s liberation from its Eurocentric base.

The re-formation of the discipline of Comparative Literature happened at a time when a series of intellectual movements initiated by thinkers like Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Deleuze, Irigaray, Cixous, and their contemporaries sought to radicalize western thought by attempting to overturn its Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism. Moreover, with the popularity of these theoreticians, the comparative departments have started focusing more on “theory”, where literature is treated as one of the instances of discourse. As a result “comparative literature practitioners adopted a broad and flexible, because of the cross-national notion of literary

production and reception as opposed to the more restrictive, nationalistic way of studying literature.” However, the orientation towards theory according to Chow resulted in the demoting of literature.

Rey Chow raises certain fundamental issues on the outcome of the disciplinary tolerance coming to comparativism. For instance, she feels that it would be difficult to be inclusionary and tolerant when a specific regional or national language continue to dominate. She also wonders if it would be easy to replace the dominance of monolingualism with translanguaging, within comparative literature. “And, in a discipline that is explicitly committed to translanguaging and translation, how could the principle of tolerance help us rethink the tendency to fetishize and privilege linguistic nativism, wherein native speakers’ linguistic abilities and skills tend to be presumed to be naturally superior to those of non-native speakers?” There would also be people who are who refuse to speak or are incapable of speaking other than in their own idioms, whose styles remain elusively antagonistic, idiotic, monolingual, or untranslatable. However, despite all these challenges will brighten the prospects of comparative literature’s self-invention.

Points to remember:

1. Showing the topics listed in the brochure of a seminar on comparative literature Rey Chow argues that Comparative literature has recently assumed extraordinary openness and flexibility in terms of the subject matter, issues and literary works that fall under its fold.
2. The list of topics in the call for papers mentioned above includes such diverse topics as “comparative literary history; literature and the languages; world literature, translation, and globalization;... technology, media, audio-visual culture; sociology, anthropology, and political economy; history and historiography; geography, geology, and ecology.
3. Comparative literature is undergoing a process of subject de-formation and subject re-formation.
4. Rey Chow feels that the call for papers form of interpellation expects the respondents to agree with the list and agree to participate as a comparatist, on the one hand, and it is an indicator of what comparative literature does. She considers this seminar as an attempt to self-define the boundaries (or a lack of fixed boundaries) of the humanities in general and comparative literature in particular.

5. According to Rey Chow, the open-ended nature of the list in the call for papers reminds one of Foucault's invocation (in *The Order of Things*) of Luis Borges' classification of animals purportedly found in 'a certain Chinese encyclopaedia.
6. The changes in Comparative Literature is to be approached with references to Erich Auerbach's idea of the "fundamental shift in the conceptualization of the human in the Western literary canon, that he discussed in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.
7. Erich Auerbach discusses how the Judeo-Christian view of the world was questioned in post-war Europe. According to him the tyrannical domination of the Judeo-Christian worldview led to changes in the conception of human beings.
8. While doing away with the Judeo – Christian perception of the world and humanity what comes out is "a demand for an egalitarian, cosmopolitan approach to human languages and cultures."
9. It is this polyphonicity or the condition of tolerating all other cultures and their values that enables the re-formulation of Comparative literature as a discipline.
10. Comparative literature's "efforts at self - reform, in recent years, from its previous Europe - dominant foci to "world," "global," or " planetary" literature, emphasizes on distant reading, circulation, translation, postcoloniality, subalternity, and world republicanism.
11. Comparative Literature has become "a subject whose humanity is reconstituted by civility, the ability to coexist peacefully with others across classes, cultures, and languages; in sum, a tolerant subject.
12. Efforts to reform comparative literature was reinforced by the recent developments in 'Theory' that attempted to overturn Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism as existing in different forms in Europe.