

Occidental and Oriental: A Comparison of American, Indian and British Poems

Dr. R. Gomathi

Associate Professor Department of English, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai

Abstract: Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the literature of two or more different linguistic, cultural or national groups. Poetry is a beautiful genre of literature. One is always fascinated by the exaggerated poetic lies though one is very much aware that it is not the absolute truth. It can also be vehement, aggressive, fatefully frank and assertive. The American poet taken for study is Robert Frost's **Mending Wall**. It is a poem which begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The poem **Night of the Scorpion** by the Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel is a concrete and composite image of the reality of Indian rural life. Robert Frost and Nissim Ezekiel have given a colorful picture of rural life of their respective nations. But William Blake who is a great visionary and revolutionary vehemently criticises the system that oppresses the poor in his poem **London**. The poem is simple but forceful. The poet appeals to the emotions of the rich people and shows them how wrong they are. A comparative study of the three brilliant poems is both interesting and enlightening.

Key words: nature, emotions, global, literary, reality, vision,

I. Introduction

Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the literature of two or more different linguistic, cultural or national groups. This field facilitates the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature. Generally, in day to day life, people say 'don't compare' for it will lead one to ruins. Of course, this is a generalised notion. On the domestic side, the siblings are taught not to compare with each other for want of materialism. On the academics side, the students are warned to keep away from comparisons for want of awarding of marks. On the side of sports, the competitors are advised to have only healthy competition and not compare one with others for want of victory. On the side of profession, the delegates are strictly prohibited from comparisons and cater to their own skills and talents. Ironically, in literature alone 'COMPARISON' enlightens one with wide knowledge and opens new avenues to tread upon.

The very term 'comparative literature' is difficult to define for it involves two or sometimes even more than two literatures in comparison at the same time. Moreover, the comparist has to take into account several factors like linguistic, cultural, economic, social, religious and historical of different societies. Etymologically, the term 'comparative literature' is the analytical study of interrelatedness between any two or more than two significant literary works. It is not an easy task though it may sound interesting. It is essential that one must take into consideration the sources, themes, myths, forms, artistic strategies and the social and historical background into consideration. Thus the study has to be an in-depth one and thoroughly analysed. The approach must be unbiased and unprejudiced to reach the ultimate truth. It is not only the comparist who gets enlightened but also the readers as well. The definition of comparative literature given by Bijay Kumar Dass in his book **Comparative Literature** is very simple and easy to understand:

The simple way to define comparative literature is to say that it is a comparison between the two literatures. Comparative literature analyses the similarities and dissimilarities and parallels between two literatures. It further studies themes, modes, conventions and use of folk tales, myths in two different literatures or even more. (1)

Comparative literature is a wonderful art and has its own benefits. It embraces the totality of human experiences into it; all internal human relationships among the various parts of the world are understood, through the critical approach to literatures under comparative study. There lies definitely certain affinity between the masterpieces of different literary works of different nations. Of course, human nature is highly complicated and this complexity in different kinds of literary works makes comparative study also a little complex. Religion oriented study of comparison is also very captivating. All religions across the globe preach the same concept – to be humane. Yet it is interesting to know about the various beliefs and practices of different religions and also to know about the life of ardent devotees and disciples of varied disciplines. All these details and information are dealt under one roof of comparative literature.

Originally, there were few renowned literatures like Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and English. But today it is global and varied – Indian, American, Australian, Canadian, African and so on. It is something remarkable and

reading a country's literature paves way to know more about it historically, geographically, socially, culturally and also ecologically, But when it comes to comparative literature, it is all the more beneficial for one is able to know the social and cultural differences between two nations. Reading global literature is a heavenly bliss. But when it is compared, the reader is able to receive an in depth knowledge of the similarities and dissimilarities. One can also adopt certain practices for good and also discard some for good. Whenever two things are compared, it is analysed thoroughly to choose the best. The 'pros' and 'cons' are weighed for a good balance; thus in literature also, a comparative study can make life more meaningful and valuable.

The field of fine arts has led to a wonderful cross cultural growth. The traditional dances, music, martial arts of various regions have unified a country. The same arts of various nations have unified a world as such. The education department has arranged for cultural exchange programme. Students of different countries go to different places to know about the people and place more thoroughly. So, everywhere there is a comparative study and people are curious and eager to learn about others. To put it in a nutshell, reading a nation's literature is like peeping into the country itself.

Poetry is a beautiful genre of literature. One is always fascinated by the exaggerated poetic lies though one is very much aware that it is not the absolute truth. The emotive part simply thrills the readers especially the love sentiments. But poetry is not meant for these 'sweet nothings' alone. It can also be vehement, aggressive, fearfully frank and assertive. The American poem taken for study is Robert Frost's **Mending Wall**. Frost was awarded the Pulitzer prize four times for poetry and received the medal of the American Academy of Art and Letters in 1933 and the poetry society of America in 1941. One finds Frost to be a pure classical poet of America who is out and out a farmer. He portrays vividly the American rural life describing the experiences of a farmer.

Mending Wall is a poem which begins in delight and ends in wisdom. It deals with one of the most common experiences in the farmer's life. The language is simple and the poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue. The neighbourhood farmer who grows pine trees in the land wants to keep his farm protected by walls so that his farm would be in good shape. When the ground gets frozen it swells and breaks the wall. Moreover, the hunters who are behind the wild animals also cause the wall to break. Occasionally, during their hunting expeditions, they strike the wall and cause cracks which in turn weaken the structure. But whenever the wall breaks, it will be repaired by him. The poet and his neighbour possess a vast area of land running to acres that the distance between them is actually the distance between two hills. Both of them are not sure of the reason of the breaking of the walls. It is only during the spring time when both the neighbours decide to mend their wall. They fix a particular day for it and the poet sends information to his neighbour as to the time and day when they can start mending the wall. Both the neighbours wear out their fingers in handling the walls and it is almost like an outdoor game for them.

The neighbour wants fences for his land at any cost. He feels that it is good to have a wall around one's property and he means to say that it is better for each man to know his limits and rights. The poet wonders as to why there should be a need for a wall. His neighbour's land is full of pine trees whereas the poet owns an apple orchard. His apple trees are not going to cross the boundary line and go to the pine trees to eat the cones. But the neighbour is very firm and determined about having fences even when the poet tries to reason out with him. He follows strictly the saying of his father that good fences are essential: "He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

The poet takes the readers to the great notion of social co-existence in the world. Nature wants man to be united. It is actually the humans who build walls between one another. The situation here is very realistic and from a very ordinary household experience, the poet brings about a philosophy of living together without any boundary lines that can foster love, better understanding and helping tendency. The neighbouring farmer is adamantly sticking on to his idea and also tries to justify his point by saying that fencing alone will promote good relationship among neighbours. But in the poem **Night of the Scorpion** by the Indian poet Nission Ezekiel, the scenario is totally different.

The poem is a concrete and composite image of the reality of Indian rural life. On a rainy night, in a village, the poet's mother was stung by a scorpion which had come for shelter beneath a sack of rice. The news spread like rapid fire and the neighbouring peasants came like "swarms of flies." There were no walls to act as barriers and the people just buzzed in to do whatever help they can. They continuously chanted prayers and recited the name of God a hundred times to "paralyze the Evil one." They also searched for the scorpion "with candles and with lanterns." After twenty four hours, the pain disappeared and the mother thanked God for having spared her children. It is noteworthy that all through the painful event the entire village sat there as a moral support. This is the culture of rural India. There was no necessity to break any walls for there were none. They all lived together as a whole family. Although, they dwelled in different houses, they all joined together when the situation arises. In **Mending Wall**, the poet displays the people's desire to build boundaries which he

actually dislikes. That is the culture of rural America. It teaches one to stay within his limits and also draws a line to show where the limit ends.

Robert Frost and Nissim Ezekiel have given a colourful picture of rural life of their respective nations. But William Blake who is a great visionary and revolutionary vehemently criticises the system that oppresses the poor in his poem **London**. His poetry is wonderful and has its own special sparkle by his imagery and rhythm. He endowed his writings with artistic excellence and decorated it with his poetic vitality and energy. He was a real revolutionary in his ideas about politics and religion. The poem is simple but forceful. The poet appeals to the emotions of the rich people and shows them how wrong they are. This is one of Blake's finest lyrics where he vividly portrays the seamy side of London in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The miseries of the poor, especially the chimney sweepers, soldiers and prostitutes are well projected. The rules framed by the cruel authorities are like handcuffs that imprison the downtrodden. Ironically, rules are framed by the intelligent to help the rich. The church is expected to aid the poor but unfortunately it has joined hands with the rich only to torture the poor.

As a result, the unlucky soldiers have to serve the king and shed their blood which is all in vain. The chimney sweepers suffer and their cries are echoed every where. The women do not know what to do for their livelihood and hence become harlots much against their wish. They do not have independence or means of livelihood. They suffer a lot and their frustrated minds have led them to curse marriage and married people. They do not want to beget children nor do they feel happy at others having any. Their hearts are full of depression and emotions of failure. How the chimney-sweepers cry Every blackning Church appalls, And the hapless soldiers sigh Runs in blood down palace walls But most thro midnight streets I hear How the youthful harlots curse

II. Conclusion

William Blake happens to be a champion of the miserable and loves London to the core. His deep concern for the nation is the outburst of this poem. Blake has a critical eye for the social evils. He is full of human kindness and wishes to do something to make the poor people happy. Hence, he brings out the exploitation of the downtrodden. The poem is without conceits and the poet's expressions are full of emotions. Thus a comparative study of the three brilliant poems gives the reader to have a peep into their window of culture. It is both interesting and enlightening to know about the different lifestyle of the different nations.

Works Consulted:

- [1] Blake, William. "London". **Blake: The Complete Poems**. Ed. E.H. Stevenson. New York: Norton, 1972. 213-214. Print.
- [2] Ezekiel, Nissim. "Night of the Scorpion". **Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets**. Chosen and Ed. R. Parthasarathy. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976. 31 – 32. Print.
- [3] Frost, Robert. "Mending Wall". **An Anthology: American Literature 1890 – 1965**. Ed. Dr. Egnert S. Oliver. New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House, 1967. 387 – 388. Print.
- [4] Kumar Das, Bijay. **Comparative Literature**. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors Pvt Ltd, 2000.