A Note on French and American Theories in Comparative Literature

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Abstract

It is fact that there are some essential differences between French theory and American thinking in Comparative Literature. We note that the credit for the development of American thinking in Comparative Literature goes to some great American writers we should study their views in the Concept of Comparative Literature. We should also mention the differences between National Literature, General Literature and World Literature, to explain the concept of Comparative Literature in Europe and United States. We study American theories in the light of the conditions have been declared by French School in this concept to analyze the differences between them.


1. Theory of French School in Comparative Literature

At first, we record the concept of Comparative Literature at the French school, which is as follows:

Comparative Literature studies places of meeting among the literatures in their different languages and links in their present or past.

The boundaries among different literatures are their languages, which separate each other. Therefore, the languages of the literatures are important to Comparative Literature in the study of the mutual impact and influence amongst them.

Comparative Literature is essential to the history of literature and criticism in their contemporary meaning, because it discloses the trends of artistic and intellectual sources for the National Literature.

The comparisons among the authors from different literatures have no historical links can not be counted from Comparative Literature.

It will not be right to put in the standards of Comparative Literature just a presentation of texts or facts related to the literature and criticism, to look for similarity or convergence, without any attention to the links among them. This kind of comparison may be useful to make the observation strengthened and to give much information, but it has no any historical value.
As well as the comparisons inside a single National Literature can not be counted from Comparative Literature, whether there are historical links among the compared texts or not, because Comparative Literature has an international field of linking between two or more than two different literatures.

The internal comparisons inside the only one literature are less fertile, less benefit and have a narrower field than comparative studies, because they often run on a single frequency and within narrow boundaries.

The scholars of Comparative Literature believe that any literature cannot live alone in isolation from the pack of other literatures, without being weak and fading. They believe that the most beautiful aspects of the National Literature may be that which is adopted in its sources a vaccine from foreign help for the prosperity of those areas in the National Literature. This branch of Comparative Literature helps the nation to understand itself and see its image in the mirror of other literatures. [1]

These are the main points of Comparative Literature at the French school. Now we move to study the headlines of American theories in Comparative Literature.

2. American thinking in Comparative Literature

"Since the Americans entered the world of Comparative Literature they had shown hesitated seriously to be bound to the hard conditions of French school, they loved always to expand the section of Comparative Literature for the entrance of various global artistic and literary trends in this zone".

"This ascent growing in Comparative Studies in America, probably is due to a hidden desire of the scholars in American universities to open the American windows for the product of global literatures or probably this literary turning point combined with other signs to form a harbinger of the American era." [2]

The credit in the development of American theory in Comparative Literature goes particularly to René Wellek and Henry. H. H. Remak. Let's study the views of each in Comparative Literature.

2.1 Wellek highlights the main points in Comparative Literature

Wellek mentioned these points in his book: “Theory of literature” (translated into Arabic by Shafi Al-Sayed, in 1989), which are as follows:

The term of Comparative Literature as it is understood by the French school is tiresome and comprehensive approach to different areas of literary study, therefore the development of this system of the knowledge was slow.

The French concept was limited in the external problems only, such as the sources, influences and fame. The seriousness of these problems is that it may focus the attention on the writers of second-class or at the center of historical time, neglecting the essence of literary phenomenon, which needs to be studied.

The best defense of the literature is the focusing on its vision and its spirit, it means study of any literature from an international perspective, hence the literature should be a separate study from the barriers of the politics, race and language, as well it should not be limited in a single method, so each of the description, designation, explanation, narration, illustration and presentation should be used in the literary study, as the comparison should be in its complete form, including the languages and literary genres, which are not linked historically and it should not be limited in the history of literature, excluding the criticism and contemporary literature, therefore, it should not be considered that the historical method is the only can be possible for the literary study, even for the study of the past.

There are three basic branches for the literary study: The literary history, theory of the literature and literary criticism, each of them contains the other. Comparative Literature is as the National Literature, cannot be separated
from the literary study as the whole, Comparative Literature will not be fertilize and useful only if get rid of the artificial borders and become just the study of literature.

One of the functions of Comparative Literature is to rewrite the literary history as being it sophisticated and at the level of supra-national, the study of Comparative Literature in this sense requires the linguistic skills, broad perspectives to put out the local and regional emotions and it must be considered that each literature should be at the technical and humanitarian level. [3]

2.2 A note on American theory in Comparative Literature presented by Wellek

Wellek objected to establish limits for Comparative Literature. He called strongly for the opening of these limits even he almost eliminated Comparative Literature, as he attributed everything to this area. This means that he wants to meet each of the "criticism", "History of the Literature", "National Literature" and "General Literature" together.

He says:"No doubt that Comparative Literature wants to overcome the passions of nationalism and narrow looks, but it does not ignore the existence of different national traditions and vitality, as it does not diminish their importance. We must beware of false choices, which are not needed, because we want both the National Literature and General Literature. We need a broad perspective, which can not be achieved except by the Comparative Literature." [4]

However, we can not agree with his words, in the third paragraph (C) : "The languages and literary genres have no links historically", as we note that we must distinguish between the history of National Literature and historicity of the links between a literature and another literature, because the historicity of links means that the research in literary texts needs to some historical gazes to determinant the growth of literary phenomenon from its inside and its transition from a literature to another literature or its mixing with another literary phenomenon and composing something new and so on…

The theory of Literary Genres stands basically on the element of time to reveal that the second one was affected by the previous one, so the critic has to know the characteristics of the text criticized by him and what was the new one added to it or how it was changed to the other characteristics. [5]

It means that there is a text and an artist or a literary work and its owner (author) before the scholar of Comparative Literature or literary critic, we cannot separate between them, because it is understood since eighteenth century, as it is said by a French scientist of the nature called Buffon (1707-1788): “The method is the man”. There are some values beside these two things, which are imposed by the type of literary works, and some facts, which are determined by the position of writer and this does not hide at all - in shaping features of the author - the role of history as being a science, that records human activities from time to time... Therefore, today we see that the philosophy of literary criticism harmonizes with the philosophy of contemporary history even we see "Emil Briye" speaks confidently about the historical criticism. [6]

As well as, the history has a major role in explaining the literary works, so it cannot be ignored.

It seems that the obscurity and less knowledge of the sketched boundaries for the area of Comparative Literature at René Wellek made him to cancel every concept of Comparative Literature -the past and contemporary-.

It is clear that Wellek represents only American trend, which does not see any border for the comparative study and includes the open comparison and the relationship between the arts and branches of other sciences in Comparative Literature. He rejects the differences between the methods of the literary studies. It seems that his open-mindedness and canceling all concepts of Comparative Literature -past and contemporary-, is responsible for
the words that Comparative Literature in English or British culture had been until recently tremulous fuzz borders. It explains partly the unwillingness of British universities from the specialization of Comparative Literature.

It is useful to mention here how the view towards the history of literature and criticism was developed in the nineteenth century, as a result of the Romantic Movement and scientific Renaissance. That development was based on counting the historical facts a base for the explanation of literary production and its emergence was very clear in the careful and true analysis of the literary texts, the status of their authors, their culture, and their status in their societies and nations and in the synthetic studies based on this careful analysis.

We should not forget that the literature is one of the fine arts, emanates its components from the heritage, values, ethics, religion, customs and traditions and so on, so it does not cut off its connection from its past, as literature is the name of a "Continuous Past ", but the sciences derive their theories from the new mental theories. The mind changes its intellectual course in its mental conclusions after a while. Scientific theories can fall any moment and be replaced by a new one unrelated to the previous one. It is true that literature or the art is benefited by scientific experiments, but we must make a distinction between the literature and Science. The expansion of literary circle and science, and its link to the humanity should be accepted, but this wideness should not be to remove the identity of literature and art, especially for some certain political purposes.

3.1 Remak defines American theory in Comparative Literature

Remak defines Comparative Literature saying: "Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the boundaries of a particular country and it is the study of relations among the literatures and other scientific areas of knowledge and belief." [7]

The first part of the definition is generally consistent with the original concept of Comparative Literature at French school, but there is a very clear diversity between them at the point of focus, particularly on the field of scientific issues. The French school prefers to go into issues that can be solved on the basis of substantial evidences based generally on the personal documents. It tries to exclude the literary criticism from the area of Comparative Literature. It looks at the studies depend on the mere comparison and indication of the similarities and differences. Even issues of the impact were being addressed with caution, as each of the Carré and Guiar has called to focus on issues such as the reception, the middlemen and the travel abroad means transfer of literary material from its borders to the outside, receiving of Arts in other borders, crossing points and the medium means that helped it to move. They both gave the importance to the study of attitudes towards a particular country in the literature of another country during a limited period.

However, there was a preoccupation with French to study the impacts and avoid the issues of special artistic tastes and technical evaluation or literary criticism. Although - in the opinion of Remak - it is possible for the comparative study not based on the impact, to make a wider field to explain the essence of literary products, as it seems that it was a preoccupation with the issue of influence, which covered this essence.

For the second part of the definition, which revolved around the relationship between literature and other fields of knowledge, it can be said that there is a radical difference between American and French schools. Since the French, such as Van Tiegem, Guyard and René Etiemble rarely showed the attention to this relationship and it was continued in subsequent generations, while the American researchers had been paid a strong attention to this issue, although some of them insisted that the comparison should be held among different nationalities of the literatures. Naturally French have their interest in the comparison between the various arts, but they do not believe it will be within the range of Comparative Literature.

Actually Remak indicates that the literary currents and movements in a single National Literature cannot be in any way (Comparative Literature) because it leads to a wrong concept of Comparative Literature and opening the
containment of Comparative Literature for everything related to the literature makes Comparative Literature almost a meaningless term.

He calls to be more precise in the future towards any given topic to be selected for the (comparison) so that cannot fall within the range of Comparative Literature, except those which are allowed and suitable. For example, it should be emphasized that the comparisons between the literature and other non-literary fields cannot enter within the range of Comparative Literature only if it is the systemic, but if it is studied as a non-literary discipline, which is capable to be separated independently, it cannot enter in Comparative Literature. Remak feels that the expansion in determining the area of Comparative Literature carries the risk of sliding this general pattern from the literary study, therefore it will be a loss of its characteristic personality and its authorized presence, therefore tries to resort to precise in his description, he says:

"We cannot classify the research efforts under the title of (Comparative Literature) simply, because they address those internal aspects of the life and art that must be reflected inevitably in all of the literatures. [8]

He tends to prefer the American concept of Comparative Literature. He strongly calls that there is a need to work seriously in order to reach minimum interrelated standards to set some clear limits for any proposed field, but at the same time he says:

"Whatever is the nature of the dispute over the theoretical aspects of Comparative Literature there is agreement on its mission: to give the scholars, teachers, students and the readers in the last, a understanding of the literature as a whole, better and more comprehensive, to be able to overcome the separate literary particle or several isolated molecules. This function can do so, not through the establishment of the link between several literatures, but also through the link between the literature and the other fields of knowledge and human activity, in particular artistic and ideological fields, by selecting the literary survey on the geographical and qualitative scale." [9].

These are the lines of what could be called "American theory of Comparative Literature" which was introduced by Henry H. H. Remak, in his article: "Comparative Literature: its definition and function", but it is still not clear, so he tried to show the difference between (Comparative Literature) and (National Literature) on one hand and between (Comparative Literature) and (World Literature) on the other.

3.2 A note on American theory in Comparative Literature presented by Remak

Remak does not require to prove the influence and impact as a basis for the comparative study, thus depriving the French school from its logic and philosophy takes the risk by bringing Comparative Literature near to literary criticism, that if the intended comparison does not reach certain conclusions outside the scope of literary taste, It is known that the method of (comparison) has been used by literary criticism through the ages, which proved to be the sharpest and the biggest weapon in the capacity of persuasion. Usually the artistic taste is associated closely with comparison, the comparison in its turn is a tool for quality of artistic taste, but the French school does not satisfy much to this weapon has major artistic capability, though it is not artistic necessarily, because its respective field is scientific research not the artistic taste.

It is surprising that Remak speaks about the aesthetic taste and its artistic evaluation and forgets that artistic beauty is basically related to the artistic forms or characteristics, which are called a semblance of the literature, including the language drafted for the literatures.

Then, there are things we realize and feel, but the expression of this feeling in the words is very difficult, such as the beauty of the melodies. How can be this aesthetic taste linked inextricably to the comparison and evaluation, while the translation is simply unable to transfer the artistic characteristics of the language to another language. [10]
It is true that the literary criticism, often uses the results of the comparison in its critical decisions, but the literary taste has a close relation to the literary criticism more than Comparative Literature. On this base, we can differentiate between the literary criticism and Comparative Literature, which studies the historical links among the literatures.

It seems that Remak does not differentiate between the subjects of "Comparative Literature" and "literary criticism", because he does not consider the "influence" and "being influenced" as a basis for comparative study. As well as we see him trying to introduce some topics not included in Comparative Literature.

Remak indicates that the mere study of literature outside the national borders will be resulted in a double burden on the researchers in this field. [11]

He understands that there is a clear difference between saying that the task of Comparative Literature is the study of National Literature outside its geographic boundaries and its mission is to study the extensions of National Literature outside the boundaries of the literatures itself. The format quality of extensions of the literature according to the American concept raises some serious questions about drawing the boundaries of Comparative Literature.

It is true that there are many of those who argue that researchers in the literature and history of the literature have to go beyond the boundaries of Comparative Literature, on what is more important and comprehensive than serving the history of literature for a particular nation. They have to look at the mutual facts involved in the inter National Literatures on the whole and they have to mean writing a history of those facts, they should depend in this writing on the history of National Literatures and texts and on the researches of Comparative Literature, which are already carried out by the scientists to elucidate particular aspects of the National Literatures. This is what they mean by the general history of literatures, or General Literature. Then, the field of General Literature is: "the literary facts, general thoughts and feelings that cannot be understood in one literature only without studying the same in many literatures, in their origin, growth and development." [12].

There are many areas and terms closing and overlapping to the term “Comparative Literature”, we must clarify the meanings of these terms.

4. Comparative Literature and National Literature

There is no essential difference between methods of the research in National Literature and Comparative Literature. There are some issues faced by the research in Comparative Literature, which are out of the borders for the study of National Literature and there are some issues related to the translation in particular. There are some key themes contained in the study of National Literature contained in Comparative Literature through the patterns were somewhat different, but tend to occupy the more important status, like: cloth, success and reception and the impact of literature, as well as travel and mediations.

Even from the geographical side it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear distinction between National Literature and Comparative Literature. How can we deal with authors write in one language, but they belong to different nations?

"When most of the scholars in the comparative field recognize the existence of complex and overlapping, agree that these difficulties are not so much and so serious that weaken the distinction between the literary study within national boundaries and its study across these borders." [13].

5. Comparative Literature and World Literature
There is a difference between (Comparative Literature) and (World Literature). (Comparative Literature) includes elements of place, time, type and density. It - in the terms of geography - includes like World Literature the element of place, but within a narrower range mostly, not necessarily. It often deals with the relationship between two countries or authors of two different nationalities, or between one author and a foreign country (for example, foreign relations, German, French), relationship (Poe: Poe with Baudelaire), (Italy in the work of Goethe). The term (World Literature) means the congruence indirectly.

(World Literature) also needs the element of time. The rule is that to be world-renowned (to obtain the world fame) takes a time. World Literature deals generally with the literature that has received a consensus on its greatness, because of being chosen by the time. Therefore, contemporary literature has a less share in the scope of World Literature. Comparative Literature, even theoretically, does not pay any attention to the oldness or newness of compared subjects. However, it must be clearly recognized that most of the literary comparative studies may focus, in the terms of science, to address the personalities of the past had earned an international reputation, but most of what we have done and what we will do, is in fact a (Global Comparative Literature). So the World literature handles basically with the literary production received an international recognition over the time and proved the ability to withstand, (for example, The Divine Comedy, Don Quixote, Paradise Lost, and Candid and others) also deals but less distinct with the authors of our time who have won great favor outside of their home countries. Comparative Literature is not restricted to the same extent with the quality and strength. The enlightening comparative studies still focus - and will continue to do so - on the authors of the second class - who are mostly more than the authors of first-class, representing the features of their age, such studies can address some authors have already considered to be great and some authors who have inferior reputations not reported to the ears of the outsider world, but their production can represent some aesthetic trends on the European scale.

Add to that that there are some popular writers who have reached the first rank in their own country without receiving the recognition of World Literature they are prominently eligible for comparative literary studies. These studies in turn can contribute to their inclusion in the niche of World Literature. The list of these names is endless.

The elements of the place, time, quality and strength are differences between World Literature and Comparative Literature in the class. There are some other differentials have also a close relation to the essence.

Primarily the American concept of Comparative Literature includes the survey on the relationship between the literature and other pivots, while World Literature does not include it.

Secondly the American concept even the most rigid French definition of Comparative Literature (where the studied material should be necessarily literary, as the material of World Literature) indicates that the method must be specified, while the World Literature does not indicate.

Comparative Literature requires that the comparison between the authors or topics or literary works or trends should be in another country or another atmosphere [14].

6. Comparative Literature and General Literature

The term (General Literature) is used to mark the course and publications of foreign literatures through the English translation, or more broadly it is used for the marking of those scripts, which are difficult to be classified under any title of literary studies, which sometimes refer to the literary trends or problems and sometimes to the theories of general interest or aesthetics. The groups of texts and critical studies or comments address several kinds of literatures, which are classified under this literary category.

We must remember that the term (General Literature) - like the term (World Literature) - has a comparative method, but it is not necessarily included in the Comparative Literature.
It should be noted that the definition of Comparative Literature, which is developed by the French researcher "Paul Van Tiegem" is very accurate. In his opinion National Literature, Comparative Literature and General Literature represent three cascading levels. National Literature studies issues enclosed within the scope of National Literature. Comparative Literature studies the issues shared by two different literatures. General Literature is fixed to study developments in the larger number of the countries forming a literary unity. [15]

In a Comparative literary study National Literatures remain the initial treasure, as being the pillars for the survey. In a study of General Literature, National Literatures are simply examples for international trends. [16]

It is true that the final division among National Literature, Comparative Literature and General Literature is not so easy to be applied and it is undesirable practically as well. [17]

(World Literature) in the sense of that literature, which has an entitlement and a success clearly makes it qualified to obtain an international attention. It is a feasible term, but it should not be used carelessly to be a sort of an alternative to Comparative Literature or General Literature. (General Literature) should be avoided whenever possible, because it is used now for many things with many differences to many people.

7. Conclusion

However, we note that the French school does not support the expansion in the section of Comparative Literature to introduce some issues not related to this topics, because there is a difference between those studies in General Literature on the one hand and the studies of National Literature and Comparative Literature on the other hand. The nature of the studies in the General Literature is not to care about national borders of the literatures and not be limited into two or three literatures, but its research deals with each literary movement of all literatures, which have developed that movement, striking a blind eye to all that is called local or specially related to a particular National Literature, ignoring everything related a place or a certain National Literature except what has an echo in the World Literatures and what has its influence in guiding the intellectual currents outside the boundaries of the National Literature.

Hence it is clear that these studies generally do not depend on the summarized and shortened studies of the National Literature, but it has its own tendency, which is not bounded to the linguistic and racial partitions, do not consider except explaining the facts and factors that control the evolution of ideas and movements in the literature, being as a general human product. On this base the goal of General Literature is: "to know the common intellectual and artistic conditions to be identified and be studied in its various forms and pictures in the sorts of literatures that can be compared to each other, so there will be a general history of literature for the ancient Greek and Romanian nations, another one for the eastern Muslim and the third one for the modern Arabic literature, desiring to determine the moments of separation and imaging the vital intellectual, moral and artistic pulses, which are translated by the tongue of Literature." [18].

Now we can explain the differences between French and American scholars briefly:

The first condition of the French school for the comparative study is that it must be among the works written in different languages; if this condition is not found the study will be out of the circle of Comparative Literature.

The second condition is the link of the writer to another writer or the literature to another literature, if the history did not prove that one of them followed the idea of the other one in any aspect of communication, this kind of study will not be included in Comparative Literature. It is not necessary to be a personal link between two writers, but it will be enough to prove that the idea moved from an environment to another environment and spread out in the new one when it was received by the writers through the simulation after they became affected by it.
We must not forget that the languages, in which literatures are drafted, are local or regional originally, establish responding the needs of regions and its issues. The differentness of languages is an essential condition of Comparative Literature at the French school.

Opinion of René Wellek in the Comparative Literature is that, it is like National Literature, cannot be separated from the literary study as a whole. Comparative Literature cannot be useful and fertile; if it will not be free from the artificial borders and be just a literary study.

Wellek protested to establish limits for Comparative Literature and called strongly to open up even removed Comparative Literature almost, as attributed every thing to its area.

The development that had occurred to explain the literary texts was based on consideration of the historical facts and its emergence was clear in the truthful and careful analysis of the literary texts.

Making Comparative Literature out of the historical links between the influential and affected literature to take the literary aesthetic taste of all the nations a standard for Comparative Literature is exceeded for the real concept of Comparative Literature, because the literature is a name of the dissimilarities.

The literature is one of the fine arts, emanates its components from the heritage, values, ethics, religion, customs and traditions and so on, so it does not cut off its connection from its past, as literature is the name of a "Continuous Past ", but the sciences derive their theories from the new mental theories. The mind changes its intellectual course during its mental conclusions after a while. Scientific theories can fall any moment and be replaced by a new one unrelated to the previous one. It is true that literature or the art is benefited by scientific experiments, but we must make a distinction between the literature and Science. The expansion of literary circle and science, and its link to the humanity should be accepted, but this wideness should not be to remove the identity of literature and art, especially for some certain political purposes.

It seems that Remak does not differentiate between the subjects of "Comparative Literature" and "literary criticism". So he does not consider "the influencing and being influenced by another one" the basis for the Comparative study.

The geographical definition of the term Comparative Literature in the literary sense is very clear and concrete, but the format quality of the literature according to the American concept raises some serious questions about the demarcation of Comparative Literature.

In the end we support French School saying: "It is well known that the image of the nations - as it is reflected in the mirror of their literatures - has a profound impact on their relations to each other, and also has an impact on the minds of the leaders of the nation's politicians and intellectuals in the formation of public opinion may result in a particular orientation in its relations with another. All of these are aspects of literary activity in the international areas. Comparative Literature interested to disclose these aspects from the historical side, to explain its various aspects over the generations. Thus the Comparative Literature paves a way for every nation to know its position amongst other nations and to see its literary image in the mirror of other literatures of the other nations. Thus they will be allowed to know themselves truthfully and try to correct their situation or defend themselves. Thus they will get an opportunity for the right understanding and sincere cooperation among themselves.” [19].

We think that these words are very clear to know what is the real function of Comparative Literature in French theory and how useful for all of the nations to recognize each other. Therefore we think that these words should be supported by all researchers.
References


8. Ibid, pp.53-54.

9. Ibid, pp. 54-55


17. Ibid, p.63-64.


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