

**Comparative Criticism: The problems of Western Models and Paradigms in Relation to  
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**Abstract:** Cultures are shaped by their geo-physical and linguistic experiences. Their differences are valuable epistemological angles to look at the world. The East and the West are two irreconcilable cultures and are so incredibly different that it is difficult for the 'twain' to meet. To bring these two into a dialogue in spite of their individualities is an enormous task as well as a challenge facing comparative literature in the present world. The comparativists have not become cross-cultural. The only thing they have done has been to apply the western critical models and paradigms to their studies of Indian literature, where the relevance of these critical models and paradigms are open to debate. Western models and paradigms can help us to understand the features of western literature whereas its application in relation to Indian literature will not serve any intelligent purpose. This present paper, thus, tries to highlight the problems of western reading of Indian literature when such models and paradigms are applied.

**Keywords:** comparative, dialogue, epistemology, geo-physical, linguistics, paradigm, polyphonous

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**INTRODUCTION:** Among the literatures of the world, Indian literature is one of the most ancient and dynamic. It is multifaceted and polyphonous. Though India abounds in different languages and their respective literatures, it is a country where the cultural root is the same in spite of many marked differences owing to the genius of the respective languages in which they are written. Today, it has reached the apex of creativity with the contribution of regional and national writers. In such a situation, there cannot be a true appreciation of a single literature in isolation. It is true that Indian literatures are the products of a multilingual, multicultural, and social-historical *mélange*, but at the same time, they are bound together by a common historical thread, without which, their proper understanding and appreciation is impossible.

Many westerners have read and appreciated Indian literature as facilitated by the extent of their critical intelligence. Many of them failed because they could never attain that degree of cultural openness which was necessary to understand the dynamics of a different culture. The enthusiasm generated by certain Indian texts in westerners, however, is genuine and

spontaneous. But what dominated the western mind with respect to Indian literature were certain stereotypes which defied the major norms of western literature. This western attitude was partly conditioned by their sense of superiority, and partly because, they applied their own standards of models and paradigms to judge Indian literature which poses a serious problem in understanding it in a proper perspective. Because any culture is distinct in its own way, it cannot be globalised like other aspects by taking a global image beyond any geographical or political topology. When a culture is handled for globalization, it loses its very foundations of race, religion, and language on which it stands. So, what becomes necessary in this situation is a process of cultural reciprocation, by ignoring any “centrism” or the predomination of the East or the West. But the question is: Can we really work towards an international poetics by bringing together the violently opposed systems of the East and the West to a meeting ground?

Whenever any western reader reads Indian literature, he/she does so with a comparative eye, which is one of the accepted ways to study literature. It is an attempt to examine the otherness or to explore the kindredness in literature growing within or beyond national boundaries. It develops the skill to judge the depth and magnitude of a particular work. So, any inter-cultural or intra-cultural study should liberate us from our cultural prison. However, most of the western readers try to find similarities by applying their own models and paradigms. But, the application of these western tools to evaluate Indian literature (s) does not seem to be a fruitful affair, given the complexity of the Indian literary tradition. The question is: Can't we move beyond the “universals”, which are not adequate for India, a civilization that has generated several sub-cultures; a civilization in which the emphasis has to be on the ‘differences’. As Gurubhagat Singh has rightly observed: “...every culture and its communication system is [a] whole which deserves to be understood in its differential...” (72). The term ‘difference’, here, means the distinctive features that a culture’s geographical and historical backgrounds generate in its language and genres.

India has had a long and glorious tradition of dramatic theory and practice. On the one hand, we have playwrights like Kalidasa, Bhababhuti, Bhasa, Sudraka, and on the other, we have the exponents of dramatic art like Bharata, Bhattanayak, Avinabagupta, and Dhanajaya. While in the western canon, only two principal forms of drama - tragedy and comedy - are recognized, Sanskrit theorists, particularly Bharata in his *Natyasastra*, which is considered encyclopedia of Indian dramaturgy, described ten kinds of dramatic forms: *Natak*, *Prakarana*, *Bhana*, *Prahasana*, *Dima*, *Vyayoga*, *Samavakara*, *Vithi*, *Anka*, and *Ihamranga*. A host of westerners like A. B. Keith, W. H. Wells, Edwin Gerow, to name but a few, have been drawn towards it. At the same time, some westerners have neglected, misunderstood, and criticized it. Their criticism is entirely guided by western notions and conceptions, especially Aristotelian. They have never bothered to familiarize themselves with this rich heritage. The reasons for such an attitude are deep rooted but not difficult to seek.

One of the crucial areas of contention in the western encounter with Indian literature is the alleged 'absence' of tragedy in the latter. The debate on the issue is quite interesting in terms of understanding a different culture, where the presence or absence of a literary genre becomes the measuring rod for the evaluation of literature of a particular culture. Western intellectuals perceived a certain kind of 'lacuna' by comparing their literature with that of a different culture by keeping in mind their own standards and paradigms. Though, formal tragedy, in the western sense, is not to be met in Indian literature, yet, that particular experience of life which gives rise to tragedy has evoked a specific response in Indian *Kavya* literature. The ancient poets of India have described sorrow and misery, which are so essential for tragedy, but in a different way, as the Indian attitude towards life and the experience of weal and woe in it differs radically from that of the West. In epics, like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, we come across profound sorrow which may come very near to the western traditional concept of tragedy. So, rather than making any attempt to issue such sweeping statements about the presence or absence of a particular genre in the literature of any civilization, it would be wiser to show how it is

fundamentally wrong to seek for and at times intellectually absurd to expect the definite presence of a particular literary genre of a particular culture, whose form, terms, and conditions have been determined by that culture, in exactly the same form in another culture which has a different understanding of that particular genre.

It is true that tragedy has long been considered one of the highest achievements of the European literary culture, with the works of Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, and Shakespeare in prominence. Since the genre has such a high standing, its comparison with that of non-European literature is difficult. The difficulty arises due to the European concept of tragedy and partly due to the difficulties involved in the European understanding (or rather lack of it) of other cultures and civilizations and also due to the range and volume of literatures of certain civilizations, much of which has not been researched intensively by the European scholars. Secondly, it is because of the status or the level of importance attached to tragedy in the literatures of the non-European cultures. Steiner has stated the dominant idea of tragedy from a European point of view in a straight forward manner:

“All men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal. Oriental art knows violence, grief, and the stroke of natural or contrived disaster...But that representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the western traditions”. (*The Death of Tragedy* 3)

But when Draper asserts that “tragedy ... is impossible to define satisfactorily” (11), it means the difficulty is because of the result of the evolution of sentiments surrounding tragedy and its varying interpretations over a period of time even within the literatures of different periods of the same civilization. The significance, conception, and interpretation of tragedy have changed in every age, as in every age society has differed in its political, economic and moral standards, and in what it has considered significant. If one accepts the view that tragedy is an imitation or “mimesis” of reality or as Aristotle has said ‘the imitation of an action’, then it also follows that

since the perception of various realities has changed through time, the nature, conception, interpretation, and the importance of tragedy must have changed and modified themselves across time according to the personal views of the authors of every era and the continuously changing political, economic, psychological, and social climates of every age.

Taking Indian literature into account, it is worthwhile to make a few generalizations about the western theory of drama which is derived and conditioned by Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle's observations on the nature of drama are largely the outcome of his analysis of the tragic drama of his own times. His writings are on the Greek tragic drama, but not on tragic drama in general nor on the meaning of tragedy in a universal sense. In all probabilities, one can say that Aristotle neither had seen the tragic drama of all the civilizations nor had an understanding of them. Thus, to consider Aristotelian definition and description of Greek tragedy as the universal guide for the understanding and the conception of tragedy in general and tragic drama in particular would be to mistake a part for the whole. Aristotle's conceptions are alien to the Indian view, which is based on the Indian theory of *Karma*. According to the theory of *Karma* man is not just a play thing in the hands of fate, but the architect of his own destiny. His fate is determined by his own actions. There is a fundamental difference which determines their respective approaches to drama.

As per the theory of *Karma*, man alone is responsible for his own weal and woes and whatever comes his way is the fruit of his own action. It is he who gets born, his parents being mere a biological cause (not the reason) related to his karma. But the actions are not confined to one life, a singular birth, which stands at a sharp contrast to the western view that believes in a single life 'this life'. Thus the sequence and consequence of the cause and the effect is complicated by many time-frames. In the epic *Ramayana*, Ravana brought so many ups and downs in the life of Rama, the protagonist, but has anyone ever looked upon him as a conventional villain? And even if we call him a villain in a certain sense, can he be regarded as an Iago? He was a tool through which Rama's Karma operated. Evil, then, becomes the

complimentary contradiction of good. Such an idea is only possible in an integral world-view. Along with Karma, an unshakeable faith in the theory of rebirth did not allow the seed of tragedy to germinate in the Indian soil. According to the western thinking death is first and the everlasting truth, so nothing can be more gruesome than death. In Indian view, when every birth is considered as an incarnation, there is no terror in death, except as temporarily simulated by the actor on the stage. The west can best be explained on the basis of the belief that what is perceived by our sense is the real. The theory of literature as a “reflection of life” also arose from this belief. The sense of temporality in western literature is therefore more acute and sharply dramatic than it is in Indian literature, which is why; tragedy exudes an extremity that is rare in Indian drama. To use a generic form as a metaphor, the Indian literary outlook is more epic than dramatic in the Aristotelian sense. The narrative of life goes on passing over many thresholds, numerous mutations, an interminable series of change and continuity.

In the Indian literary theory the constructive principle that in order for any work of art to accomplish its harmonious effect the action presented should end happily stands in contradistinction to the western theory of tragedy. Happiness is a logical outcome, for the essential nature of consciousness is *ananda*- joy. Behind all existence there is the yearning for joy. If all human beings are always looking for happiness in different things in divergent ways, it is logical to conclude that happiness or *ananda* is innately related to what we are.

In the western tragedy the central character is presented as separated from his community in a conflict in which he stands alone against both the society and with the principle of the cosmos. This is not possible in the Indian drama of the classical period, where at the end the aims of the leading character are not contrary to the order of the cosmos. As Hussian and Wilkinson have observed: “in Indian drama the central character is an ideal type-represents the general and the universal qualities which the hero in Greek tragedy does not” (63). The self control of the hero in the Indian drama indicates high aims and values and his actions give

examples of how real happiness can be achieved, and how the harmonious order of the society can be restored.

Another fundamental difference between the eastern and the western thought lies in the concept of tragic conflict, in the rebellion against the destiny which is expressed in extremes of tension. Eastern thought found a harmony between the man and the universe. The ideal of serenity of mind of a composed balance, together with a restraint in action, has opened the way to quiet contentment and spiritual peace. Action as such is not renounced. But action is not the end. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* centre around war. Both underline the inevitability of conflict. But both the epics also point to what lies beyond the mechanics of action- the peace that wisdom brings. The world has been given to us, so that, we who are a part, can realize the whole. The whole heals the suffering of the parts. Fragmentation is suffering; individuation is suffering, time as mortality is suffering. But all these sufferings are subsumed and sublated by the whole- the totality of the known and the unknown- existence as absolute being. In the words of S.J. Robert Antoine “The succession of births and deaths is a pilgrimage leading the spirit to its immortal abode where the earthly ego, with its hopes, ambitions and conflicts, will be set at rest in the transcendental bliss of the *atman*” (122). That is why Indian drama, illuminated by the light of fulfillment, never has the tragic finality of Greek tragedy.

Gods occupy an important place in Greek tragedies. Greek gods are not only highly irascible but belong to the category of superpower who can “do, undo or misdo” anything. They can reduce man to dust. But Indian gods are generally reasonable and good: on top of it they are tied down by the principle of *Karma*. Karma is often popularly understood as fate when compared to the Greek notion of ‘moira’. But there is a fundamental difference: to the Greek mind human helplessness makes tragedy possible, tragedy being the ultimate and inevitable fatal clash of man’s will with fate. This is not the case in Indian literature, for Karma is immanent in nature as well as in human nature. Fate is often arbitrary, irrational, and absurd. Fate is imposed



from above the human agency. Karma, on the other hand, does not have the character of a capricious will. Karma is not a blind mechanism unlike fate. Karma is the law of moral causality.

#### CONCLUSION:

From the above discussions it may be concluded that the Greek vision focuses exclusively on necessity, contingency, and mortality. But the Indian vision gazes at a more distant horizon; it may have its tragic moments (*dukha*), but it does not end in tragedy (*dukhanta*). The end fulfils the beginning- the circle is completed. So a study of the characteristics of Indian literature should naturally follow an examination of those aspects of Indian consciousness, as distinguished from the western, upon which an Indian is nurtured from birth onwards, and which, when the time comes, permeate through aesthetic creation. There was some truth in Rudyard Kipling's oft-quoted line, 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'. But it is possible for the both to meet on a common ground. This common space is a space of negotiation- a dialogic space. The East and the West can let their lights reflect on each other. A dialogue is possible, but it has to take place in terms of cultural equality. There should not be a hegemonic term, a privileged concept of value. When two things are different, the difference should be accepted and respected, then only a meaningful conversation is possible which can be oriented towards understanding each other- a non- judgmental understanding.

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