



### The Five Cardinal Codes of Comparative Literary Theory

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where  
knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by  
narrow domestic walls; Where words come out from the depth  
of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; Where the clear  
stream of reason has not lost its way

into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; Where the  
mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought  
and action; Into that heaven of freedom, my father Let  
my country awake.

The above poem by Rabindranath Tagore epitomizes the core ideas of Comparative Literary Theory (CLT). This paper proposes to develop the five cardinal codes of CLT as they emanate from the Gitanjali 'text' and thereby establish that there is no better composite definition of CL in World Literature other than the one visualized by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

The first basic code of Comparative Literary Theory is the assumption that in the study, pedagogy and research of literature it is not the "what" but rather the "how" that is of importance. Tagore appropriately begins with the idea of 'fearlessness of mind' to preserve one's self-esteem. It appears that Tagore is providing us with an answer to the inconsequential and meaningless debate of 'nativism' versus 'nationhood'. Perhaps it is important to maintain one's national identity hand-in-hand with one's regional identity for the unification/merger of one into the other (while retaining its core identity/ideology) would instill a sense of fearlessness and therefore a comparative theorist, among others, would not fail to take complete stock of the area, the discipline, the culture and the language and then approach the 'text' with a fearless mind. Fearlessness is thus a vital prerequisite of CLT. In fact, it is a fearless critique that is vital to composing an ethical, comprehensive theory of Comparative Literary Studies. For instance, Aristotle's Poetics is a fearless critique of his master Plato. Again, Thomas More, suggestions in Utopia that fearlessly advocate communal ownership, women-equality, religious toleration, importance of education – all go against the extreme corruption and irrationality of European politics that was a governing feature of contemporary times. Here, More's cognizance of Plato's Republic invites significant parallels between the two texts.

Shakespeare, similarly, fearlessly spoke out his mind on colonialism in The Tempest. In fact, the one to one parallels between the Indian concept of death and the ideas of death presented in Hamlet by Hamlet demonstrate a certain universality of thought far beyond time and space. The idea of the immortality of the human spirit (Bhagavad Gita)

## **The Five Cardinal Codes of Comparative Literary Theory**

demonstrates a quest for Truth and truth alone; a fearless analysis of Reality. The Italian poet and Propagandist F. T. Marinetti rightly observes in his manifesto,

““We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.”

([https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/20century/topic2\\_05/ftmarinetti.htm](https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/20century/topic2_05/ftmarinetti.htm))

In fact, the idea of a direct, joyful, and totally fearless relationship with God can be found in many of Tagore's religious writings, including Gitanjali. From India's diverse religious traditions he drew many ideas, both from ancient texts and from popular poetry. He correctly sings in one of his poems, “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!” The core idea here is one of courageously facing the reality of life and living. To free one's self from orthodoxy and to face one's true self squarely is the crux of the poem.

The second basic code of Comparative Literature is the speculative as well as practical claim to move and to have a dialogue between cultures, languages, literatures and disciplines. The second and the third line of Tagore's poem “Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls...” pin-pointedly addresses this principle of disseminating ‘knowledge’ irrespective of region or territory. Truly, knowledge would be ‘free’ when it is not bound to caste, creed, race or religion. In fact, CL offers an incredible amount of ‘freedom’ to read several languages and synthesize multiple fields of knowledge. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it would be unwise to compartmentalize the boundaries and the disciplines of knowledge. The right way forward would be to methodically and intelligently connect the varied branches of knowledge and believe in the principle of selective ‘assimilation’ and ‘accommodation’. In T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, the west and the east, as represented in their canonical texts, goes beyond established dichotomies and enters into a dialogue that embraces international boundaries. In fact, every period establishes a dialogue that differs from the preceding age and provides a solution to it. For instance, If ‘Empiricism’ was the question of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Romanticism’, ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘De-Colonization’ were the responses that followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In other words ages, periods and writers are always at some level engaged in an inter-textual dialogue, with its interdisciplinary approach that makes comparative literary studies inclusive in character.

The third basic code of CL is the necessity for the comparatist to achieve comprehensive education in numerous languages and literatures as well as other disciplines. The fourth line of Tagore's poem, “Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit...” suggests ‘clarity of vision’ and ‘libration from orthodoxy’. A comparatist's knowledge of many languages and literatures enables him to delve deep into the mythical ethos and correctly comprehend the cultural fabric of that particular language/literature. In his 2012 *The Promise and Premise of Creativity: Why Comparative Literature Matters*, Eugene Eoyang posits that "where other

## **The Five Cardinal Codes of Comparative Literary Theory**

disciplines aspire to order and orthodoxy, comparative literature encompasses chaos and heterodoxy, even against itself" (208). Indeed this is CL's strength and source of vitality that makes it ‘creatively wander’ into regions yet unexplored. For instance, the *Bhakti* movement had an indelible impact on almost all the regional

literatures of India. In fact, the idea of religious toleration went hand in hand with incorporating and adapting different regional facets in literary works and studies. Patriotism as a theme found resonance in Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi literatures.

The fourth basic code of CL is its interest to study literature in relation to other forms of artistic expression and in relation to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The fifth line of Tagore's poem, "Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action..." refers to the all-encompassing and the trans-disciplinary nature of CL. In fact, CL helps to locate affinities not only in world literature but also in aesthetic processes of allied disciplines. The ever-widening direction of the thoughtful 'mind' is symptomatic of the 'evolutionary' realm of CL. CL, like the other arts is an expression of individual thought and feeling achieved through the creative process. Artists seek to share their experiences, observations, and understanding (their "truths") through the medium that most effectively lends itself to their personal skills and abilities. Whether artists are writing stories, painting pictures, writing music, composing a photograph, or creating a film, they are expressing their relationship to the world around them at that moment. Their works share certain expressive elements, such as structure, theme, and tone. Art connects human beings to each other in that it allows us to share each other's perceptions, emotions, and experiences. A gifted artist may capture creatively what we feel but cannot express ourselves. For instance, when one looks at Modernist literature (Early 20th century) and compares that to the other arts, certain themes pop up: the need for the individual to express himself or herself in an increasingly more chaotic world, an experimentation with or even rejection of certain traditional elements, etc. In other words, CL liberates itself from the puritanic notions of purity of/in literature and examines ideas irrespective of its form. Take for example Tagore's *Chandalika*, where in one of the play's defining moments, Ananda, the monk and disciple of Lord Buddha pleads, *Give me some water*, and Prakriti resists by voicing her powerlessness to quench the monk's thirst. This is the moment of awakening for the daughter of Chandal when the monk tells her she is not *impur'* but the child of the same almighty like others. All this while when Prakriti had internalized herself as a victim of social stigma and negated her selfhood suddenly elevates to a moment of recognition. Recounting this incident to her mother, she says, *This is my new birth. In satisfying his thirst I feel baptised. I am aware of my 'self' now mother. I now know what freedom tastes like.* (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nri/art-culture/Tagores-lovelorn-Chandalika-returns-to-stage/articleshow/11524410.cms>). Suggestively, CL too defies orthodoxy and embraces all forms of literary and artistic expressions. The notion of purity/impurity thus becomes a misnomer and every CL study would invariably incorporate an inter-disciplinary; intra-disciplinary or a multi-disciplinary approach.

### **The Five Cardinal Codes of Comparative Literary Theory**

The fifth code of CL in the context of conceptual approach and function is the study of languages and literatures translated into English. When Tagore finally says, "Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake," he is subtly referring to a composite form of literature that assimilates expressions/impressions across linguistic and cultural boundaries and thus a kind of "heaven" is envisioned by the poet. Such comparatists constitute a superior variety of human beings that would bring heaven on earth. There is no denying that English is a window to all the great literatures of the world and therefore translations/transcreations in English would effectively serve one of the basic principles of CL – that of *selective assimilation and accommodation* (Italics mine) - and make the world exchange the best of ideas with each other. John Keats' *On First reading Chapman's Homer* beautifully encapsulates the joy of becoming familiar with a text/s (island/s) that had been hitherto unknown. The happiness of the reader is equated with that of an astronomer and a navigator. Secondly, as the purpose of literature is always meant to define a

cultural framework, it is important to ensure that regional cultural paradigms are effectively communicated through literature. For instance, the notion of Indianness in Indian writing in English; Englishness in British English Literature and Americanness in American English literature need to find appropriate cultural 'transport' through literature written in English. In other words, a literary study should also achieve the aim of cultural orientation without marginalizing any domain of literature. Tagore, himself was well-grounded in a number of languages and therefore as a *vishyamanab*, one experiences much of Bengali culture in his literary creations. This is the kind of world (*heaven*) in which all of us should eventually *awake*.

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