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Literary Theories

Cross-Cultural Dialogues in Comparative Literary Studies: Negotiating Identity, Power, and Narrative Across Traditions

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Abstract: Comparative Literary Studies has long functioned as a space where cultures encounter one another through literary texts, often under conditions shaped by historical inequality, translation, and circulation. In the context of globalization, cross-cultural dialogue has become central to how literature is read, taught, and theorized. This paper examines comparative literature not merely as a method of textual juxtaposition but as an ethical and interpretive practice that negotiates identity, power, and narrative form across cultural traditions. Drawing on selected theoretical perspectives and literary practices from Western and non-Western contexts, the study explores how translation, adaptation, and intertextuality operate as dialogic processes rather than unidirectional acts of influence. By foregrounding cultural specificity alongside transnational movement, the paper argues that comparative literature resists homogenization and instead encourages plural, historically informed modes of reading. Situating comparative practice within postcolonial and world literature debates, the paper emphasizes reciprocity, contextual reading, and responsible comparison. Ultimately, it demonstrates that cross-cultural literary dialogue enriches critical understanding by revealing shared human concerns such as memory, displacement, and resistance, while preserving the integrity of cultural difference.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Translation, Power, World Literature.

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Introduction

Comparative Literary Studies emerged from a desire to read beyond national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. From its early institutional foundations in nineteenth-century Europe to its present global orientation, the discipline has continually redefined its methods and assumptions. Early comparative scholarship often concentrated on tracing influence among European literatures, reinforcing a hierarchy in which Western texts were treated as universal reference points. As the field expanded, this model increasingly appeared inadequate, particularly in light of growing engagement with non-Western literatures and the historical conditions shaping literary circulation.

In the contemporary literary landscape, cross-cultural dialogue occupies a central place in comparative inquiry. Literature now moves across borders through translation, adaptation, academic exchange, and global publishing networks. Yet this circulation is never neutral. Linguistic dominance, colonial histories, and economic inequality determine which texts are translated, taught, and canonized. Susan Bassnett notes that “comparison is never innocent; it always occurs within specific cultural and ideological frameworks” (*Comparative Literature* 2). Comparative literature must therefore acknowledge interconnectedness while remaining attentive to difference, context, and power.

This paper approaches comparative literature as a dialogic space where cultures encounter one another without being reduced to sameness. Rather than viewing comparison as a search for universal themes alone, it emphasizes relational reading that accounts for mediation, historical location, and asymmetry. By examining translation, intertextuality, and adaptation across traditions, the paper argues for an ethically grounded comparative practice that values mutual illumination over hierarchy.

Comparative Literature as a Dialogic Practice

At its most productive level, comparative literature is not simply the act of placing texts side by side. It is an interpretive practice that creates dialogue among literary traditions shaped by different histories, languages, and cultural memories. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism provides a useful framework for understanding this process. Bakhtin argues that all texts are inherently relational, shaped by prior utterances and responsive to social voices. As he observes, “the word in language is half someone else’s” (*Dialogic Imagination* 293).

When texts from different cultural traditions are read comparatively, they enter into a conversation that reveals both affinity and tension. Difference does not obstruct comparison; instead, it deepens it. A postcolonial narrative may expose the ideological assumptions embedded in a canonical Western text, while a classical work may acquire new meanings when read alongside narratives of migration, exile, or resistance.

This dialogic understanding challenges earlier comparative models that privileged Western literature as a normative standard. Contemporary comparative studies emphasize multidirectional exchange, recognizing that non-Western literatures are active contributors to global literary discourse. Elleke Boehmer argues that postcolonial texts “write back not only to empire but to literary history itself” (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 235). Such reciprocity allows comparative literature to function as a critical space that questions inherited hierarchies rather than reinforcing them.

Translation as Cultural Mediation

Translation occupies a central position in cross-cultural literary dialogue. Without translation, comparative engagement across languages would remain limited. Yet translation is not a transparent transfer of meaning. It is an interpretive act shaped by ideology, audience, and historical context. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes that translation involves ethical responsibility, cautioning against practices that erase cultural specificity. She argues that “to translate is to surrender to the text, not to appropriate it” (“Politics of Translation” 191).

In comparative studies, translated texts become sites of negotiation where languages and cultures intersect. The global circulation of novels, epics, and poetry through translation has generated new literary forms and critical responses. At the same time, translation can reinforce unequal power relations when dominant languages control access to global readership.

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Lawrence Venuti critiques this imbalance through his discussion of domestication, arguing that fluent translations often conceal cultural difference and render the translator invisible (*Translator's Invisibility* 1). Comparative reading that attends to translation strategies can therefore reveal how meaning shifts across borders and how literary value is produced. Ethical comparative practice requires readers to recognize translation itself as a dialogic process rather than a neutral medium.

Intertextuality and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Intertextuality provides another framework for understanding cross-cultural dialogue. Literary texts frequently echo, revise, or respond to earlier narratives, myths, and genres. These connections often cross cultural boundaries, demonstrating how stories migrate and acquire new meanings. Julia Kristeva's claim that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (*Desire in Language* 66) underscores the relational nature of literary production.

Myths and classical narratives offer clear examples of cross-cultural adaptation. When a story rooted in one tradition is reimagined in another, it reflects both continuity and change. Such adaptations allow writers to engage with inherited forms while addressing local concerns and historical realities. Comparative analysis of adaptation reveals how literature negotiates identity. A narrative adapted from a Western source into a postcolonial context may challenge colonial ideology or reinterpret themes of authority and belonging. Conversely, non-Western narratives adapted for global audiences may resist exoticization by asserting cultural agency. These intertextual dialogues demonstrate literature's capacity to sustain conversation across time and space.

Power, Context, and Ethical Comparison

Cross-cultural comparison cannot be separated from questions of power. Colonial histories, economic inequality, and linguistic dominance shape literary circulation and reception. Certain texts gain global visibility, while others remain marginalized due to structural barriers rather than aesthetic limitations.

Edward Said's analysis of cultural imperialism remains foundational for ethical comparative practice. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he argues that literary representations often sustain imperial power by normalizing domination and silencing resistance. Comparative reading informed by such critique seeks to uncover these dynamics rather than reproduce them.

Ethical comparison requires contextual reading that situates texts within their socio-historical conditions. Rather than abstracting works into universal themes, scholars must attend to the cultural and political forces shaping literary production. Aamir Mufti notes that comparison must remain "attentive to history rather than detached from it" (*Forget English!* 12). Postcolonial theory has thus reshaped comparative studies by foregrounding resistance, hybridity, and counter-narrative.

Comparative Literature and World Literature

Recent debates on world literature have further complicated comparative practice. World literature emphasizes global circulation and readership, focusing on how texts move beyond their points of origin. David Damrosch defines world literature as “a mode of circulation and reading” (*What Is World Literature?* 5).

While this framework highlights connectivity, it risks flattening cultural difference into market-driven universality. Comparative literary studies offer a corrective by insisting on contextual reading alongside transnational movement. Cross-cultural dialogue provides a balanced approach that recognizes circulation without erasing rootedness. Literature gains meaning not only through global reach but through cultural specificity and ethical interpretation.

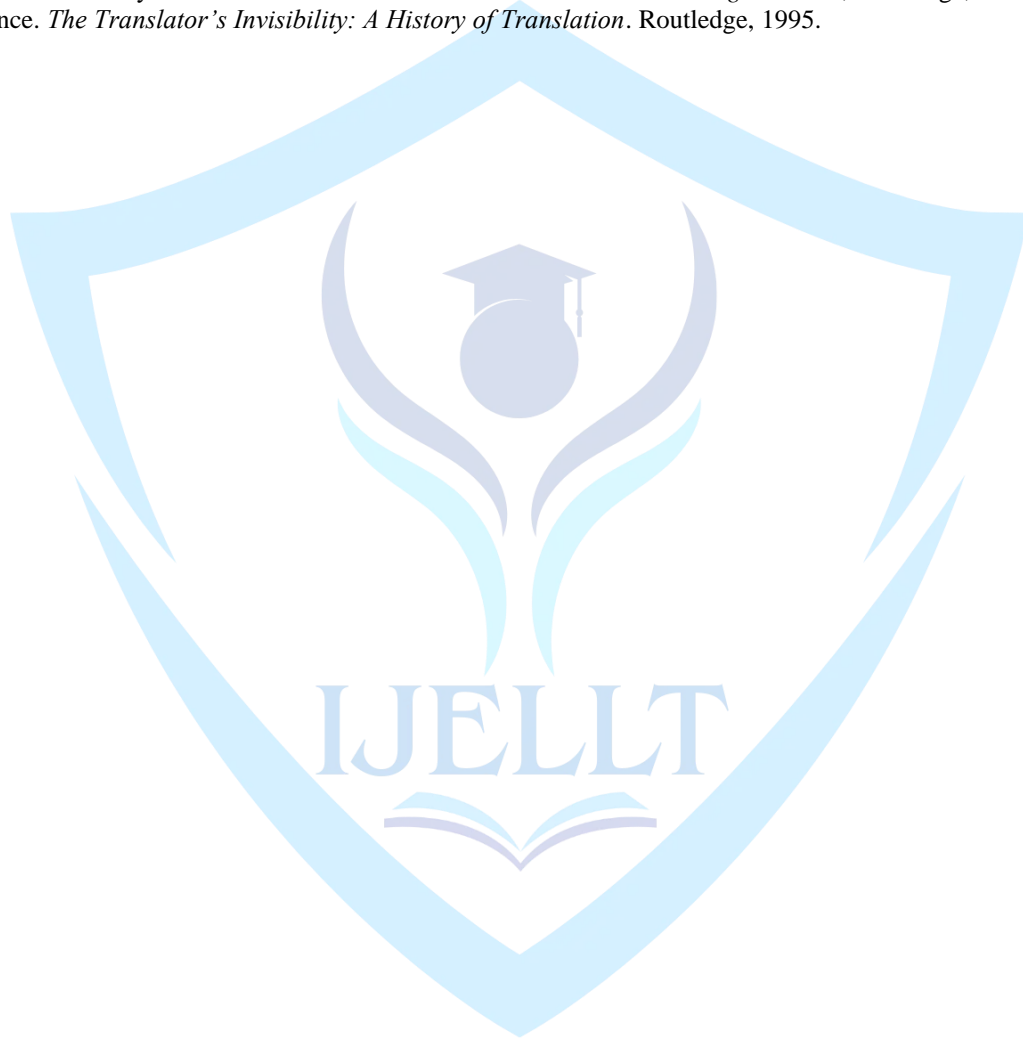
Conclusion

Cross-cultural dialogues in Comparative Literary Studies reveal literature as a dynamic field shaped by exchange, negotiation, and ethical engagement. By approaching texts as participants in dialogue rather than isolated artifacts, comparative scholars can uncover shared human concerns alongside culturally specific expressions. Translation, adaptation, and intertextuality emerge as central processes through which literature travels and transforms.

This paper has argued for a relational and context-sensitive comparative practice that resists hierarchy and emphasizes reciprocity. In an increasingly interconnected literary world, comparative literature remains essential for understanding how narratives shape and reflect complex human experiences.

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