

# **ANTROPO-LIT AND PRAX-LINGUA RESEARCH CENTRES**



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# **RETHINKING IDENTITY**

**BRITISH, AMERICAN AND GERMAN STUDIES**



**Editura UNIVERSITARIA**

**Craiova, 2019**

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**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**

**Rethinking identity** / coord.: Titela Vîlceanu, Sorin Cazacu. - Craiova :

Universitaria, 2019

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-14-1480-2

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## FOREWORD

Identity studies have undergone such a revival in the last thirty years that the term is ubiquitous in contemporary linguistic, cultural and literary theory. It also cuts across disciplines, from psychoanalysis through psychology, sociology, political science and history. Studies on the self, agency and subjectivity in narrative theory, anthropology, feminism, class, race and postcolonial studies have produced a plethora of recent work in an age which shifts paradigms at a very fast pace under the influence of technological advancement, demographic change, political and societal development.

This volume explores various facets of identity, such as racial, class, gender or cultural identity with a view to assessing the current state of the subject and providing ground for further research. The 23 papers included in this volume encompass a variety of perspectives, ranging from linguistics to cultural and literary studies collected under the auspices of the Centre for Anthropological and Literary Studies on Imaginary, Creativity and Modern and Contemporary Languages (Antropo-Lit) and the Centre for Research in Linguistic Diversity and Identity Discursive Practices (PraxLingua).

Along with the Annals of the University of Craiova, Series Philology English, which publishes the proceedings of the annual conferences on *Language, Literature and Cultural Policies*, this volume contributes to the consolidation of the research profile of our department and its academic worth.

*Sorin CAZACU, PhD*



# Comparative Literature and Otherness

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**Abstract:** Our study provides the theoretical basis for a wider investigation, emphasizes the general principles of comparative literature and defines the terms: diaspora, exile, diaspora literature, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of Arabic comparative literature. We start from the premise that comparative literature, as a hermeneutical practice, is responsible for the study of literature through cultures and transcends the geographic boundaries of a particular country. We make reference to the authoritative position of outstanding theorists of the field: Jonathan Culler, Djelal Kadir, Steven Tötösi de Zepetnek, Manfred Schmeling to reach the conclusion that Comparative literature has developed into the systematic study of supranational ensembles, in which the linguistic variety and the relations with otherness weave a canvas that is projected in the literary theory and criticism. A special section is devoted to the development of the discipline of comparative literature in the Arab world, and the contributions of the pioneers of Arabic comparatism, such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Adib Ishaq, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyah, Najib Al-Haddad, Sulayman Al-Bustani, and Ruhi al-Khalidi and Qusati al-Homsi.

**Keywords:** *Arabic, comparative literature, diaspora, exile, otherness.*

## **Defining the Notions: Comparative Literature**

Comparative literature, in a broad sense, is a hermeneutical practice that is responsible for the study of literature through cultures, a proposal of interdisciplinary nature that directs its specific interest to establish the elements of relationship between literary manifestations over time, and of space. On the other hand, this perspective of studying the literary text results in a fundamental contribution for those who approach literary creation from the shores of the creator, or the critic or whoever is dedicated to translation. In short, comparative literature starts from conceiving such a fundamental way of comprehension, variation or extension of reality, a suggestive, creative approach, for those seeking a rigorous training from an open perspective, not always present in the current studies of the humanistic area.

“Comparative literature,” with denominations in different languages – *Littérature comparée*, *Vergleichende Literatur*, *Letteratura comparata*, or, in Arabic, المقارن الأدب (“al’adab almuqarin”) – was developed fundamentally as a rethinking of the literary history and the histories of individual literatures, in which a preeminent methodological place was given to the comparative component. Thus, coherently with its denomination, comparative literature has dealt with the contrastive study of literatures, literary works, authors and contexts, extracting in this study similarities and differences, becoming one of the most active and important disciplines in all literary studies.

Starting from a comprehensive vision of comparative literature and its development, we can distinguish in it two large thematic spaces, diachronically established, in which the objects and perspectives of study are grouped. These two spaces, within each of which it is possible to establish other spaces as sections of those, respond to different epistemological approaches and have different degrees of consolidation in the set of comparative literature studies.

The space first consolidated has an important positivist and historical-literary foundation; the study of the delimitation and configuration of national literatures is part of this thematic space, as well as the reflection on the histories of these, from a comparative perspective of some national literatures with others. Also in this space there are comparative studies between literary works, authors, generations, movements and literary contexts, and the comparative treatment of themes, genres, styles, treatment that is situated in a theoretical and critical tendency to which comparative literature has never renounced.

The space defined more recently can be considered still in the process of settlement and adjustments in the set of disciplines of study of literature, is that which has been constituted on the most modern trends in comparative literature. It is the result of the suitability of the latter for the study of questions that are to a large extent in the contexts of literary production; from there they are projected to the works, to their production and to their reception, and that they respond to the complex new reality of the current world, which has experienced an important social, economic and political transformation in the last decades of the 20th century. From this most recent space are the studies that deal with the relationship between literature and multiculturalism, interculturality and transculturality, with which the studies

of postcolonial literatures and postcolonial elements in literary works are related, as well as post-structuralist studies, with concrete theoretical-critical perspectives such as those of political and ideological criticism, feminist criticism, criticism of minority literatures, etc., in the field of cultural studies. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek has proposed comparative cultural studies (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2003). In this thematic space there is also the comparative study of literature with other arts, which, with a great tradition in aesthetic criticism and literary criticism, was not usually considered in the central space of comparative literature. This space is also related to the study of digital literature, hyper-textual construction from a comparative perspective.

We are also considering the principles of comparative literature as defined by the American comparatist Djelal Kadir: “Comparative Literature is the systematic practice of discerning, examining, and theorizing symbolic processes as they affect the material and aesthetic enablements in the production, valuation, and dissemination of literary culture at and through transnational and transcultural sites” (Kadir, 2001: 25). Discussing the ability of the discipline to answer the challenges of the new circumstances, he concludes that: “Comparative Literature must now countenance the flux and reflux of spherical entanglements, global and globalizing formations, polyglossic aesthetics and heteroglossic constructs, radically enmeshed textualities and historical contexts [...]” (*idem*)

Canadian scholar Steven Tötösi de Zepetnek, in his *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (1998), formulates his “Ten General Principles of Comparative Literature,” establishing both the content and the future directions of the field. We are interested in the fifth principle, which stresses the “composite principle of approach and methodology,” by which the author understands the “parallel recognition and study of single languages and literatures in the context of the comparative conceptual approach and function but so with a special focus on English” (Zepetnek, 1998: 17-18). Also, the eighth principle underlines the central position taken by methodology as an “umbrella term in interdisciplinary study,” in which he identifies “three main types of methodological precision: intra-disciplinarity (analysis and research within the disciplines in the humanities); multi-disciplinarity (analysis and research by one scholar employing any other discipline), and pluri-disciplinarity (analysis and research by team-work with participants from several disciplines).” (*idem*)

German researcher Manfred Schmeling provides an important definitional precision which facilitates the use of this concept as a literary category: World literature does not mean the sum of all the literatures of the world, nor the works that stand out particularly, nor the fundamentally human that connects all literatures; it means, on the other hand, the growing internationalization of the world of literature. He maintains that “contemporary discourse on Weltliteratur merges into the general discourse on literature in the age of (globalized) mass media. Information overload and deterritorialized cultural transference have led to a manner of writing so intertextual, according to Schmeling, that creative works have become world literature in the most literal sense, as “a kind of melting pot of international cultural experience”” (qtd. in Pizer, 2006: 80-81)

To conclude, comparative literature maintains two principles: the involvement in their studies of more than one language or of more than one literature and the inclusion of the other and, therefore, of the perspectives of otherness (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998: 11), principles on which the comparative analysis and reflection are based. Comparative literature has been constituted as the systematic study of supranational ensembles, in which the linguistic variety and the relations with otherness weave a canvas that is projected in the literary theory and criticism. But comparative literature, as a study of literature with these approaches, can be considered as a discipline linked to poetics, in a conception of this widely configured, in which all aspects of the literary work, of literature, of its production, of its reception, of its contexts, etc., are taken care of, and in which there is a comparative component, in relation to which comparative literature has been constituted as a discipline provided with autonomy in a space in which diverse disciplines are very closely related. On comparative literature the whole of poetics is projected as a theoretical systematization formed by concepts and relationships that allow us to explain the literary phenomenon in its constitution, in its production, in its reception, in its contextualization and in its relationship with the human being and with the society.

## **Defining the Notions: Otherness**

The evolution of literature itself, as well as the evolution of new orientations of thought and new methodological conceptions, makes it necessary to question the traditional canon. It has now become almost a truism that literature has become “more international,” “more intercultural,” and, in this sense, “more open.” How could it be otherwise? Since, of course, the new waves of emigration did not remain without a trace. A tendency to ethnologization not only characterizes literary texts but still is reflected in many areas of the humanities, where categories like “otherness,” “cultural hybridity,” “miscegenation,” etc., have made a lasting fortune. The common interest in the Other has led to new connections between philosophy (hermeneutics), sociology, ethnology and literary criticism.

The question of otherness is constitutive of discipline; it is even consubstantial to it. Would not there be two possible entries for a discipline changed into a double-faced Janus: the comparison and the foreign dimension? It may be advisable to reflect on our practices, on the comparatist act which is primarily reading, comparative reading or better comparing, to reach perhaps some beneficial and salutary developments. The premise of otherness, a crucial point in intercultural studies, gives reason for the true nature of comparative literature. Thanks to its open-mindedness, it has an eminently expansive character, both because of the plurality of national literatures it affects, and because of the diversity of the field of application or, also, by its relations with the other disciplines. This tendency to dilation would be enough to explain why genuine comparatist studies do not experience obstacles either in space or in time. Logically, the main problems could arise from the fact that borders exist, just as there are also periodizations between different eras of literary history. But here we are faced with a discipline concerned with decompartmentalizing literary teachings.

If the borders exist, it would be illusory to ignore them. They can be political, historical, cultural, linguistic, etc., and the comparatist must take into account the different aspects that come into action as soon as one of these barriers is crossed. Thus, for example, we cannot ignore the cultural conditioning experienced, or is still known in some places, by the importation of new literary ideas into the countries which are subject – or have been – to

a communist regime. This is a factor that must be taken into consideration in any reception study concerning these cultural ensembles. Another area of action where boundaries must be well defined before moving to literal analysis is intracultural studies, which are distinct from intercultural studies. These are exercised on languages that do not belong to the same family and whose influence is not discussed. The fact remains that the capital point of reference is that of frontiers based on linguistic criteria. But again there would be some remarks to make here. What to do, for example, with literatures of a single language that develop in different countries? Can we consider them as sets in which we would be able to successfully implement the relationships mentioned above? This is the case, for example, in the Arabic-speaking community, in the French-speaking community, in the Spanish-speaking community or in the Portuguese-speaking community.

Edward Said argues that the colonial relationship between colonizers and colonized, the marginal other, is a hierarchical relationship that does not suppose mutual interchange, that is, knowing about the other enables representation, appropriation of the other creates and legitimizes the right of arbitrary termination and control according to their own economic and geopolitical interests. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) he writes:

In time, culture comes to be associated often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates “us” from “them,” almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent ‘returns’ to culture and tradition. These “returns” accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behavior that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridist. In the formerly colonized world, these ‘returns’ have produced varieties of religious and nationalist fundamentalism. (Said, 1994: xii)

Homi Bhabha postulates the concepts of “the Other” and “otherness.” In this sense an important change occurs between two key texts: “The other question” (1983) and “The Postcolonial and Postmodern: The Question of Agency” (from *The Location of Culture*, 1994). In the first text “otherness” is linked as a process to the concept of “mimicry,” the attempt of a displacement of the position and effects of the colonial subject through the