

TEACHING COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET GEORGIAN UNIVERSITIES

Irma Ratiani¹

RESUMO: Literatura Comparada, uma disciplina universitária conforme se compreende no Ocidente, não se popularizou no *curriculum* das universidades soviéticas, incluindo as universidades da Geórgia. Embora a Literatura Comparada tendesse a expandir as fronteiras da pesquisa literária até as literaturas de países não soviéticos e não socialistas, isso era uma perspectiva arriscada para a pesquisa soviética. Em oposição a esta noção foi criada a expressão “Estudos Literários Histórico-Comparativos”, que mais tarde ganhou força com uma nova expressão: “Relações Literárias”. Esta expressão foi usada amplamente para o estudo de relações literárias dentre de países soviéticos e socialistas. A principal diferença entre a “Literatura Comparada” e as “Relações Literárias” era a falta de *metodologias* que pudessem ligar os estudos literários soviéticos com os internacionais. No período pós-soviético, surgiram entusiásticos esforços para preencher esta lacuna: o processo de expandir as fronteiras foi seguido pelo aprofundamento dos estudos literários e universidades de liderança na Geórgia estavam prontas para implementar programas de Literatura Comparada. No entanto, outro problema surgiu; a falta de especialistas e livros-textos. Portanto, as universidades encaravam uma necessidade complexa – traduzir livros-textos, criar cursos, treinar especialistas, produzir pesquisa original. O resultado foi um sucesso: hoje a Literatura Comparada é parte do processo de ensino e pesquisa em grandes universidades da Geórgia: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi, Iliá, Universidade da Geórgia.

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Literatura Comparada; História; Geórgia

ABSTRACT: Comparative Literature, a university discipline as understood in the West, was not popularized in the curriculum of Soviet universities, including the Georgian universities. As much as Comparative Literature was tended to expand borders of literary research towards the literatures of non-soviet and non-socialist countries, it was a risky prospect for Soviet research. Contrary to this notion was activated the term – “Comparative-Historical Literary Studies”, which was later strengthened by the new term - “Literary relations”. This term was widely used towards the study of literary relations within Soviet and Socialist countries. The main difference between the “Comparative Literature” and “Literary Relations” was the lack of *methodologies*, which could bond Soviet literary studies with international one. In Post-soviet period enthusiastic efforts to fill this gap showed up: in Post-soviet period the process of expanding the boundaries was followed by the process of deepening literary studies and leading Georgian universities were ready to implement Comparative Literature programme. However, the problem of a different kind was raised: the shortage of specialists and text-books. Therefore, universities faced a complex need, like – translating textbooks, creating syllabuses, training specialists, producing original research. But the result was nevertheless successful: today Comparative Literature is part of the teaching and research process in major Georgian universities: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Iliá State University, Georgian University.

KEY WORDS: Comparative Literature; History; Georgia

¹ Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

Comparative Literature, a university discipline as understood in the West, was not popularized in the curriculum of Soviet universities, including the Georgian universities. As much as Comparative Literature was tended to expand borders of literary research towards the literatures of non-soviet and non-socialist countries, it was a risky prospect for Soviet research. Contrary to this notion was activated the term – “Comparative-Historical Literary Studies”, which was later strengthened by the new term – “Literary relations”. This term was widely used towards the study of literary relations within Soviet and Socialist countries. The main difference between the “Comparative Literature” and “Literary Relations” was the lack of *methodologies*, which could bond Soviet literary studies with international one.

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Historical background

Comparative Literature, a university discipline as understood in the West, was not popularized in the curriculum of Soviet universities, including the Georgian universities. As much as Comparative Literature was tended to expand borders of literary research towards the literatures of non-soviet and non-socialist countries, it was a risky prospect for Soviet research. Contrary to this notion was activated the term – “Comparative-Historical Literary Studies”, which was later strengthened by the new term – “Literary relations”. This term was widely used towards the study of literary relations within Soviet and Socialist countries.

The issue establishment of “Comparative Literature” as a concept and as a methodology in the circle of Soviet Literary Studies was widely discussed among the most famous Soviet researchers, including V. Zhirmunsky, A. Dima, N. Konrad, A. Bushmin, G. Neupakoeva and etc. As I. K. Gorsky admits in his paper “About the Differences between the Comparative Literature and Comparative-Historical Literature”, one of the main goals of Soviet researchers was the proving of tight relations between the Comparative Literature and the history of literature (Gorsky 142). “History” was considered as a necessary attribute to “Comparative analysis”, where the distinction between “Regional literature” and “World literature” was quite unclear. This vagueness has led to the wrong conclusions concerning the split of national and world literary studies, turning the study of a national literature into an isolated process (Durishin 31-32).

The tendency of pushing comparative methodology to the mode of historical poetics derives from theoretical works of Russian scholar Alexandr Veselovsky (1838-1906), who established the term “Comparative-Historical Literature”, by means of which the comparative analysis as a special methodology was removed from the agenda (Veselovsky 1940)². Veselovsky discussed the connection between comparative methodology and tendencies of “Influences” (*вливания*) and “Borrowings” (*заимствования*). While analyzing different mythological plots, germinated in depth of either Eastern or Western cultural layers, he considered that the theories of “Influences” and “Borrowings” causes the theory of “Basics” and vice versa. Veselovsky was tended to reunite the Genetic Approach with Historical Methodology and parallel studies of so-called “General Literature”. Veselovsky characterized his theory as “the more intensive form” of historical poetics

² Historical approach to Comparative studies was germinated in the depth of German philology (Gervinus G. G., Brothers Grimm).

recurring in “parallel rows” and directed towards the total generalization (Lecture – “On the Method and Tasks of Literary History as a Field of Scholarship”, 1870)

Veselovsky’s theory was a brilliant start for development, but, unfortunately, almost all attempts failed because of methodological flaws as well as ideological clichés already established in Soviet Russia³. The process of further expansion of Veselovsky’s theory has been started in Russia by Victor Zhirmunsky, though with some corrections. Due to the ideological dogmatism, which existed in Soviet scholarship, it was difficult to develop the concept of Comparative Studies apart from Marxist doctrine; as much as comparative methodology was linked with theories of “Influences” and “Borrowings”, it was going beyond the limits of Soviet rule, neglecting the principles of materialist theory. The way out from this dilemma was found by Zhirmunsky by splitting the terms “Methodology” and “Technique”: comparative method was pronounced as one of the techniques of historical researches (Zhirmunsky 1961). This approach allowed the propaganda of equalization of “Big” and “Small” literatures, which conformed with the principle of equality declared in the USSR; however, from today’s perspective the hidden agenda of cultural assimilation can be observed beyond the cultural policy towards national literatures implemented by the Soviet Center. Zhirmunsky’s approach was further developed by Mikhail Khrapchenko, Giorgi Lomidze and other influential Soviet scholars, arguing that young literatures of some ethno-linguistic groups within the USSR could catch up with the older literatures⁴. This point of view, oriented towards baseless unification, was unacceptable for Soviet countries with long historical and literary traditions, such as Georgia or Armenia⁵.

Due to such approaches the understanding of literature in general was divided into “Soviet literatures” and “Foreign literature”, which emphasized the borders between these two. The Soviet myth of “Wholeness” of “Soviet Literatures” was activated. But those approaches were as artificial as the declared principle of equality or the myth itself: actually, the shadow of Russia as a “Big Brother” was omnipresent to all other Soviet nations; consequently, all national literatures had to be compared to Russian literature, and had to recognize its greatness and importance. The ignorance of the theories of “Influences” and “Borrowings” by Soviet scholars caused the lowering of the level of research in the field of Comparative Studies.

We should not avoid the fact, that during this thorny period, outstanding scholars, who lived in Soviet Union, Mikhail Bakhtin, Juri Lotman, Mikhail Gasparov, Sergei Averintsev and some others, were developing their research free from ideology: Bakhtin was able to return from Saransk to Moscow and publish his book on Rabelais and republish his book on Dostoevsky, Lotman managed to establish the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School attended by Mikhail Gasparov, Vladimir Toporov and some other talented and distinguished scholars. Despite the fact that research conducted by this progressive wing of Soviet intellectuals was an important part of the world Comparative studies, Comparative Literature still was not officially announced as a methodology.

Later on, in the late 1960s and 1970s-1980s, some of Soviet researchers (I. Neupakoeva⁶) reconsidered the definition of Comparative Studies, taking into account an internal connection of Comparative Studies with the general development of Literary Studies, and tried to escape from the declared methodology of historicism. They tried to activate the concept of “World literature”, but, in any case, they needed to conform to state ideology. The newly fashioned term – “Literary Relations” became a rescuer. The term was intended: a) to cover the space of Soviet countries and

³ One of a bright exceptions was E. Meletinsky, the author of several research books and articles concerning the problem of historical approach towards the archaic mythology as well as to contemporary literary texts.

⁴ Different development of this concept was presented in the work by Gachev, G. *Accelerated Development of Literatures* (1964), where the author argued, that literatures, “detained” in their historical development are rapidly evolving and mastering global stages.

⁵ N. Konrad in his book *The West and the East* (1972) was repeatedly stating, that Georgian literature belongs to the old literatures of the word.

⁶ See Neupakoeva, I. *The Problem of Interaction of Contemporary Literatures*. M. 1963 (In Russian); Neupakoeva, I. *The History of the World Literature. Issues of Systematic and Comparative Analyzes*. M. 1976 (In Russian).

stimulate theories of “Influences” and “Borrowings” within this space; b) to stimulate comparative researches towards the non-Soviet and non-Socialist literary space. The major risk here was a simplification of the process: external merging of Comparative Studies with Literary Studies, because the main difference between the “Comparative Literature” and “Literary Relations” was the lack of *methodologies* which might bond Soviet literary studies with international perspectives. Much depended on the competence of a scholar as well as on his talent to blend the two successfully.

As for Georgian scholarship, the issue of Comparative Studies became active from 1960s-1970s, in works of Akaki Gatsserelia and Grigol Kiknadze, but the basics were presented earlier, in the research of Vakhtang Kotetishvili, who was executed in 1937 in the Stalin’s Great Purge.

Teaching Comparative Literature in Soviet Georgian Universities

The Soviet regime reigned in Georgia for a period of 70 years (1921-1990) and impacted all fields of scholarship and intellectual thinking. The primary feature of totalitarianism as enforced rule was the creation of ideological dictatorship, which established clichés and enforced their implementation. For decades the Soviet Union was the symbol of historical and cultural eclecticism, though the incongruences were successfully masked by the smooth work of the hypertrophied state mechanism and the principle of the centralization of power: nationality, history, tradition, thinking, aspiration were only unimportant details against the backdrop of the large-scale Soviet hegemony.

Barring a small group of enthusiasts excited (or intoxicated) with the idea of “saving the masses”, the establishment of Soviet ideology in the sphere of social thought and life was effected through emotional-psychological influence. Culture and literature soon came under the grip of Soviet ideology. Classically defined, “Soviet discourse is a socio-cultural phenomenon of lingua-rhetorical nature” (Vorozhbitova 2000. Web). The anthem, of course, is the socio-psychological key to its mentality. On the one hand, it was a discourse of “new democracy” and leftist intelligentsia, where the word-fiction dominated over the word-object. On the other hand, it was a “superficial discourse” that had no depth and was devoid of the experience of national individuality. Nothing can be understood in the framework of this discourse; it could only be simulated (or dissimulated).

Not only creation, but also an interpretation of the literary text was strictly controlled. Soviet censorship, initiated by Lev Trotsky in 1918, was rampant. In the space of specific Soviet narrative, side by side with other politicized terms, a place of honor was accorded to the concepts: “Soviet literature”, “Socialist realism”, “Soviet critical school”, which expressed extremely well the priority of literature, marked under the token of ideology, promising special privileges and honor to the “servants of the muse”. Soviet criticism praised poems and odes, eulogizing the helmsmen of the Soviet country, and bulky novels, but this was not all: it relentlessly distorted the interpretation of the now rare quality literature. Quite a few texts of Georgian writers of landmark significance fell victim to such misguided, unacceptable interpretation.

Soviet criticism tried to isolate Soviet literature from the rest of the world, which was labeled “Bourgeois” and “Aristocratic”. In the late 1920s-1930s Soviet critical experiments were transformed into the established ideological system: special books in the field of literary history and theory were written declaring a new, totally Soviet, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist point of view. Soviet versions of literary theory were widely implemented in universities and schools, establishing the different curricula of this subject. Observing the political correctness was a basic requirement to fulfill for every course in the field of literary theory and history. They had to provide appropriate passages from Lenin and Stalin theories for each notion and form of analysis therefore strengthening their scholarly positions. If a similar argument was not found, they had to find another fragment, more proper for the particular idea or style of study. Soviet “Red professors” were warmly accepted by the authorities.

Tbilisi State University was established in 1918, in a short three-year period of sovereignty of Georgia and the life of the free Georgian Democratic Republic. The University held a status as a national research and cultural centre. However, since 1921, the year of the Sovietization of Georgia, things changed. Georgia lost its political sovereignty. Soon after, the autonomy of first Georgian University was also shaken. At the end of 1920s the 'iron hand' of Soviet power was already tangible. Rectors of the University were no longer elected; they were appointed by the Soviet government, according to their loyalty towards the Soviet system. The political system wanted to develop and rely on "politically properly oriented" academic staff. So-called 'differently minded' scholars and teachers were announced as 'enemies' and their works as anti-state activity. They risked ending in punishment: execution, exile, suicide - all these forms of 'settling' the problem were identical in content, only strategies of implementation varied. One of the tragic cases was the execution of outstanding Georgian literary scholar Vakhtang Kotetishvili, who was sent to the death penalty in 1937 by Stalin's regime because of his education and intellectual skills gained in France, free thinking and attraction towards the Western philosophy. Consequently, the most notable Georgian scholars were forced to obey the rule and make their activities less noticeable to Soviet power. Scholars like Vakhtang Kotetishvili, Shalva Nutsubidze, Simon Kaukhchishvili, Geronti Qiqodze, Akaki Gatsrelia, Grigol Kiknadze, Mikheil Kveselava were applying to comparative method in their scholarly works, however they were trying to make emphasis on it and make less noticeable. But, despite their attempts to conceal their factual opinion, they were never in favor of the Soviet authorities. Most of them were undergoing different political and social suppression; their careers and studies were often banned; some of them even never were appointed to appropriate positions or conferred academic degrees.

As much as comparative approach was not accepted as a methodology by Soviet criticism for a long time, teaching of Comparative Literature in Soviet Georgian universities was not allowed. Main courses were: the history of Georgian literature, the history of Soviet literature, the history of foreign literature and literary relations. Since 1960s-1970s, following the overall trend, Literary relations became an important direction in Soviet period Georgian literary researches with emphasize on Georgian-Russian literary relations; this particular sphere of literary relations was especially ideologized.

Later, from the end of the 1970s, and especially from the 1980s, with the *Perestroika* and the start of dissolution of the Soviet state, Georgian literary criticism started to reassess the situation with the teaching and research of literary theory and Comparative Literature. Scholars of new generation were less concerned with the Soviet regulations. Western critical theories and conceptions enter the space of literary criticism in the USSR, including Georgian one. The pioneers were professors of European literatures – Revaz Karalashvili, Nodar Kakabadze, Mzia Baqradze, Niko Kiasashvili, Leila Tetrushvili. They were soon joined by scholars in the field of Georgian literary studies who were revising Georgian literature in the context of different literary and cultural models – Alexandre Gvakharia, Elguja Khintibidze, Irakli Kenchoshvili, Giorgi Gachehiladze, Revaz Siradze, Revaz Tvaradze, Zurab Kiknadze. Ideology was no more capable to stop it.

Importance of Comparative Studies

The world community today lives in a period of minimization of frontiers, when the concept of time and space acquires an all but conditional meaning, while globalization appears as the most urgent and frequently quoted term and has taken the shape of the central problem of various scholarly debates: at authoritative gatherings of scholars, issues of globalization and globalize world, extreme and moderate globalism and of course, anti-globalist movements are discussed under permanent regime. Accepting it or not, it should be admitted that the frontiers of literary communication expand not only at the level of basic aesthetic principles but at that of individual textual structures as well, such as plot, subject, composition, etc. This trend of literary development

finds perfect reflection on the methodological plane. Theoretical conceptualization of a “literary frontier” is obviously determined by the specificity of the current literary process.

From the very beginning of 20th century a great diversity of literary-theoretical schools and trends arose side by side resting on differing conceptual foundations. This resulted in a kind of multi-interpretation space which at first sight had more differences than similarities. But this was only at first sight. The term that doubtless united 20th-century literary and theoretical schools and trends, placing them under a single umbrella, as it were, is interdisciplinary studies. True, all theoretical schools had their related discipline, some philosophy, some aesthetics, some linguistics, ethics or mathematics, and some several of these simultaneously, but the principle was common: literary theory clearly took the path of inter-disciplinary studies. The most important gain of interdisciplinary studies is an active link with related disciplines, which in the case of the theory of literature meant an analysis based on conceptual parallels, or the creation of a general humanitarian research space. The multi-interpretative and inter-disciplinary methods, worked out in European and American literary criticism space quickly spread at the level of various national literatures, while methodological regulation of the process became the prerogative of comparative studies, which became a focus for best minds – René Wellek, Austin Warren, René Étiemble, Peter Szondi, Paul de Mann and etc. Though the way of Comparative Literature was not easy or similar (recalling the controversy about the crisis of Comparative Literature), there was no ideology capable to stop it. That’s why, despite the artificial obstacles, it anyway entered the territory of Soviet criticism.

“Frontier” in this case loses material significance, shifting to the conceptual plane. Literary and cultural systems are transparent and conceptually and culturally intertwined; Comparative Studies is the only methodology that theoretically correctly reflects these most involved processes, seeking to solve the problem of “literary frontiers” in a methodologically correct way.

Comparative Studies implies not an analysis of individual national literatures through their juxtaposition, but implementation of that universal method that conceptualizes a concrete literary work in general perspective or, leaving the boundaries of national characteristics, it determines the extent of integration of national cultures and literatures, only on condition of preservation of their cultural identity. Later is particularly important for so called “Small literatures”. The aesthetic perspective of this process may be defined as coming close to one another. Analogies without contact ensure synthesis of concrete texts in a special literary model. In this case, the global trend of literary-theoretical analytical thought addresses the identification of the literary foundations of a writer’s works. A dialogue between literatures is logically transformed into an intercultural dialogue.

Teaching Comparative Literature in Post-Soviet Georgian Universities

In early 1990s, when the Soviet state was officially ended, the discussion concerning the problem of Comparative Literature and its establishment in Georgian criticism was shifted in the field of literary theory. The Georgian critical school started to overview the situation. From this standpoint, works by Teimuraz Doiashvili and Tamar Lomidze are of primary importance. The ongoing process of demolishing borders gave a brilliant chance to the new generation of Georgian critics, which has already gained an international experience, to approach closely the World and European experience of literary studies and teaching literary theory, as well as writing text-books and books in this field (Zaal Andronikashvili, Gaga Lomidze, Irma Ratiani, Zaza Shatirishvili, Bela Tsipuria). The hardest period of filling gaps has been started. The main goal was to provide Georgian readers with efficient information and approaches, tendencies, terms and concepts already established in Western academic circles. Due to these efforts, in the beginning of 21st century Georgian readers

were already offered the qualified reception of scholarly works by outstanding representatives of literary theory and Comparative Literature. Soon after, the accumulative stage was replaced by the analytical one, when Georgian scholars attempted not only to describe the achievements of Western literary studies, but to use their results in original research.

In 2006 it became possible to establish the first chair of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (Director, Prof. Irma Ratiani). In 2008, the graduate program of Comparative Literature, and in 2009 the Institute of Comparative Literature was established at the Iliia State University, Tbilisi (Director, Prof. Bela Tsipuria). Thus, the process of expanding the boundaries was followed by the process of deepening literary studies. These Georgian universities, which were implementing Comparative Literature in their programs, were dealing with several problems: replacement of Soviet-type text-books with new versions; intensification of translating work, training of specialists, development of a student's intellectual level and language skills. Universities were trying to speed those processes, even though some time and, also, some patience from professors was needed. From the very beginning most of the professors at university were teaching courses without any text-books in Georgian, relying on their own professional experience; they were stimulating individual work with students – seminars and practica; they were encouraging students to learn foreign languages⁷.

Due to those activities, some significant results are already achieved: new original text-books in the field are published. Among them should be mentioned the following: *Literary Theory. 20th Century Theoretical Schools and Conceptions* (Authors' collection. Tbilisi, Institute of Literature Press, 2008); *Literary Studies. An Introduction* (Authors collection. Tbilisi, Institute of Literature Press, 2012); *Fable and Plot* (Author – Irma Ratiani. Tbilisi, Institute of Literature Press 2011); *Genre Theory* (Author – Irma Ratiani. Tbilisi, University Press 2009); *Textology* (Authors collection. Tbilisi, Institute of Literature Press, 2008); *Comparative Literature. Chrestomathies 1,2,3*. Works embodying original research using comparative methods were published by Georgian scholars.

It should be also admitted, that in 2008 was founded the Georgian Comparative Literature Association (GCLA), which organizes numerous scientific events. GCLA, in partnership with Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature and Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, since 2008, issues the Georgian peer-reviewed journal of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature – *Sjani (Thoughts)*, which is already included in the database of Central and Eastern European Online Library (<http://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=276471>) and VABB-SHW (<https://www.ecoom.be/en/vabb>).

Various courses in Comparative Literature were introduced on different levels of university education, including: Introduction to Literary Studies (BA), Poetics of the Novel (BA), Comparative Studies (MA), Modern Literary Theories (MA), 20th Century Literary Trends and Tendencies (MA), Poetics of Drama (MA), Narratology (MA), Comparative Literature and Typology of Culture (PhD).

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the level of interest towards this discipline is increasing. Comparative Literature is widely accepted by the new generation of Georgian students. The teaching process corresponds to international standards. Quite a few Georgian students are already taking part in international exchange programs. Despite these achievements, there are still problems to be solved if other Georgian universities are also intended to implement Comparative Literature in their teaching and research, such as: the lack of human resources (qualified staff), the low level of foreign language skills among students, deficiency of translation skills. However, the foundation

⁷ Unfortunately, in 1990s, because of civil war and economical crises in Georgia, parents were not able to provide the desired education for their children).

is already created and we do hope, that Georgian universities will develop Comparative Literature as an essential contemporary international discipline in order to intensify international contacts and professional communication in the field of Humanities.

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