



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

Towards an Intercultural Comparative Study of Critical Texts, ed., Toward a Theory of Comparative Literature.

Schipper, Mineke; Valdéz M.J.

Citation

Schipper, M. (1990). Towards an Intercultural Comparative Study of Critical Texts, ed., Toward a Theory of Comparative Literature. *Selected Papers Presented In The Division Of Theory Of Literature At The Xith Icla Congress*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/7793>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/7793>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Towards an Intercultural Comparative Study of Critical Texts

Mineke Schipper
(Amsterdam Free University)

In Western literary criticism, the starting point is still apt to be 'real' literature with a capital L, the body of texts known as World Literature. As I have pointed out elsewhere¹, the texts that are part of this literature have been selected on the basis of Eurocentric norms by Western critics from works of literature that are exclusively or mainly Western.

As a body of texts, this literature with a capital L forms a literary system maintained and protected as an institution in its own right by the bodyguards or critics who keep a vigilant eye on something they consider very beautiful indeed. Sometimes 'the body' is slightly altered by critics to suit changing circumstances — historical or political, aesthetical or social — inside in the Western world itself.

As far as the present-day global literary bulwark is concerned, the Western cultural domination can not be ignored. If writers from other cultures are to be taken seriously outside their own cultural context, they have little choice but to take into account Western literary taste and criteria. The problems inherent in these relations are reflected in criticism.

How Western is literary criticism? How aware are Western critics of the limitations of their own perspective? According to Wellek and Warren, the value of a text exists potentially in the literary structures, and texts are valued 'only as they are contemplated by readers who meet the requisite conditions'.²

1 Mineke Schipper, 'Eurocentrism and Criticism: Reflections on the Study of Literature in Past and Present', in: *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 24, no. 1, summer 1984, pp. 16-27

2 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, (1949) 1973, p. 249

What, however, is a competent reader? Are there different competences or only one, and on what terms? Does it mean that there is only one value system for all the literature of the world? What about literature other than what is produced in the West? Wellek was too conditioned by his own cultural context to ever ask himself these questions. For him, art is autonomous, and cultural relativism fatally results in 'anarchy':

Relativism in the sense of a denial of all objectivity is refuted by many arguments; by the parallels to ethics and science, by recognition that there are aesthetic as well as ethical imperatives and scientific truths. Our whole society is based on the assumption that we know what is just, and our science on the assumption that we know what is true. Our teaching of literature is actually also based on aesthetic imperatives, even if we feel less definitely bound by them and seem more hesitant to bring these assumptions out in the open. The disaster of the 'humanities' as far as they are concerned with the arts and literature is due to their timidity in making the very same claims which are made in regard to law and truth (...) The concept of adequacy of interpretation leads clearly to the concept of the correctness of judgment. Evaluation grows out of understanding; correct evaluation out of correct understanding. There is a hierarchy of viewpoints implied in the very concept of adequacy of interpretation.³

'We know what is just and we know what is true' ... and thus we know what is beautiful. This kind of positiveness sounds amazing from an intercultural global point of view, rejecting the belief in an eternal canon of literary texts for all times and all places. Even within one culture or social group, the fixed body of favorite texts selected by the most prominent critics is modified in the course of time.

This is why it would be better, I should think, to start from a semiotic point of view and consider literature and literary texts as signs in a particular communication situation. Messages in the forms of texts are sent by the authors and appreciated by the recipients as literary, only if their social, cultural, intellectual and aesthetic norms

3. In: *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1963, pp. 17-18

and knowledge more or less coincide. In this communication, the literary codes used by the 'sender' have to be at least partially decoded by the recipient in order to enable him/her to appreciate the literary aspects of the sender's code. The code that makes a text be experienced and appreciated as a literary one is based on certain conventions that can be studied. The reconstruction of the author's or reader's code is very complicated and the necessary semiotic apparatus is still largely lacking. A solution might be to compare the analyzed reactions to a literary text with reactions to non-literary texts or with texts and codes that are no longer accepted as literary, or with texts and codes from a different social or cultural context. The study of regularities in readers' reactions which do make them accept certain texts as literary, and reject others, can tell us as much about the readers' background as about the texts as such.

The Russian Formalists noted that texts have to be read and viewed against the background of the literary and other traditions they result from or react to: there has been a rise and fall of literary systems throughout history. Literary systems are appreciated or rejected by readers and critics on the basis of contextual norms. The evaluation of texts and the values readers attach to texts are interesting objects of research and grant us better insight into the functioning of literary texts in their own and other social, cultural, historical and political contexts.

Literary criticism becomes part of literary research in the larger framework of communication. A rather new aspect of the comparative study of text interpretations is the intercultural comparison of critical texts. The world has become too small for the monocultural Western approach and this approach has received more and more critical, sometimes quite negative, comments from critics and scholars in other cultures. A study of the influence and impact of certain values on authors as recipients of texts (from their own and other cultures) on the one hand and as producers of texts on the other hand may well deepen and widen a scholar's insight into the way literature functions in today's cultures, where cultural autonomy is threatened by cultural synchronization.

At a Commonwealth Literature Conference in 1974, the well-known Nigerian author Chinua Achebe read a paper entitled "Colo-

nialist Criticism", in which he denounced what he called the colonialist mentality of the Western critic:

This attitude and assumption was crystallised in Albert Schweitzer's immortal dictum in the heyday of colonialism: *The African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother*. The latter-day colonialist critic, equally given to big-brother arrogance, sees the African writer as a somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European, but meanwhile must be humble, must learn all he can and while at it give due credit to his teachers in the form of either direct praise or, even better, since praise sometimes goes bad and becomes embarrassing, manifest self-contempt.⁴

Achebe advocated banning the word *universal* from discussions on African literature 'until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world'. The word has sometimes been used by Western critics to encourage African writers whose works they valued – in relation to other writers' works – as 'almost universal'.⁵

In fact its use illustrates critics' evolutionist thinking. Another point broached in the same article is the effect of this mentality on Third World writers themselves. Achebe wanted to know 'on whose ideological side they are playing'.

4 In: Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day. Essays*, London, Heinemann, 1975, p. 3.

5 E.g. Charles Larson's obvious Eurocentrism in his *The Emergence of African Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1972; adequate reactions from an African point of view by Molara Leslie from Niberia reviewing the book in *The Benin Review*, no. 1, June 1974, pp. 129-135, and by Ayi Kwei Armah from Ghana in: *First World. An International Journal of Black Thought*, Vol. 1, no. 2, March/April, 1977.

Critics and their Criticism

According to Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the four salient features generally distinguished in the study of literary texts are the work, the artist, the universe and the audience:

Although any reasonable adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories (...) exhibit a discernable orientation toward one only.⁶

Thus Abrams distinguished four different kinds of art theories: mimetic theories, pragmatic theories, expressive theories and objective theories. In the critical texts from different cultures, one might try to find out which particular theory is favorite. To what extent do critics use one or more of the same kind of argument in their criticism? These arguments may be useful for the scholar who wants to deduce the norms that some critical text is based on. One might check whether the following main categories are to be found in the critical texts to be studied:

1. The literary text in its relation to reality
2. The literary text in its relation to the author
3. The literary text as an autonomous entity
4. The literary text in its relation to the reader
5. The literary text in its relation to other literary works.⁷

To these quite obvious aspects, I should like to add:

6. The critical comment on other critical perspectives originating from different social, cultural, historical and political backgrounds.
- All the six points reflect value judgements by critics. There is never any question in their statements about the reality, the author, the work *as such*, but about the reality, author, work etc. *as seen by* this or that particular critic belonging to this or that culture, nation,

6 M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Oxford University Press, 1976², p. 6

7 These items were described in a Dutch article by H.T. Boonstra, 'Van waardeoordeel tot literatuurovervatting', in: *De Gids*, 1979, pp. 243-252

gender, social group, political party and so on. Ideology, group interests are hidden under the surface all the time. Our task is then to trace in critical comments the cultural differences behind the critics' basic norms and values.

As Marx and Engels put it in 1848, 'the ruling ideas in every epoch have always been the ideas of the ruling class'. There is a dialectical process going on between literatures and counter-literatures, criticism and counter-criticism, bringing about changes in the world-wide 'mega-polysystem' of literature as described by Even-Zohar. He rightly stated that in the study of literature, one cannot confine oneself to the masterpieces: 'This kind of elitism should be banished from literary historiography (...) as scholars committed to the discovery of the mechanism of literary history, we cannot use arbitrary and temporary value judgments as criteria in selecting the objects of study in a historical context. The prevalent value judgments of any period are themselves an integral part of the objects to be observed. No field of study can select its objects according to norms of taste without losing its status as an intersubjective discipline'.⁸ He added that criticism can be either used to support and reinforce a ruling literary system or to weaken and undermine it. The phenomenon Even-Zohar described, giving examples from within the Western culture, also applies to the (global) literary polysystem. Literature functions more as an overall semiotic system than as an exclusively literary one: 'As systems are governed by those who control them, the tools fought for will depend on their relative efficacy in controlling the system (...). The constraints imposed upon the 'literary' polysystem by its various systematic co-systems contribute their share to the hierarchical relations governing it'. This is not only valid for the correlations within a community but also for those between different communities:

Just as an aggregate of phenomena operating for a certain community can be conceived of as a system constituting part of a larger polysystem, which,

8 It. Even-Zohar, 'Polysystem Theory', in: *Poetics Today*, Vol. 1, autumn 1979, p. 292

in turn, is just a component within the larger polysystem of "total culture" of the said community, so can the latter be conceived of as a component in a "mega-polysystem", i.e., one which organizes and controls several communities in history, such "units" are by no means clear-cut or finalized for ever. Rather, the opposite holds true, as the borders separating adjacent systems shift all the time, not only within polysystems, but between them. The very notions of "within" and "between" cannot be taken statically. Such an approach, as the static a-historical approach in general, has been a major obstacle in the adequate understanding of the various historical facts (...) Literatures which developed before others, and which belonged to nations which influenced, by prestige or direct domination, other nations, were taken as sources for younger literatures. As a result, there inevitably emerged a discrepancy between the imitated models, which were often of the secondary type, and the original ones, as the latter might have been pushed by that time from the center of their own PS to the periphery.⁹

In cross-cultural relations, the power factor always plays an undeniable role.¹⁰ Looking at comments by a critic from one culture on a text written by an author from another culture, this factor has to be taken into account, particularly if the critic belongs to a globally dominant country and/or culture and the author to a dominated country and/or culture, or the other way round. The critic may not be aware of his own lack of modesty, the superiority complex expressed in his critical comment, even though it might have been written with the best of intentions. In reaction, counter-criticism is produced, commenting on the same text from the other (i.e. the author's) culture, and the differences in view and background can be striking. Sometimes there is an obvious incompatibility of norms. Looking carefully at the critical texts from an intercultural comparative point of view, we must constantly take into account the possible cultural differences with all their ideological connotations, expressing group interests and values.

9 Ibid.: pp. 301, 302

10 This aspect has been overlooked as an essential aspect of the interplay between cultural systems by Douwe Fokkema in his 'Cultural Relativism Reconsidered: Comparative Literature and Intercultural Relations', in: *Douze cas d'interaction culturelle dans l'Europe ancienne et l'Orient proche ou lointain*, Paris, UNESCO, 1984, pp. 239-258

I shall illustrate the intercultural oppositions and reactions expressed by critics from Africa, the West, and the Caribbean in comments upon texts and critics from these same areas. Although cultural differences can be found in all the categories, I cannot go into more than one point in this limited paper, viz. the first one — text and reality — and only as far as the intercultural implications are concerned.

Text and Reality

One of the main issues in the intercultural comparison of critical texts has to do with this category: different cultural contexts seem to lead to different views of reality. I shall mention three arguments related to this point. a) The *reflection argument*: it points out that a book is good if reality is well reflected. The idea behind it is that literature has to reflect reality correctly according to "the truth". It can be found in many critical texts, where reality in the text and reality in the context are compared. The book is appreciated positively if it is credible, probable, truthful, convincing.

Another argument concerning this point is b) the *commitment argument*: a book is good if it is committed to social or political change. The critic might or might not appreciate the committed nature of a text and the fact that the problems of the contemporary situation are recognizable. Either that or the author is reproached for refusing to commit himself/herself, for presenting events without taking sides. c) The *moral argument* also belongs to this category: a book is good if the critic agrees with its moral tendency. In order to appreciate a literary work, the critic has to be able to agree with the moral norms in the book. Thus judgment is based upon the extent to which the critic shares the author's political, religious, social, moral views of reality.

ad a): Commenting on the phenomenon of the European colonial novel set in Africa, the Nigerian critic Professor Echeruo once said that 'if there is anything 'true' of such novels, it is not essentially (or properly) in its setting or in its depiction of character and personal-

ity, but in the accuracy of its reflection of the imaginative temper of the author's culture'.¹¹

Against this exotic and colonial perspective of the European novel about Africa, a whole generation of African writers started to give their own version of the same reality. The eurocentric version had to be corrected, for example in a novel like Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. The well-known Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe stated in an interview that 'this was a most superficial picture — not only of the country, but even of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at it from the inside'.¹² And he did. How can the difference be described? For the European critic, unfamiliar with the African cultural background, the 'otherness' of the depicted milieu, customs, everyday life etc., had the effect of a continual flow of sociological information in fiction form, an effect it did not necessarily have in Africa. Dan Izevbaye made the point that an African might notice a comparable abundance of sociological details in European novels. One simply overlooks this fact if one is familiar with a cultural context. One's own culture, of course, is taken for granted by the reader. Izevbaye concluded:

For any one of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels of Scotland or the fairly contemporary account of London life which we find in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, a truly African reader — if it were possible for him to read English without a good knowledge of its cultural background — would require as full a glossary as the average English reader would need to enter the literary world of *The Interpreters* and *Petals of Blood*.¹³

The European critic who blames the African writer for giving too much realistic information about his/her own society probably never

11 Michael Echeruo, *Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa*, London, Evans, 1973, p. 5

12 Interview with Chinua Achebe in: D. Duerden and C. Pieterse, *African Writers Talking*, London, Heinemann, 1972, p. 4

13 Dan Izevbaye, 'Issues in the Reassessment of the African Novel,' in: *African Literature Today*, 10, 1979, p. 15

thought of that when reading Virginia Woolf or other British writers. Different cultures lead to different appreciation of 'the other's reality'.

ad b): *The commitment argument* has become somewhat dubious in the Western context since, in the words of E.D. Hirsch, the instrumentalistic conception of literature has been replaced by the intrinsic.¹⁴ In Africa this is very different. The artist has always had a social role and this is considered very positive and necessary. The Kenyan critic Micere Githae Mugo noted:

No apology is made for treating politics as a valid content of African literature. Being committed spokesmen of their societies, writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others cannot avoid engagement with politics or indeed with other force that affects the lives of the people (...) The militant African writer has become quite a formidable figure among the ruling elite and such a force in society that he is beginning to unsettle apathy and complacency at many levels (...) the good African writer has grown progressively radical in his denunciation of plunder, enslavement, inhumanity, corruption, oppression and other twin forces of destruction that have crippled his society and disfigured his people's image.¹⁵

Such an outspoken positive approach to committed literature is not easily found among Western critics as far as contemporary Western literature is concerned ...

ad c): *The moral argument*. Earlier in this paper, I quoted from Achebe's essay on colonialist criticism. Here I should like to refer to a critical essay the same writer wrote on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The whole essay is in fact based upon an analysis of the text-reality relation. For Achebe, the most serious negative point in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is what he calls 'the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude (of Western arrogance) has fostered and continues to foster in the world'. And the question is for him 'whether a novel which celebrates this dehumani-

14 E.D. Hirsch, in a lecture given at the State University of Groningen in 1981

15 Micere Githae Mugo, *Visions of Africa*, Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978, pp. 187-188

zation, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art', and his answer is no. He deplores the fact that the book is described by a serious scholar as belonging to 'the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language' and is required reading in 20th-century literature courses in English Departments everywhere. His conclusion is that *Heart of Darkness* is an objectionable book and he reproaches the critics for not having clearly made this point:

... namely that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected (...) The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people.¹⁶

It is an eloquent example of the moral argument based upon the relation between text and reality. Not all, or rather only a few Third World critics, agree with Achebe's view of Conrad. Although at first sight the selection of quotations he presents may seem significant, they are quoted out of context as both Wilson Harris (Caribbean) and Peter Nazareth (Goa) have convincingly demonstrated. Nazareth has written a very interesting critical essay on Conrad, "Out of Darkness", in which he compares this author with the controversial Trinidadan writer whom he has inspired, viz. V.S. Naipaul, who like Conrad was 'missing a society'.¹⁷

V.S. Naipaul is an interesting 'case' indeed for the intercultural comparative study of critical texts. The fact that he is originally from the Third World has been used by critics in the Western world to label him a 'specialist' on that world. As the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun once said, V.S. Naipaul confirms the Western status quo, which is why Western critics are preparing him for the Nobel Prize.

16 Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa.' in: *Research in African Literatures*, 9, 1978, p. 9

17 Peter Nazareth, 'Out of Darkness: Conrad and Other Third World Writers,' in: *Conradiana*, Vol. XIV (3), 1982, pp. 173-188

In almost all the important Western literary magazines and supplements to newspapers, his books have been praised. His view of Third World 'reality' has rarely been challenged in these reviews. The American critic Robert Hamner admires Naipaul's realism and the fact that he introduces 'a significantly new environment (and) details necessary to an understanding and acceptance of the exotic (sic!) situation'.¹⁸ 'Significantly new' to whom one might ask, and exotic from whose angle? He clearly speaks from a Western reader's perspective.

Hamner does not question Naipaul's selection of details and their ideological implications, but the Third World critics Peter Nazareth (Goa) and Mpoi-Buatu (Zaire) do. I shall summarize their main points with regard to the relation between text and reality:

Having read a large number of critical comments by Western critics, who glossed over the problem, it struck me as a reader that the African Mpoi-Buatu immediately drew attention to the core of the matter, viz. the conflict between the two value systems: Naipaul constantly refers to universal civilization but what does he mean by it? Nonetheless, Mpoi-Buatu agreed that Naipaul is an excellent writer, 'unfortunately' he added, but that was not the point he wanted to discuss: For him, a) Naipaul's talents are undeniable and he disconnects them from his ideological objections to this author. b) He does not deny the author his freedom and his right to look at any society he wants and pass it through his moral filter. c) He also stated that as a critic he would not deny Naipaul the right to criticize the Third World. These three remarks are followed by counter remarks, in which he demonstrates how Naipaul uses his filter as a mechanism to condition his views of the Third World, views that are not the only possible views nor necessarily the most correct ones of TW reality. The key concept in Naipaul's work is civilization, it is introduced to underline and stigmatize the absence of it in a number of societies. Thus all people, things, situations that do not belong to what this novelist considers 'universal civilization' are just the opposite: 'primitive', 'elementary', 'barbarous', 'savage', 'bush' and he

18 Robert D. Hamner, in Idem (Ed.), *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, London, Heinemann, 1979, p. 209

refuses to see any wisdom or intellectual life in such societies. This is exactly the way colonization dealt with 'universal civilization'. Mpoyi-Buatu analyzed the oppositions in Naipaul's travelogues as well as in his fiction — constructed around the poles city/desinfected universe/western world versus primitivism/barbarity/Africa/Third World. The Third World is eternally damned in Naipaul's eyes.¹⁹

In his review of *A Bend in the River*, the same critic used arguments with regard to the category of the text-reality relation and the category of the author-text relation. His conclusion was that Naipaul refuses to know Africa because his only intention is to rescue 'Western civilization'. He compared Naipaul with the European colonial writers in the past who used their colonial novels to nurture the Western world with their prejudices against people in other continents: Naipaul as a 'technical assistant for propaganda on behalf of the West', 'a huge entertainer of the Western Gallery'.²⁰

Peter Nazareth made a comparative analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*. Naipaul's interpretation of Conrad's book had been that the Africans are to blame for Kurtz's own unrecognized darkness. Naipaul himself is obsessed by a terror of the bush. In *A Bend in the River* his protagonist Salim is horrified 'not at the way the West has exploited the colonies but at how the Arabs with their oil are going to bring down the West (...) Naipaul refuses to show what the West was really doing out there. 'Conrad tells the truth through his novella, although he did not have the opportunity to read Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (...) or other African novels that show that the 'bush' was not just 'bush'; there were people living there with their own cultural matrix and their own relationship to the environment before the white man came and tore them apart. V.S. Naipaul had that opportunity and made nothing of it'.²¹

19 Th. Mpoyi-Buatu, 'Naipaul ou les anathèmes d'un brahmane apatride', in: *Peuples noirs, peuples africains*, Mars/avril, 1982, pp. 146-152

20 Idem, 'A la courbe du fleuve,' in: *Peuples noirs, peuples africains*, Mai/juin, 1983, pp. 146-152

21 Nazareth, art. cit., p. 182

In closing I should like to link up the points I have made on the intercultural comparison of critical texts from different cultural value systems. Values are expressed in language, in the texts we study. Here I have not been able to present a detailed analysis, but the texts present ideological and cultural views of society on the basis of a particular sociolect which can be described on three levels.²²

1. as a lexical repertory (the selection of a specific vocabulary)
2. on the semantic level (i.e. the relevance of certain classifications and oppositions resulting in a code which is the model for a corresponding view of 'reality' and thus of culture)
3. on the syntactic level, i.e. the level of the discourse as the concretization, actualization, realization of semantic oppositions within the code of a sociolect.

In critical texts, examples of selections on the basis of oppositions with regard to different cultures can be contrasts like civilization vs. barbarity, aesthetics vs. politics, world literature vs. local literature, light vs. darkness, intellect vs. emotions etc. as well as reactions to these views.

The critic's cultural norms can be discovered in his criticism. Its meaning will become much clearer when compared with a critical text coming from a very different cultural value system. Along the lines of the above mentioned six categories to be found in critical texts, the critics' own selected relevances can be compared and may provide better insight into the complex phenomenon of intercultural communication.

22 Cf. theories developed by Peter V. Zima, e.g. his most recent books *Manuel de sociocritique*, Paris, Picard, 1985, and *Roman und Ideologie*, München, Fink Verlag 1986