

## INTERNAL COLONIALISM AND THE DISCIPLINE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN IRAN\*

*Colonialismo interno e a disciplina da literatura comparada no Irã*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay studies the history, current, and future status of the discipline of comparative literature in Iran. It compares the theoretical norms of contemporary comparative literature to the Pre-modern Perso-Islamic notion of “comparison,” which has been theorized in Iran and the Arab World as the Arabic, Islamic, and Iranian schools of comparative literature. The article highlights profound institutional and canonical Perso-Shi’a centrism in Iranian academia, and shows how the discipline of comparative literature has been used as a vehicle for transnationalism of this Perso-Shi’a centrism that has manifested in “Persianate World” in the context of European and North American academia. Marshall Hodgson’s 1960s neologism “Persianate World” has been placed with the paradigm shifts ushered in by the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1970s, the postcolonial scholarship that grew from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in the late 1990s, and Sheldon Pollock’s formulation of a ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’ in the 21st century. The article explains how the Persianate comparatists, under the banner of postcolonial studies, not only erased the experience of the subaltern and internally colonialized non-Persians of Iran in favor of the Middle Eastern states in a binary matrix (Western Imperialism versus a “colonialized” Islamic world), but also represents an unrealistic and exaggerated picture of the discipline to Western readers. The article further maps the conversations within the postcolonial Middle East about “internal colonialism,” as an analytic tool for thinking about operations and interlocking systems of power in the Middle East and abroad, here applied to the discipline of comparative literature for the first time.

**KEYWORDS:** Comparative literature, Perso-Shi’a centrism, persianate, internal colonialism.

### RESUMO

Este ensaio estuda aspectos da história corrente e do futuro estatuto da disciplina Literatura Comparada no Irã. Compara as normas teóricas da Literatura Comparada contemporânea à noção perso-islâmica pré-moderna de “Comparação,” que havia sido teorizada no Irã e no Mundo Árabe como fundamento dos estudos em literaturas comparadas árabe, islâmica e iraniana. O artigo realça a profundidade do centrismo perso-xiita institucional no cânone acadêmico iraniano e mostra de que modo a disciplina da Literatura Comparada tem sido usada como veículo para o transnacionalismo deste centrismo perso-xiita, manifesto em “Mundo do Persianato” no contexto dos estudos acadêmicos europeu e norte-americano. O neologismo “Persianato” criado por Marshall Hodgson nos anos de 1960, tem sido situado junto ao paradigma inaugurado pela virada linguística e cultural dos anos 1970, dos Estudos Pós-Coloniais que emergem em fins de 1990 a partir do Orientalismo de Said, e à formulação de Sheldon Pollock da “Cosmópolis do sânscrito” no século XXI. O artigo demonstra como os comparatistas do Persianato, sob a bandeira dos Estudos Pós-Coloniais, não somente apagaram a experiência dos subalternos internos e colonizados não-persas do Irã em favor de Estados do

### EDITORES:

Regina Zilberman  
Gerson Roberto Neumann

**SUBMETIDO:** 30.12.2020

**ACEITO:** 04.03.2021

### COMO CITAR:

KHEZRI, Haidar.  
Internal Colonialism  
and the Discipline of  
Comparative Literature  
in Iran. *Revista Brasileira  
de Literatura Comparada*,  
v. 23, n. 43, p. 94-117, mai.-  
ago., 2021. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2596-304x20212343hk>

<http://www.scielo.br/rbhc>  
<https://revista.abralic.org.br>

\* The original version of this paper was presented at the First Biennial Iranian Studies Graduate Conference, at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, in April 2013. Diana Hatchett, Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah, Benjamin Priest, Stephen Hopkins, Lauren Pattison, Sandra Sousa, and Tyler Fisher provided encouragement and critical readings of this article along the way. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of this article and their many insightful comments and suggestions.

Oriente Médio, numa matriz binária (imperialismo ocidental *versus* um mundo islâmico “colonizado”), como também apresentam uma imagem daquela disciplina igualmente irreal e exagerada aos leitores ocidentais. O artigo mapeia ademais as discussões desenroladas no âmbito dos Estudos Pós-coloniais do Oriente Médio sobre “colonialismo interno”, como ferramenta analítica para se pensar a respeito das operações e dos entrelaçamentos de sistemas de poder no Oriente Médio e estrangeiro, aplicada aqui pela primeira vez à disciplina da Literatura Comparada.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Literatura comparada, centrismo perso-xiita, mundo persa, colonialismo interno.

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent speech given to K-12 (i.e. primary and secondary) teachers in Tehran, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamene'i, criticized teaching English in Iranian K-12 and college education. He warned that the early learning of English opens the way to “Western cultural invasion” (The NYT, 2018). On several other occasions, he criticized promoting English in Iran, and instead, he encouraged teaching Arabic (BBC, 2016). Following Khamene'i's warning, Mehdi-ye Adham, the Supreme Council of The Ministry of Education, announced the prohibition of, “teaching English in government and nongovernment primary schools” (The Guardian, 2018). On October 12, 2019, fifty-seven Iranian senators introduced a bill that prohibits teaching English in Iranian K-12 and bans the employment of English language teachers (Radio Farda, 2019). Khamene'i's criticisms of English language seem to have been challenged by the Iranian President, Rouhani. In an indirect response to the Supreme Leader's criticism, Rouhani stated, “to learn which and how many foreign languages, depends on the available facilities and the number of our teachers” (Radio Farda, 2020).

While they might seem at odds, these two apparently opposite approaches regarding western/English and eastern/Arabic languages converge when it comes to suppressing the non-Persian languages of Iran. The most recent attack came from Hākīmzādeh, the VP of Iran's Department of Education. On May 29, 2019, she announced that a test for “sufficiency in Persian language” would be added across preschools in Iran. According to this discriminatory policy, if non-Persian children in Iran fail a Persian language sufficiency test at the age of five, they will be treated as a person with biological defects and special needs. Such systematic policies aimed at stigmatizing non-Persian children of Iran recall colonial states' erasure of national identities of the countries, ethnic enclaves, and populations they colonized.

Among the many questions raised by this proposal, here I am particularly concerned with the impact of such macro policies on the disciplines of comparative literature, post-colonial studies, and translation studies –as those disciplines that are in direct contact with foreign and national languages. How can the discipline of comparative literature, and the question of subaltern and non-Persian languages of Iran, speak to the larger conversations within Middle Eastern studies at home and North American academia? And does comparative literature in the Islamic world in general and Iran in particular contain some unique features to be used to give a >rebirth< to the discipline and counter the widely-held >death< of comparative literature proposed by Spivak (184), as has been proposed by most recent studies on comparative literature in the Islamic world and Iran? (See: Ghazoul, 2006; Gould, 2011; Anushiravani, 2012; Ahmed, 2016; Mirzababazadeh-Fomeshi, 2017).

## FROM SEED TO EMBRYO: EARLY DAYS TO 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

Broadly speaking, comparative literary studies in Iran were put into motion around 1938-1940 with the publication of *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet; its Comparison with Nezami's Layla and Majnun* (n.d.). The author, ʿAlī-Aṣḡhar-i Ḥikmat (1893-1980), was a well-known scholar who was the chief architect of the modernization and Persification of the educational system under Reza Shah (1878-1944). In his comparative study, Ḥikmat touches on different areas of history, literature, and architecture with a broad understanding of comparative literature, “for the mighty architect, studying the Samarqand’s mosque and comparing it with Canterbury Cathedral Church is notable and deserves time and effort. Also for a literary scholar, comparing *Laylā and Majnūn* by the wiseman of Ganja with *Romeo and Juliet* by the poet of Stratford is an enjoyable comparison and beneficial research” (n.d., 106). In his effort to rightfully select the best Persian term for “comparison,” Ḥikmat interestingly uses all of the available Persian terms; “*muqāyese*, *taṭbīq*, and *sanjish*.” It is a challenge that the Persian comparatists in Iran are still struggling with (Khezri, 2013, p. 321-338).

Ḥikmat’s non-theoretical comparative study was concurrent with an institutional initiative (1938-1947) in the field of comparative literature, which included the program *sanjish-i ʿadabīyāt* (evaluation of literature) to Tehran University’s curriculum for the first time. Fāṭemeh Sayyāḥ (1902-1947), a Russian-born Iranian, who worked as a professor at Moscow University, undertook the responsibility of teaching the course. However, her death in 1947 resulted in the closure of the program since “the university wasn’t able to recruit a faculty member with Sayyāḥ’s scholarly qualifications, i.e., knowing foreign languages and literatures” (Anushiravani, 2012, p. 485). Just as Sayyāḥ herself was considered more “foreign” than “Persian/Iranian,” so was comparative literature regarded from its early stages as a foreign-language related discipline. It is not for nothing that comparative literature in Sayyāḥ’s time was placed in the sub-discipline of foreign languages and literatures, specifically Russian.

While the first non-theoretical work of the discipline in Iranian academia can be traced to Ḥikmat, and the first institutional activity to Sayyāḥ, Jamshīd-i Behnām (b. 1928) was, in fact, the first Iranian scholar to publish a theoretical work on the discipline and the first to use the term “comparative literature” in its academic sense. Furthermore, he identified comparative literature as a “science” and “discipline.” Despite his allusion to “General Literature” and Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*, he focused only on literary influences and was exclusively concerned with a western archive (1952, 1953). In 1953, he published his book *Comparative Literature*, which was a free translation of 1951 Guyard’s *La Littérature Comparée*. Behnām contributed significantly to modernity in Iran. His contribution to the discipline, however, beside its historical importance, remains small.

From the 1960s to the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, comparative literature in both non-theoretical studies and institutional activities took steps forward. Ḥasan-i Honarmandī (1928-2002) taught comparative literature at Tehran University. He contributed to Persian comparative literary studies in Iran, mainly by publishing three non-theoretical works that focused exclusively on the impact of Persian poetry on French (1970, 1971, 1972). In these works, he uses comparative literature as his primarily vehicle for transnationalization of his Persianism. It is worth nothing that his book *André Gide and Persian Literature* has been subtitled on the second page with the phrase, “Comparative Literature in the service of Persian Literature.” The Islamic scholar and translator Javād-i Ḥadīdī (1932-2002) taught

comparative literature in the department of French at Ferdowsi University. Similar to Honarmandī, he too, contributed to Persian comparative literary circles in Iran by publishing three non-theoretical works that focused exclusively on the impact of Persian and Shi'a Islam on French (1964, 1967, 1978). During the same period 'Abu-al-Ḥasan-i Najafī (1929-2016), translator and linguist, taught comparative literature at Isfahan University. He contributed to the purification of the Persian language, most notably through his book *Let's Not to Write Wrong* (1987). 'Eslāmī-ye-Nadūshan (b.1925), literary critic and translator, taught comparative literature at Tehran University. He, too, was preoccupied by this Persianism in his oeuvre, particularly the epic of *Shāhnāmeḥ*.

All these advocates for comparative literature in Iran were graduates of French educational institutions. All of them went to France to continue their graduate programs in French, but not comparative literature. Upon their return to Iran, these scholars were inevitably appointed to positions in French departments, where they offered courses on comparative literature. Comparative literature in both the Sayyāḥ(ian) and the Honarmandī-Najafī-Ḥadīdī-Eslāmī-ye-Nadūshan(ian) eras had engaged exclusively with foreign language departments, namely Russian and French. The long-lasting, old-fashioned insistence on investigating influence and tracing sources between two languages and literatures, ubiquitous within Iran and the Arab world as French School of Comparative Literature (henceforth I use the term), was rooted mainly in this early domination of the classical French notion of comparison. There was, however, another major source that was equally, if not more, equipping scholars with this old-fashioned notion of comparison: the pre-modern Islamic notion of "comparison". In order to have a better understanding of the discipline in the Islamic world in general, and Iran in particular, we have no choice but to detour into the medieval and early modern periods.

Of course, before (and ever since) the advent of Islam, scholars have been aware of "comparison." Both premodern Arabic and Persian scholars have investigated mutual influences and traced the sources between the two languages and cultures, often to show the superiority of one over the other. The peak of these comparisons, for the sake of showing superiority, can be observed in the title of the books listed in *al-Fehrest* in which the tenth-century Muslim bibliographer 'Ibn-al-Nadīm categorized them as "*Faẓl al-ʿAjam ʿala al-ʿArab*" ("superiority of non-Arabs over the Arabs") and "*Faẓl al-ʿArab ʿala al-ʿAjam*" ("superiority of Arabs over non-Arabs") (1994, p. 156).

Since the Qur'an and Hadith (the prophet's speech) were the sacred texts, they remained inimitable and incomparable for Islamic scholars. That is, while the Qur'an and Hadith were sometimes compared to other texts, it was only done in order to demonstrate their superiority. "Medievalists even coined a specific term, *i'jaz*, to indicate a sort of sublime beauty beyond reach, something that characterized Revelation and was akin to the miraculous" (Ghazoul, 2006, p.114). The case for the profane pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* (ode), however, was different. From the earliest days, the pre-Islamic al-ʿUkkāz Market was a famous place for competition between poets to establish who the best poet was. Al-Nābigha al-Ḍubayānī (535-604 AD) often served as the judge and comparatist. The comparison that 'Um Jundub made between her husband's poems with that of ʿAlqama is the most famous comparison of pre-Islamic era. When she favored ʿAlqama's poems over that of her husband, she was divorced by her husband and was married by ʿAlqama, gaining him the title *fahl* (i.e. stallion). Within the domain of *balāghah*, most of the literary analysis of this medieval comparison has been carried out. Medieval Arabs coined the terms *sariqah*, *mu'āraḍah*, *muṭābaqah*, *muvāzana*, and *visāṭa*, in order to compare, mediate, defend,

and surpass one poet over another (See: al-Āmidī; Al-Jurjānī; Mubārak). As for non-Arabic poetry, some medieval Arab critics, such as a ninth-century critic, Al-Jāhiz (1965, p. 74-75), report some popular accounts that say the Greeks and other nations did not have poetry. Such common trends led to an Arabic-centrism (Ghazoul, 2006, p. 114). Historically, non-Arab Medieval Islamic scholars have followed two different approaches toward this Arabic-Islamic-centrism. From one side, some of them took an extreme approach in embracing this Arabic-centrism by downplaying their own national languages and cultures. An instance of this internalized colonialism may be found in the works of the Iranian polymath, al-Birūnī (973-1040). In his comparison between the two languages, he stated, “I have engaged recently in both Arabic and Persian languages. To insult me in Arabic is more pleasant than to praise me in Persian” (2004, p.168). On the other side, we have the account of those scholars who resisted this Arabic-centrism and developed a Persian-centrism. An example of this anti-Arabic, Perso-centrism may be found in the comparison that the twelfth-century Persian poet, ‘Anvarī, made between the two languages. He preferred the Persian Maqāmāt of Ḥamīd-al-Dīn over the entire Arabic culture, except the Qur’an and Hadith: “Any speech that is not Qur’an and Mohammad’s Hadith / Now became bullshit, compare to Maqāmāt of Ḥamīd-al-Dīn” (1985, p. 523). From the introduction of Islam to these regions, these two comparative approaches: anti-national, pro-Arabic/Islamic and anti-Arabic, pro-national literature, are attested in many of the languages and literatures of the Islamic world.

Having taken our historical detour, we can now return to a consideration of comparative literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1900 up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, parallel to the Persian-western (Russian/French) conversation in the comparative literature circles in Iran, there was a Persian-Arabic conversation that was taking the theoretical framework for “comparison” from this premodern Islamic notion of comparison. These comparative studies surfaced at the end of 1920s as approaches to Persian and Arabic literary relationships. Almost all these studies focused intensively on the impact and superiority of Persian over Arabic. This corresponded to Reza Shah’s anti-Arab nationalism. The peak of this stream can be seen clearly in two landmark books: *Iranian Civilization and Culture* (first published in 1944) and *Two Centuries of Silence* (first published in 1951). In response to these Perso-centric studies, several Persian-educated Arab scholars in Iran took the opposite direction and wrote exclusively about the impact of Arabic and its superiority over Persian (see: Ḥarīrī 1967, Maḥfūz 1957). This premodern Islamic notion of “comparison” engaged with the western French School in Iran and resulted in the domination of an old-fashioned insistence on investigating influence and tracing sources for showing the superiority of Persian over other languages and cultures. However, this Perso-centrism engaged with Shi’a-centrism in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and developed into a profound Perso-Shi’a centrism that has dominated all aspects of modern Iran, including humanities.

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

During the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iranian Cultural Revolution, Iranian academia was purged of Western and non-Islamic influences to bring it in line with political Shi’ism. Directed by the Cultural Revolutionary Headquarters, the revolutionaries closed universities from 1980 to 1983. The Department of Comparative Literature was shut down and many scholars like Honarmandī were purged (Aḥmadi, 2002, p. 302). As a result, nothing significant developed in comparative literature in Iran for an entire decade. Despite this, the concept of “comparison” in its pre-modern Islamic definition was

widespread. This “comparison” was used to show the superiority of “the Islamic Bloc” over the Western and Eastern blocs, the superiority of the 1979 Islamic Revolution over other revolutions, and the superiority of Shi’ism over Sunnism. The bulk of non-theoretical literary works focused on the impact and influence of Islam over Persian literature to determine an Islamic identity for Persian literature. Topics central to Shi’ism, such as ʿĀshūrā, Ḥussein and Karbalā were highlighted in comparative literary studies (Khezri, 2013). These studies, as well as a small amount of literary studies took their theoretical approach from the premodern Islamic concept of comparison rather than the developments the discipline witnessed in the second half of the twentieth century.

In terms of critical theory, comparative literary studies in Iran took a step forward in the 1990s through the translation of Velek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature*. This translation extended the theoretical geography of comparative Literature to what has been famously developed in Iran and the Arab world under the American School of Comparative Literature (henceforth I use the term). This school, unlike the French School, does not require the historical connection between the two authors or texts, nor does it require the difference between languages. The goal for comparison via the American School has been to find similarities and differences between authors or their works. However, it was still the French School that continued to dominate Persian literary circles. In 1994, Hilāl’s Arabic book *Comparative Literature* was translated into Persian. The significance of this book is in its practical examples of the influence of Islam and Arabic literature on Persian. This book remains the most influential book on comparative literature in Iran and the Arab World. The Palestinian comparatist, Ḥussām Al-Khaṭīb (b.1932), has highlighted the importance of Hilāl’s book in the following words, “until the end of seventies, Hilāl’s book remains the only source for comparative literature, and I challenge any book that has brought a single dot or a single page more than what he offered” (1990, p. 54).

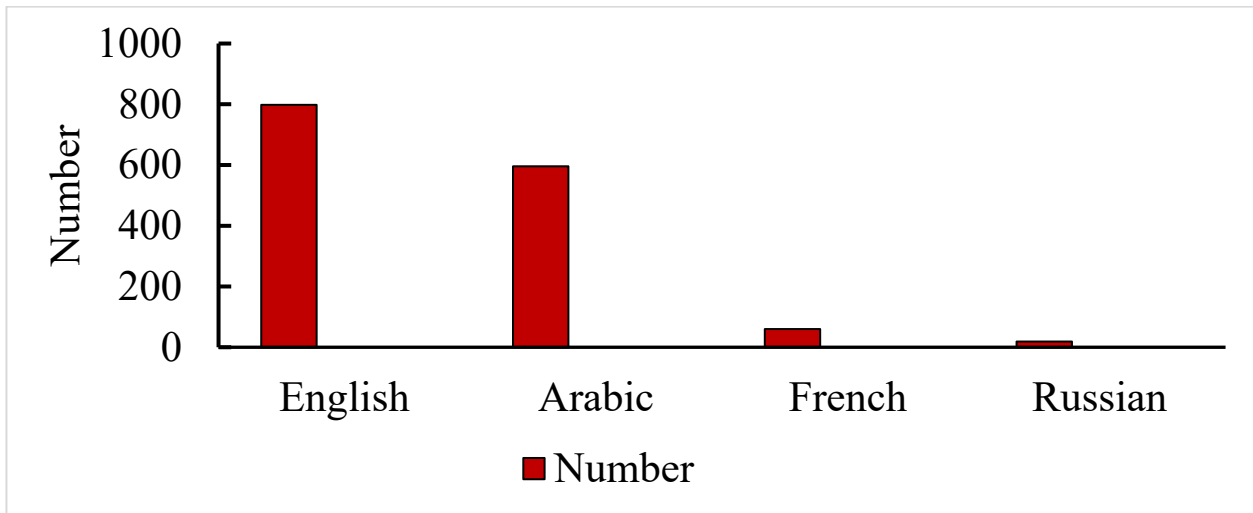
By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the content of new comparative literature in Iran seems to be more substantial. Dozens of theoretical comparative books have been written and translated into Persian. Several Iranian journals have exclusively focused on comparative literary studies. Conferences and workshops have been devoted to comparative literature. In addition, several universities have founded new majors in comparative literature. Similar developments have been noticed in the Middle Eastern comparative literary circles. The Syrian comparatist, Isstaif describes these unprecedented developments in comparative literature in the Arab World in respect to the number of theoretical books as, “The number of theoretical books in comparative literature in Arabic language became more than any living languages, including English and French. Even the number of these Arabic books outnumbered comparative literary books in France, UK, and the United States combined” (2007, p. 12-13). The current available scholarship on the discipline in Iran and the Arab world, has taken these sophisticated developments as a sign of the development that discipline has made inroads, and/or may pave the way for future developments (see: Gould, 2011; Anushiravani, 2012; Ahmed, 2016, Mirzababazadeh-Fomeshi, 2017). The following sections, however, argue the opposite.

## INSTITUTIONAL PERSO-SHI’A CENTRISM

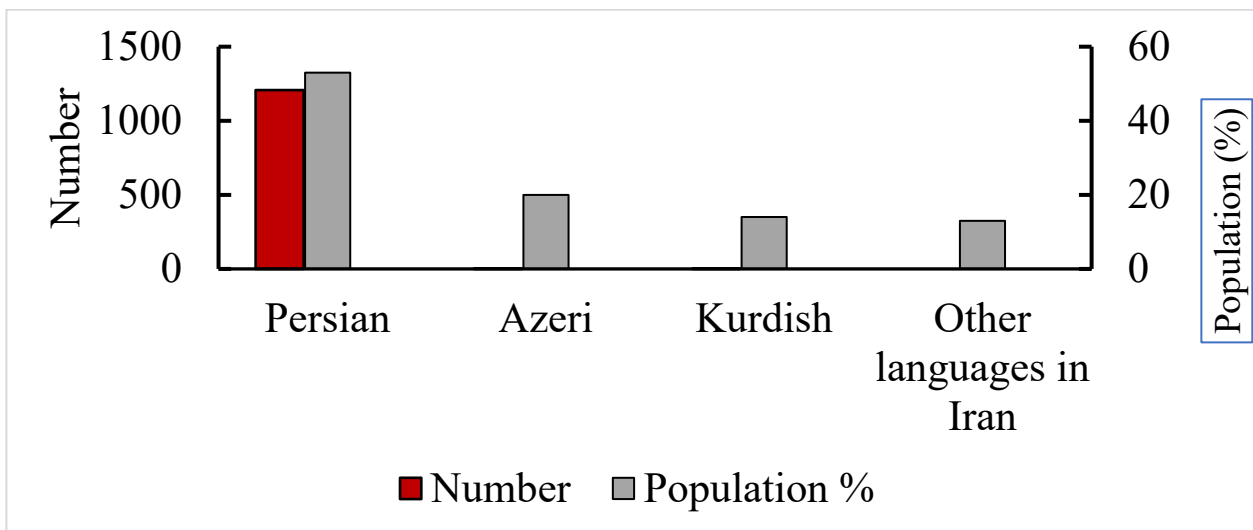
An average faculty of literature and humanities in Iran consists of the below departments regarding national and foreign languages: Department of Persian, Arabic, and English. At some of the more progressive institutions one might find departments of French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese, among

others. The Arabic and English languages have been put in the student’s curriculum throughout K-12. What is striking here is the lack of departments that focus on languages and cultures of neighboring countries, particularly the Indian subcontinent, Central Eurasia, and West Asia.

Parallel to this external geographical bias, there is an internal geographical bias regarding non-Persian languages of Iran, where about half of the population’s mother tongues are non-Persian. There, Persian remains the sole legal language of instruction in K-12 and college education. Even the constitution describes non-Persian languages in Iran with colonizing terms such as “regional and tribal languages” (Article 15). Figures 1 and 2 show this Persian-centrism with respect to the number



**Figure 1** – Approximate number of foreign language departments in public universities across Iran. If the foreign language is not mentioned, there are fewer than 5 departments. **Source:** SANJESH (2017).

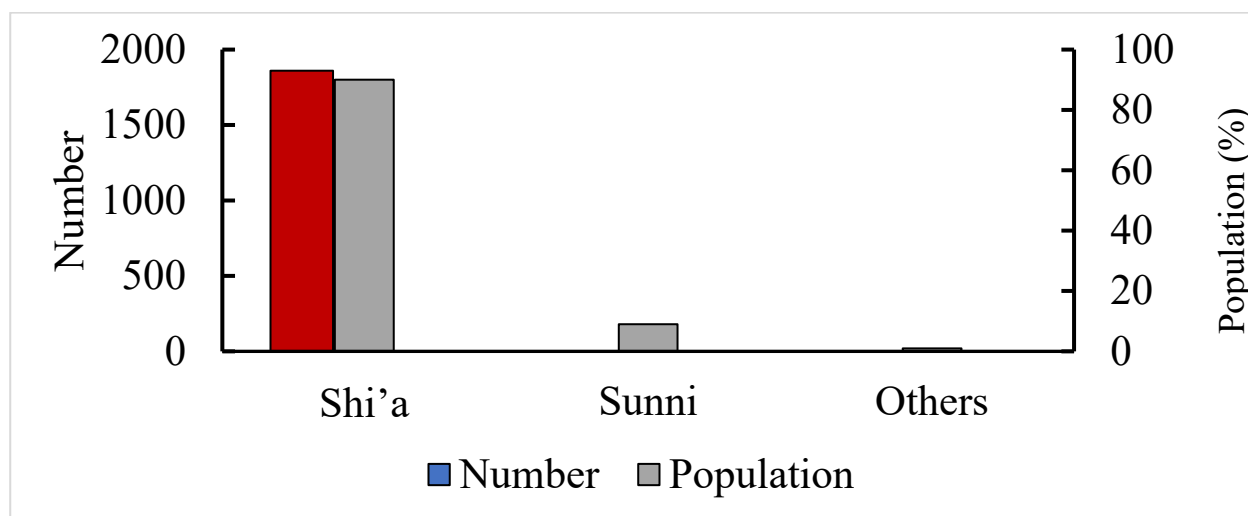


**Figure 2** – Approximate number of Persian/Farsi and other indigenous language departments in Iran, and their percentage of speakers. The ethnic and religious minorities’ population percentage is a highly debated issue in Iran. The government considers this issue a matter of national security. I have relied on various Iranian and international resources such as: CIA World Factbook, PBS, Iran Data Portal, ‘Āmār, among others.

of national and foreign language departments across Iran. The same situation applies to non-Shi'a religious minorities within Iran. Iran's constitution names the Twelver Ja'fari School of Shi'a Islam as the state religion. Non-Shi'a religions of Iran historically have been removed from the scope of Persian/Shi'a comparative literature in Iran. Figure 3 shows this Shi'a-centrism with respect to the number of religious and Islamic studies departments across Iran.

Despite the available assumption, this is not just an Iranian/Middle Eastern problem; this is a universal problem as well, extendable to North America. None of the institutions of higher education in the U.S. have any permanent positions for stateless languages and cultures of the Middle East. Yet they offer hundreds of programs for dominant privileged statehood languages, often under bold "area studies" titles such as "Middle Eastern and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures". According to the institution of Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota,<sup>1</sup> in the US alone, there are more than 788 permanent programs in Arabic, 109 in Turkish, 100 in Persian, and nothing on stateless languages of the Middle East. According to Middle Eastern Studies Association, there are 225 higher-education programs in the U.S. for Arabic (159), Hebrew (91), Persian (49), and Turkish (36). There are no such permanent programs for critical/stateless languages such as Kurdish. Figure 4 shows number of permanent programs for Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures in the U.S.

These departments and their affiliated centers also have an imbalance in distributing internal and external resources from the federal government; most notably, they have a monopoly on those grants for area studies, critical languages, and unrepresented cultures such as Kurdish. On August 29, 2019, the US Department of Education published a letter notifying the University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill that the Department's review of annual project reports submitted by the Duke-UNC consortium for Title VI Middle East Studies (CSME) evinced inherent inequities: "The Duke-UNC CSME appears to lack balance as it offers very few, if any, programs focused on the historic discrimina-



**Figure 3** – Approximate number of religion departments in public universities in Iran and their population percentages. Most recent survey reveals huge changes in religious beliefs in Iran. See: <https://theconversation.com/irans-secular-shift-new-survey-reveals-huge-changes-in-religious-beliefs-145253>

1 See: <http://carla.umn.edu/lctl/db/index.php>.



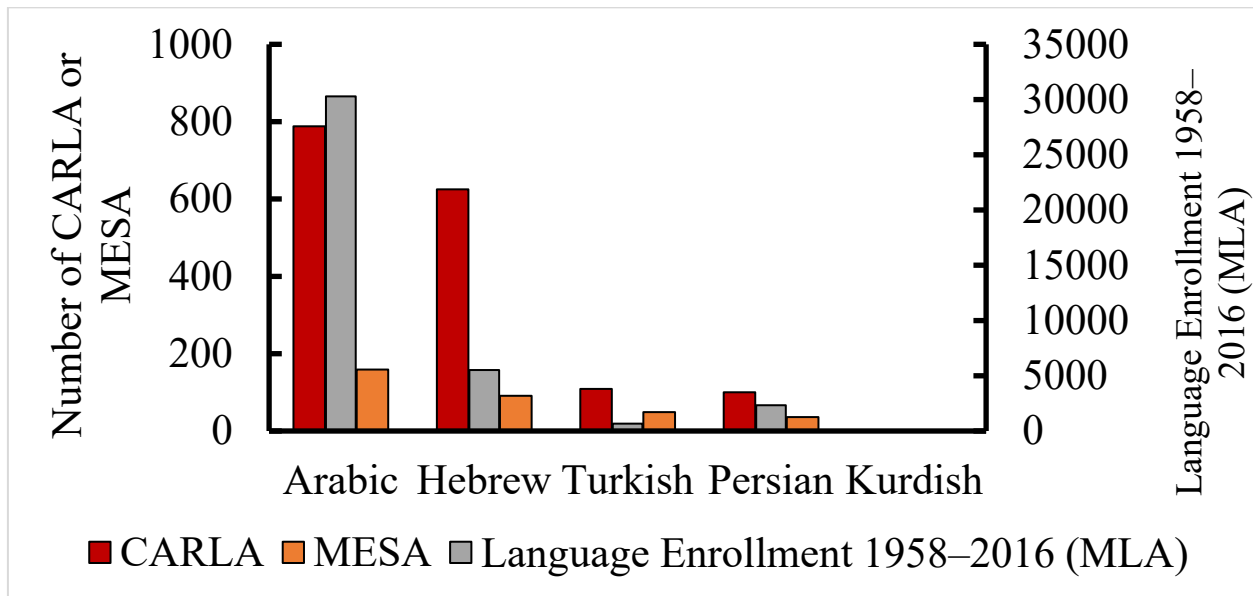


Figure 4 – Number of permanent programs for Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures in the U.S.

tion faced by, and current circumstances of, religious minorities in the Middle East, including Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Yazidis, Kurds, Druze, and others.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of recognizing this inadequacy in Middle Eastern studies, “post-colonial” Persian scholars such as Hamid Dabashi claim that the U.S. Department of Education’s letter to the Duke-UNC CSME is truly motivated to counter perceptions of “anti-Israeli and anti-Imperialism bias” in such university contexts (2019). Historically, the promotion of minority mother-tongues as a medium of instruction in the Middle East has been attributed by Middle Eastern states to Zionism, Imperialism, and the enemies of these states (Sheyholislami, 2019; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019).

The other major institutional barrier with respect to comparative literature in the Middle Eastern academy in general, and Iran in particular, is the centralized and monodisciplinary system of education. The K-12 curricula across the country have been (pre)designed by the Iranian Ministry of Education. This makes any changes in any curriculum or even a single course across the country impossible. The curricula for post K-12 for all universities across the country, have been (pre)designed by Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. This centralized and monodisciplinary approach doesn’t allow faculties and departments to offer a *single* new course beyond the curriculum that has been previously approved by the state. It doesn’t allow students also to enroll in other courses which have been offered by other departments. Unlike North American universities, for example, it is impossible for a student of Persian to complete a minor in political science or even take a single course in gender studies. Unlike in the North American system, both K-12 and collegiate education are closely affiliated with and monitored by the state. It’s something of an open secret in the Iranian academia that ‘you can write and discuss anything but religion, politics, and women.’ The three main topics that historically have been central to the discipline.

2 See: <https://www.ed.gov/content/notice-letter-regarding-duke-unc-consortium-middle-east-studies>.

## CANONICAL PERSO–SHI'A CENTRISM

Almost all the twenty available theoretical books in comparative literature in Iran are pre-occupied with the French School. Sājidi's *From Comparative Literature to Literary Criticism*, Dadvar's *Initiation à la Littérature Comparée*, and Liṭāfatī and Farāhānī's *Comparative Literature in Oscillation* are the only three exceptions. However, the contribution of these three books to the development of the discipline in Iran is difficult to quantify, as they have been exclusively developed for students in the department of French. For instance, Dadvar's book has been written in the French language. The authors of the remaining seventeen books have received their training in Arabic, Persian, and Islamic studies, rather than comparative literature as a discipline. Even five of these theoretical books in Iran have been written in Arabic (Ṣābirī, 2007; Sheikhī, 2008; Khezri, 2013; Parvīnī, 2013; Zainīvand, 2013). Many of these books contain endless examples of Perso–Shi'a centrism.

From those twenty translated theoretical books on comparative literature in Iran, thirteen books have been translated from Arabic comparative literature. In chronological order, we have: Hilāl 1994 and 2014; Nidā 2001, 2004, and 2005; Kafāfi 2003; Jamāl-al-Dīn 2011 and 2014; Hammūd 2011; Sheikhī 2012; Al-Tunjī 2016; °Alloūsh 2016; and Isstaif 2018. The remaining seven books from English and French languages are: *Outline of Comparative Literature from Dante Alighieri to Eugene O'Neill* (Friederich; Malone: 2009); *La Littérature Comparée* (Guyard: 1995); *Littérature Generale et Littérature Comparée* (Jeune: 2011); *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Prawer 2019); *Introduction to Comparative Literature* (Jost: 2019); and *La Littérature Comparée* (Chevrel: 2007); and *La République mondiale des Lettres* (Casanova 2014). What these translations and their chronological order tell us is that comparative literature in Iran has no substantial and continuous connection with global comparative literature. Except for Chevrel and Casanova's, all other non-Arabic books were originally written before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Similar arguments could be extended to the majority of other related activities of the discipline (i.e., workshops, conferences, and journals).

In Iranian academia, the discipline is commonly situated in Arabic departments. Even at present, policy makers in Iran do not recognize comparative literature as an independent and distinct discipline, but as a sub-discipline or as a branch of Persian and Arabic (Mirzababazadeh-Fomeshi, 2017, p. 153-154). The problematic implications of this overlap, which makes technical ability in Arabic tantamount to comparativism and comparativism tantamount to fluency in Arabic, have yet to be discussed in comparative literary circles. One problematic implication has been unprecedented reception of a highly selective portion of Arabic comparative literature that matches well with a Perso-Shi'a centric ideology. The Majority of the Arab comparatists whose works have been translated into Persian are affiliated with Middle Eastern languages and literatures in the Arab World. These scholars have not received any training in comparative literature as a discipline. In all these translations, one will clearly find endless examples of Perso-Shi'a centrism and instrumentalization of the discipline for religious and political purposes. One of the clearest examples, perhaps, is Ṭāhā Nidā's *Comparative Literature*. This book, which has been translated at least five times into Persian by various translators, is preoccupied by topics central to this Perso-Shi'a centrism, such as Hussein, Karbalā and °Āshūrā. In this book, Nidā advocates for the limiting of the geography of comparative literature to Islamic societies and instrumentalizing the discipline for political purposes (°Allūsh, 1987, p.255). It is noteworthy that almost all of the Arab comparatists whose works have been received by Persian literary circles, belong to Cairo, Beirut, and

Damascus –namely, the Arab countries that Iran historically has maintained political relationships with. These Perso-Shi'a centrism in Iran (and similar Arabo-Islamic centrism in the Arab world) have even endeavored to create a theoretical framework for this canonical Perso-Arabic-Islamic centrism, which have been reflected in Arabic, Islamic, and Iranian schools of comparative literature.

#### ARABIC SCHOOL OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Ever since its appearance in 1970s, the term *al-Madrasa al-ʿArabīya fī al-ʿAdab al-Muqāran* (the Arabic School of Comparative Literature), has been one of the most used yet most misleading phrases in the vocabulary of the Arabic comparative literary circles. Not only does the term lack any theoretical innovation, but it has also been concerned primarily with Arabic centrism. It appeared primarily as a reaction to French, American, and Slavic schools of comparative literature in the Arab World. The term 'Arabic School' has been often used by nationalist agendas of the Arab world as the main catalyst for investigating and proving the influence, and therefore the superiority, of Arabic over other languages. It has also been used for non-literary purposes, mainly to portray the Arabic world as a "united bloc," with *one* Arabic language and literature. From this point of view, the Arabic School requires two necessary conditions for any research to be included in comparative literature: different languages and historical connections in the form of influence and source study. Kafāfī, one of the leading advocates for the Arabic School, asks, "Do we include in comparative literary studies any comparative study between modern Arabic poetry in Egypt and modern Arabic poetry in Lebanon? The fact is the political borders can't be the criterion for distinguishing between literatures, to make them different literatures, to be put in the area of comparative literature, like those literatures of different languages" (1971, p. 24). In strengthening its Arabic centrism, the Arabic School also considers what has been written in the Arabic language by non-Arab scholars as Arabic literature, for, "if a poet or an author writes in Arabic, we consider their literature Arabic, despite the race that they have originated from. Therefore, those Arabic *dīvāns* and works by Persian authors are considered as specimens of Arabic literature, not Persian" wrote Jamāl-al-Dīn, another advocator for Arabic School (1989, p. 5). Recognizing this Arabic centrism of the Arabic School and the lack of any theoretical innovation, scholars such Isstaif (2007) refuses to use the term, and prefers using "Arabs and Comparative Literature". As I have explained, the Arabic School has a concerted and continuous link with ideologically-loaded notions of a "selected tribe" in the pre-Islamic era, or a "selected nation" in medieval Arabia, and with equally loaded phenomena such as "pan-Arabism", "Arabic Block", "Arabic Unity", and most recently the Arab Spring (2015, p. 40-67).

#### ISLAMIC SCHOOL OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

While the nationalists of the Arab World were advocating for the Arabic School, the Islamists of the Arab world coined their own term, "the Islamic School of Comparative Literature." The term appeared as a direct reaction against French, American, Slavic, and Arabic schools. The theoretical manifesto of this school is Makkī's books *Toward an Islamic Comparative Literature*, and *Introduction to the Islamic Comparative Literature*. Makkī (1924-217) introduces the school with the following words: "There is a possible and wide field that is in the framework of the discipline [... and it is] the Islamic

Comparative Literature. If the theorists of comparative literature move beyond the aesthetic purposes of the discipline [...] Islam preceded the discipline in its [ultimate] goal, and finds in the discipline a beneficial literary instrument in raising mankind's emotion beyond color, race, and language" (1994, p.5).

Similar to the Arabic School, the Islamic School, too, lacks any theoretical innovation in comparative literary studies. The term often has been used as the main catalyst for highlighting and comparing the committed literature of the Islamic world on the one hand and downplaying the non-committed literature and the literature of non-Muslims on other. The roots of this Islamic School can be traced to the Islamic centrism within different historical periods and stages. As I have shown, the term has a direct connection with the "best nation" during the premodern era and with "pan-Islamism", "Islamic Unity", "Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought", and finally in Islamic Spring in today's Arab world (2015, p. 40–67).

As of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been unprecedented reception of Arabic comparative literature in Iran (Khezri, 2020, pp.105-140). Both the Islamic and the Arabic schools have been received and discussed in Persian comparative literary circles. The Islamic School has been used only in highlighting literary themes that are central to Shi'ism. The situation of the Arabic School, however, has been slightly different. Some have (mis)received it as an anti-imperial Arabic experience, and, therefore, welcomed it. Others have received it as merely an Arabic centric experience. In their anti-Arabic, pro-Persian efforts, the Persian comparatists coined their own term: the Iranian School of Comparative Literature!

## IRANIAN SCHOOL OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Similar to the Arabic and the Islamic schools, the Iranian School too, lacks any innovation in literary theory. The term often has been used by Perso-Shi'a scholars as the main catalyst for investigating and showing the influence, and therefore the superiority of the Persian and Shi'ism over other languages and religions of the Islamic world. Mīrzā'ī and Salīmī have proposed the implementing of an Iranian School as a "catalyst for the understanding and the reception of comparative literature as an academic discipline in Iran," and "instrumentalizing it for enriching the national/[Persian] literature" (2010, p. 2, 7). Referring to the "cultural pluralism of the Iranian Plateau", Akbarī calls for the Iranian School, because *only* via such a school "comparison could be done between two poets inside of the borders of Iran, from two different periods"<sup>3</sup>.

In his article, "Iranian School of Comparative Literature", Zainivand (2012, p.2), claims that the Iranian School rejects the discipline's profound "Eurocentrism" and "colonial and imperial goals," and replaces them with an "Islamic-Iranian approach." In his reading, the Slavic School advocates for Communism; the French School advocates for Eurocentrism; and the American School advocates for Imperialism and colonialism. However, the Iranian School is "a new school that has its deep roots with culture and identity of a pure Iran and pure Islam. The goal of this school is strengthening the basis of national literature and Islamic literature and using these two as the catalyst for understanding other cultures. Therefore, the two main keywords of this school are: "Iranian culture and literature" and "religious doctrine" (Ibid., p.5). He considers, "discovering the pure roots of Iranian culture and

3 <http://drakbari.com/news51.aspx>

civilization” and “focusing on spiritual, ethical, and committed literature” as the two main differences between this school and other schools of comparative literature (Ibid., p. 7).

No doubt the discipline in Iran –and to some extent in the Arab world- is in a serious crisis, particularly with respect to the literary theory. Through the limitation of English in Iran, and under the government’s direction, the Eurocentric aspect of the discipline has been highlighted and retold so often that it has become synonymous for the discipline itself, resulting in a public calling for a replacement of the Eurocentrism of the discipline with a Perso-Shi’a centrism.

#### COMPARISON BEYOND THE ISLAMIC WORLD?

The most recent critical works on comparative literature in Iran claim that Persian comparative literature has made notable progress and that it has a (potential) contribution to the globalization of the discipline (Gould, 2011; Anushiravani, 2012; Ahmed, 2016; Mirzababazadeh-Fomeshi, 2017).

In his 2012 English language study “Comparative Literature in Iran”, Anushiravani, the most well-known of comparatists inside of Iran today, describes the status of the discipline in Iran and the Islamic world, in these words, “Comparative literature is rapidly growing in Middle Eastern and neighboring countries. [...] Iranian graduate students from different departments of national literatures [...] have shown great interest in the new trends of comparative literature studies. [...] they] have already started to write interdisciplinary theses on literature and painting, literature and cinema, and literature and cultural studies” (p.489). Criticizing the Eurocentrism of the discipline in the west, Anushiravani envisions a bright future for the discipline. He concludes, “It seems that the Iranian Academy, which has the potentiality and the responsibility for the promotion and sustainability of the discipline, has a global vision in mind. In this regard, inter-Asian literary and cultural relations, which have long been neglected, must be brought back to the foreground” (Ibid., p. 491).

To demonstrate the invalidity of these claims about the status and this unrealistic optimism about the future of the discipline in Iran, I refer to Anushiravani’s most recent study. In his 2019 Persian article “The Disintegration of Comparative Literature in Iran,” Anushiravani takes a completely opposite direction from his 2012 English article. He highlights the current crisis of the discipline in Iran, lamenting a “reduction and mis-implementation of theories, superficial research methods, lack of academic and comprehensive curriculum, and exclusiveness and intolerance” (p. 79). Blaming mostly the Perso-Arabic comparative literary circles, Anushiravani arrives at this conclusion: “Today, comparative literature in Iran is facing a serious crisis and closing it is better than continuing it [...] after a few decades of efforts for establishing comparative literature in Iran, [...] I have arrived at this conclusion: that there is no hope for establishing and implementing this discipline in Iran” (p. 79, 106). Anushiravani is right, and he rightfully highlights some of the main crises of the discipline in today’s Iran. However, he fails to address fundamentally the main obstacle before the discipline of comparative literature in Iran: Perso-Shi’a centrism. Anushiravani proposes a geography from South Asia to the Caucasus to Africa, from China to the Mediterranean, and from Delhi to Istanbul to be included in the geography of Persian comparative literature, while turning a blind eye to the non-Persian cultures of Iran.

In her 2011 study “The Geography of Comparative Literature”, Gould criticizes the Eurocentric tendency of comparative literature in western academia in comparison to that of the discipline of History. She presents an overview of the discipline of comparative literature in the Islamic world, Arabic and Persian in particular, and predicts a bright future for the discipline, which, in her words, could give a >rebirth< to the discipline and counter the widely-held >death< of comparative literature proposed by Spivak (p.184). Here, I am not challenging her arguments about the Eurocentrism of the discipline compared to that of History. No doubt, one of the most highlighted and discussed concepts in recent reflections on the disciplinary identity of comparative literature has been Eurocentrism. Even those comparatists who have been most loud about the Eurocentric character of the discipline are still preoccupied with European and western archives. Even Gould’s study here suffers severely from lack of the most important Persian and Arabic studies of the discipline in Iran and the Arab world. What I am concerned with is why many scholars of the Islamic world, though criticizing the Eurocentrism of the discipline, turn a blind eye to this profound Perso-Arabic centrism of the discipline in the Middle East. Claiming an imperial feature for the English language with respect to the Middle Eastern comparative literature, Gould claims: “At Middle Eastern universities, such as, notably, the University of Damascus, comparative studies are commonly situated in English language and literature departments. The problematic implications of this overlap that makes technical ability in English tantamount to comparativism and comparativism tantamount to fluency in English has been discussed by Edward Said and others” (p. 173). What Gould claims is simply not true in respect to the Middle Eastern universities in general, nor for Damascus University in particular. The young department of English at Damascus University has been the home for the only two credit course “Comparative Literature” in BA in English Department. The same course has been offered for decades through the departments of Arabic and Persian for both undergraduate and graduate programs. When Gould published her article in 2011, hundreds of theses and dissertations had already been defended in the Department of Arabic, while the department of English at Damascus University produced only *one* M.A dissertation by Nahed Hashem in 2010. This English dissertation is perhaps the only source that Gould has relied on to support her claim about comparative literature in Middle Eastern universities. The situation is comparable in other Iranian universities, where comparative studies commonly were situated within Russian and French departments before 1979 Islamic Revolution, and in Arabic and Persian departments after the revolution.

Gould then goes on to claim that, “Comparative literature’s contemporary ascent in the Arab and Persian world follows a trajectory precisely the inverse of its North American and European descent. This may be because, in the Islamic world, the discipline stands at the forefront of debates in postcolonial and gender studies in a way it has aspired to do, but often has not been able to achieve, in North American contexts” (p.179.) Not only does Gould fail to provide a single source of evidence for this claim, but she also turns a blind eye to one of the disciplines that no doubt has most severely suffered under the 1979 Islamic Revolution: Gender Studies. The first programs in “Women’s Studies” were founded in 2001 at the M.A. level at three universities: al-Zahra, Allameh Tabataba'i, and Tarbiat Modares in Tehran. In 2012, Ḥaddād-i-Ādil, the current President of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature in Iran, as well as the president of Special Council of the Cultural Revolution, stated, “The way that Women’s Studies is taught in today’s world universities is in serious conflict with Islam. Therefore, our council has decided to undertake a fundamental revision of the discipline” (Deutsche, 2012). The

Council –in which Shi’a clerks comprise 12 of its 20 members- changed the name of the departments to “Family’s Studies and Women’s Rights in Islam.” Just a few months before Gould’s article, we witnessed that this anti-feminist discourse of Iranian academia, under severe government control, removed the name of the most well-known contemporary Iranian feminist poet, Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967) from the Anthology of Contemporary World and Iranian Poets, due to her feminist discourse (BBC, 2010). Even a cursory glance at the general information and curriculum of these “Family’s Studies” in Iran, reveals that these programs are completely in contradiction with the main goals of Gender and Women’s Studies in the way we understand them in North America.<sup>4</sup>

In another section of her article, Gould takes a telling stamp in Persian on the cover of the most widely available electronic version of the first edition of the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (NATC) as a sign that the anthology has been widely read by Persian audience. There is no evidence that NATC has been read or ever put in curriculum of any Iranian universities. Perhaps it is because there is no copyright in Iran, and someone has uploaded it to the internet. Consequently, NATC has been read by those scholars across the globe who have reading proficiency in English; but this is far from the case with many Iranian audiences. What is ironic here is that the Persian stamp on NATC belongs to the library of Colleague of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages at Allameh Tabataba’i University (ATU) in Tehran, a leading university in Iran in de-Westernization and Shi’ization, localization and anti-cosmopolitanism, and gender segregation in the humanities. As recently as August 2011, while Gould was making her claim based on a stamp, the ATU removed 13 undergraduate degrees in the humanities from its curriculum, following the current Supreme Leader’s criticism on “the western cultural invasion in the humanities” (BBC, 2011). Glancing at the curriculum in the English department at ATU, as well as other universities in Iran, the potential audience of NATC could reverse easily Gould’s claim that these curricula and programs are completely empty from any significant courses in literary theory.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, among the three potential Perso-Islamic terms for the English term “comparative literature”, i.e. *‘adabiyāt-i sanjishī*, *‘adabiyāt-i muqāyese’ī*, and *‘adabiyāt-i taṭbīqī*, the Persian literary circles have adopted the term that least relates to literary theory: *‘adabiyāt-i taṭbīqī*. Philologically the Perso-Arabic term, *taṭbīq*, means “to implement; to give a practical effect to; and, to match”. The Persian term *‘adabiyāt-i taṭbīqī* does not fully correspond to its English counterpart. The “practical” and “matchness” aspects of this Perso-Arabic term cannot fully capture the theoretical and interdisciplinarity of the English term.

Counter to Gould’s claim, in fact, the Middle Eastern comparative literary circles have looked suspiciously at western literary theories, genres, and particularly the discipline of comparative literature since their foundation. This suspicion and concern about comparative literature was strong enough that the first academic Arabic text on the discipline in the Arab World was published anonymously between 1902-1903 in *al-Hilāl Magazine* and in its first edition as a book in 1904, (see: al-Khaṭīb, 1985) because, and in the words of the most well-known Arab comparatists, Ḥussām Al-Khaṭīb, “connection with the west and progressive ideas in that period brought official shame and indignation upon its

4 For general information about the curriculum see: <https://sep.iau.ir/silabes/15302.pdf>. No doubt, most recently, one might find a handful of academic programs in the Middle Eastern university, that are mainly located in American universities in Cairo and Sulaimaniah in Iraq, regarding Gender Studies. Such progressive and academic programs in Iran have not been established.

5 For ATU’s curricula see: [https://lit.atu.ac.ir/uploads/chart\\_adabiat\\_english.pdf](https://lit.atu.ac.ir/uploads/chart_adabiat_english.pdf)

[Arab] owner, even if it remained in the boundary of culture and literature” (1984, p. 18). Perhaps similar reasons lie behind the first Arabic and Persian translations of a western book on comparative literature, where the Arabic translation was published anonymously, and the Persian translation was published under the name of the translator, without having any indication about the western author (Khezri, 2015, p.41).

Is this unbalanced and biased picture of the discipline in North America another indication that area studies, which is dominant within academic institutions in the U.S. for research and teaching on America’s overseas “other,” is in the thralls of a fiscal and epistemological crisis? Or maybe it is because post-colonial studies in the U.S. stand at the forefront of Middle East studies. On the one hand, post-colonial scholars of Middle Eastern studies oppose Eurocentrism of the discipline and the global West’s violent denial of subaltern people’s historical agency, autonomy, and language rights; on the other hand, they tacitly condone Perso-Arabic-Islamic centrism of the discipline and Middle Eastern states’ denial of their violently subalternised people’s historical agency, autonomy, and language rights. They have erased the experiences of the subaltern and internally colonized stateless languages and cultures in the favor of the Middle Eastern dominant languages and cultures in a binary matrix: Western Imperialism versus a “colonialized” Iran/Islamic world. Furthermore, they have often represented an unrealistic, exaggerated picture of the Middle East, that has resulted in an “orientalism in reverse” or “reverse orientalism” (Boroujerdi, 1998, pp.43–55). Through this lens, one can understand Edward Said’s denial of the Iraqi Ba’athist regime’s chemical attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja and his silence on the same regime’s notorious al-Anfal Campaign against the Kurds, where thousands were massacred. Said pointed out in the London Review of Books that the “claim that Iraq gassed its own citizens has often been repeated. At best, this is uncertain” (1991).

#### PERSO-SHĪ‘A CENTRISM AND PERSIANATE COSMOPOLIS

Since late nineteenth century, despite the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic composition of Iranian peninsula and population, the Persian intelligentsia has presented the Persian language and identity as primordial for all Iranians including Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Lors, and Balouch, among others. They represented Iran as the motherland (*sarzamīn-i mādarī*) and tied it to Persian as the mother tongue (*zabān-i mādarī*) and later to official tongue (*zabān-i rasmi*) (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2011, p. 112). Ever since, the ‘formation of a modern Iranian national identity [has been] linked intimately [to] the Persian language’ (Ibid., 96). Such views about the inevitability of unilingualism for national unity encouraged many leading figures from the Qaja prince Jalāl Mīrzā (1832-71), to the father of Persian nationalism Kirmānī (1854–1896/1897) to Aḥmad-i Kasravī (1890–1946), the prominent Iranian linguistic and historian, to advocate publicly for the elimination of all non-Persian languages of Iran. Kasravī, for instance, claimed that multiple languages would cause discord and therefore ‘the less diversity, the better [national] unity’ (1944, p. 1). He summarize the mission of his oeuvres as: “all I have defended and wished is the elimination of [non-Persian] languages spoken in Iran: Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian and semi-languages [i.e. Kurdish], for all the Iranians to speak only one language, which is Persian. This has been my will, and I have striven for that” (Ibid). Through the adoption of such a policy by Persian intellectuals, the state was able to impose Persian language and



identity (singular) equal to Iranian languages and identities (plural). Non-Persian languages and identities systematically marginalized, criminalized, and silenced (Soleimani&Mohammadpour, 2019).

The main institution for implementing such policy with respect to language and culture has been the Academy of Iran. Reza Shah (r. 1925-1941) founded the Academy in 1934/5 to purify Persian language from Arabic, European, and non-Persian languages of Iran. Hikmat, whose work on William Shakespeare has been considered the first non-theoretical work in the field of comparative literature in Iran, was appointed as the president of the Academy in 1938. The Academy not only purified Persian from Arabic and European languages, but in the words of Fazeli, “intended to employ Persian folk language and literature for purifying the Persian language and strengthening national identity over other ethnic and regional identities” (2006, p. 53).

Since 1970s, the Academy of Iran has continued the same policies under the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. In 1972, the Persian intelligentsia also founded the Society for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature, to promote Persian in non-Persian areas of Iran and abroad. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, many members of the Society and the Academy such as Movahid (b. 1924), have publicly called for elimination of all non-Persian languages of Iran. In their self-claimed project to present Persian as an anti-colonial and anti-imperial language, they considered any demands for minority language rights inside Iran to colonialism, Imperialism, and Zionism that try to weaken their project. Take for example Shafī‘ī-ye-Kadkanī (b.1939), the colossal Persian literary figure, who considers any demands for language rights and mother tongue-based multilingual education in Iran as Imperial and colonial demands: “They [western imperialism] were well aware that the Persian language owned *Shāhnāmeḥ*, *Masnavī*, Sa‘dī, Ḥāfīz, Nezāmī and could wrestle with Shakespeare, and that this was not the case with Urdu. After a while, the Indian kid decides to get rid of the Urdu language. [...] Those who insist on our indigenous languages, stressing that we’d better compose poems in Kadkanī’s dialect, they know what they are doing. They know that Kadkanī’s dialect lacks *Shāhnāmeḥ*, *Masnavī*, Nezāmī, and Sa‘dī. Even if this dialect achieves a high status, it can simply create a few short stories and romantic poems. Then the Indian Kid would say farewell to this type of dialect and opt for reading Shakespeare [in English] and Pushkin [in Russian] instead” (Sheyholislami, 2019, p. 118).

In addition to this purification policy, the Academy and the Society are the main institutions responsible for promoting the Persian language and culture beyond the borders of Iran. The Academy and the Society currently have more than fifty academic members in Europe and North America. The works of these scholars have shaped fundamentally contemporary western understandings of Iran and its literature. In addition, The Academy also founded the Department of Comparative Literature in 2000. Since its founding as the first and only department in Iran, the department of Comparative Literature has been in the forefront of a transnational Perso-Shi’a centrism. English and Arabic languages have been in close competition to be used as the primary vehicle for this trans-nationalization of this Perso-Shi’a centrism. From such a perspective, one could understand why there is no room for non-Persian languages of Iran in Anushiravani’s global vision for an Iranian discipline, even one that stretches from China to the Mediterranean. The department’s journal, *Comparative Literature*, was first published in 2010. Since its foundation, the journal has not published a single article on non-Persian cultures of Iran. This Perso-Shi’a centrism not only founded the Iranian School of Comparative Literature, but even claimed Iran as the founder of the discipline, itself. The former president of the Society and a

member of the Academy, Mehdi-ye Moḥaqiq, famously claimed: “It is being said that the west has founded comparative literature and implemented it in their academic programs. As it is clear, this claim is nothing but bullshit, because, and according to the historical facts, Iran is the founder of the discipline of comparative literature in the world” (SNN, 2008).

Since the 1960s, Persian scholars in the West have underestimated the degree to which Persian was vernacular language with strong ties to power, territory, and specific urban population. The discussion of Persian’s scope and impact has been framed by the term “Persianate,” which was first coined in the 1960s by Marshall Hodgson (1974/2, p. 293). As a historian, Hodgson claimed “Persianate” as a “linguistic and literary process based on cultural imitation, and thereby, if only implicitly, on Power” (Green, 2019, p.3). Hodgson’s neologism engaged with the paradigm shifts ushered in by the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1970s, post-colonial scholarship that grew from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in late 1990s, Tavakoli-Targhi’s “The Homeless Texts,” and Sheldon Pollock’s formulation of a “Sanskrit cosmopolis” in 21st century. Ever since, Persian historians and comparatists have ignored that inequality, or almost as bad, have sublimated it into universal “themes”. At the same time, they have advocated for tyrannies of comparison that facilitate contemporary ideologies of absolutism, and have ignored “the call to an ethics of comparison, one that is based on an aspiration toward equality [and] invite our sense of ethics, of right and wrong, of subject-making and object-making, to interrupt this chain of production” (Palumbo-Liu, 2020, pp. 263, 270). These scholars, by and large, set out to apply an anticolonial and cosmopolitan approach to modern Iranian history and literature. “However, instead of deconstructing [Perso-Shi’a] hegemonic discourse, their argument seems to have reproduced a ‘provincialized form of Orientalism’ that privileges dominant Persian culture over ‘Others’ (Soleimani&Muhammadpour, 2019, p. 7). Hamid Dabashi, for example, summarizes the mission of his book, *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Postcolonial Nation*, as: “to dismantle that false binary, and proposes [...] the “cosmopolitan worldliness” characterizing the modus operandi of Iranian culture, from its own imperial background to its subsequent postcolonial character, as well as the future rediscovery of its origins beyond its current fictive frontiers – borders manufactured through colonial domination” (2016, p. 5). The question of the subaltern languages and cultures of today’s Iran requires new and more critical readings of the many ways in which Iranian nationalism draws on the heritage of Persian as a hegemonic language.

One starting point could be “internal colonialism” to tackle the discipline’s profound Perso-Shi’a centrism in Iran. As a concept, “internal colonialism” describes how political, cultural, and economic inequalities exist between the center and various regions within a given state. These inequalities are often structured along ethno-linguistic, racial, and religious fault lines (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019, p. 3). The terms “internal colonialism,” “domestic colonialism,” and “semi-colonialism,” appear to be used interchangeably in literature since 1944, interpreting the experience of African Americans as “colonized” (Pinderhughes, 2011, p. 236). The term was employed by Leo Marquard (1957) in his study on Apartheid in South Africa. It subsequently gained currency in developmental studies following the publication of Casanova’s article on Mexico in 1965. In his 1965 work, Casanova describes internal colonialism as the “rule of one ethnic group... over other such groups living within the continuous boundaries of a single state” (p. 130-132). Casanova employed the concept in the context of multi-ethnic societies. For him, internal colonial relations are not necessarily limited to the economic sphere

(Love, 1989, p. 906-907). Inspired by Casanova, Andre Frank (1971) states that internal colonialism is a form of “uneven development” signifying unequal structural relationship manifest in “metropole–satellite” or “center-periphery”. Through adopting internal colonialism, Pinderhughes aims to move the discussion beyond narrow, European-bound descriptions of colonialism and re-assert an analysis of colonialism that takes proper note of the *condition of the colonized* as the starting point for analysis. He defines internal colonialism as a “geographically-based pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within the dominant power or country” (236). As an analytical tool, ever since internal colonialism has been developed and adopted by many scholars particularly in the context of Latin America and the U.S., and most recently in link to other neo-colonial settings, including Iran. (see: Frank, 1970; Blauner; Marquard, 1969; Peckham, 2004; Portes&Bach, 1985; Pinderhughes, 2011).

Internal colonialism in Iran has given rise to the internal center and periphery relations through a sustained de-development of non Perso-Shi’a nations. The current context of non-Persian Iranian social oppression reflects this definition, including enduring residential segregation, massive educational inequality, massive constitutional inequality, massive economic inequality, sweeping suppression through imprisonment and executions, and profound health disparities, to name a few. Therefore, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several scholars have adopted the concept of internal colonialism in their study of modern Iran. Asgharzadeh, for instance, views ‘various Azeri-Turks’ communal activities as signs of their “resistance against internal colonialism ... in Iran” (2007, p.179). Within the scholarship on Kurds, the Turkish sociologist Ismail Beşikçi was the first scholar, after the 1965 work by the Iranian Kurdish political activist Ghassemloo (1930-1989) and renowned Kurdish writer, Hajhār (1921-1991), to refer to Kurdistan as an “international colony.” Such an approach to Kurdish studies, particularly Eastern/Iranian Kurdistan seems to have gained a wider acceptance in recent scholarship (see: Gambetti 2010; Yüksel, 2011; Kurt, 2019; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019; 2020).

Half a century ago, Ḥasan-i Honarmandī, working from an anti-Eurocentric perspective, argued that the center for Iranian and Persian studies “should be Tehran, not Rome, or Paris, or London, or any other place” (69). To advance the facets of the discipline that relate to ethics and human rights, it is now time for the comparatists and scholars of post- and internal colonialisms to extend their own call, that the center for comparative literature in Iran should be expanded, decentered, and multiplied beyond the capital Tehran to Tabriz (with respect to Azeri), Kurdistan (with respect to Kurdish), Ahvaz (with respect to Arabic), Loristan (with respect to Lori), and Sistan and Baluchestan (with respect to Balochi), among other cities and subaltern, religious and ethnic minorities. The discipline of comparative literature, in the context of a multi-ethnic society like Iran’s, makes clear that any postcolonial approach that does not take internal colonialism into account reproduces colonial(ist) discourses in one way or another.

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