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A Critical Study of the Potentials of Polysystem Theory as a Comparative Research Methodology in the Literary Scene of Iran: the Case of the System of Persian Prose Fiction

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To my dear parents and Professor Sayedi who brought me the fire of knowledge…

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Despite the prevalent literary interactions between Persian literature and the Euro-American literary systems, especially after the Constitutional Revolution in 1905 and through the channel of translation, Comparative Literature has hardly attained a secure position in Iran. Consequently, comparative studies and research methodologies in Iran have largely failed to address the actual context of literary communications in the literary scene of Iran. The present study, bridging the gap between Translation Studies and Comparative Literature, tends to investigate the potentials of Polysystem Theory as a comparative methodology that can correspond with the *status quo* of Persian literary polysystem and in particular Persian prose fiction. Accordingly, in the first step, the relationship between translation and comparative literary studies in Euro-American comparativism is investigated. Furthermore, the correspondence between the comparative methodologies and the paradigms of literary communication in Europe is elaborated on. In the next step, the comparative potentials of polysystem theory and systemic translation studies, as a research methodology with its roots in translation and literary studies, are critically explored. Finally, after the investigation of the dependency of the system of Persian prose fiction upon the system of translated fiction, the potentials as well as various facets of systemic interference studies in the contemporary system of prose fiction in Iran are expounded. As a matter of fact, systemic interference studies can be an appropriate alternative for the ailing traditional influence studies of Comparative Literature in the context of transnational-translational literary communications in Iran.

Keywords: Polysystem Studies; Comparative Literature; Persian Prose Fiction; Translated Literature; Interference Studies; Comparative Methodology.

Perhaps a translation is devoted to ruin, to that form of memory or commemoration that is called a ruin; ruin is perhaps its vocation and a destiny that it accepts from the very outset.

(Derrida, 2001, p. 181)

Are we witnessing a globalization of the economy? Certainly. A globalization of political calculations? Without a doubt. But a universalization of political consciousness — certainly not.

(Foucault, 1997, p. 141)

1. Introduction

1.1. Translation Studies and Interdisciplinarity

Ever since its birth as a distinct branch of study in the academia, Translation Studies, by common consent, has been considered as an interdiscipline (Snell-Hornby, Pöchhhacker & Kaindl, 1994). Indeed the very essential components of the translation studies have their roots in a variety of disciplines ranging from literary studies and linguistics to political sciences and cultural studies. Thereby, it seems neither possible nor logical to study translation in isolation. Among the disciplines closely connected to translation studies are literary studies and Comparative Literature (CompLit). While literary studies have enormously contributed to translation theories and critical discussions in the realm of Translation Studies (Khazaee Farid & Faridi, 2008, pp. 25-38), the study of translation also can be a fertile ground for the field of literary studies. This mutual relationship especially makes more sense in view of the prevalent discussions concerning globalization.

One of the major theories that has been the source of many interdisciplinary studies in the realm of literary and translation studies is polysystem theory. Bassnett maintains that "Polysystems theory filled the gap that opened up in the 1970s between linguistics and literary studies and provided the base upon which the new interdisciplinary Translation Studies could build" (Bassnett, 2002, p. 7). Even-Zohar, drawing on a Formalist tradition, first in 1979 and later in 1990 and most recently in 2010, has proposed a systemic methodology of literary and cultural studies. The aim of the following study is to bridge the gap between CompLit and Translation Studies through the channel of polysystem theory. Particularly, it tends to highlight potentials of polysystem theory – a theory with its roots in translation and literary studies – as a comparative methodology for the study of the interrelations of the system of Persian prose fiction and the system of translated fiction.

1.2. Defining the Problem: *Polysystem Studies* as a *Comparative Methodology* in the *Literary Scene of Iran*

With the proliferation of translations in the past two centuries, the interrelations of national literatures became more complex and hence the need for methodological developments in the realm of literary studies. In fact, translation, in and of itself, has been a major step towards the realization of Goethe's system of world literature (*Weltliteratur*). Damrosch believes that world literature encompasses "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch, 2003, p. 4). He also cautions that "a work only has *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (ibid.).

The truth is that no such active presence is conceivable without translation and this is the point that many translation scholars nowadays try to shed light on (cf. Bassnett, 1993). Today the claim of reading world literature in original language seems to be more like a myth, especially considering the large corpus of world literature. Furthermore, scholars have become more and more aware of the fact that translated literature plays a crucial role in evolution of the national literary repertoires as well as readers' taste (cf. Even-Zohar, 2010). In the case of European nations, for instance, in spite of the close cultural as well as linguistic affiliation, it was principally through the channel of translation and rewriting that the spread and evolution of novel as a genre was made possible (cf. McMurran, 2002, pp 50-72).

In such an environment there is the need for development of methods and comparative methodologies that can investigate aspects of the interactions of the national literary canons. In older trends of CompLit, especially in the orthodox school of CompLit, the scholars investigated the influence of one genre, writer, or work upon another literary system. However, as it will be explored in Chapter 2, these trends of influence studies due to their limitations cannot truly account for the aspects of the literary interactions of (trans)national canons. Conversely, in polysystem theory, Even-Zohar considered literature in general as a polysystem that is "both autonomous and heteronomous" (Fokkema & Ibsch, 2000, p. 114). Translated literature, from his point of view, is itself a system affecting the national literary repertoires. What matters here is

the position of the translated literature in comparison to the national literature. Even-Zohar's theory has given rise to the study of different aspects of the interrelations of the national literatures and the translated literature, as well as concepts such as "canonicity," "interference," "peripheral vs. central" with respect to the literary systems. As Bassnett (1993, p. 142, p. 159) notes, Even-Zohar's systemic studies of the interrelations of these literary systems shed light on those areas of literary studies that have been for long in darkness. As it will be argued in Chapter 3, polysystem theories due to its attributes can especially benefit those aspects of literary communications that by and large have been disregarded in traditional influence studies.

There are two major concepts in polysystem studies that can be of high significance for the comparatists: (1) dependency; and (2) interference. Even-Zohar in his *Polysystem Studies* (1990) explicates the concepts of "dependency" and "interference" meticulously. In the opening paragraph of the "Laws of Literary Interference" Even-Zohar criticizes the vague notion of "influence" in CompLit claiming that "Comparative Literature" has been "contending itself with the vague notion of 'influence', and confining itself to uncritical comparison of isolated cases" (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 53). He substitutes the comparatists' notion of "influence," especially in the "influence studies" of the orthodox school of CompLit, with the notion of "interference" in order to be able to describe more accurately "some general laws" or "regularities" governing the "literary interference." These concepts can especially help the scholars in investigation of the system of Persian prose fiction.

1.2.1. Defining the Problem in the Context of Literary Communications in Iran

Iran's literary scene was for long dominated by poetry, especially before the Constitutional Revolution in 1905. Compared to the central position of poetry in the literary system of Iran, prose fiction has for long occupied almost a peripheral position. Over years, this resulted in a kind of stagnancy in the realm of prose writing and fiction. Even-Zohar, describing a similar condition, maintains that

> The normative repertoires of any activity would very likely stagnate after a certain time if not for competition from non-normative challengers. Under the pressure from the latter, the normative repertoires may not be able to remain unchanged. This guarantees the evolution of the 'system'. … If no such interplay of the repertoires is possible, we often witness either the gradual abandonment of a repertoire and movement to another…or even the total collapse of the polysystem. (Even-Zohar, 2010, pp. 46-47)

No such "total collapse" ever occurred in the literary polysystem of Iran. This was partly due to the tradition of prose writing in the form of folktales and popular stories, mostly parables and allegories. Popular stories such as *Samak-e Ayyār* and *Amir Arsalān-e Nāmdār*, written down during the Qajar dynasty, are among the notable examples of prose fiction writing before the acquaintance of the Iranian writers with the European novels. However, compared to the centrality of the tradition of poetry, the limited corpus of the prose fiction literature could not respond to the social demands of the new generations of intellectuals.

By the ending decades of the nineteenth century, as it will be explicated in Chapter 4, Iran was undergoing important sociopolitical and cultural changes. The gradual encounters of the Iranian literati and intellectuals with Western thoughts, coupled with the growth of printing industry, paved the way for some important social and cultural reforms (Balaÿ, 2007/1386, p. 15). Moreover, these interactions resulted in a partly better understanding of the lack in the national literary repertoires (Mirābedini, 2008/1387, p. 29). As Balaÿ (2007/1386, p. 103) notes, the Iranian thinkers, at this point in history, became gradually more conscious of the fact that their traditional popular prose fiction lacked the realism of European literatures they were facing and could not in fact cope with the new social realities.

The contacts with foreign literatures paved the way for the emergence of the Intra- and Inter-systemic means of change in national literary repertoires (Balaÿ, 2007/1386, p. 84). Perhaps the most significant stylistic change in the realm of Persian prose was the linguistic conformity of the literary texts to the social realities. Such conformity required the authors and translators to change their language from a highly dignified and ornamented style to a colloquial language which was more understandable to the ordinary readers. Moreover, the writers became more conscious of the subtleties of the narrations of the foreign novels, and, as a result, began to

experiment with new narrative techniques. By and large, as it will be discussed in Chapter 4, it can be maintained that the evolution of Persian prose fiction was a dialogue between the traditional forms and the forms that were emerging in the translations from European literary systems.

It can be observed that for more than a century Iranian literati have been translating the foreign literatures and have been involved in the renovation of Iranian national literary repertoires through the channel of translation and, as statistics suggests, translation still occupies an important position in the literary system of Iran (Faridi & Hashemi, forthcoming). In Even-Zohar's framework of Polysystem theory, it can be stated that during the emergence of the novel as a genre in the Persian prose fiction, since the national repertoire of prose fiction was "young," the literary system of Iran had to "depend" on the system of translated literature. The "interference" from translated literature was indeed responsible for the formation of the pillars of Persian prose fiction. Later, despite the fact that the Persian prose fiction had partly renovated its repertoire, the translated literature continued to play a significant role in Iran's literary polysystem. Interestingly, most of the prominent Iranian writers were themselves translators; for instance Mohammad-Ali Jamālzādeh (1892-1997), the father and founder of the Persian short story, who translated from Schiller, Moliere, and Ibsen; Sādegh Hedāyat (1903-1951), the most prominent Iranian writer in the twentieth century, who translated some works by Kafka, Chekhov, and also has some translations from the Pahlavi language; Ebrāhim Golestān (1922-), the prestigious writer and filmmaker, among whose translations are some of Hemingway's and Faulkner's works; Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad (1923-1969), the prominent fiction writer and essayist whose distinct prose style influenced his generation, and who translated Dostoyevsky, Camus, Sartre, Ionesco, and Gide; and Simin Dāneshvar (1921-) one of the most translated Iranian female novelists who translated a number of works by Shaw, Chekhov, Hawthorn, Moravia, and Schnitzler (cf. Mirābedini, 2007a/1386). Naturally, with the dominance of the Other systems and the dependence of the national repertoires on the translated literature, most of the Iranian writers were/are either ideologically or stylistically under the influence of the Euro-American literary schools. Realism, Naturalism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Magic Realism, and more recently Postmodern trends of fiction writing are but a few literary currents that have largely

influenced the Iranian writers in different historical periods. In addition to this influence on writers and repertoires, the translated literatures have affected the orientations and expectations of the Iranian readers of the novel and other genres of prose fiction.

This brief discussion shows the extent to which the contemporary prose fiction in Iran is founded and dependent on the Other literary systems and hence the need for systemic studies on the contemporary system of Persian prose fiction. The present study is not concerned with elaboration on the cause of the prevalence of translations in Persian literary polysystem; instead, it draws upon the aforementioned crucial role of literary translation in the transformation of Persian literary polysystem, in order to reach at a systemic methodology that can best serve the needs of comparative literary studies in Iran.

1.2.2. The Gap in Systemic Translation Studies in Iran

In spite of the aforementioned dependency of the contemporary Persian literature on the Euro-American literary systems, the systemic translation and comparative studies have never enjoyed a firm ground in the academia of Iran. Is our national literary polysystem isolated from transnational systems? The answer, as this thesis shows, would be definitely *no*. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the introduction of the Other literary systems through the channel of translation to Iranian literati and readers has been to a large extent responsible for the renovation and transformation of the national literary repertoires in Iran. However, the number of studies in this area is limited and like many other theoretical discussions in the realm of literary studies in Iran, these studies suffer from lack of a solid methodology. There have been only two books and a few scattered researches in the realm of systemic studies. Balaÿ and Cuypers (1983) and Balaÿ (1998) have explicated the systemic relations in literary polysystem of Iran. These studies are undeniably precious; however, it should be noted that they are very much limited to the foundations of the Persian prose fiction. In fact, there has been no further research into the later historical periods and other literary genres. Mirābedini also in his influential studies on the history prose fiction and drama in contemporary Iran has partly dealt with the system of literary translation; yet, the major goal of his works is not influence or interference study, but rather a

historical study. Furthermore, in his limited references to translation systems and the role of foreign literary systems, he is mostly dependent on Balaÿ's studies (cf. Mirābedini, 2008/1387). One of the possible reasons for the paucity of researches on the interrelations of the system of translated and national literature is the lack of studies on the theoretical aspects of polysystem studies in Iran. As a result, there is yet a long way ahead of Persian academies for comparative literary studies. Moreover, there is an urgent need for a solid methodology in the realm of comparative studies in Iran.

1.3. Purpose of the Study and Hypothesis

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the foremost goal of this study is to introduce a comparative systemic research methodology based on Even-Zohar's model and other related systemic studies by Schmidt that can serve the needs of comparative literary studies at a macro-level in Iran. Accordingly, the framework of this thesis will be constituted of three major parts: (1) CompLit, history and methodology and its ties with translation studies; (2) Polysystem theory (history and recent developments), systemic literary studies, and potentials of polysystem as a research methodology in CompLit; and (3) the *how*, *why*, and *what* of polysystem studies as a comparative research methodology in the literary scene of Iran. The major hypothesis of this study is that with respect to the dependency of the system of Persian prose fiction on foreign systems, Even-Zohar's polysystem theory can best provide the scholars of CompLit with a framework for influence studies or studies of the interference of the imported or translated literature on the systems of national literary productions at a macro level in Iran. On the whole, among the primary questions that this study will deal with are:

(1) What is the relation between comparative literary theories and methodologies and the actual literary contexts of the countries involved in comparativism?
(2) Is polysystem theory apt to be considered as a comparative methodology?
(3) Is the context of Persian prose fiction a proper ground for the systemic studies? If so, what are the potentials of the systemic studies of the translated literature as a comparative methodology for the contemporary literary polysystem of Iran?

(4) What aspects of the "literary influence" or in systemic terminology "literary interference" of dependent and independent systems are revealed in the light of the polysystem studies with regard to the case of Iran?

I have already dealt with one facet of the interference of the system of translated literature with the literary system of Iran in "Acts of Resistance: the *Other* Literature and Translations of the *Oppressed*" (2010), presented at the University of Alberta during the conference "Contemporary Canon: Cultural and Intellectual Dialogues." This article sheds light on a cultural facet of the literary interference in Iran. In the case of Iran, although translations of the Other literature were often supposed to compensate for the "lack" in Persian literary repertoires and at the same time to function as a dynamic resisting the patriarchy (*nom-du-père*) of the state, especially in historical periods following social upheavals and political instabilities (e.g. the *coup d'état* against Mosaddegh's national government), by turning to translation, *ipso facto*, Iranian intellectuals were facing another form of patriarchy, i.e. the hegemony of Euro-American literary systems. This hegemony coupled with the orientation of the tastes of the readers towards the Other literature hindered some of the most prominent Iranian literati from original productions and forced them towards translation.

Hypothetically it can be claimed that most of the modifications that should be applied to Even-Zohar's systemic studies is with regard to the socio-political functions of literary translation in Iran. Furthermore, Even-Zohar's theory, as highlighted by Fokkema and Ibsch (2000, p. 115), falls short of defining the "distinguishing features of the literary systems" from other social systems. A problem-oriented approach based on the polysystem of Iran and drawing on the distinguishing defining features that Schmidt considers for the literary systems can be a way out of some of these *cul-de-sacs*.

1.4. Research Methodology

This study is essentially theoretical and is based on a systemic analysis of the Persian prose fiction. The dominant research methodology throughout this study is qualitative research. Furthermore, most of the analyses are based on a systemic methodology rooting from a Formalist-Structuralist tradition. Accordingly, in the first step, the course of the evolution of the comparative literary methodologies in the Western academia will be elaborated on. This discussion will pave the way for a critical investigation of the close ties between translation studies and CompLit as well as the relations between the comparative methods and theories and the actual literary context of the countries involved in the process of theorization. Next, Chapter 3 deals with the foundations of the polysystem theory and the most recent methodological developments of the systemic studies in the hands of Schmidt and Even-Zohar. More specifically, this chapter presents a critical investigation of the potentials of polysystem as a comparative research methodology.

Finally, in the third part of this study, first and foremost, the dependency of the system of Persian prose upon the system of imported or translated literature will be investigated. This investigation will be based on: (1) an explication of the foundation of the Persian prose fiction from a systemic perspective; (2) a critical study of the statistics and aspects of the "author-translator" phenomenon in the literary scene of Iran; (3) an inquiry into the status of the translators in the Literary Scene of Iran; and (4) a brief investigation of those international literary currents that have played a significant role in the literary orientations of different generations of Iranian writers (e.g. Realism, Naturalism, Expressionism, Postmodernism, Metafiction, etc.). By expounding the dependency of the system of Persian prose fiction upon the Other literary systems, and drawing on the cross-disciplinary ties, previously discussed, between Translation Studies and CompLit, this study will further its discussion on the aspects of the "interference" – a concept that in Even-Zohar's studies is an evolved form of "influence" in CompLit – in the Persian literary polysystem.

Accordingly, in place of conclusion at the end of chapter 2, 3, and 4, this thesis draws on three chained arguments all equally important to the aforementioned theme of the study. The first

argument, concluding Chapter 2, is about the correspondence of the comparative literary theories and methodologies with the literary context out of which those theories have come to life. Furthermore, the significance of translation in comparative literary studies is critically studied. Based on these two assumptions, then there is an argument about the need for the redefinition of the borders and research methodologies of CompLit based on the actual context of literary communication in Iran. The second argument, presented at Chapter 3, tends to highlight the possible contributions of the polysystem theory and systemic studies to CompLit. Generally, it defends the claim that polysystem theory is apt to be employed as a research methodology in CompLit. In Argument III, drawing on the chain of the argumentum in Chapters 2 and 3, and the *status quo* of the system of Persian prose fiction in relation to the system of translation, it is claimed that polysystem studies can be employed as an appropriate comparative research methodology to address questions concerning the aspects of "interference" as well as "dependency" in the system of Persian prose fiction.

1.5. A Glimpse on the Implications

By elaborating on the nuances of systemic literary studies, its recent developments, and by examining its applicability as a comparative methodology to the case of the literary polysystem of Iran, I hope to pave the way, theoretically, for further systemic studies on the contemporary literary polysystem of Iran. Balaÿ's systemic study of the foundation of Persian novel is one example of such studies; and indeed it is a precious example. However, it is limited only to the emergence of the Persian novel. With meticulous adoption and assimilation of these theoretical discussions, Iranian scholars can develop similar illuminating studies for later historical periods, for instance studies on Iran's post-revolution literary polysystem. This study can also provide the scholars with a deeper insight into the comparative literary studies at a macro-level and CompLit as a discipline that can serve some of the most essential needs of literary studies in Iran. The proposed models can, in particular, have significant implications for studies of the literary of history Iran.

2. Comparative Literature and Translation Studies Reunited: Globalization, Translation, and Literary Studies

2.1. An Overview

"Crossing borders", whether those segregating the geopolitical boundaries or dividing the disciplines of human knowledge, has indeed been the *raison d'être* of comparative literary studies in the past century. This task of CompLit makes more sense in view of a "globalized" modern world; a world in which, as Albrow notes, societies "cannot be seen as systems in an environment of other systems, but as sub-systems of the larger inclusive world society" (cited in Gupta, 2009, p. 4). With the enormous growth of mass media and internet, the interrelations of the societies have become more complex than ever, pushing the mankind towards the image, or the illusion, of McLuhan's "Global Village." Even though we are still far from calling for the dissolution of borders, but the very act of "border-crossing" has become a very essential part of our daily lives. And so is the case for literary studies. Interestingly, Goethe, long before the call for globalization, asseverated that:

> There has for sometime been a talk of a universal world literature [weltliteratur]; and rightly so, for the nations, flung together by dreadful warfare, then thrown apart again, have all realized that they had absorbed many foreign elements, and become conscious of new intellectual needs. This led to more neighbourly relations, and a desire for a freer system of intellectual give-and-take. (Cited in Strich, 1949, p. 32)

About a decade later, Marx recounting the attributes of bourgeoisie's literature predicated that "…from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (Marx & Engels, 1847/1888, p. 9). Ever since the nineteenth century, the concept of *Weltliteratur*, not in opposition to, but rather alongside the concept of national literature has evolved. Even beneath Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* lies the nationalistic will to cultural fecundity of Germany (cf. Khazaee Farid & Faridi, 2008, pp. 29-32).

In the twentieth century, with the proliferation of translations in a globalized context, the interrelations of national literatures became more complex and hence there emerged an urgent need for methodological developments in the realm of comparative literary studies. Accordingly,